

Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the Curtain

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

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

Rather than see a decline in killing with the infusion of hundreds of thousands of dollars, killing actually increased 11% during the first year of the campaign. An animal had *less* of a 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 of its own unrelated to the ASPCA, saw deaths decline by 53%. The contrast in both approaches and 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 communities which are succeeding in their No Kill goals through 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 a token level of spay/neuter for feral cats. In addition, advocacy efforts focused around a decision—supported by "Mission: Orange," the ASPCA, and also 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 have given 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 where "adoptable" standards are so strict that shy cats, cats with ear mites, pregnant cats, and even cats with fleas appeared on a PSPCA draft of animals that would not be saved in "collaboration" with the animal control shelter. 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." Not only does this ignore the fact that silence as to inhumane conditions or policies is unethical, but that the approach dooms No Kill to fail.

What makes "Mission: Orange" downright dangerous is that it is being promoted as a legitimate 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 devoid of substance that will have the level of positive, measurable impact for the animals to make No Kill a reality.

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

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 actual 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 trying to demonstrate 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 can put out press releases that it supports No Kill, it falls short of what is needed—in fact, makes things worse—as it props up shelter directors whose interests are put 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 has proven indispensable in those communities which 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 at the same time putting a premium on “collaboration” at the expense of demanding accountability from shelters and shelter leadership is not only to elevate form over substance, it is a betrayal of the animals. Given that the ASPCA has had a 100-year “free ride” when it comes to providing dogs and cats with substantive solutions to killing, it 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

* The ASPCA claims that the “color orange is identified with vibrancy and energy.” Indeed, the color orange appears to be a favorite among the “aura” reading crowd who claim that orange signifies “vibrancy” and “innovation.” As a result, the ASPCA hopes that the public will identify the color “with the welfare of animals.” Hence, the name “Mission: Orange.” This type of un-measurable and “feel good” focus that is devoid of substance also marked the San Francisco SPCA tenure of Sayres. Under Sayres’ direction, the San Francisco SPCA spent a significant amount of money on esoteric conferences about communicating with dead pets, insects as messengers of the “soul,” and other similar topics instead of focusing all its energy (and resources) on saving the animals actually facing death in shelters. Roughly during the same time period, the San Francisco SPCA underwent its first “forced” lay-offs of staff and cutting of critical programs due to budget problems in 135-years.

Zero” and HSUS’ “Asilomar Accords” are all variants of the “Mission: Orange” half-hearted effort to diffuse public criticism for kill-oriented histories while doing little to actually end the systematic killing of animals in shelters.)

What Would It Look Like If These Groups Were Sincere and Adamant About No Kill?

We have been conditioned to expect very little from these large, stagnant behemoths. So much so, in fact, that we label it as progress when they merely temper their language to be less openly hostile to No Kill, while doing very little to actually promote it nationwide despite its proven success—on the contrary, some organizations like HSUS continue with business as usual fighting true No Kill initiatives on the local level and promoting “No Kill equals hoarding” rhetoric at national conferences.

Now that we know how to end the killing, there is only one directive: nationally promote the model that has made it a reality in communities which have fully and rigorously implemented it. To do that successfully, we need to replace every shelter director who refuses to implement that model immediately with those who will. These are our most pressing and urgent responsibilities towards the animals who end up in our nation’s shelters. As organizations theoretically committed to the goal of promoting animal welfare, and taking in millions of dollars a year from animal lovers who believe this is what their philanthropic dollars are going to promote, this is an ethical, moral and strategic imperative. Shelter directors who refuse to implement the No Kill Equation have no place in our movement. If we truly care about animals, that is the inevitable conclusion. Because the model of lifesaving has been around for more than a decade, any director who is sincere in their desire to save lives would have implemented it by now. There is no reason to wait any longer. And as Maddie’s Fund has proven, even hundreds of millions of dollars can’t change the calculus. After ten years, they still do not have one No Kill community based on the collaboration model. Not even one. Why?

Collaboration does not work because lack of collaboration is not why animals are being killed. Because it never was about getting along or not getting along. Often, it isn’t even about the money. It’s about the No Kill Equation model and those whose job it is to implement the model, but refuse to do so. It is about the shelter directors. Because at the end of the day, what we are suffering from, what is truly killing animals in U.S. shelters is an overpopulation of shelter directors content with the status quo and mired in the failed philosophies of the past.

Raising Our Expectations

Despite this reality, I continue to hear from some people (admittedly, a scant few but often using very forceful and colorful language) saying that I should give credit where credit is due; that groups like HSUS and the ASPCA are “changing.” This, of course, begs several questions. What does “changing” mean and how long does it take? Rather than *changing*, why don’t they just *change*? Should we have to wait for “animal protection” organizations to stop supporting the systematic killing of animals? Instead, shouldn’t that be a given? And, more importantly, what would that change look like? In other words, what would a sincere and adamant commitment to No Kill by these organizations result in? Because instead of the “crumbs” they give with one hand (and often take away with the other), what would a truly No Kill committed HSUS or ASPCA do *in practice*?

