

# Missing Animal Response: A Paradigm Shift to Reduce Shelter Kill Rates

By

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*Missing Pet Partnership*

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One of the most overlooked areas for reducing killing in animal control shelters is “owner” reclaims. Most progressive shelters looking to improve save rates tend to focus all of their efforts on providing spay/neuter services, developing foster care programs, and increasing rates of adoption. Clearly these are important and should be done, but how much attention is paid to the issue of reuniting lost pets? Sadly, besides having pet owners fill out a lost pet report, very little effort is made in this area of shelter operations. This is unfortunate because doing so—primarily shifting from passive to a more proactive approach—would have a significant impact on lifesaving.

In a typical shelter, 1-2% of cats are redeemed by their families, while roughly 20% of dogs are. Those rare communities who have systematized their approach and become more proactive have more than doubled this. Washoe County Animal Services in Nevada, for example, reclaimed 6% of cats and 54% of dogs despite taking in over two times the number of animals per capita than the national average.

Take, for example, an animal control shelter that impounds 10,000 stray dogs per year. In that community, only 2,000 dogs will be redeemed and, given rates of non-rehabilitatable illness and aggression in dogs, another roughly 700 will be truly “not savable” (sick, ill or aggressive with a poor prognosis for rehabilitation) and killed outright. That leaves 7,300 stray dogs, above and beyond the owner surrendered animals, the shelter must find a home for annually to avoid killing them.

Now, take that same community with Washoe County level success. In that community, 5,400 of the 10,000 dogs will be redeemed. That reduces to 3,900 the number of stray dogs it must find a home for. (Add other programs such as pet retention efforts and the number could drop to around 2,700). Needless to say, this is a world of difference.

The difference between the average community and Washoe County is striking, but even more so because this latter community was only scratching the surface of what could be accomplished. Some communities have achieved a nearly 65% reclaim rate for stray dogs and even higher outside of the United States, and the reclaim rate for cats can—and should—match these, rather than remain at deplorably low current averages.

## A Failed Paradigm

In the United States today, most shelter workers blame “irresponsible” people for high numbers of stray animals and low reclaim rates. This is part of the traditional sheltering paradigm that puts the onus on the pet owner. Under this approach, if someone has lost a pet, it is their responsibility to come down to the shelter to look for and hopefully recover their missing companion.

It is believed that if that pet owner cared enough about their missing dog or cat, they would make the effort to drive down to the shelter daily. This thinking further assumes that if they don’t show up, then they don’t deserve the animal. The prevailing viewpoint says that under these circumstances, the shelter is doing a service to the animal by finding a different home or even killing him/her. It is a flawed paradigm

which costs too many animals their lives.

With a national return to owner rate of only 20% for dogs and 2% for cats, existing policies are obviously not working! Nonetheless, shelters continue to needlessly kill these animals by shifting the blame to others and wrongly dismiss all of these deaths as the fault of an irresponsible or uncaring public. In reality, the reasons why reclaim rates are low are more complex. On the pet owner side: improper search techniques, searching the wrong shelter, grief avoidance, transportation problems, logistics, finances, confusion or ignorance about shelter locations, conflicting schedule, poor customer service, and/or limited shelter hours all contribute to the number of stray dogs and cats who are never claimed by their families.

On the shelter side: poor 'lost and found' matching techniques, filing lost pet reports but not matching them with animals in the shelters, lack of diligence, killing animals too quickly before a match can be made, providing erroneous information about animal behavior, and giving the public a false assurance that once the report of a lost pet is made, the owner will be called when the animal is recovered.

Beyond scanning animals for microchips, most shelters do very little to help people recover their lost pets. Worse yet, most shelter workers and pet owners have absolutely no idea how lost pets behave, the typical distances that they travel, and the best techniques that should be used to recover them. The result is that people get discouraged because they are using incorrect search techniques that fail to produce results. People who are discouraged lose hope. People without hope give up searching. The result is that lost pets are not recovered. Instead, they are absorbed into feral, stray, and shelter populations. The end result has been high kill rates. It is this broken system that dominates sheltering in the United States today. And it is time for a new approach.

