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They're not killing, they're taking lives

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A guy with a serious medical condition is admitted to the hospital. The doctor presents him with his options.

We can give you a modern treatment that has succeeded every time we have used it, he says. Or we can use a treatment developed in the 19th century. It never has succeeded, but it's very popular.

Which one do you choose?

That was the question posed for more than 100 animal lovers Monday night at Bethlehem's Comfort Suites by Nathan Winograd, author of the book "Redemption" and leader of America's animal shelter No Kill Revolution. He was brought in by the advocacy group No Kill Lehigh Valley.

The 19th century treatment in that allegory is the approach employed by the Lehigh County Humane Society and most other animal control shelters. Adopt out what animals you can within your own walls, kill the rest, blame it on bad pet owners and claim you're doing the best you can.

This approach has the support of all the nation's major animal welfare organizations, but if the goal is to reduce the population of unwanted dogs and cats -- short of just killing as many as possible -- it's not working.

At the Humane Society of the United States national animal sheltering conference a couple of years ago, a euthanasia expert said she prefers the term "humanely destroy" to "killing." Winograd played a tape of her remarks.

"Killing's such a negative connotation," she explained. "We are not killing them. We are taking their lives, we are ending their lives, we are giving them a good death, we are humanely destroying, whatever, but we are

not killing. And that is why I can't stand the term No Kill shelters."

The audience actually clapped at this Orwellian pronouncement.

War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Killing isÂ...Not Killing. Killing is Kindness.

The modern treatment, Winograd argued, is the one used successfully in a growing number of communities of various sizes and locations -- and the approach advocated, at least to some extent, by most of the Lehigh Valley's animal welfare organizations.

There will always be irresponsible people, he argued, so blaming them and awaiting an attitude change serves no constructive purpose, except to deflect responsibility.

There's nothing merciful about killing healthy, adoptable animals when you haven't done everything you can to find them homes and prevent future births.

The No Kill Equation, as outlined by Winograd, requires:

A comprehensive adoption program that includes convenient hours and an aggressive schedule of off-site adoptions. A comprehensive foster care program. A feral cat Trap-Neuter-Return program. A high-volume, low-cost spay/neuter program. Cooperation with local rescue groups.

Outreach to the community with advice and even hands-on help to improve pet retention. In-house medical and behavior rehabilitation. Strong public relations efforts. A strong volunteer program.

Winograd says that approach has worked in every community where it has been fully adopted. If every community embraced it, he says, we could save 4.5 million dogs and cats a year.

Not everyone buys into that. I've read articles criticizing Winograd's claims, arguing that he has sugar-coated problems with those success stories. I've talked to people who scoff at the idea that no kill is achievable in a shelter that doesn't turn animals away.

But even if adopting all the measures he outlined wouldn't eliminate the killing of unwanted dogs and cats, I have no doubt that it would drastically reduce it. That goal never will be achieved by repeating the failed policies of the past.

Unfortunately, he was mostly preaching to the choir Monday night. Until the leadership at the Lehigh Valley's remaining kill shelter is ousted or finally sees the light, we'll stay locked into that 19th century treatment that doesn't work.

Killing is killing.

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