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Is No-Kill Shelter Beneficial For Animals?

Becoming a true “No-Kill Nation” where no animal is euthanized for space or behavior requires a lot of effort and creative ideas that are accompanied by legislative changes. An example of such no-kill shelter is Humane Society Silicon Valley (HSSV), which was awarded the nation’s first-ever Model Shelter by Association of Shelter Veterinarians in 2017. As you walk toward the entrance of the HSSV facility, the smell of nature hits you - freshly mowed lawn and blooming flowers. In the leash-free dog park, you see dogs wagging their tails, barking and chasing balls thrown by their owners. Once in the building, the reception area where adoption takes place looks airy and bright with sunshine. Cats can be seen in the Community Room filled with comfortable couches and cat trees napping or taking in the sunshine in the sunshine terrace. Unlike other animal shelters that are gloomy and depressing, HSSV comes across as a cheery place for animals. Yet not all animals are this lucky. Other shelters are struggling to become a no-kill shelter.

There are many reasons animals enter the shelter system. Many are adopted to new families however many more are killed for lack of space or other reasons that are not medical. In the U.S., 1.5 million animals are killed every year. That is 32% of the animals entering the

shelter system. This is a staggering number but it is a decline from 2.6 million animals killed in 2011. California is one of 5 states that kills most animals in shelters. In 2016, 110,000 animals were killed in California. That is the second worst after 114,000 animals euthanized in Texas. In California 75% of killed animals are cats, mainly because there are more feral cats and kittens born to those feral cats. Los Angeles suffers from many unwanted kittens every year because of the mild winter. Nearly 9 months out of a year can be the kitten season. The small kittens separated from their mothers are the most vulnerable because they might be sick and they can't take care of themselves. Los Angeles ends up euthanizing hundreds of thousands of helpless kittens every year.

The concept of no-kill shelter did not start just recently. In 1984, 17 million animals were killed in shelters. This is the year founders of Best Friends Animal Society started an animal sanctuary in Utah for abandoned and abused animals and this is regarded as the start of the no-kill movement. In 1990 Alley Cat Allies (ACA) was founded by Becky Robinson and Louise Holton. ACA gives voice to feral cats on a national stage and introduces trap-neuter-return (TNR) as the most humane and practical method for relating to community cats. In 1992 Best Friends Animal Sanctuary began publishing Best Friends Magazine and it quickly became the national voice of the no-kill movement and the largest general interest animal publication in the United States. In 1994 San Francisco became the first no-kill city, led by Richard Avanzino who would later become the President of Maddie's Fund. In 1995 there was the first No-Kill Conference organized by Lynda Foro. In 2004 Nathan Winograd set a widely accepted guideline for no-kill.

The term “no-kill shelter” does not seem to have a consistent meaning. Does it mean you never euthanize an animal? How about those animals that are suffering in pain? Bridget Keenan, director of development at HSSV explains, “Rather than saying we are a no-kill shelter, we like to align ourselves with the no-kill philosophy. The broad definition is that we have a 90% save rate. Generally any shelter with a 90% is considered no-kill.” At HSSV they never euthanize for lack of space. The majority of 5% that are euthanized are young kittens and animals that are very sick. She says some animals come in “very sick or have conditions that are more humane to euthanize them than to try to keep them alive. There's a lot of pain involved”. Some may be euthanized for behavioral issues that are “overly aggressive and a danger to be adopted by a new family.” It is also important to have a program to reduce the number of animals that are entering the shelter, which means reduce the number of kittens born in the wild. For feral cats, HSSV has an aggressive Trap-and-Neuter program and they work with other rescue agencies to trap cats, neuter and spay them and return them to their neighborhood. However, sometimes the neighbors don't want them back. To counter this issue HSSV created a community-cat garden in the back of the shelter where untamed feral cats can roam and be adopted for only \$10. “Feral cats are great at catching mice and rats and they also deter mice and rats, so people come to us and adopt them for barns, gardens, garages, nurseries and they solve their problems, we increase our save rate and this is just a win-win for the adopter, for us, and for these cats,” Bridget explains. Rural areas outside of Santa Clara County tend to have lower save rates because they tend to be more low-income and they do not have access to veterinarians to get their animals spayed and neutered. For those areas, HSSV sends a mobile spay and neuter vans with veterinarians and

helps the communities spay and neuter their animals so that there will be less unwanted dogs and cats. According to Alley Cat Organization, during an 11-year study of TNR at the University of Florida, the number of cats on campus declined by 66%, with no new kittens being born after the first four years of operation. They mentioned another study that in Rome, Italy, the colony size had decreased by 16 to 32% over a 10 year period.

The animal shelters depend heavily on hundreds of volunteers to accomplish the no-kill mission because they do not have enough money to take care of all the animals and hire thousands of staff on their own. Makiko Barrett is one of those volunteers who often takes in underage kittens as a foster parent until they are ready for the spay and neuter surgery before they become available for adoption. She has been volunteering for HSSV as a feline foster parent and a mentor to new foster families since 2010. Her involvement started with Seattle Humane Society in 1999 when she found a litter of kittens by the apartment dumpster. “Because they tested positive for Feline Leukemia, none of the shelters took them in, so I had to keep them all,” she explains. That was when she learned to take care of kittens, but also learned the limitation of no-kill animal shelters. If they are full, they turn away the animals, which means they are contributing to killing in a way. Makiko says HSSV is different from other shelters because the animals stay in a nice big space to live while they are waiting to be adopted. She is impressed that the shelter is bright and not gloomy and sad like other shelters. She is also impressed that HSSV focuses on human education, not just helping animals. HSSV adopts out feline leukemia positive cats by educating the new adopting families. Here animals with medical conditions get a second chance at living. Before, cats with skin conditions such as ringworm were euthanized because the shelters did not have space to separate them. “Ringworm is not a

worm, it's a fungus like an athlete's foot. Kittens with ringworms are not sick - nobody dies from it. Yet, many shelters euthanize them because they don't have the resources to go through the 6 weeks treatment to get rid of the fungus," Makiko explains. She takes in cats with ringworm until they are cleared. Foster volunteers get supplies from the shelter and get training before they start. Cat foster volunteers usually need food and water dishes, cat food, litter box and a playpen or a separate bathroom or a room to separate them from their own pets for the first 2 weeks, because you never know what kind of diseases they may carry. At HSSV, they assign a mentor who can answer questions and guide them throughout the fostering process. "Having a mentor is helpful for beginner foster volunteers because 90% of animals will have some kind of problems and if kittens die in your care you will be devastated. They can help them get through some of the hardships," Makiko says.

In order to make all shelters no-kill, the laws will also need to change. According to No-Kill Advocacy Center, California passed a law in 1998 that made it illegal to kill animals if rescue groups are willing to save them. This has resulted in an increase of animals sent to rescue groups by 370%. Rental laws can be changed so that the landlords won't reject tenants with pets. California also has an ambition to become a no-kill state by 2025. Governor Gavin Newsom proposed a 50 million dollar grant to the University of California Davis to create no-kill shelters across California. UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine will work with animal shelters to create a no-kill program, train staff and give resources so that California will be a no-kill state in 5 years. Humane Society Silicon Valley is one of the model shelters that can be used as a successful example.

No-Kill shelters are beneficial for animals that go through the shelter system because all animals get a second chance. In order to achieve a no-kill nation, saving shelter animals from unnecessary euthanasia is important, however, humans need to be educated to spay or neuter the animals in order to reduce the unwanted animals being born. The laws need to be changed to support the mission. It is time to end the barbaric process to kill animals when they can be saved.

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