### Missing Animal Response

Rigorous, comprehensive, and proactive lost pet services offered by trained individuals are needed to help reunite lost dogs and cats with their families before they have a chance to enter stray or feral animal populations, or be killed in shelters. The "Missing Animal Response" (MAR) paradigm puts the onus *on the shelter* to reunite lost pets with their families, a trend of accountability increasingly being demanded of shelters as part of the larger No Kill movement.

The central premise of MAR is that instead of capturing and containing loose dogs and cats and expecting pet owners to claim their animals within a short holding period, a new approach is needed. MAR works in two ways:

1. Aggressively searching for lost pets (recovering them before they end up as a stray in the shelter); and,
2. Aggressively searching for the owner/guardians of impounded strays (facilitating a reclaim and avoiding the unnecessary death of another animal).

Most sheltered strays do not require that new homes—they *need to be returned to their original homes*. [Feral cats, of course, should be sterilized and released back into their habitats.]

The philosophy of MAR is that lost pet assistance should be offered whether the public asks for it or not. It should be the expected standard. This is not to say a truly neglectful or abusive person should be allowed to keep their companion animals. They should not. But what needs to change is the erroneous mentality of shelter workers who make blanket decisions on what people "deserve" based on bias and false assumptions. In other words, a shelter worker should not have the power to refuse to assist people because they do not feel that person deserves it.

What MAR demands is the same principle of how law enforcement, fire departments, and ambulance services operate. Approaching the issue of reuniting lost pets from a public service platform will actually save the lives of more animals than shelters are currently saving. That is because expecting grieving, broken-hearted people who are untrained and unequipped to search for their missing pets and who easily

give up hope (because there are no resources to help them conduct a thorough search for their lost companion) simply does not make sense.

People need—and as taxpayers who pay the salaries and expenses for these facilities deserve—help in finding their lost pets; and by directly assisting these people, shelters will be saving the lives of animals. Lost pet services will prevent strays from entering feral cat colonies, rescue groups and shelters and will ultimately reduce shelter kill rates. And just as importantly, it will free up shelter cage space for the animals who truly need to find loving, new homes—those animals relinquished by their owners.

### Why Lost Pets Are Not Found

The first step to a successful MAR program is to understand why lost pets are not found by their families. In addition to a system that does not offer assistance to pet owners, pet owners and others inadvertently contribute to the permanent displacement of companion animals by their own misinformed actions. Three primary factors reduce the chances that lost pets will be found: (1) improper search techniques (2) lack of proper education about lost pet behaviors, and (3) rescuer behavior. All three factors inhibit redemptions and facilitate displacements.

#### *Improper Search*

Many people whose companion animals become lost are desperate to find their pet. But without an understanding of lost pet behavior and the proper way to search for an animal, the chance for recovery does not necessarily increase with the level of effort. In too many cases, their search does not facilitate recovery.

A recent study showed that of lost cats who were recovered, the vast majority were found in their own neighborhood. Only 7% of these cats were found by visiting an animal shelter. It is therefore imperative that shelters develop services to help people properly and effectively search their neighborhoods to help them recover even more of these missing cats. Traditional search-and-rescue probability theory shows that the likelihood of finding a missing person increases if the search is conducted in the areas where the missing person is most likely to be. The same holds true for missing cats. But that doesn't mean simply walking around the neighborhood calling out the cat's name or shaking a box of the cat's favorite treat, as some lost cats—such as panicked indoor-only cats who get out of their home—will not respond to even their owner's voice.

For example, as will be discussed in greater detail below, the proper technique that should be used to recover a displaced, panicked indoor-only cat who has escaped outside is setting a baited humane trap near the point of escape. But because most shelters aren't recommending humane traps for capturing lost cats, most people who have an indoor-only cat escape outside seldom consider using a trap. This method (called "trap-and-reunite" or "TAR") has produced remarkable results in recovering panicked, hiding cats that would have been absorbed into the feral cat and shelter populations.

