

DISPROVING
THE LIE AT
THE HEART
OF SHELTER
KILLING



The MYTH of Pet Overpopulation



A PUBLICATION OF THE NO KILL ADVOCACY CENTER



The MYTH of Pet Overpopulation



Why the claim that there are too many animals and not enough homes is false, and how this myth enables the atrocity of shelter killing.

Today, an animal entering an average American animal shelter has a 50 percent chance of being killed, and in some communities it is as high as 99 percent, with shelters blaming a lack of available homes as the cause of death. But is pet overpopulation real? And are shelters doing all they can to save lives? If you believe traditional sheltering dogma, the answer to both those questions is “yes.” The next logical question is: *How do we know?* To adherents of the “we have no choice but to kill because of pet overpopulation” school, pet overpopulation is real because animals are being killed, a logical fallacy based on backwards reasoning and circular illogic. As to whether shelters are doing all they can, the answer here too, is long on cliché and short on evidence: because “no one wants to kill.” Data, analysis, and experience—in short, evidence—have no place. Tragically, neither do ethics.

In truth, and at the heart of the No Kill philosophy, is the understanding that the reasons we have historically been given for why animals are being killed in shelters—there are too many for too few homes available, that shelters are doing all they can, and that the American public is uncaring and irresponsible—have been proven wrong in the face of irrefutable evidence: data, experience, and communities that are achieving No Kill level save rates not by changing the habits of the people within a community, but by changing the culture, policies, and procedures of the shelter itself. In other words, we know pet overpopulation is a myth because both statistics themselves and the experience of progressive shelters in communities across the country prove it is.

THE NUMBERS

Some eight million animals enter shelters every year and while shelter killing apologists state that we cannot adopt our way out of killing eight million animals, the truth is that we can, but we do not have to. The actual number of animals needing homes is so much less. Some animals entering shelters need adoption, but others do not. Some animals, like community cats who are not socialized to people, need neuter and release. Others will be—and many more can be with greater effort—reclaimed by their families. Still others are irremediably suffering or hopelessly ill. And many more can be kept out of the shelter through a comprehensive retention effort, helping people overcome the challenges which have caused them to seek the surrender of their animal companion to the local shelter in the first place. In truth, shelters only need to find homes for a high end of 65 percent of total intakes. While estimates claim between three million and four million animals will be killed in pounds and shelters this year, roughly 2.7 to three million will be killed for lack of a new home. Can we find homes for three million animals? Yes, we can.

Using the most successful adoption communities as a benchmark and adjusting for population, U.S. shelters combined have the potential to adopt almost nine million animals a year. That is about three times the number of animals being killed for lack of a home. In fact, it is more than total impounds; and of those, over one-third do not need a new home. But the news gets even better because the number of people looking to get an animal is so much larger than the shelter “supply.”

According to one national study, there are about 23.5 million people who get an animal every year. While some of those are already committed to adopting from a shelter and others from a breeder or other commercial source, some 17 million have not decided where that animal will come from and research shows they can be influenced to adopt from a shelter. That's 17 million people potentially vying for roughly three million animals. So even if 80 percent of those people acquired their animal from somewhere other than a shelter, we could still zero out the killing.

Another analysis looked at current rates of households with animal companions and compared them to death rates and the number of households who would acquire another animal when their resident animal died. The analysis put the number of new homes at a very conservative low end of 12 million a year (if animals averaged a 15 year lifespan) and a more liberal estimate of about 30 million a year (if animals averaged a seven year lifespan). This analysis further assumed no animals would run away or get lost, no households would get another animal if they currently had one, and that the number of homes was not growing, but rather stagnant. Indeed, the analysis assumed attrition in homes (that 15 percent of households with animals would not get another animal when the current companion died). Since the number of households is growing and markets for animals must take into account both new homes and replacement homes (including homes which currently have an animal but get another one anyway)—what statisticians call “stock” and “flow”—these assumptions underreport the outcome. In layman's terms, what this means is that

some of the market will be replacement life (someone's dog or cat dies or runs away) and some will be expanding markets (someone doesn't have a dog or cat but wants one, or someone has a dog or cat but wants another one). In other words, the low end of 12 million per year is too low, as could well be the high end of 30 million.

