

How We Did It:

How Nevada Humane Society Made Dramatic Improvements in One Year

by Bonney Brown

Many people have asked how we have made such dramatic improvements in the Washoe County, Nevada save rate for dogs and cats over the past year. So we have put together the game plan we used in hopes that it will help others who want to produce similar results in their communities.

Nevada Humane Society's Results for 2007

- We found new homes for 7,452 homeless dogs and cats and 578 other animals.
- The adoption rate increased 53% for dogs and over 84% for cats (compared to 2006).
- The number of dogs and cats killed in Washoe County animal shelters has declined by 51% for dogs and 52% for cats (compared to 2006).
- The save rate for dogs was 92% and 78% for cats and trending upward, despite a per capita intake rate that is over twice the national average and over three times that of many communities.
- The volunteer ranks increased from 30 to over 1,200 local citizens since expanding the volunteer program in March of 2007.



How We Did It

1. Establish priorities and align actions with them to save animals immediately.
2. Get “the right people on the bus.”
3. Invest time and assets in lifesaving.
4. Inspire and involve the community.
5. Increase adoptions.
6. Spay and neuter animals.
7. Actively work to keep animals out of shelters.
8. Provide a safety net for the feral cats.
9. Partner with other groups.
10. Stay flexible.

1. Establish priorities and align actions with them to save animals immediately.

First and foremost, make lifesaving priority one. The key to lifesaving is to increase the number of animals leaving area animal shelters alive today and each and every day.

To support these goals, we established four priorities:

- Create lifesaving solutions for the animals.
- Involve the community in our work.
- Deliver quality customer service.
- Provide excellent care to the animals.

Focus your energies. Rather than trying to be all-things-to-all-people and doing a mediocre job at that, we decided to focus on first doing a good job for our local community and the animals in it. Once this is accomplished, we plan to expand our reach from a position of success to make a real difference for other communities.

2. Get “the right people on the bus.”

In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins explains that the most successful businesses and organizations invest significant time in ensuring that they have “the right people on the bus.”



Clearly, people are the heart and soul of any organization, so we set out to find a team of managers and staff members who are committed to the organization’s mission and goals, share our lifesaving values, and have a strong work ethic. We also sought out people who had proven skills and a track record of success.

In making organizational change, there will be people on staff who will support the new direction and those who will not. A colleague who used to orchestrate turn-arounds in restaurants explained his rule of thumb: “One-third of the staff will quit when wholesale change is being implemented, one-third will support the new direction and, with training, will become valuable team members, and one-third will need to be let go.” Yes, that may mean termination of employment for a significant number of people. Admittedly, this is no fun for anyone involved, but it is a necessary step to move forward effectively. The

animals and the donors are counting on us to get this right even when it means making tough decisions.

On the plus side, when you have the right people on the team, a lot of things fall into place right away!

It is absolutely essential that each member of the management team be passionately committed to lifesaving and fully support the organization’s mission.

3. Invest time and assets in lifesaving.

Review every program in terms of its lifesaving impact. If a given program did not significantly and immediately contribute to saving lives, then we gave a hard look at letting it go. Though a program may be a nice thing to do, until we are saving all the animals that can be saved, we have a responsibility to ensure that we focus our resources and attention on creating a true safety net for homeless animals of the community – not next year, but right now.

We took a hard look at staffing levels and space allocation in the shelter to be sure it reflected our focus on saving lives and then made appropriate adjustments. For example, we eliminated the retail store, using the space for pet adoptions and let several traditional humane education projects go in order to focus on getting the community immediately involved in saving lives.

The power of words. All of us are subtly influenced by labels, so we made changes to ensure function names and job titles reflected our mission. The Intake Room became Admissions, Kennel Attendants became Animal Caregivers, and Office Assistants became Adoption Counselors. On the other side, we didn’t want to hide behind euphemisms and we never want to forget the gravity of ending an animal’s life, so euthanasia became killing.

4. Inspire and involve the community.

Make a public declaration. While the idea of making a public declaration to become a no-kill community may be intimidating, the declaration itself actually has a powerful effect. Not only does it focus your internal efforts on the no-kill community goal, but it helps inspire and energize the community to support what you do.

