

On The Positive Side

People, shelters must be on same page in their definition of 'no-kill' Overpopulation, overcrowding very real issues

By Judy Long / For the Sun-News

Posted: 07/24/2010 09:36:38 PM MDT

In last week's On the Positive Side, Win Jacobs introduced some of the issues involved in the trend to "no-kill" in animal shelters, under the hopeful rubric, No-kill Done Right. This week and next I will continue to explore the challenges and opportunities in the change that is already taking place in Do-a Ana County.

Las Cruces is blessed with a large population of people concerned with the welfare of animals.

Perhaps invisible (but often audible) are interlocking nets of individuals and agencies working for the welfare of animals on a volunteer basis. These are often mentioned in this column.

Perhaps the most visible agency is the Animal Services Center (once known as "the pound"). It is within the past two years that a new director arrived, expressing the goal of turning the shelter into a no-kill facility.

Even more recently, a joint county and city oversight board was appointed for the renamed Animal Services Center. Thus we are already in the midst of change, even as change becomes a major topic for discussion.

As readers of this column know, a no-kill policy is the goal of the Animal Services Center of the city and the county. To begin a discussion a workable definition is a first step.

The term "no-kill" may initially be misleading, in that euthanasia will not cease to exist in the time of "no-kill." But a "no-kill" facility is one where all "adoptable" and "treatable" animals are saved and where only "unadoptable" or "non-rehabilitatable" animals are euthanized.

Even with a definition in hand, ambiguities and disagreements may remain. Clearly, there is room for interpretation even in the straightforward terms used in this definition.

A California statute defines as "adoptable" animals over 8 weeks of age, ones that have shown no sign of a defect that could pose a health or safety risk and that have manifested no sign of disease, injury, or congenital or hereditary condition that adversely affects the health of the animal or that is likely to adversely affect the animal's health in the future. "Treatable" may include any animal that could become adoptable with reasonable efforts and/or veterinary treatment.

This may sound like "cherry-picking," but in fact includes animals that might be considered "unadoptable" in some shelters: they may be old, deaf, blind, disfigured or disabled. Clearly, the definition of who is "treatable" can be a point of difference between shelter protagonists and their critics.

Shelter workers, animal control officers and community activists are all people who support euthanasia (and therefore animal shelters).

They share a belief, however reluctant, that there are some fates worse than death. Shelters exist to be a safety net for animals that are victims of irresponsible people, for homeless animals, and for animals whose people have nowhere else to turn.

Animal lovers, whether "inside" or "outside," share a commitment to a kindly and peaceful death for homeless or hopeless animals. So those who operate shelters and those who lobby for "no-kill" policies are on the same side.

But overpopulation and overcrowding can strain or even rupture the safety net. And the public has every right to expect compassionate treatment of all animals, whatever their destination, and to monitor conditions and procedures in our shelter.

Among advocates of “no-kill,” people who place priority on saving lives, there has developed a critique of the way shelters traditionally operate. Animal activists may practice “tough love” in communicating with their animal shelter, but this should not obscure the fact that they are on the same side.

In her blog for the Las Cruces Sun-News, Michel Meunier has discussed the sometimes adversarial exchanges between no-kill advocates and public shelters. Some of those pushing most vigorously for a reduction in euthanasia rates have described a “bunker mentality” of those inside the walls.

I can easily imagine that pressures of overcrowding and underfunding create a sense of desperation. I know that euthanasia workers nationwide have morale problems as day after day, week after week they must end the lives of animals. The bunker mentality of “us against them” dampens communication with “the outside world.” This leads to a continual recirculation of pessimism.

It is useful to remember that, as sociologists observe, where we stand depends on where we sit. There’s a difference between rescuing an animal (or even several at a time) and dealing with the unenviable responsibility for euthanasia. The two experiences may well produce a different balance between optimism and pessimism when it comes to animal outcomes.

Expectations about what is an acceptable “kill rate” are going to enter into any future discussions. It comes down to assumptions: do we assume that admission to the shelter equals a death sentence? Do we assume that there’s a home out there for every animal that gains admission?

Are we assuming that most people are callous and indifferent to the welfare of animals, too lazy, uneducated or just too cheap to take proper care? Or are we assuming that most people are animal lovers, some with a great need for education?

In a recent blog Meunier made a distinction between changes needed at the shelter and changes needed in the public who are the clients. Some change efforts are directed inward, toward animal welfare organizations and agencies, while others are directed outward, toward the community. In seeking direction and evaluating proposals, in our ongoing and collective movement toward “no-kill,” it will be fruitful for our community to keep this distinction in mind.

We will have to stay clear on the fact that some of the changes required must take place in human hearts and minds, and some of them in the organizations that take the ultimate responsibility for animals’ life and death. Organizational change that is capable of changing outcomes for animals is going to be difficult. This difficulty is not to be underestimated: shelters that have achieved this kind of turnaround have had to scrutinize and ultimately divorce themselves from a history of 60-100 years.

Next week’s On the Positive Side is devoted to success stories: Shelters that have made the transition to no-kill and how they did it.

Dr. Judy Long is a retired professor of sociology and longtime animal lover.