Still other studies looked at actual acquisition rates. In other words, they looked at how many people *actually* acquired an animal in the last 12 months. That analysis put the number of new homes at a low end of 9.1 million per year (dogs and cats in the household less than one year) and a high end of 37.3 million (including all dogs and cats who have been in the household up to, and including, one year). And still others looked at both death and loss rates (the animal dies or runs away) and subtracted birth rates, putting the number of new homes at a very conservative 10.8 million annually.

The answer as to whether there are: 1. too many animals and, 2. not enough homes, requires a comparison of both supply and demand. With about 2.7 million animals being killed in shelters but for a home annually (supply), regardless of which analysis is used (a low end of 9.1 million and a high end of 37.3 million) for demand, the calculus is not even close: Pet overpopulation is a myth. We can adopt our way out of killing. In fact, many communities already have.

THE EXPERIENCE

A before and after snapshot of the hundreds of cities and towns which now have save rates between 90 percent



Statistics shows that every year there are 17 million people potentially vying for roughly three million shelter animals. So even if 80 percent of those people acquired their animal from somewhere other than a shelter, we could still zero out the killing of healthy and treatable animals.

DO THE MATH

For too many years, the killing of millions of animals in our nation's pounds has been justified on the basis of a supply-demand imbalance. We've been told that there are just "too many animals and not enough homes." In other words, pet overpopulation.

BUT PET OVERPOPULATION DOES *NOT* EXIST.

SUPPLY DEMAND

Number of animals entering
American shelters every year:

8,000,000

Number of animals killed
annually in our nation's shelters:

4,000,000

Of those, the number killed
but for a home:

3,000,000

versus

Number of animals acquired by
Americans every year from
all sources:

23,500,000

Of those, the number who have
not yet decided where they
will get an animal and can
be influenced to adopt from
a shelter:

17,000,000

PET OVERPOPULATION:
It Just Doesn't Add Up

and 99 percent shows that their shelters achieved that rate of lifesaving by changing the way they operated. Contrary to what conventional wisdom has prescribed for decades, they did not change the public. That's because animals are not being killed in shelters because of the choices made by the public. Instead, they are being killed because of the choices made by the people overseeing those shelters.

In traditional U.S. animal shelters and despite decades of public assurances to the contrary by our nation's shelter directors and animal protection organizations, animals are killed primarily out of habit and convenience. Visit an animal shelter run in line with traditional sheltering protocols, and this will become evident in a variety of ways. You will see animals killed rather than placed in available cages so staff doesn't have to clean those cages or feed the animals inside them. Not only do sheltering policies promoted by large animal protection groups recommend keeping cages and kennels empty, in shelter after shelter where animals were being killed allegedly "for space," many of those shelters in fact had plenty of empty cages, sometimes entire rooms of them. On a day No Kill Advocacy Center attorneys visited the Carson shelter of the Los Angeles Department of Animal Care & Control, for example, a shelter where roughly eight out of 10 cats were being put to death, 80 percent of the cages were intentionally kept empty. During a visit to a shelter in Shreveport, Louisiana, only one cat was available for adoption despite a 92 percent death rate for cats at the time. In Eugene, Oregon, at a time it was killing 72 percent of cats and claiming to do so for lack of space caused by of pet overpopulation, only six cats were available for adoption. The rest of the cages were empty.

At a traditional animal shelter, you will find animals being killed despite offers from other non-profits and rescue groups to save those very animals. In fact, 71 percent of New York rescue groups and 63 percent of Florida rescue groups reported shelters killing the very animals they had offered to save. And the large national groups believe this is as it should be, as they have worked to defeat legislation which would have made it illegal for shelters to kill animals who qualified rescue groups are willing to save—legislation that has already saved hundreds of thousands of lives in other states. Since California passed such a law over the opposition of HSUS, the number of animals transferred to rescue groups rather than killed went from 12,526 to 58,939—a 370 percent increase because shelters were now required to work with rescue groups.