Most animal lovers really want animals to be saved, but they also lead busy lives. To inspire them to get involved you need to invite them to be part of something big, something exciting, and worth the effort. So declaring an all-out effort to create a no-kill community is an important step in getting the support you need to make it happen. Be sure to let people know exactly what you need them to do – ask them to donate for a specific purpose or to volunteer to do a specific task, such as walking dogs, socializing cats, distributing brochures, or fostering an animal.

One important thing to remember: When putting your no-kill goal out there to the public, you'll want to be sure to clearly define it and to report progress regularly by publishing statistics. We publish statistics monthly, including the number of animals coming into the community's primary shelters, the numbers adopted, and killed, both for the current and prior year.

Develop a volunteer program or revitalize the one you have. Be sure to offer a variety of volunteer opportunities from easy to more involved. Let volunteers know that even a couple of hours a month of their time can make a difference for the animals at the shelter. Many people need to start off slowly and become more involved over time.



While some volunteers have limited time, all of them want to make a real contribution. Volunteers need real jobs that make a real difference. For instance, our volunteer coordinator is herself, a volunteer. We have job descriptions for key volunteer opportunities that make expectations clear and on a monthly basis offer brief (one hour each) orientation and animal handling training sessions. Remember to make it easy for people to get involved.

A special and vital kind of volunteering is providing temporary foster care to litters of puppies or kittens who are too young to be put up for adoption, animals who are shy, those that need a little extra TLC, or those that need special medical care. A well-developed foster program can dramatically increase your shelter's lifesaving capacity and costs very little to run.

Volunteers can accomplish amazing things, you just need to ask them.

Reach out to the media. While ads (especially those sponsored by a donor or local business) are very beneficial, news releases are the best way to let people know what you are doing, why you are doing it, and what they can do to help. One of the first orders of business should be to create a media list that you add to as you make additional contacts. Be sure to include radio, television, and online, as well as print media. The goal should be to send out a genuinely newsworthy news release each week. Our news releases go out to promote each adoption event, to highlight special needs animals, and to report progress toward our goals.

Creating interesting events and promotions, sharing news and developments, and providing information on what your organization is doing is the best way to establish and develop relationships with the media and, in turn, get the needs of the animals out in front of the public. Always prioritize calls from the media and do your best to answer any questions on a timely basis. Be sure to let your staff know that media contact is a high priority so that they will immediately put any calls through to you.

Ask the community for feedback. We recently established Community Advisory Meetings, on the advice of an active volunteer. Ninety-minute meetings are held once a month where volunteers, rescuers, other groups, and concerned citizens can come together to give us feedback, ask questions, discuss topics of interest, and make recommendations.

Our meetings are structured so that at the beginning attendees can throw out any ideas they would like to discuss and they are documented on the board. Then each attendee gets to vote for the two or three they are most interested in discussing, creating a prioritized list of topics. This eliminated fringe topics that only one person may be interested in. It's important to have a strong leader chair the meeting to keep the discussions on track and within time limits.

The meetings give us insights into the needs of the community while also providing some creative suggestions. They also give us a chance to get our challenges out there to the attendees and to address concerns before they become big issues. We have found that they also stimulate support, as the attendees can be encouraged to become part of resolving the very issues they bring up.

5. Increase adoptions.

Set specific adoption goals for each event or for each month. Goals have a way of uniting and inspiring people, so you will want to let everyone know about your goals. Ask the staff, volunteers, and public to help you meet these goals, making it clear that they are helping save the lives of homeless animals. Be sure to congratulate and thank everyone when the goals are met too. For example, when we met our 1,000 adoptions goal for Home 4 the Holidays (1,006 adoptions) we sent out a news release to thank the community and hosted a pizza luncheon for the entire staff as they all contributed to the success.

As each adoption is cause to celebrate, we ring a triangle (a bell would work too) and everyone pauses to applaud when each adoption is completed. It reminds us all of what we are doing here and it makes the pet adopter feel special. Additionally, we have a white board behind the adoption counter where adoptions are recorded as they happen and where everyone can see the progress toward the event or monthly goal at any point in time.



