

On The Positive Side

No-kill policy has many success stories

By Judy Long / For the Sun-News

Posted: 07/31/2010 11:40:18 PM MDT

Las Cruces is in the midst of a transformation to a no-kill community. The no-kill idea has taken hold, and a lot of discussion is taking place. Last week Las Cruces received an opportune visit from Betty Hoover, executive director of the Humane Society of El Paso.

Betty's background is a reminder of the close relationship between animal welfare and human welfare. Betty brought her skills as a social worker to the Humane Society, and has served in many social service and human welfare organizations.

In her talk at the annual meeting of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico, Betty shared the history, in detail, of how El Paso achieved the goal of becoming a no-kill shelter. El Paso board and senior staff followed a strenuous two-day strategic planning process by appointing an "admittedly contentious" task force on no-kill, including no-kill advocates, stay-as-is advocates and undecideds.

When they took the decision to go no-kill, the Humane Society's commitments included remaining open-door and avoiding cherry-picking admissions. The emphasis was on saving lives and adopting animals out. To accomplish this, they extended business hours (including holidays) to fit the availability of the public. In partnership with local businesses, they hold off-site adoption hours on a regular basis.

Their use of advertising and media contacts have been especially effective. They enriched their volunteer training and emphasized fostering of shelter animals during training. One of the most interesting innovations was to provide stimulation for the shelter animals: swim days, Kong bones and exercise for dogs, and for cats, two playrooms. They increased veterinary services to the animals. And they increased surrender fees and required a four-page questionnaire from those relinquishing a pet.

In early 2007, Nevada Humane Society committed to making Washoe County, Nev., into one of the nation's safest communities for dogs and cats. They reviewed every one of their programs in terms of its impact on saving lives, their top priority. They felt that making a public declaration of their new goal energized the staff inspired the public and opened the floodgates for public support.

The results were dramatic. The number of dogs and cats killed in Washoe County animal shelters declined by 51 percent for dogs and 52 percent for cats (2007 compared to 2006). The save rate for dogs was 92 percent and 78 percent for cats and trending upward, despite a per capita intake rate that was over twice the national average. By year's end, 92 percent of all dogs and 78 percent of all cats found loving new homes, or were reclaimed by their responsible caretakers. Feral cats were often adopted as barn cats or returned to their habitats.

Another success story is that of Tompkins County, N.Y. In Ithaca (where I lived before moving to Las Cruces) Nathan Winograd led the community to a no-kill future, reversing the hundred-year history of the Tompkins County SPCA. Their first step was to stop killing healthy animals. The second year they stopped killing treatable sick and injured animals, as well as feral cats. The death rate was reduced 75 percent.

They moved to spaying or neutering 100 percent of the animals they admitted. The foster program increased from a handful annually to nearly 800 per year, the volunteer rolls to 181. All this they did while reducing staff size and budget. The goodwill and community support has enabled the Tompkins County SPCA to raise considerable money for a new facility.

These success stories share a number of features, many of which required change in organizational philosophy and in organizational procedures. They include:

- Creating an emphasis on lifesaving, often requiring a turn away from traditional shelter philosophy.
- Defining and communicating clearly about the no-kill goal. There is misinformation out there: educating the public is an important component of no-kill.
- Prioritizing: focus resources and, with whatever regret, consider shrinking non-central programs. If saving lives is the priority, euthanasia drops way down on the list.
- Increasing the adoption rate: In Nevada this meant streamlining the adoption process. Animals have already been microchipped, vaccinated and spayed on admission; they are ready to go. The Nevada Humane Society relies on an interview form that has reduced paperwork as well as time required for the adoption process.
- Increasing volunteer ranks: Nevada increased its volunteers from 30 to more than 1,300 local citizens since expanding the volunteer program in March 2007.
- Developing active and ardent support from the community, including volunteering, donations, business and organization partnerships.
- Stressing spay and neuter programs, including Trap Neuter and Return programs for feral cats. When kittens or puppies are surrendered at the shelter, spay or neuter the parent(s) for free.
- Strengthening foster programs expands the capability of the shelter and the adoptability of the animals.
- Emphasizing quality in customer service: this includes support for adopters, such as adoption counseling. Making sure the shelter is a welcoming place.
- Reporting: the public wants to hear progress reports. Such communication strengthens the bond between the shelter and the community. The Nevada project made this a two-way street: they solicit community feedback via monthly Community Advisory meetings.
- Developing planning and management skills required by ongoing self-evaluation. This immediately affects staffing and use of space.
- Successful programs also emphasize communication and media skills. Ads and news releases are basic. Media list and contact list should get a regular workout. Positive images of the shelter and its no-kill goal are important for public support and staff functioning. The Nevada group emphasizes being specific in requests for money, goods, facilities or effort.
- Never to be overlooked: providing an excellent standard of care for the animals.

No-kill advocates operate on the principle that communities like Las Cruces have a vast and great potential for saving more animal lives. Making this a reality will require exploring new ways of doing things (and letting go of the way they have always been done). It will require working together and communicating better as well.

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