CONVENIENCE KILLING IN AMERICAN SHELTERS:



A DEADLY EPIDEMIC

In traditional American shelters, animals are killed primarily out of habit and convenience and not "necessity" as claimed. How is this evident? In a variety of ways:

- Animals are killed even when there are empty cages, sometimes banks and even rooms of them
- Animals are killed rather than given to other non-profits which want to find the animals homes or care for them in a sanctuary
- Motherless puppies & kittens are killed rather than sent into foster care to be bottlefed
- "Owner" surrendered animals are killed immediately upon entering shelters without ever being afforded an opportunity at adoption
- The shelter maintains operating hours that make it difficult for working people to reclaim their animals or adopt
- Field officers impound (then often kill) rather than return home lost animals bearing identification
- Animals are killed rather than afforded the alternative presented by neuter & release programs, medical & behavior rehabilitation programs, comprehensive adoption programs, and the other alternatives of the No Kill Equation

Animals in shelters are also killed because the shelter director refuses to implement a comprehensive foster care program for neonatal puppies and kittens, choosing to kill those animals instead. At one such shelter, the director fired staff and volunteers who were bottle-feeding orphaned baby animals on their own time and at their own expense. And at traditional shelters, animals are killed because shelter directors do not want to make the effort to implement all the other alternatives that already exist: neuter and release, offsite adoptions, pet retention and field service programs to reduce impounds, as well as medical and behavior rehabilitation programs, to name just a few.

In the end, killing is occurring in our nation's shelters not because there are too many animals, but because killing is easier than doing what is necessary to replace it. As heartless as that reason is, shelter directors have been allowed to get away with it anyway. Why? Because the people who should be their fiercest critics—those within the animal protection movement itself—have provided them political cover by falsely portraying the killing that they do as a necessity born of pet overpopulation. In fact, the lie of pet overpopulation is at the heart of the killing paradigm. It is the primary excuse that allows shelter directors to shift the blame from their own failure to stop killing to someone else. And it is the excuse that has, for decades, kept the animal protection movement wringing its hands, spinning in endless, hopeless circles, trying to “solve” the problem of shelter killing by attacking a phantom cause, rather than the one that is truly to blame.

There are now No Kill communities across the U.S. and abroad: in New York and in California, in Michigan and Kentucky, in Nevada, and across the globe, including areas suffering from high rates of unemployment and foreclosure. All these communities did it virtually overnight, by implementing proven strategies to lower impounds and relinquishments, increase redemptions, return animals to their responsible caretakers and return community cats who are not social with people to their habitats, while adopting out the remainder.

From both the perspective of animals and the perspective of the true animal lover, the fact that pet overpopulation turns out not to exist can only be described as welcome news. That the main excuse historically used to justify the need to systematically poison or gas to death millions of dogs and cats turns out to be a fabrication should be cause for celebration. Indeed, one would expect that the leadership of the animal protection movement and those within the grassroots who defer to them would not just embrace this news but would shout it

from the rooftops. Tragically, that has not been the case. Rather than accept and then evolve their approach to this issue in light of new information (a study conducted by HSUS itself proved that demand for animals vastly exceeds the number of animals being killed in shelters), they have instead tenaciously clung to and even jealously guarded the idea of pet overpopulation, working to stall its rapidly diminishing sway over animal lovers by repackaging pet overpopulation with “new and improved” labels such as “Regional Pet Overpopulation,” “Shelter Overpopulation” or reasserting the efficacy of pet overpopulation by redefining the terms of the debate in a specious manner.

REGIONAL PET OVERPOPULATION:

SAME ARGUMENT, SAME INESCAPABLE CONCLUSION

According to these groups, regardless of whether pet overpopulation exists nationally, it does exist regionally in areas with higher rates of poverty, particularly the South. Not only does this argument ignore the experience of economically distressed areas with No Kill level save rates, communities with high per capita poverty rates, foreclosure rates, unemployment rates, transiency rates, and shelter intake rates; it ignores the fact that each of the communities that have succeeded were also once steeped in killing, claiming at one time they had no choice but to kill by using the same excuses that have been proven false by virtue of their own success (almost always after a shelter director resistant to No kill was replaced with a progressive one). It ignores the growing number of communities with save rates between 90 percent and 99 percent in the South. And it ignores that while each of our nation's successful communities are demographically and geographically diverse, the one thing they do share is that their success was not the result of a very specific set of circumstances which set them apart from other American communities, such as their geography or affluence.