People searching for lost dogs also have a difficult time recovering them because the odds are against them. The moment a dog escapes an owner's care, they lose all control over the fate of that dog. Loose, lost dogs are often picked up by people who determine what will happen to the dog. While some are taken to shelters, many are held and either self adopted or placed elsewhere. Sadly, dogs have a reduced chance of being recovered because the first location where dog owners are searching for their lost dog (the city pound) is sometimes the last location where a found dog will be taken (due to the fear that she/he will be killed by the shelter). This is very different from the central clearinghouse system established in law enforcement. If you lose a toddler or if you find a wandering toddler, the chances of reuniting the toddler with his/her family are high because everyone calls the same entity—9-1-1.

Ideally the local animal shelter would operate effectively, efficiently, rigorously, and comprehensively and would therefore save all the lives at risk. These shelters could then become the central clearinghouse where all found dogs and cats are taken and where all pet owners go when their pet has vanished. But due to high kill rates, finders of loose animals understandably do everything in their power to avoid taking the animal to the shelter. This behavior of not taking found animals to shelters was confirmed in a recent

study on lost dogs. The study showed that only 8% of respondents who found a stray dog immediately surrendered the dog to a shelter. The primary reason cited why they did not immediately take the animal to the shelter was the fear the shelter would kill the animal.

In addition to searching the shelter, the primary mode of recovery for lost dogs should be the dog owner working to *effectively* communicate to the public that their dog is lost. However, this is where dog owners typically fail. In most cases dog owners will plaster an area with white, 8 ½ x 11 lost dog flyers in an attempt to convey their message. However, very few people will notice a small, white lost pet flyer where the only message that can be read is REWARD LOST DOG. People—especially people driving through an area—are just too busy and distracted to pull over and read a flyer in order to decipher the information. Yet dog owners actually believe that their message is being conveyed to these potential witnesses. When no one calls with a sighting of the lost dog, the dog owner quickly gives up hope and stops searching.

The 8 ½ x 11 sheets of white paper are fine for posting at stores and veterinary offices, but they are not suitable for capturing the attention of people outdoors, especially those in automobiles. Studies on “Inattentional Blindness” and the nature of perception confirm this. Inattentional Blindness is defined as “a total failure of perception under conditions of inattention.” There is no perception without attention. This means that unless someone is paying attention to something (like a lost pet flyer), they will not see it. If a person is concentrating on driving, looking at a signal light, jogging, on an errand, or is talking on their cell telephone, they are simply not going to notice a lost pet flyer and they won’t receive the information that was posted.

However, there are several things pet owners can do to change the calculus. Studies have shown that a larger object (giant lost pet poster), for example, will capture attention quickly compared to a smaller object (8 ½ x 11 flyer). Moreover, an object placed within the “zone of attention” is more likely to be seen than one outside of that zone. This means that placing lost pet posters along the side of a road are less effective than placing them by traffic signals and stop signs at intersections where people slow down, stop, and/or focus their attention.

Because of what we’ve learned about Inattentional Blindness, shelters should advise pet owners to develop posters that fall under what Missing Pet Partnership calls the “5 + 5 + 55 RULE.” Here’s how it works. At any typical intersection, pet owners only have five seconds and five words to get their message across to drivers passing through the area. Therefore, there is an increased chance that a missing pet will be recovered if the owner/guardian creates posters using the following rules:

1. Make the posters GIANT so that people driving by cannot miss them.
2. Make them FLUORESCENT so that the color attracts the attention of everyone.
3. Put them at major intersections or busy highways near where the pet was lost (and in the area of sightings).
4. Keep them BRIEF and to the point.
5. Let them convey a VISUAL IMAGE (Reward! Lost Orange Tabby Cat; Yellow Labrador-type Dog Lost) of what has been lost.

Advising cat owners in how and where to search for lost cats and teaching dog owners the concept of creating giant, fluorescent posters are two methods that empower pet owners and increase the probability that lost dogs and cats will be found before they have a chance to enter a shelter.