There is someone for everyone – believe it. Old-school sheltering holds that there are not enough homes out there and that only animals who are attractive and easy going can be adopted. But, in fact, compassion knows no limits. Apart from animals who pose a genuine risk to public safety or those who have a poor medical prognosis, there really is someone out there for every pet – it is just a matter of marketing the individual animal.

Adoption Counselors play a dual role. They are looking out for the well being of the animals, to ensure that they are going to good homes, but they are also there to provide quality customer service to visitors and potential adopters, helping them find the perfect pet. In hiring staff, we are looking for people who like people as well as animals.

Open the shelter for pet adoptions when people are available. A retail store that wanted to be successful would not miss being open when people are off work – evenings, weekends, and holidays. We should not miss the opportunity to find homes for the animals at these times either. Usually, this can be accomplished at little or no additional cost by shifting the schedule to open the shelter a bit later in the morning when fewer people are likely to be coming in to adopt.

Bring the animals to the people. Statistically very few people get their pets from animal shelters. Many just don't think about it, others have misconceptions about shelters or are reluctant to visit. You can overcome all of these obstacles with offsite pet adoptions.

Don't buy into the outmoded concept that "impulse adoptions" are bad. Studies have proven this to be untrue. Humans are capable of many good and noble impulses, including adopting a pet and giving them a loving home.

Encourage the public to interact with the animals – to touch them, spend time with them, and fall in love with them. Even if they do not adopt, the animals enjoy the attention.

Old-school animal sheltering experts advise minimizing public contact with animals, but it is human nature to want to make personal contact. Politicians and retailers understand this and use it to their ends. We should certainly be putting the same psychology to work in the service of lifesaving.

Additionally, studies show that the benefit of socialization and contact not only increases adoptions, but also decreases the animals' stress which makes them more resistant to disease. So you see animals are healthier when they are played with, touched, and cuddled!

We have cat colony rooms and showcase cages for cats in the lobby to make them more visible and accessible. Volunteers walk dogs wearing "Adopt Me" vests throughout the shelter. These animals get adopted much more readily than the ones who are behind glass or bars where it is difficult for people to interact with them.

We are always looking for ways to encourage public interaction with the animals. Recently, we converted a room to create a new cat colony. The room had counters and we decided to leave them in place. As it turns out, the cats love to lounge on these counter tops, which happen to be at the perfect level for people interaction. We see dramatically increased adoptions out of this colony room and are looking for ways to get more cats at this optimal level in the other colony rooms.

Streamline the adoption process. We have found it to be most efficient to vaccinate, neuter, and microchip each dog and cat before they go onto the adoption floor. (Actually, we vaccinate each dog or cat within minutes of their arrival at the shelter, which dramatically reduces the risk of the animal becoming ill in the shelter.) Doing these things up front has the benefit of allowing people to take the pet home as soon as the adoption is finalized, which is not only more efficient for the shelter staff, but it is more rewarding for the pet adopters. (Now, if you do not have the capacity to do this right away, it should not be viewed as an obstacle to lifesaving.)

Make documents and forms practical and user-friendly. Paperwork and policies are, of course, necessary parts of the adoption process, but we strive to make the paperwork and interview as friendly as possible while still obtaining the information needed to make a quality decision. (Sometimes, in the zeal to ensure that pets are going to good homes, groups can alienate potential adopters.)



While the animals are relying upon us to be sure that they are going to good homes, making this determination comes more from a person-to-person conversation, rather than a form. Studies show that knowledge about animal behavior, reasonable expectations for the pet, and the bond between the person and the animal are far better predictors of successful adoptions than rigorous grilling and rigid adherence to a set of rules. Our adoption process includes an interview form that guides the adoption counselor through their discussions with the prospective adopter.

Make it is easy to identify staff and volunteers. We invested in logo shirts for staff and volunteers. Staff members wear royal blue and volunteers wear forest green. It made it much easier for visitors to spot someone who can help and had the beneficial effect of helping the staff feel like a team.

Make the shelter a welcoming place. We like to encourage the community to visit, even if they aren't necessarily looking to adopt. The extra attention is good for the animals, the visitors are more likely to tell family and friends about the animals they saw leading to adoptions later, and the goodwill leads to more community support.

