

The Giuliani-appointed bureaucrats that run CACC have failed because they have not embraced the following successful philosophy leading to a no-kill shelter.

Executive Director Perspectives:

Nathan Winograd

TOMPKINS COUNTY SPCA

The Tompkins County SPCA (TC SPCA) is located in Ithaca, New York. TC SPCA maintains an animal control contract with the city of Ithaca as well as all ten townships in the county. The semi rural/urban county has a population of 100,000 people. TC SPCA has a full-time staff of twelve, an annual budget of \$616,000 and takes in approximately 3,000 animals per year.

On June 11, 2001, I started as Executive Director of the Tompkins County SPCA. Before I shared with the staff my philosophy and approach to animal sheltering, I wanted to give them an opportunity to show and tell me their own, unencumbered by fear that it would conflict with mine. What were their views of releasing feral cats after neutering? How did they temperament test dogs for aggression? Could people who surrendered animals put in a "call before euthanasia" in the event their pet could not be placed? Should we release animals to rescue groups? I could have told them what I was planning, but I wanted to see where they were, what their experience was, whether they had experiences that were different from my own? My plan was to spend the first two weeks learning how they cleaned the kennels, fed the animals, treated them for illness, tested dogs for aggression, took animals in, adopted them out, investigated cruelty complaints.

On June 12, my staff informed me that our dog kennels were full and that since a litter of six puppies just came in, I needed to decide who was going to be killed to make space. I asked for Plan B. There was none. I asked for suggestions. None were forthcoming. My plan to be the silent observer came to an end. It was time for a staff meeting.

I introduced myself formally, told them about my background and experiences, and shared with them my view of what it takes to be a successful shelter. Success, I said, is defined by how many animals go home alive, period. Of course, we want to make sure they are going into responsible, loving homes-anything less would mean that the animal would come right back, taking us further away from, not closer, to our goals. I told them that hard work was expected to make sure we saved them, but hard work was not enough. At the end of the day, everyone would be measured by results. The rest would fall into place: community support, new resources, and the programs that follow. To get the results, we needed the desire to succeed, the creativity to come up with solutions, and the flexibility to implement them.

As a former prosecutor, I learned in the courtroom that context matters greatly. That concepts like "truth," "guilt," "reasonable doubt," were often meaningless abstractions devoid of a clear, articulable concept. Who can forget the famous quip "if it doesn't fit, you must acquit?" Jurors can grasp that. So, without context, "desire," "flexibility," "creativity" were meaningless

abstractions, the kind of jargon batted around by self-help gurus. So I used the full cages scenario to provide context to these concepts: What will we do with the puppies? Should we kill dogs to make room? Do we have foster homes? Is there something we haven't tried? I got nowhere. "We don't have anywhere to put them." "We don't have any foster parents who would take dogs or puppies." "This is how we have always done it." Day two and my experiment with trying to build consensus came to an end.

"Volunteers do not bring home a paycheck," I said. "They do what they do for the sheer love of the animals and for no other reason. If they throw up their hands and say 'there is nothing we can do,' I will accept it from them." I looked around at the blank stares. "Staff," I continued, "are paid to save lives. If they throw up their hands and say 'there is nothing we can do,' I may as well eliminate their position and use the money more constructively to either hire someone who will find a solution or for something else like temporary boarding space at a local kennel. So, what are we going to do with the puppies that doesn't involve killing animals?"

And a solution was found: horse troughs for puppies in the lobby next to the front desk. What better way to showcase those little gems, keep a loving vigil over them while they play and sleep and ensure much needed socialization during their tender critical period? This simple change giving staff responsibility for finding alternatives to killing has since resulted in many such innovations, but the process took time.

The next weekend, 70 kittens were relinquished to the shelter, above and beyond the regular cadre of incoming dogs, cats, and other assorted animals (including 16 mice left out by our dumpster). As the humane officers informed me that they had just raided a residence and were bringing in 30 sick cats, I overheard one staff member say to another "maybe now he will euthanize some animals." Back to square one. I explained that killing for space reasons was no longer an option, and again, appropriate alternatives were found.

Not all staff were supportive of our newly achieved no-kill status. Over the next five months, seven of the twelve full-time employees on staff moved on, eventually replaced with new co-workers who shared our vision of a no-kill Tompkins County. In the meantime, not a single animal was killed for lack of space.

Taking the Community No-Kill

How does a traditional shelter make a community No-kill? In Tompkins County, we did it with a simple, yet highly effective three-step process: 1. Stop the killing; 2. Stop the killing; 3. Stop the killing. I am not joking. No-kill starts as an act of will.

