Animal Shelters: another chance at life or death

By fortheloveofwriting, a place, OK

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Image Credit: Janell E., Westland, MI
I've always thought that it seemed hypocritical for shelters to say that they save animals' lives only to kill them. Animal welfare is a great passion of mine and many others, as well. This is one way I can be their voice.

An animal shelter, by definition, is: an establishment, especially one supported by charitable contributions, that provides a temporary home for dogs, cats, and other animals that are offered for adoption. An establishment that temporarily provides a home until the animal is adoptable. Sounds good, right?

However, this definition is more in line with no kill animal shelters. These shelters will either keep animals as long as possible, or give them to some other organization that can attempt to adopt out the animals. They will do all in their power to find a great new home for animals that may have been homeless, abused, or a victim of hoarding. Through these types of organizations and charities, animals are given a second chance at life, love, and happiness.

Not only do the animals benefit, but those who adopt them do as well. They can receive some of the best animals and friends from places such as these, (as I know from experience.) While animals may come from any condition, if they are healthy, and great with people, even if it so happens to be as a result of many months or years of training, they will get another chance to be happy and to know love like they should.

Programs like these are great and can really help people in many conditions. There are many success stories out there that will make one want to go adopt every single animal from a shelter that they can, or at the very least, help them.

On the contrary, when comparing no kill shelters to ones without the same beliefs, the results often are not so 'successful.' These shelters may take in animals from the streets, and give them what they need, if only for a little amount of time depending upon their policies.

To clarify, there are some shelters that will let an animal stay for two weeks before euthanizing it. Others give only 3 days. According to research, some shelters may give an animal 3 days, then an additional 7, should the owner come looking for the animal.
Meanwhile, other shelters may give the animals a few months, a few weeks, a few days, or even just an hour.

These particular shelters may have excuses, such as “we don’t have enough room, we don’t have enough money to keep them alive, or they aren’t young or ‘cute’ enough and nobody will want to adopt them.” While it may be true that there is no room for the animal or not enough money, the shelters could give the animals to a no kill shelter or an adoption organization.

I personally believe that all animals, no matter what age, as long as they are healthy and gentle, are “adoptable.” The excuse that the animal is not young or cute enough has no support, seeing as many ages and kinds of animals are adopted all the time.

Animal shelters that do not have no kill policies don’t give the animals enough time. It may take more than 3 days, 7 days, or even a couple of weeks for someone to come to the shelter. But the people coming to adopt are not to blame, because the shelter could put out fliers or notices that there are adoptable pets waiting to find their ‘furever homes.’

Though some shelters may do this, and may even genuinely care about the animals, there are always those who just look at the animals as profit. Maybe they think keeping the animals alive is too much money or that there’s less hassle with less animals, but clearly, the animals’ best interest is not in mind, as it is at a no kill shelter.

Sure, maybe this is the first time in the animal’s life that they’ve had shelter or food and water, but is it beneficial if the animal will not even get a fair chance at life? The animals don’t know what’s going on, and they may be scared from the past, traumatized, or extremely shy, but they haven’t done anything at all to deserve to die.

So while not all shelters can ‘afford’ to keep the animals, they could find people who will foster the animals until adoption, or some other, positive alternative. Why, if an animal is not a harm to others, should it be killed without any choice? The animals can’t speak for themselves. Their fates depend on us to be their voice. Are you up for the challenge? I know I am.
Animal Homelessness Is a Community Challenge

By Gary Weitzman, DVM

Our relationships with the animals we keep are highly personal. They provide us with unconditional love, and we take on a personal responsibility for making sure that they are well cared for. But when the bond between an animal and his guardian is broken, as when an animal is lost, abandoned, or surrendered to a shelter, who then has responsibility for the animal and his care?

Most people would say it’s the local animal shelter’s responsibility. And that’s true. We take on the function of caring for animals other people don’t want or can’t care for. And we acknowledge our special role in speaking for the voiceless and upholding the moral status of animals in our communities. But if you were to ask the people at the shelter whose responsibility it is to care for lost, mistreated, and abandoned animals, they’d insist that it’s the community’s as a whole.

That’s because we can’t do this work by ourselves. Animal shelters rely on the community for funding, homes, volunteer help, and most importantly, we need people to care for their animals properly and not contribute to the problem. That’s why we insist that animal welfare is a community responsibility and that success in this field comes through partnerships with people outside of the shelter.

In fact, just a few weekends ago we had an amazing adoption event — a real example of community partnership. We got 65 animals into new homes in just two
days. We kept our adoption trucks moving back and forth from the shelter to their temporary station in front of Friendship Hospital for Animals all weekend.

This private veterinary hospital, the largest in the nation’s capital, understands the need for community involvement in animal welfare. Thanks to them, we have a thriving humane education program, ready veterinary interns and staff to help for events and patient care, and now... 65 new homes for our animals. It’s exactly the kind of partnership we’re always looking for.

With the help of that hospital, we made a lot of new friends and found many new homes. The astonishing thing to me though, was not the number of adoptions. We’d like to do that every weekend. It’s the fact that by simply bringing animals to where our adopters live, and not keeping them in our shelter, which, let’s face it, is not exactly on the beaten track of metro D.C.’s population (most shelters are tucked away near landfills, railroad tracks, airports, and other well-healed neighborhoods!), we literally tripled our adoptions for the weekend. One obvious conclusion — we’ve got to get out more!

