

"Mission: Orange" & the Wizard of "A"

Failure is the New Success with the ASPCA's "Mission: Orange"



Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain

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When Fix Austin, a grassroots group of animal advocates working to reform Austin's abysmal shelter system released their report on the results of the community's first year under "Mission: Orange," the ASPCA's national No Kill campaign, its results held key information for understanding the program and its implications for the rest of the nation.

Rather than declining with the infusion of hundreds of thousands of dollars, killing in Austin, TX, actually increased 11% in 2007, the first year of the campaign. An animal had *less* chance of coming out of the shelter alive in Austin, TX, under "Mission: Orange" than it did just one year before. That this is a travesty goes without saying. But what makes it especially tragic, indeed devastating, is that it was neither surprising nor necessary. As the Fix Austin report makes clear, the city should have gone the way of Reno, Nevada, which during the same time period and with a new No Kill initiative unrelated to the ASPCA, saw deaths decline by 53%. The contrast between the two approaches and their results is a stunning indictment of the "Mission: Orange" program.

But you would not know that if you read the public relations coming out of the ASPCA. By simply not talking about the numbers saved or killed, the ASPCA put out a one-year progress report billing the campaign as a success. And the ASPCA continues to claim that Austin holds promise for the rest of the nation as it moves towards becoming a "sustainable model."

There are many reasons why "Mission: Orange" failed its first year in Austin. Instead of following existing models of success, including a foster care program, increasing volunteer and rescue group partnerships, expanding offsite adoption venues, a TNR initiative and all the other programs of the No Kill Equation, the shelters simply "discounted" the costs for cat adoptions during the summer and combined it with token level spay/neuter for feral cats. In addition, advocacy efforts focused around a decision—supported by "Mission: Orange," the ASPCA, and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS)—to move the animal control shelter from its central location that is the daily destination of thousands of Austinites to a more remote, out-of-the-way part of the city where it

would be out of sight and out of mind but would give shelter bureaucrats bigger offices at the expense of animal space.

Nor are “Mission: Orange” failures limited to Austin. In Philadelphia, another “Mission: Orange” city, the Pennsylvania SPCA promoted a watered down version of No Kill with “adoptable” standards so strict that shy cats, cats with ear mites, pregnant cats, and even cats with fleas would not be saved in their “collaboration” with the animal control shelter, according to a PSPCA draft. Meanwhile, that animal control shelter has allowed killing-oriented approaches to creep back into the agency while the ASPCA sits on the sidelines asking everyone not to criticize “Mission: Orange” funding is, in fact, predicated on not going public with concerns about the policies or practices of shelter directors in the community because this is seen as “criticism” which violates some vague notion of “collaboration.” This ignores not only the fact that silence as to inhumane conditions or policies is unethical but also that the approach dooms No Kill to fail.

What makes “Mission: Orange” downright dangerous is that it is being promoted as a legitimate step on the path to No Kill (though the ASPCA is very careful not to use that term, preferring vague terms like “humane community” or “no more unnecessary euthanasia”), when nothing could be further from the truth. Like the fake wizard in the Wizard of Oz, “Mission: Orange” has lots of noise, lots of theatrics, down to the name but is devoid of substance that will have positive, measurable impact for the animals.

What is behind the “Mission: Orange” curtain of rhetoric? Primarily, “Mission: Orange” fails to address the fundamental problems that lead to killing or to demand accountability of those receiving the money to put into place the programs and services that would end it. Instead, it demands silence as to shelter atrocities and allows shelters to continue with programs that represent the status quo.

Campaigns like “Mission: Orange”—which ignore the vital truth that we already know what it takes to save lives—give the public the illusion of progress and a commitment to No Kill but in reality do little to foster its implementation. And when such efforts fail, as they invariably do, the public begins to grow weary of unmet promised goals and erroneously concludes that No Kill is simply not achievable. At the same time, these flawed efforts seek to walk the political tightrope of demonstrating support for No Kill to the general public without offending entrenched shelter directors who are hostile to calls for true reform. As a result, while the ASPCA puts out press releases saying that it supports No Kill, it falls short of what is needed—in fact, makes things worse—as it props up shelter directors who put their interests above those of the animals, while providing them money and political support without demanding accountability in return.

For years, and despite the tenacious efforts of local grassroots organizations such as Fix Austin, the director of Austin’s Town Lake Animal Control has refused to put in place a public foster care program, for example, even though No Kill is simply impossible without one. She has also publicly stated that her staff doesn’t have time to do more adoptions, although high volume and comprehensive adoption efforts, including evening and weekend hours and multiple offsite venues supported by volunteers, have proven indispensable in those communities that have achieved No Kill success. As long as this type of thinking is not challenged under “Mission: Orange,” No Kill will remain out of reach. Because without full and comprehensive implementation of all the programs of the No Kill Equation, at-risk animals will continue to die.

Ed Sayres, the President of the ASPCA, knows this, but demands no policy changes in line with these principles in exchange for the ASPCA’s “Mission: Orange” financial and political support. As the former head of the San Francisco SPCA, he knows full well what it takes to make a community succeed at lifesaving. While he claims to have “successfully implemented” the model in San Francisco, the reality is that he *inherited* it. Nonetheless, Sayres did oversee a staff that ran the most successful shelter in the country, and he was able to see first hand *why* it was so successful. During his tenure, the San Francisco SPCA produced a document called “Mission: Possible” which underscored the necessity of what eventually would be called the No Kill Equation. Given that, why does he now promote a so-called “solution” which fails to fully demand all of the programs that were responsible for San Francisco’s success?

To say that each community is unique and should decide for itself what programs are wanted, while putting a premium on “collaboration” at the expense of demanding accountability from shelters and shelter leadership is to elevate form over substance. More importantly it is a betrayal of the animals. Given that the ASPCA has had a 100-year “free ride” when it comes to providing substantive solutions to killing, this is not surprising. But it is disturbing nonetheless, given Sayres’ history in San Francisco, the then-safest community in the United States for animals and the first to end the killing of healthy, homeless dogs and cats. (In this same vein, the American Humane Association’s “Getting to Zero” and HSUS’ “Asilomar Accords” are all variants of the “Mission: Orange” half-hearted effort to defuse public criticism for kill-oriented histories while doing little to actually end the systematic killing of animals in shelters.)