On February 6, 1901, the Tompkins County SPCA was incorporated and opened its first shelter three years later. For the next one hundred years, the SPCA would act in the primary capacity of pound master for Tompkins County, a beautiful rural community in Central New York. Like so many shelters with animal control contracts, the TC SPCA would rely on the fiction that the only solution to pet overpopulation is the "blue solution," and continue to blame "irresponsible owners" for the fact that so many animals would go out the door in barrels rather than in the loving arms of families. Like so many other shelters, it never once saw the killing as its own

failure to find solutions, meet its mandate, or live up to the very real but often ignored shelter credo that "every life is precious." A new Board of Directors decided to make a change. It was time to take some personal responsibility.

Next year, the Tompkins County SPCA will celebrate its 100th birthday, no small achievement. But to highlight the centennial would be an exercise in elevating form over substance compared to the real celebration: the first traditional shelter that serves as an animal control agency that takes in every stray animal and has not killed a single healthy animal, feral cat, or sick or injured treatable animal since June 11, 2001. And that includes goats, chickens, bunnies, guinea pigs, and other assorted critters, in addition to dogs and cats.

I have worked for many no-kill organizations including the San Francisco SPCA, where the concept of creating a partnership between municipal animal control and a private no-kill agency was developed. Such a model is now touted as the way of the future. Unfortunately, the model not applicable in Tompkins County where, like so many other rural/semi-urban areas, there are no other shelters in the community. Nor are there any prospects for one-small counties do not, as a general rule, prioritize animal sheltering for public funding. Like many other rural/semi-urban communities, the TC SPCA is the only animal organization in the county, aside from a few dog or cat fanciers that also do rescue. If we were to relinquish our contracts, the alternative would be a pick up truck and someone's barn. Dogs would be slaughtered by the thousands. We would have to find another way.

Over the next five months at the TC SPCA, I developed a flurry of programs to increase the number of homes, reduce birthrates, rehabilitate injured animals, and keep animals with their loving, responsible caretakers. We plead our case before the public and asked for their help. The result?

In 2001, the death rate in Tompkins County plummeted by 78% during our peak summer season, the number of animals sterilized prior to adoption went from 10% to 100%, we went from a dozen to 140 regular volunteers, and from a handful of foster homes to 196 during our busy summer months. And the level of community giving skyrocketed. What happened? We went from excuses to answers, from blaming to solving. We went back to the basics.

The Keys to Our Success

There is no magic formula to saving lives in Tompkins County. We started with a commitment: to stop the killing of healthy and treatable animals. To make the dream a reality required accountability, services that get results, and the community's help. These are the programs that worked for us:

1. **Volunteers.** When I arrived in Tompkins County, the then-shelter manager informed me that it was her view that "volunteers were more trouble than they were worth." That view would be simply ludicrous if it were not so disturbing. We increased our volunteer core to 140 from about 10-by asking people for their help, and telling them what their help would accomplish.

2. Foster Homes. Foster parents are free to adopt their own animals or find homes for them. If I trust them to bottle feed baby kittens for four weeks around the clock, I am going to trust them to place them with loving, responsible caretakers-after we spay or neuter them.

3. Off site adoptions. The TC SPCA attends every neighborhood fair, grand opening, Church bazaar, community event, or simply sets up shop at corner malls, stores, and neighborhoods. Over 10% of all our adoptions occur off-site and the number is steadily increasing. Once the community began to learn about the lives being saved at the TC SPCA, the offers to help by hosting events began pouring in.

4. Public Access Hours. The TC SPCA is open seven days a week until 5:30 pm giving working people an opportunity to reclaim lost pets or find new ones.

5. Pre-Release Sterilization. No animal goes home unaltered so that we do not contribute to overpopulation or kill the offspring of pets we ourselves adopt out.

6. Work with Local Veterinarians. We offer free and low-cost spay/neuter thanks to partnerships with local practitioners, and get vastly discounted fees on care for our sick and injured animals.

7. Get the word out. The TC SPCA is either on the radio, television or newspaper an average of 20 days out of every month without paying for a single ad. Get those press release, events, stories out daily!

8. Ask for help. Once you give us support, we will be unrelenting. You can say no, but we will always ask. And people generally always give. Ask, ask, ask. We speak at community groups and always end by asking them "to support our lifesaving work by opening your hearts and wallets to the needy animals who make their way to the shelter."

9. Treat volunteers and staff at the end of the day, but only for a job well done. Hard work alone doesn't save lives. Hard work, effective programs, and results save lives. Reward that!

10. Come in under budget on one line-item and one line-item only: euthanasia drugs. Fundraise and meet your line-items for the rest.

But the bottom line is this: we evaluate and treat each animal as an individual and stay flexible. Too many shelters lose sight of individual animals as they stay rigid with their shelter protocols, believing that these are engraved in stone. They are not. Protocols are important because they ensure accountability from staff. But protocols without flexibility can have the opposite effect: stifling innovation, causing lives to be needlessly lost, allowing shelter employees who fail to save lives to hide behind a paper trail.