#### *Lack Of Education About Lost Pet Behavior*

Another reason why pet owners fail to find their missing companion is their lack of understanding of lost animal behavior. There is a science, for example, to finding missing people with important parallels to the search for missing animals.

While most people walk their neighborhood calling out to their lost pet, search-and-rescue managers do not deploy resources to wander aimlessly in the woods to call out for lost people. There is an organized plan with set strategies which are based on the knowledge of how specific lost people behave. There

could be a backpacker, a berry picker, and a child all lost in the exact same area of woods but the tactics, techniques, and resources that search managers use to find these three different classifications of lost people are all very different.

Until recently, there has been no real effort put out by the mainstream animal welfare organizations into studying the behavioral patterns of lost dogs and cats. But understanding how dogs and cats behave when lost will help us understand how and where to search for them. This topic is too broad to cover in this article, but highlighting a few aspects of lost cat behavior to demonstrate why understanding behavior is key to the successful recovery of lost pets, will shed light on this issue.

Not all lost cat incidents should be treated the same. There are three basic categories of missing cats: displaced indoor-only cats, lost outdoor-access cats, and displaced outdoor-access cats. An indoor-only cat that escapes outdoors is a very different scenario than an outdoor-access cat that suddenly vanishes.

**Displaced Indoor-only Cats** – When an indoor-only cat escapes outside and is displaced into unfamiliar territory there is good news – it means the cat is probably not lost at all. That’s because displaced cats, depending upon the terrain, typically look for the first location that offers concealment and protection and they hide there. If the cat has a skittish temperament, the cat will typically remain immobile as long as he or she has found a good hiding place. The investigative question and mystery to solve when an indoor-only cat escapes outdoors is: *where is the cat hiding?*

**Lost Outdoor-Access Cats** – When an outdoor-access cat disappears, it means that something has happened to the cat to interrupt his/her behavior of coming home. Cats are territorial and they do not just run away from home (like some dogs do). Thus the tactics and techniques used to search for a missing cat should be different than those used to search for a missing dog. The investigative question and mystery to solve is: *what happened to the cat?*

Unless a cat was transported (intentionally or unintentionally) out of the area, missing outdoor-access cats are most likely to be found within a seven-house radius of the edge of their territory. That’s because sick, injured, and trapped cats tend to be found within their territory. Deceased cats tend to be found under decks or houses. When injured or ill, cats will rush or crawl into a place of concealment that is familiar to them such as under decks and houses. Oftentimes this will be their outdoor litter box. If the cat was chased by a predator, the cat may be several houses or a few blocks from home. On rare occasions (but it does happen) some cats will travel a several miles from their territory. The cats that end up the furthest (many miles) from home, and who are the most difficult to recover are those who were transported out of their territory.

**Displaced Outdoor-Access Cats** – When an outdoor-access cat has vanished, it is also possible that he/she is displaced and hiding in fear. Outdoor-access cats can become displaced into unfamiliar territory when they are chased off (beaten up by another cat, chased by a dog, etc.) and they end up in a yard or area that is totally foreign to them. Many cases where cats were "lost" turn up only some five houses or a block away, hiding inside a neighbor's yard in fear because they were disoriented and unable (or unwilling because of fear) to return home.

Ultimately, the reason why so many lost cats are never found and why the reclaim rate of stray cats is so low is because cat owners don’t understand lost cat behaviors. When a cat vanishes, cat owners post flyers in their neighborhood and expect results from sightings. The reality is that their cat might be trapped or hiding nearby where no one will see her. They ask neighbors to “look” for their cat, but realistically, neighbors are not going to crawl on their bellies to search under their house or deck for someone else’s cat! Yet neighbor’s yards are the locations where displaced and trapped cats are most likely to be found. Cat owners check the shelter cages for a few weeks, but their cat might remain hidden for several weeks or even months. And months later when the cat finally slinks out of hiding a block away and is trapped and transported to the shelter by a neighbor who believes the skittish cat is feral, the true owner who lost that cat has long since given up hope. The lost/stray cat is never claimed at the shelter and is ultimately killed there.