And that’s exactly what we bought our new adoption truck to do — bring our animals literally into the waiting arms of adopters. Easy enough to say, but not so simple to do. Especially in a city like Washington, in which parking a 22-foot truck has its challenges. So we need partners: businesses like Friendship Hospital for Animals that can host adoption events and provide us with venues to meet the public and tell them about our work.

At the same time, it’s incumbent upon us in the animal welfare business to make our shelters welcoming places that the public doesn’t have to be afraid to visit. So many times I hear from donors or other supporters that they love what we do, but don’t want to visit because it’s so sad to see all those animals without homes or hope.

But that’s exactly what you won’t see at the Washington Animal Rescue League or in any of the new “breed” of animal shelters being built all over the country. What you’ll see at the League are contented dogs and cats acting like dogs and cats. That
means you’ll see them playing, eating, sleeping, and wagging their tails or stretching their paws in greeting. You’ll also see funny bowls and buckets holding treats and messages from our behavior staff asking you to toss a few treats to help train our dogs to be household pets.

Every shelter needs to become a place of hope, education, and engagement — not despair. They should be places where you can bring kids to adopt a pet, learn about the animals, or just practice compassion for all living things. But above all, places where you can teach responsible animal care, which includes spaying and neutering and adopting from shelters, not from Craig’s List. Places where they are taught kindness and that it’s important to be part of the world’s solutions. Which includes ending animal homelessness. Put us out of business — please.

November 6-12 is National Animal Shelter Appreciation Week. (But you knew that already, didn’t you?) It’s a great time to get to know your local animal shelter and show them that you’re ready to become part of the solution. Every shelter needs adopters, donors, and volunteers. But here are few other ways you might get involved:

1. Help publicize the animals who are looking for homes. Hang a picture and description of an adoptable animal at your workplace or school. You can pull them straight from the shelter’s website.
2. Consider donating used towels, blankets, toys, and treats to the shelter. Shelters go through a lot of these. You might even use your neighborhood list serve to organize a drive.
3. Host an adoption event at your work, school, or community group. Even if the event doesn’t manage to find too many homes for animals — and some are more successful in this regard than others — you will introduce lots of people to the shelter and the work it does.
4. Learn about the services that your local shelter offers — spay/neuter programs, low-cost vaccination clinics, dog training classes, help for feral cats, and the like — so that you’re ready to talk to friends and neighbors about how they can find help caring for their pets properly.
5. Offer to organize a tour of the shelter for a group of young people. Almost every shelter will happily talk to children about what they do and introduce them to their animals.
It’s all about community. What Friendship Hospital showed us this weekend was that community partnerships work. Animal shelters need community support. And this starts by taking good care of all of our own animals. But if it’s easier for the mountain to come to Mohammed, we’ll do that too, like we did last weekend.

Because when the problem of animal homelessness becomes all of our problems, by spaying and neutering, giving proper veterinary care and teaching compassion for all living things, the animals will finally win. Sixty five dogs and cats who got to sleep in their new beds last week can attest to that.

**Gary Weitzman, DVM**  
CEO, Washington Animal Rescue League
Bianca of Rancho Cucamonga, CA, attended YEA Camp in 2010 at the age of 14. She has accomplished so much in the past year and a half for animals, we are blown away.

Right after YEA Camp, she started a school club called Hearts for Animals. Their first year, they raised over $1000 for their local animal shelter, participated in community beach clean-ups, and more. This year is their second year, and things have really picked up! She has recruited a lot of great club members, including her co-president whom she credits as helping make the club an even bigger success. Here are just some of the things Hearts for Animals has accomplished this school year:

- A collection drive for items needed by the local animal shelter
- A walk-a-thon to raise money for the shelter
- The club hosts an “activism of the week” program, where Bianca educates members about animal-related issues and ways to take action to help them; she created a whole PowerPoint presentation on going vegetarian
• Volunteering at the organization Cats In Need
• Creating a campaign to help the shelter adopt out their black animals, which they have been having difficulty with
• Starting Pennies for Paws, a fundraiser in which each class at her school donates money for the shelter
• Engaging in a volunteer day once a month at the shelter
• Planning and hosting, along with the school’s environmental club and an animal club at another school, a beach cleanup in Huntington Beach to pick up trash that can harm marine animals!

Bianca says it’s important for their club to be involved with their local animal shelter because they are one of the only groups helping.

According to Bianca, “I really think we our making an impact in our community! I have learned SO MUCH from this experience and even though next year will be my last year with the club, I believe that Hearts for Animals will continue to run at our school and do even bigger and better things, truly leaving a legacy. I know I’ve said this quite some times but I still want to really thank YEA. I still recount my week at camp as one of the best weeks of my life, and remember in detail what I learned and how great of an experience it was. The whole reason why I started Hearts for Animals is because you all inspired me and gave me the confidence to do so. I don’t know where I would be without having gone through that experience!”

Aww, shucks. Thanks, Bianca!

We are so proud and impressed with Bianca’s accomplishments and commitment! Got any words of encouragement, thanks, or questions for her? Post them below.