Come what may, you are only successful if the animals go home alive. The number of children reached through humane education is nice, the number of volunteer hours amassed is nice, the size of the endowment is nice. None of it amounts to much if the save rate (the percentage of animals going home alive) is not steadily increasing every year. In Tompkins County, by sheer

will, hard work, creativity and flexibility, this year 9 out of every 10 dogs and 8 out of every 10 cats will go home alive!

And we did it, not with a big shelter, not with lots of money, but with a commitment to stop the killing and the flexibility to see it through. It started with six puppies in a horse trough. Today, it involves hundreds of animals in foster care, hundreds more traveling to off-site adoptions, a coalition of breed specific rescue groups, local veterinary participation, and a community that has faith in its shelter and wants to support our lifesaving results. Is each life precious as every shelter tells us? Only if we believe that at the end of the day, every death of a healthy, treatable sick or injured animal or feral cat is a profound failure. And only if the shelter director acknowledges that the responsibility for the death is his or hers alone.

***About the Author:** Nathan Winograd is the Executive Director of the Tompkins County SPCA in Ithaca, New York. Nathan has been instrumental in developing groundbreaking programs for feral cats for more than ten years at institutions like Stanford University and the San Francisco SPCA. Winograd has also worked with the Animal Legal Defense Fund, the Greyhound Protection League, the Palo Alto Humane Society, Farm Sanctuary, Alley Cat Allies and the ASPCA. In a former life, Nathan was a criminal prosecutor.*

For Animal Organizations

Community Partnerships

IT TAKES A COMMUNITY

By Nathan Winograd

Executive Director, Tompkins County SPCA

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A decade ago, the idea of finding a home for every healthy shelter dog and cat would have sounded like science fiction. Now we are poised to make it a reality. But whether you call it No More Homeless Pets, No Kill, or other things, in a nutshell, the challenge is to build a humane "society."

To meet that challenge, we need to get the community excited, to energize people for the task at hand. Everybody needs to be a part of the mission. And the measure of how much we succeed-or fail-is a function of what happens to the cat living in an alley in our community, whether the business downtown adopts a 'pets at work' policy, whether landlords will help our lifesaving goals by saying yes to renters with dogs, whether our neighbors adopt imperfect pets because they believe in our lifesaving mission. It is about the cafes, the storefronts, the squares, the

neighborhoods. That is how we will be measured. And that is what it takes to save all the lives at risk-regardless of how big or how small your shelter is.

What confuses a lot of people in this movement, what stops them before they start is the completely false idea that to end the killing of healthy and sick homeless pets, you need to start with big bucks and big shelters. That helps, it helps a lot, but it is putting the cart before the horse. And that's not so great an idea when our cart and our horse have a long way to go.

To reach our goals, we must first focus our energies, not on building a shelter, but on rebuilding our relationship with the community.

If No Kill is going to become a reality in our hometowns, the ethic, the beliefs, the desire must penetrate the community. No-Kill may be defined by what happens to the animals within the halls of the shelter, but it can only be achieved by what happens outside of them. How much the lifesaving ethic is embraced in the cafes, storefronts, squares and neighborhoods. By how much we build our image by reflecting the values that people hold dear, and in turn expand the resources to save more and more lives at risk.

Let me give you one example. Jamie had never heard of feral cats. All Jamie knew was that after she fed the hungry stray in her yard, she started noticing others-- all of them hungry. So she started feeding them. And she wanted to have them spayed.

She managed to catch them-one by one. And since she paid full price, over \$200 for an exam, vaccinations, and spay/neuter, she could only afford one cat every two weeks.

When the local SPCA opened a feral cat spay/neuter clinic and began loaning out traps for free, Jamie went on to trap and alter over 120 cats in one year alone. And a team of 70 "Jamies" put together a neonatal foster network that reduced kitten deaths by 85% throughout the city.

Jamie exists in every community. We need to tap into that energy, that compassion, that desire to do the right thing-and harness it. We build a humane shelter within our walls. We become a humane society by embracing the landlords, merchants, and feral cat caretakers in our communities-and energizing them for the lifesaving effort ahead.

It is absolutely essential for the humane movement to embrace the community we serve. We cannot save the lives of animals without people's help.

If you reflect the community's values, if you are doing a good job for animals, if you tell them about it, and then ask for their help. They do help. They want to be a part of the effort. Jamie traps cats for spay/neuter. Landlords make their apartments "pet friendly." Others give donations.

Whether its pets in rental housing, dogs at work, cats in alleys, or finding homes for older, sick, injured or traumatized pets in our shelter, if we are going to save lives, we need four things: desire, creativity, flexibility, and most importantly, community support.

The big, beautiful shelter, the expanding resource base, the successes will all be a byproduct of that, not their cause.

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