Be sure that staff and volunteers know to greet visitors with a smile, make eye contact, and offer to help or answer any questions. Provide places for people to sit to interact with the animals. Toys and brushes in cat rooms and dog exercise areas give people an easy way to interact with the animals. Holiday decorations, activities, and refreshments encourage visitors to spend a bit of extra time.

Providing a place the volunteers can call their own, even if it is modest in size, demonstrates that volunteers are a valued part of the organization.



Aggressively promote pet adoptions with fun events. Come up with fun ideas and programs that will get media attention and create excitement around pet adoptions. In addition to news releases about the events, be sure to create simple 8.5 x 11” posters for volunteers to distribute. Don’t forget pet-of-the-week ads in the local paper or in conjunction with local television and radio stations. We are happy to provide samples of some of the adoption events that have been most successful for us.

One of our newest programs is called Staff Picks. Just like in the book or video store, we have asked the staff to let the public know about their favorite animal. Staff members get their photo taken with the pet and it, along with the animal’s story, is posted in the lobby. Visitors love it and so does the staff.

Keep adoption fees reasonable and offer special prices on pet adoptions when you really need to call attention to the animals.

After all, people who are adopting will have other expenses associated with acquiring a new pet. The ability to pay a large adoption fee does not guarantee a good home. If it did, we would not be seeing purebred dogs in animal shelters.

6. Spay and Neuter Animals

Low-cost and free spay/neuter services have been proven to reduce shelter intake (a key part of any successful no-kill community plan) making spay/neuter incredibly cost effective.

Fix mom and dad. When people surrender kittens or puppies, we offer to neuter the mom and other pets in the household for free. Feral cats should also be neutered free of charge and returned to their home turf whenever possible as part of a Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) effort.

Focus efforts where it will have greatest impact. As pit bulls are among the most frequently surrendered or impounded dogs in our community, our Pit Bull Spay/Neuter Program not only offers free spay/neuter and vaccinations, but pays a \$5 rebate to residents who get their pit bulls fixed at our clinic.

Getting the job done. Many organizations require that people produce proof of low-income status to qualify for assistance, but we have found that in many cases those who need the help the most do not have things together enough to submit forms and documentation. Additionally, even gainfully employed people can find it challenging to pay full cost to spay the mom cat and kittens they kindly took in. Instead of a lot of rigid requirements and forms, we have sensible, compassionate people spend a little bit of time talking with the individual about their situation and make a decision about how we can best help.

Another mistake some people make is putting a lot of effort into mandatory spay/neuter legislation. While spay/neuter legislation that requires shelters and pet stores to neuter all pets can be a good idea, the effort and energy that goes into passing legislation that focuses on individual pet owners can almost always be better spent ensuring that low-cost and free spay/neuter services are readily available and accessible to the people who need it most.

7. Actively work to keep animals out of area shelters.

Establish an Animal Help Desk. You are probably only too familiar with the reasons why people bring animals to shelters or abandon them, but what you may not know (or believe) is that many of these situations can be resolved in such a way that will keep the animals out of the shelter. After all, shelters are stressful places for animals and should be places of last resort, not a readily available dumping ground.

Most pet owners are not animal behavior experts and not everyone is good at problem solving, but we have found that many people are willing to try a few things to help keep their pet. The suggestions may include behavior modification, training, minor changes to the environment, vet care, or – if they really cannot keep the pet – making the effort to find a new home for the pet themselves. Sometimes we provide practical assistance, vet care, free spay/neuter services, or pet food. In other cases, all the caller needs is a bit of information and moral support. The Animal Help Desk received 300 requests the first week it opened and now averages 400 calls or e-mails per week.

We are happy to share our Animal Help Desk Handbook with other organizations who want to establish such a program for their community.

Spay/Neuter. Of course, one of the most important ways to keep animals out of shelters is through spay/neuter and TNR programs. Because they are so critical, they are actually key points on their own (points 6 and 8).

8. Provide a safety net for the feral cats.

Promote Trap/Neuter/Return (TNR) and Provide Free Spay/Neuter for Feral Cats. TNR programs have been proven to dramatically reduce the number of cats coming into area shelters and improve the lives of outdoor cats. A TNR program is very cost effective and immensely popular with the public.

We're fortunate to have a local group, Community Cats, that has been providing free spay/neuter for feral cats for six years. If such a program does not exist in your community, you really need to get one started. You can find everything you need to know about how to start a TNR program on the Alley Cat Allies website at www.alleycat.org.



