



For the love of dog: The future of animal sheltering

As some shelters seek to fill their inventory of adoptable pets with animals from the South, veterinarians are posing the tough question: What's next for shelters? *By Portia Stewart*

In cartoons and movies, it's not uncommon for shelters to be portrayed as animal jails, gray and cruel, where the only path out besides escape is a quick march to euthanasia. But this image belies all of the changes veterinary professionals and animal rescue advocates have brought about in creating safe, comfortable spaces for animals. More and more, shelters are becoming waystations for pets' transitions from homelessness to loving homes.

Many potential pet owners see shelters and rescue groups as the only acceptable source for adoptable pets. So when a shelter no longer houses enough adoptable animals to meet pet owner demand, how should it shift its services? Some are rewriting their goals, offering new services and building new relationships to promote healthier relationships between people and pets.

Apryl Steele, DVM, president and CEO of Dumb Friends League in Denver, says her organization is building spaces to work with fearful dogs that would currently be dangerous if placed in homes. "There are some animals that we feel could be adopted that aren't now," she says. "If we had some really quiet places where we could work with them for four to eight weeks, we could make them trust again, and we could

make them safe. So that's something we're working towards."

Dr. Steele says they also don't currently place diabetic cats, but they do transfer some of them to a group that places these special needs felines. Pets with chronic diseases may also be new targets for adoption.

What else could the future of sheltering hold? Let's look at what shelter and veterinary professionals are saying.

New opportunities for shelters

Jed Rogers, DVM, is CEO at Firehouse Animal Health Centers in Austin, Texas, and previously served as senior vice president of animal health services for the ASPCA. In years past, he says the focus for shelters has been getting adoptable pets in homes. But the shifts in available dogs may be an opportunity for shelters to reimagine the services they offer. For example, they might focus instead on keeping adoptable pets in their homes. He points to efforts like the ASPCA's Safety Net program, which works with communities to provide services like one-on-one counseling, pet food banks, community vaccination clinics and spay/neuter services, pet help lines and more.

Dr. Rogers says a positive trend he sees is the sheltering world becoming

more organized. "It's always been a professional world, it's just now more organized in a very professional way," he says. "You can have a better chance of doing a good job if you're sharing best practices and adhering to standards."

The second positive trend he sees is a deepening relationship between some veterinary professionals in private practice and shelters.

"I see more and more veterinarians participating in a positive way with shelters and rescue groups in their community, and I think that's an awesome thing," Dr. Rogers says. His own practices work closely with animal shelters and rescue groups to support pet adoptions and rescue efforts. He says the key is to identify the services the shelter or rescue most needs—and it's not always what you think it will be.

"We always spend a little time to get to know them and say, 'How can we help you?'" Dr. Rogers says. "And if they don't have any ideas, then we can say, 'OK, here are the four or five things we do with other shelters; are any of these interesting to you?' And usually there's something there that clicks."

For example, some rescue groups offer to reimburse the adoption fee in the form of free veterinary services at a partnering practice. So if you paid \$100 to adopt a dog, you'd receive \$100 worth of free veterinary services.

Another way to help? Helping rescues and shelters offer the care required to get pets healthy and adoptable.

"At the beginning of each year we

give the shelters we work with a credit for services, a \$5,000 or \$10,000 credit, and then they can use it however they want throughout the year," Dr. Rogers says. "If they have a complicated surgery they want done or a bunch of dental work or whatever, they can just use the credit."

"There are a hundred things a veterinarian can do with a shelter, so it's just a matter of taking the time to get to know each other and figure out what that relationship is going to look like."

A new view on sheltering

Nichole Boudreau is director of shelter operations at Young-Williams Animal Center in Knoxville, Tennessee, which takes in more than 10,000 animals each year. Since she joined the organization two years ago, Boudreau has been working to change the attitudes and relationships in the community to support responsible pet ownership.

"There was a mentality that own-



Clients evaluating adoption options?

Help them know what to watch for—both red flags and signs a group is reputable—by reading "Dogs R Us: Evaluating adoption options" at dvm360.com/futureofsheltering.

ers are bad and we need to have open doors and take all of the animals from the people, even if it means putting them down,” Boudreau says. “I’ve been trying to change all that.”

For one, she’s helped implement a managed intake system to work with pet owners to discover their issues with their pets and help resolve them. “We’re contributing to the cycle of poor pet ownership if we’re just taking them every time someone gets sick of having an animal or bumps against some behavior concerns,” Boudreau says.

She has a dedicated intake manager and pet resource coordinator who fields all owner surrender calls. These team members have received some behavior counseling training to help people manage litterbox issues, fear and play aggression, and so on.

Boudreau is also focused on changing the attitudes of other groups in the animal sheltering community, including animal control officers. She says her goal is to shift their attitudes from law enforcement to social services.

“It all starts with shifting the concept of what an animal shelter’s role is in a community. I think we need to get away from having people think of a shelter as somewhere to relinquish their pet for adoption,” Boudreau says. “We’re in the business of housing, sheltering, rehabilitating and finding homes for stray animals that are never reclaimed by owners, despite a proactive effort on the shelter’s part and animal control’s part.”

To that end, Boudreau has been working closely with an organization called Mission Reunite, which has gifted Young-Williams with microchip scanners for their animal control trucks. This way animal control officers can scan loose pets in the field and drive the pet home instead of taking it to the shelter. This frees up resources at the shelter and makes space for pets that need sheltering.

Boudreau says her efforts are guided by three principles: keep pets out of the shelter as much as possible, reduce their length of stay, and remove any barriers to getting them out of the shelter.

