

# Word Games That Kill

September 19, 2008

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Is the controversy over the term “no-kill” just a matter of semantics? Some shelter industry insiders insist that it is, but their heated reactions to the words suggest that something else is going on. When we profess a commitment to “no-kill”, we create friction against their attempts to frame the discussion in a way that protects their vested interests in the status quo, systematic killing of homeless animals in shelters.

People of good faith justifiably debate the ethical and practical concerns that the language highlights. Literal interpretation of the phrase “no-kill” would exclude practices that are accepted by many, if not most, no-kill advocates and in the culture at large: Euthanasia for suffering and terminally ill pets is a commonly accepted standard of humane care. Few alternatives currently exist to killing aggressive animals (mostly dogs) who pose a danger to the human population. The vast majority of the public accepts and expects that shelters put animals to death under these circumstances just as caring, agonized owners do.

Public discourse exists about these exceptions. Most people who voice objections of this kind plead for *less* killing. Some people are morally opposed to the default of facilitating death in terminally ill animals. They propose options like hospice with pain control until the onset of natural death. Others are sticklers for raising awareness of the dilemmas surrounding even last-resort killing, such as the destruction of dogs bred or trained by humans to be vicious and dangerous.

These are not the intentions of the leaders of many public and private shelters and national organizations that claim to advocate for animals. The purpose of their arguments is to deflect challenges to their authority to kill. Their usual criticisms about the term “no-kill” are that it is “inaccurate”, “confusing and misleading to the public”, and “divisive”. It is not evident, though, that the public is confused -- except to extent that no-kill enemies have proactively deceived them.

So, why does the language inspire such ire in some directors of public and private shelters and national animal advocacy organizations? In “What Has No-Kill Accomplished?” Merritt Clifton, editor of *Animal People* states it plainly: “Another way to describe the ‘no-kill’ movement might be ‘the democratization of animal sheltering’.”

Clifton points out that over the past twenty years, declines in animal shelter deaths have been dramatic. A meaningful proportion of the public has gotten the messages about altering their pets, adopting from shelters, and training. Many people spend money on pet sitters and doggie play groups and day care, to keep their pets despite pet-unfriendly lifestyles. The responsible members of the public, those who are holding up our end of the bargain, now demand a higher level of performance from people who collect paychecks funded by tax or donation dollars. We are calling that demand “no-kill.”

“No-Kill” is not a descriptor. It is a set of marching orders from communities to industry people, and some entrenched leaders just don't like it. Its use signifies demands for life-saving programs and policies, and for results. It says:

“Animal control departments: Be diligent about reuniting lost animals with people who may be looking for them, providing adequate shelter and medical care, and exhausting every

alternative for placing animals in homes, with rescue organizations, or in sanctuaries instead of killing them.”

“Private humane societies and SPCAs: Use our donations and volunteer hours wisely, apply sound business practices and up-to-date technologies, and take on the tough behavioral and medical cases rather than abandoning the hardest work to private individuals.”

“National animal advocacy organizations: Leverage your influence and money to advance the status of animals in society; for example, if local animal control departments kill feral cats as pests, defend the cats rather than the barbarity. Fund research and programs directed at discovering life-saving innovations rather than giving grants to bail out poor performers.”

*Animal Sheltering* is a publication of the Humane Society of the United States, "the nation's largest animal protection organization," in its own words. Large, here, refers to its coffers; HSUS does not operate shelters. A piece entitled "The Language of Cooperation" lauds efforts in Denver, Colorado, to clarify labels attached to animals coming into the public and private shelters in the area. It tells the story of a coalition of staff from area agencies that came together for a "definitions task force." According to committee member Martha Smith of All Breed Rescue Network, "no-kill" was dismissed as "negative, destructive, judgmental, divisive, and dishonest." No surprises there.

Now, consider a quotation concerning the term "rescue." Jan McHugh-Smith, Asilomar Accords participant, former CEO of the Humane Society of Boulder Valley (Colorado), and current President of the San Francisco SPCA, is quoted as saying, "In some communities, the word 'rescue' has been divisive, but not in Denver—All Breed Rescue Network has always been supportive of the work shelters do, never using its own name to deride it. The word 'rescue' has never been used offensively, and so no one seems offended."