Council People who Surrender Feral Cats. People who are surrendering feral cats to animal shelters often mistakenly believe that they are doing the cat a service and that the kitty has a chance of being adopted as a pet. For this reason, anyone surrendering feral cats should be engaged in a conversation about the fate of feral cats in shelters and offered the alternative of TNR. Once people learn that the cat will be okay living outside once neutered and that impoundment usually leads to death, many opt for TNR.

A recent survey showed that 81% of the public would rather see the cat live out their life outdoors than be destroyed in an animal control facility.

Create a Barn Cat Adoption Program. Once feral cats end up in a shelter it is usually a death sentence for them. In addition to an active TNR Program to keep them out of the shelter in the first place, a Barn Cat Adoption Program can be the ticket to a new chance at life for feral cats who cannot be returned to their original home.

We are happy to share the details on our Barn Cat Adoption Program, but you can also check out the Barn Cat Inc. program at www.barncats.org. Their *Katrina Cats* presentation will show you how to set up a program for your shelter or community.

9. Partner with other groups.

Non-profit organizations often seem to believe that there is a limited pie of resources out there and, therefore, they are in direct competition with other humane groups in the community. This is really more a matter of perception than reality. Animal lovers are amazingly generous, especially when they feel that groups are working together to get an important job done.

Our lifesaving success would truly not be possible without the support of the many amazing local rescue groups and individual rescuers who are hard at work every day helping to get the animals out of the shelters alive. SPCA of Northern Nevada, Community Cats, Shakespeare Animal Fund, and many other humane groups are truly our partners in life saving.

Animal Control organizations and other major shelters should work with legitimate rescue groups, making any animal available to them, at any time, and without charging fees to release the animal.

10. Stay flexible.

While we continue to streamline processes and document them to ensure the smooth operation of the shelter, we also strive to remain flexible about how we achieve our goal. We seek creative, even unconventional, solutions to save lives – which is always priority one.

Find the opportunities in challenges. Animals and people being what they are, unexpected things will always come up. If animal control busts a hoarder, if there is a natural disaster, or if an injured animal needs expensive care, ask the public to come forward to help. They will adopt the animals, make donations to provide care, volunteer to help, or provide foster homes – all you have to do is ask.

You Can Do It!

No-kill is not only achievable, but it is richly rewarding to be a part of making it happen. Knowing that homeless dogs and cats, who so want and deserve a chance at life, have gotten that chance because of your work is exciting and fulfilling – it just doesn't get much better. It is a feeling that you too can know. Don't miss the opportunity; make your community no-kill too! Start today!

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Creating a no-kill community: The national No Kill Advocacy Center provides excellent resources and consulting services – www.nokilladvocacycenter.org
- Spay/neuter programs: Spay USA provides a wealth of resources about spay/neuter – www.spayusa.org
- Feral cats: Alley Cat Allies offers everything you need to know about saving feral cats in your community – www.alleycat.org
- Barn cat programs: Barn Cats Inc. has a terrific barn cat program that could be a model for your community too – www.barncat.org
- Adoption events: Two nationwide events that you can create in your community
 - Home 4 the Holidays – www.animalcenter.org/home4theholidays
 - Pet Adoptathon – www.nsalamerica.org/how_we_help/adoptathon
- Photography: Photos are invaluable in telling your story. Petimage.org provides low cost image and photo services to non-profit animal welfare groups – www.petimage.org
- Library of resources: Best Friends Animal Society's website includes two extensive resource libraries under No More Homeless Pets and You and Your Pets. Between them they cover everything from no-kill philosophy to pet care information. – www.bestfriends.org

- No-kill community in action: Nevada Humane Society – www.nevadahumanesociety.org

BOOKS

- *Redemption: The Myth of Pet Overpopulation and the No Kill Revolution in America*, by Nathan J. Winograd (2007: Almaden Books)
- *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great*, by Jim Collins (2005: HarperCollins)
- *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*, by Jim Collins (2001: Collins)
- *Disposable Animals: Ending the Tragedy of Throwaway Pets*, by Craig Brestrup (1998: Camino Bay Books)