## What Should Shelters Do?

Every year, millions of dogs and cats escape from their homes and are never reunited with their families. The entire burden of finding and recovering a displaced dog or cat rests solely on the shoulders of the owner, who, in most cases, is not trained in how or where to search. They are not equipped with or trained in how to use animal capturing tools like humane traps. We offer every imaginable service under the sun for our companion animals but when they become separated from the families who love them, we leave lost pet recovery up to grieving people who are discouraged, overwhelmed, and untrained.

With everything working against them, people who lose their beloved dogs and cats need all the help they can get in order to achieve a successful reunion. Lost dogs and cats that are not returned to their families take up valuable space in our animal shelters. Through a MAR approach, there are various services that shelter workers can offer to help reunite lost pets with their families, thus reducing the number of strays that will enter their facilities.

In 2007, Washoe County Animal Services did a comparatively remarkable job in increasing their redemption rates of stray dogs to an unprecedented 54%, the highest in the United States. Rather than simply impound stray dogs, animal services officers made aggressive attempts to reunite stray dogs in the field. Officers check for identification, scan for microchips, knock on doors in the neighborhood where the dog was found, and talk to area residents rather than immediately transport found dogs to the shelters. They also carry mobile telephones so that they can immediately call the owner and facilitate a quick reunion.

If the dog is transported to the Washoe County facility, their shelter staff is equally aggressive through the use of the internet to facilitate dog redemptions. Photographs, identifying information, and location of where the dog was found is posted immediately onto a website so that owners can see if the dogs are in the shelter from their computers at home or at work.

But what Washoe County field and shelter officers do only scratches the surface of what shelters could do to improve redemption rates. Evidence of this is that Washoe County's redemption rate for stray cats was only 6%. Granted, this was three times the national average, and six times that of poorly performing shelters, but shelters can vastly increase these numbers by offering a fully functioning MAR program.

Every lost pet that is found before the animal enters the local shelter is one less animal that shelter workers will need to process. Giving pet owners the advice, tools, and access to resources that will help them humanely trap their displaced cat or quickly recover their missing dog will result in a reduction in the number of stray animals who enter shelters. In addition, providing actual assistance like shelter checks, posting found animal signs, and renting out humane traps will also increase return to owner rates both before and after impoundment.

Like rescuers, many shelter workers often assume that most of the unclaimed strays sitting in their cages were dumped or abandoned. Another assumption is that cat owners fail to come to the shelter because they are influenced by the "Lassie Syndrome" and believe that their missing cat will come home on his own. (While some cat owners do this, there are many others who do begin searching for their missing cats immediately.) There is an obvious yet overlooked third explanation about why stray cat redemption rates are so low and that is the one that is operating most of the time: failure to understand how lost cats behave when lost or displaced.

And without the proper understanding, support, and resources which should be provided by animal shelters, these owners give up. By the time the cats end up at the shelters, it is too late, the owner has lost hope. Shelter staff fail to make a match because effective systems are not in place to match lost and found animals, or the cat is assumed to be an ownerless feral. They are then killed, while shelter workers continue to blame an "irresponsible" owner, who in actuality, is at home grieving that everything they tried failed to bring back their beloved companion and thus erroneously concluded that some harm (other than shelter killing) likely befell the cat.

We often hear, for example, that the cat “must have been eaten by a coyote.” Even in areas with coyote populations, however, this is not as probable as commonly believed. A study on the diet of urban coyotes showed that while coyotes do occasionally consume cats, their primary diet consists of rodents, fruit, and wildlife. A study of over 1,400 coyote scats showed that domestic cats were found in only 1.3 % of the scats. The area studied was an area filled with outdoor cats. Despite the improbability of this outcome, however, cat owners and shelter workers continue to jump to the erroneous conclusion that predators were likely responsible for a cat’s disappearance and no further recovery effort to find the cat is made.