Pay attention to the way these speakers use words: "Dishonest" refers to the precision of their opponents' terms. "Deride", "offensive" (as contrasted with "supportive"), "judgmental", and "divisive" all refer to something else. Specifically, they suggest a lack of deference to those folks in the political position to get seats on bodies like the "definitions task force."

For all their talk about accuracy, no-kill detractors are willing to stretch definitions beyond reason when it comes to their own terms of art. At the Humane Society International's Animal Expo 2006, Penny Cistaro of the Whatcom Humane Society in Washington gave a presentation entitled "Euthanasia", which covered methods and techniques for killing while minimizing anxiety for both animals and workers. When confronted by an audience member about her organization's use of the euphemism "humanely destroy," she objected vehemently to the use of the word "kill" to describe killing. She proceeded to reveal her attitude to everyone in earshot.

"We're not killing them," she says, a statement that would suggest to a casual listener that sheltering organizations are not putting animals to death.

"'Kill' is such a negative connotation," she continues, though the use of the word kill to describe killing is, technically, a denotation. The associated connotation is that the people carrying out the killing are killers.

"We are taking their life. We are ending their life. We are giving them a good death," she insists, using a cascade of verbs that are increasingly benign and distanced. By the end of this string of sentences, the accused killers are givers, though Cistaro stops short of the claim made proudly by PETA's Ingrid Newkirk that "euthanasia is the kindest gift."

By the end of her outburst, Ms. Cistaro becomes too exasperated even to sputter out the final syllable of her preferred term, "humanely destroy", a phrase stripped of direct connection to "life", "death" or "killing." Communicating contempt for the person who had the nerve to question her, her final word is, "Whatever."

The response from this audience of animal welfare professionals: Applause.

It has been said that, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." What better example of absolute power exists in our society today than the statutory authority to put living creatures to death under the cover of trade secret and to police even the words people use to describe what you are doing?

In response to a flurry of negative publicity that included unfavorable coverage in the local independent press, public criticism by unhappy former volunteers and staff, a protest outside of the facility, and an internet petition calling for the resignation of the current senior management team, the San Francisco SPCA posted on their Website "a response to inaccuracies", authored by board president Catherine Brown. Unfortunately, Ms. Brown introduced her own inaccuracies into her reassurances, "It is important for people to know that we have not changed our decades-old commitment to trying to find a home for every adoptable animal under our roof. In the past, that's been called 'no-kill'."

In fact, this statement hedges the agency's pledge. Article 1.2 of San Francisco's Adoption Pact, effected on April 1, 1994, signed by then-president Richard Avanzino and Animal Care and Control Director Carl Friedman, and still posted on the San Francisco SPCA's own Website, reads as follows: "The SF/SPCA guarantees that it will take any 'adoptable' cat or dog offered to it by SF/DACC and that it will hold the cat or dog until it arranges for the adoption of the cat or dog into a suitable home."

In addition to failing to give even a nod to the fact that retiring the term "no-kill" is a matter of controversy, Ms. Brown's carefully worded statement fails to confirm that every "adoptable" animal offered will ever end up "under [the SF/SPCA's] roof." To those animals who are admitted she commits only to "trying" to save them, a far cry from a "guarantee."

The objection to "no-kill" terminology communicates arrogance from a current regime that objects to having to answer to anyone, to submit to a system of checks and balances. Though some organizations unquestionably do a much better job than others, the attitude is the same. If these leaders believed that the public was in agreement with their actual methods, there would be no reason to bother with word games.

What are they really saying?

They resent scrutiny from the ordinary citizens who provide the tax dollars and donations, and who subsidize nonprofit tax exemptions. They will defy lawmakers who dictate performance objectives and standards such as holding periods for strays. They feel threatened by independently certified professionals, including some veterinarians and behaviorists; those people's formal codes of ethics require them to defend individual animals over concerns about cost, legal liability, and public relations. Finally they reject the notion that they should apply sound business practices, allocate their money to programs that save lives, hold employees to high standards, and put forth the effort to keep their operations up to date with the right tools and technologies.

What's a no-kill activist to do about this? Press forward with concrete language. Ask questions like: "What precisely is the process, and what are the criteria, for determining that a dog's behavior is beyond remediation?" "How many kittens were killed due to suffering acute illnesses?" "How long

are cats with chronic illnesses being retained, and what, if any, chronic illnesses are not treated?" Demand to see the numbers.

We have the power and the absolute right to demand and make change, no matter how offensive that may seem to those who have become accustomed to holding the keys to the kingdom.

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