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By Eric Gay, AP

# Merits of no-kill shelters questioned

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By Elizabeth White, Associated Press

The shelter wants to turn those numbers around. By 2012, San Antonio plans to become a "no-kill" facility, meaning it wouldn't kill any animal deemed healthy or treatable.

By reducing the homeless pet population through spay-neuter programs and working with other shelters to find permanent homes for animals, the San Antonio shelter believes it has learned from those that have tried, but failed, to become no-kill.

But the pitfalls are many, animal welfare advocates say, and some aren't at all convinced that the national trend toward no-kill shelters is always in the best interest of the animals that need help.

"It sounds very good, but the reality is that it will probably leave some animals to suffer," said Daphna Nachminovitch, director of the domestic animal department at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

No-kill shelters that have worked elsewhere in the country have succeeded because they partner with other local facilities.

"We are definitely seeing a broad movement toward no-kill," said Richard Avanzino, president of Maddie's Fund in Alameda, Calif., which aims for the U.S. to be no-kill by 2017. "And there are some isolated examples of horror stories where things have gone astray and people in their zeal have actually done harm. ... It's not something that you just flip a switch and it happens immediately."

National organizations want to reduce needless killing. The ASPCA this year launched "Mission: Orange" to increase adoption and reduce euthanasia in five U.S. communities. The American Humane Association has an initiative called "Getting to Zero."

But many no-kill shelters have no backup plan and hang onto animals for months, sometimes years, until they are adopted, causing crowding and health problems for the animals.

The practice of "warehousing" is a top concern for animal organizations when a shelter decides to go no-kill. And animal advocates say they understand that killing the animals is sometimes the only humane way to ease overcrowding.

PETA said it routinely receives complaints that animals are stacked in kennels one on top of another and allowed water only once a day so they don't urinate in their cages. Others spin around and around in their cages because they're rarely let out for a walk.

"I've been to good no-kills, and I've been to bad no-kills," said Jef Hale, the San Antonio shelter's director. "I was at a no-kill in Louisiana and basically what they did is they just put animals in a cage and they just continued to add animals to a cage. ... If we put them in a cage and we don't interact with them, we slowly drive them crazy."

But no-kill shelters that don't warehouse animals fill up quickly and are forced to stop taking in new ones.

"Now what's their alternative?" said Kim Intino, director of animal sheltering for the Humane Society of the United States. The animal likely ends up either in an open-admission facility that does euthanize, or worse, on the streets.

Animal Care Services has traditionally taken in 50,000 dogs and cats and euthanized 95% of them, Hale said. It once used a gas chamber, but switched to the more humane lethal injections about a year and a half ago.

Nationally, about 6 million to 8 million dogs and cats enter animal shelters each year. About half are killed.

"The problem of course is that 8 million animals are being discarded," Nachminovitch said. "If it were as easy as simply stopping euthanasia, then that would have been done a long time ago."

In pursuing the no-kill label, some shelters will only take in animals they're sure they can adopt out, said Charlene Jones, founder and director of Animals at Heart, a non-profit in Jacksonville, Fla., that works to help people keep their pets longer. Others will adopt out potentially dangerous animals just to make space.

Another topic that has created a tense divide is the no-kill label. If one shelter is "no-kill," that makes the others "kill" shelters.

"There is no room for no-kill as morally superior," said Ed Sayres, president of the ASPCA.

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