First of all, they would recognize that there is an epidemic of uncaring among shelter directors which is at crisis proportions and therefore, they would stop providing the political cover and legitimacy represented by the fiction that “*all stakeholders in the animal welfare community have a passion for and are dedicated to the mutual goal of saving animals’ lives.*” (Asilomar Accords signed by HSUS, ASPCA, and AHA.) To do so would recognize the reality that rescuers, grassroots activists, feral cat caretakers and those involved in shelter reform nationwide face daily in their struggle to save the lives of the animals in their communities: that our nation’s shelters are failing, that they are hostile to calls for reform and innovation, and that in many cases, they are neglecting and abusing the animals in their care.

This recognition would immediately put an end to this and other misleading rhetoric that these groups are fond of: “we all want the same things,” “no one wants to kill,” “collaboration [with these shelters/shelter directors] is key,” “we need to stop fighting each other and focus on our common enemies.” These

pronouncements are, first and foremost, a distraction. But, more importantly, they are simply not true. The evidence is overwhelming that many shelter directors find killing easier than doing what is necessary to stop it. When shelter directors kill animals rather than avail themselves of opportunities to save them (e.g., foster care, working with rescue, keeping cages and kennels full rather than empty), they would rather kill the animals than not kill them. As a result, they become the enemies of those who truly love dogs and cats and find killing them what it is: unethical, outrageous, abhorrent, and intolerable.'

In practice, recognition of this fact by the large national groups would mean reporting to the public and shelter administrators that No Kill has been achieved, requires full implementation of the No Kill Equation, and requires the removal of shelter leaders who refuse to do so. It means promoting the communities which have achieved levels of No Kill success that others have not. Instead of functionaries from groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals which kill over 90% of the animals they take in giving workshops at their national conferences, they would have representatives from communities which save over 90% of the animals they take in.

At Expo 2009, HSUS' national conference on sheltering, we should see workshops like: "Charlottesville saved 90% of all impounded animals. Learn how you can too." And "Reno reduced shelter rates of killing by over 50% in one year, find out how." We should see seminars like: "Reforming your local shelter" which would include not only a sincere discussion about how shelters currently do not reflect the values of animal lovers and often kill in the face of readily available lifesaving alternatives, but how to force them to change when they refuse to do so willingly, as they often do.

It means arguing in all publications, advocacy efforts, educational materials, media interactions and conferences that No Kill is the only legitimate standard for animal sheltering—and must be embraced by all shelters with sincere commitment and with all deliberate speed.

This means stating unequivocally that, with the *possible* exception of those who are irremediably suffering, hopelessly ill or injured, or truly vicious dogs with a poor prognosis for rehabilitation, sheltered animals have a right to live, and that shelters must modernize and innovate by replacing century old ways of doing business with the life-affirming programs and services of the No Kill Equation as outlined in the U.S. No Kill Declaration, in order to give meaning to that right.

It means no longer fighting activists who are trying to reform their shelters but assisting them in doing so—even when doing so means fighting an entrenched shelter director that refuses to change. It means no longer rewarding failing shelter directors with speaking engagements at their conferences, with features in their magazines, with national awards, or—as in Austin—with hundreds of thousands of dollars which are squandered.

It is time for action, not empty words, not meaningless platitudes, not ineffectual campaigns that appear sexy or have fancy, esoteric names and give the illusion of promoting No Kill, but, in reality will do nothing but perpetuate the status quo—or, as in the case of Austin, actually make things worse for the animals.

That would be a good start. And would truly demonstrate that these groups are "changing" in deeds, as well as words. But it is only a start. That, of course, would be quickly followed with investments of their huge resources in changing communities, in lobbying for change in communities, including a widespread effort to reform shelters, remove entrenched kill-oriented directors, and provide the infrastructure needed to achieve success. That is the kind of approach critically missing from these organizations. And it is critically missing from campaigns like "Mission: Orange," "Getting to Zero," and the "Asilomar Accords."

Instead of using esoteric references to the color orange that don't seem to apply, let's call the campaign for what it is. The continued failure to follow proven models and demand true accountability while thwarting these efforts at the local level is precisely why "Mission: Orange" should be called "Agent Orange." It will do nothing to end the war against shelter killing just like its namesake did nothing to end the war in Vietnam. Instead, it carpet bombs the local activists working for true reform. By demanding

silence in the guise of collaboration as a precondition to receiving support, by using the ASPCA brand to provide legitimacy and political cover to directors who continue to thwart the will of animal lovers, by giving money to groups which know that simply blaming the public will allow them to forestall necessary changes, No Kill can never be achieved. And the sooner we all realize that, the quicker we can move past empty rhetoric and unfulfilled promises and focus our reform efforts where they should be, precisely because that it is where they will have the most impact: on the very shelters and especially the shelter directors actually doing the killing.

We need regime change at all levels of this movement. And we need it now.

For more information, including links to the report and more, go to www.nokillblog.com