“So don’t charge rescue groups pull fees, reduce the adoption fees, don’t have crazy home visit requirements and vet record requirements for your adopters,” she says.

Thanks to these efforts and more, the shelter team has increased the organization’s save rate from 67 percent

The great no-kill debate

Apryl Steele, DVM, says she sees a disturbing trend in the no-kill animal movement in which some advocates are pushing organizations to go no-kill if they want donor dollars. The challenge: this means no-kill shelters have to shut their doors to any animal that’s not highly adoptable and send it down the street to the municipal shelter or another organization that takes every animal.

The result? The open-admission shelter winds up with a 40 percent live release rate, while the no-kill shelter has a 96 percent live release rate. “But then the no-kill shelter doesn’t have enough adoptable animals coming in from their community, so they start bringing them in from another community and taking up homes, while there are animals being euthanized less than a mile away that could have had a home,” Dr. Steele says.

If you’re confused about what “no-kill” actually means, you’re not alone. There’s no single definition that everyone agrees on. “No-Kill Colorado and No-Kill Nation have said that a no-kill shelter is a shelter that adopts [out] at least 90 percent of the animals that come to them,” Dr. Steele says. “And you can make that number—anybody can become a ‘no-kill shelter’ quickly—just by saying you’re not going to take any animal you can’t adopt into your shelter. But what are you doing to prevent suffering and homelessness?”

Dr. Steele says this doesn’t mean she thinks all no-kill shelters are bad. Her goal instead is to take a look at goals and language—and calling a shelter a “kill” shelter is inflammatory, she says.

Another concern is mandated live release rates that don’t take into account the health and well-being of the shelter animals. “If 12 percent of the animals that come to me are in end-of-life situations, to achieve a 90 percent live release rate, 2 percent of those suffering animals would have to be allowed to suffer,” Dr. Steele says.

In communities like Denver where animals are increas-

ingly desired and adoptable, animals that are healthy and behaviorally appropriate may be rehomed before they reach the shelter, because a friend or neighbor will take that pet. This means the shelters are seeing an increasing proportion of sick and aggressive animals.

“I don’t want to give people the impression we don’t have highly adoptable, wonderful animals, because we do,” Dr. Steele says. “But if you look at the overall population as animals continue to be more valued in the community, we’re going to see a higher and higher percentage of animals coming to us that are more difficult.”

In the not-so-ancient past, many shelters would take animals in, hold them for three days and, if no one claimed them, euthanize them. Adoption and foster programs didn’t exist like they do today.

“I think no-kill was a useful message to knock communities and policymakers out of that complacency that that was acceptable. But when you get above a 70 percent live release rate, it becomes a very detrimental, bullying-type movement. And it starts creating decisions that cause suffering and poorer outcomes,” Dr. Steele says. “And the other thing is, no-kill language basically by definition says if you’re not a no-kill shelter you’re a kill shelter, and people working at that shelter are killers. That’s such a not-OK thing to say.”

Jed Rogers, DVM, also struggles with the term “no-kill.”

“I wrote an article 15 years ago where I said there is no such thing as a no-kill, and I still believe that. I think no-kill is an aspiration. I think anybody who’s involved in animal welfare aspires to save every pet we possibly can,” Dr. Rogers says. “The term ‘no-kill’ suggests that there are people out there in sheltering who want to kill, who really enjoy killing. And that just doesn’t sit right with me. I’ve been doing this for 25 years, and I have yet to meet one person in my entire time doing this who enjoyed euthanizing an animal. Not one.”

to 84 percent at the end of last year.

“It’s on us. We have the biggest stake in this whole thing. We have to kill the animals we can’t save. That’s the end-all, be-all for me,” Boudreau says. “I don’t want my staff to have to kill these animals because we don’t have solutions or because we’re too full.”

Rescues, shelters and vets can work together

In an ideal world, animal rescue organizations will find ways to work together to promote healthy relationships between pets and people.

“In Colorado, rescue groups have really taken off. Last year was the first year that adoptions through rescue groups exceeded adoptions through shelters,” Dr. Steele says. “Rescues transferred in about 20,000 dogs, shelters 10,000, and the other 5,000 animals were cats, which had a similar

ratio of rescues to shelters.”

Breed rescues, she says, are having the most trouble, because there aren’t as many purebreds that need homes. But the breed rescue groups also offer an opportunity for shelters. Dr. Steele uses the example of purebred German shepherds. They can be protective, and it’s important to know this breed in order to provide a good home for it.

“We will often transfer to a German shepherd rescue, even though we can put that dog on the floor and adopt it,” Dr. Steele says. “They have a following of people who really understand German shepherd behavior, and that will be the best outcome for that dog.”

On the flip side, breed rescues used to get most of their dogs from shelters, Dr. Steele says, and if there’s a purebred that comes to a shelter it’s adopted as fast as it can be adopted.

“A lot of the breed rescues we’ve

seen in our community, the specific breed rescues, have really diminished. Whether they’ve gone away completely or they just handle way fewer dogs, it depends on the group.”

At the end of the day, our experts say, it’s the relationships veterinary professionals, animal control officers, shelter professionals and rescue groups form that will create stronger relationships between people and pets.

“There’s a lot of potential to tighten up the community, have rescue groups work closely with shelters, have animal control officers work closely with shelters and have everyone on the same page, seeing the big picture,” Boudreau says. “More communication, getting together more, sharing the same goals and sharing the same data.”

Portia Stewart is former team channel director for dvm360.com.

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