### Where Do We Go From Here?

Good information, humane traps, proper lost pet signs, found pet signs, and better systems in the shelter to match lost with found pets, is just the start. A fully comprehensive MAR program should also include:

**Improved Lost & Found Procedures** – Shelters check identification, scan for a microchip, knock on doors where the animal was found and talk to area residents to return lost dogs and cats to their homes rather than impounding them; upload photographs, descriptions and location where the animal was found onto websites like petharbor.com so that people can search for their lost animals from any computer; get complete information on the animals to increase the possibility of a match; hold strays beyond the minimum holding period; match lost with found reports and vice-versa; and have staff and supervisors walk through the shelter daily matching shelter animals with lost reports.

**Lost Pet Counselors** – Volunteers offer counseling, encouragement, strategy, training, and advice to every person who reports their pet missing. Every lost pet incident would be assigned a case number and detailed records would be maintained. Volunteers would routinely search the shelter cages for dogs and cats reported lost. If a “look alike” animal is found (even weeks or months later), volunteers would call the pet owner and ask them to come down and see if the caged stray is their lost pet.

**Reverse Search Team** – Volunteers respond to the neighborhood where a stray dog or stray cat was picked up by animal control. Volunteers, for example, can knock on doors and post a giant, fluorescent poster with a brief description of the animal.

**Missing Pet Search Team** – Volunteers conduct neighborhood checks, interviewing neighbors and passing out flyers to see if they have seen the missing cat or dog.

For those shelters who want to do even more, this can include:

**Night Patrol Team** – Volunteers drive through residential neighborhoods at night (using a spotlight at times) to look for the “eye shine” of missing cats and roaming lost dogs. Research has shown that many stray dogs and cats that have skittish temperaments will hunker down and hide during the day but will come out at night. This technique of slowly driving through neighborhoods looking for eye shine was tested in Los Angeles and proved to be successful in recovering missing cats that were found just a few blocks from their home. A study of the behavior patterns of free-roaming stray dogs indicates that they are most active in the hours surrounding dusk and dawn – from 5:00 a.m. until 8:00 a.m. and in the evening from 7:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m., hours when most shelters are not open for business and when officers are not out in the field. Using volunteers during these hours would help increase the number of stray, lost dogs that would be recovered before they had a chance of entering the shelter.

**Distant Shelter Check Team** – Volunteers throughout the region routinely search all nearby and distant shelters and rescue groups and report back if they found any “look alike” dogs and cats that match the description of the lost dogs and cats reported to the shelter.

**Cold Case Team** – Several times a week, volunteers compare the longer term binder photographs in lost dog and cat files with the stray dogs and cats in the shelter. If a potential match were found, they would contact the owner to come down to the shelter to see if the sheltered stray belongs to them.

**Follow-Up Team** – This team researches both lost and found notices on internet lost pet websites, Craig’s List, area rescue groups, websites like Petfinder, and local newspapers, while also conducting follow-ups on any LOST DOG and LOST CAT posters found in the community by volunteers. Most shelters unfortunately do not recommend that people post their lost pets on non-animal websites such as Craig’s List, but the average finder may be unaware of sites like [www.petharbor.com](http://www.petharbor.com), [www.lostpets.com](http://www.lostpets.com), or [www.pets911.com](http://www.pets911.com). Pet owners need to search for found pet advertisements and post lost pet information on websites where the general public is most likely to search, and that includes popular sites like Craig’s List.

**Referrals to Los Pet Resources** – Some communities now have certified MAR Technicians equipped with search dogs trained to detect or track the scent of lost pets.

And more.

### Looking Towards The Future

What would happen if all pet owners who have lost a dog or cat were offered comprehensive hands-on assistance, while volunteers or staff conducted an aggressive physical search to help them recover their missing pet?

Instead of passively waiting for pet owners to show up at the shelter, what if a paradigm shift took place and shelters went out into the community to look for the rightful owner of found strays?

How much would kill levels drop and how high would return-to-owner rates soar if aggressive efforts were put into returning found “stray” dogs and cats to the families from which they first escaped?

How many animals’ lives and how much money would be saved?

MAR is an important component of the No Kill Equation. And one that will help pave the way toward a No Kill nation.



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You can learn more at [www.missingpetpartnership.org](http://www.missingpetpartnership.org)