In fact, an analysis of per capita funding rates found no correlation between spending on animal control and save rates. A separate analysis found no correlation between unemployment and foreclosure rates and save rates. And a third found no correlation between intake rates and corresponding save rates. In other words, communities with high foreclosure and unemployment rates also had high save rates, while communities with low foreclosure and unemployment rates killed a lot of animals. Communities with high per capita intake rates also had high save rates, while those with low per capita intake rates had low save rates, too. Likewise, communities with low per capita animal control spending had high save rates and some communities spending four

CASE STUDY



Disproving Claims of “Regional Pet Overpopulation” in Michigan

If shelters increase the number of animals who come from shelters by a few percentage points, we would be a No Kill nation. Today, there are about 179 million dogs and cats in homes. Two percent of 179 million equates to 3.6 million, more than all the animals killed in shelters but for a home. A two percent increase would replace all killing with adoption. Take a state like Michigan, where some claim that regional pet overpopulation exists because of economic distress and high rates of unemployment. Today, roughly 85,000 animals statewide are losing their lives annually. Of those, just over 80,000 animals are healthy and treatable. Of those, at least another 4,000 can and should be reunited with their families. On average, Michigan shelters have 10 percent reclaim rates, a figure that is far below the national average, and a fraction of the most successful communities in the nation, but a statistic that could be dramatically improved if the reclaim protocols of the No Kill Equation were followed. For example, 59 percent of stray dogs and 22 percent of stray cats are reclaimed in Colorado and at least one shelter there has a 90 percent reclaim rate for dogs. If community cats who are not socialized to people were neutered and released rather than killed as the No Kill Equation also mandates, then under a worst-case scenario, about 70,000 additional homes need to be found for Michigan to become a No Kill state. That amounts to just over 1/2 of one percent of Michigan's 10,000,000 residents. Even if one is looking at the number of households instead of the number of people, it's less than two percent. How is that evidence of a “regional pet overpopulation” problem? It isn't. In fact, the evidence reveals that the opposite is actually true.

times the rate of these communities were saving less than half. What these analyses found was that each of those communities which were succeeding were succeeding for one reason and one reason alone: the shelter itself changed the way it operated, by rejecting killing in favor of existing alternatives and rejecting the false premise that they can't save them all because of pet overpopulation. In other words, what mattered was what the shelters itself were doing, whether they were putting in place the cost-effective, lifesaving alternatives of the No Kill Equation. If they did, they saved lives, regardless of other factors such as intake rates, adoption rates, poverty rates, or, as it relates to the current argument, in which region of the country they are located.

In the end, the regional pet overpopulation argument has the same flaws as the traditional pet overpopulation problem. With no statistical analysis to support it and the experience of communities with extremely high per capita intake rates proving that No Kill can succeed in spite of such challenges (today there are No Kill communities with per capita intake rates 20 times higher than New York City, the most densely populated city in America), regional pet overpopulation is the same argument with a new label and every bit as devoid of verifiable, concrete data to back it up.

SHELTER OVERPOPULATION: IT'S DEJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN

One proponent of the pet overpopulation argument has gone so far as to admit there is neither national pet overpopulation, nor regional pet overpopulation, but instead claims that killing is necessary because of “shelter overpopulation.” Under this argument, if a shelter has 100 cages, when the 101st animal comes in, there is “shelter overpopulation” which justifies the killing of that animal. Not only does this argument lack any threshold or standards to ensure protections for animals of any kind, there is no killing that cannot be justified. If this same community dismantled 95 of the 100 cages, they would be justified in killing the 6th animal who came in. Moreover, the argument does not take into account foster homes, temporary cages and kennels, doubling up animals, pet retention programs and adoption campaigns—all the alternatives to killing that successful communities use to replace killing when cages get full. And it presupposes that No Kill communities never have more animals than cage space when it is a given that, at some point, every shelter will face such a scenario, especially during peak intake times such as spring and summer. Indeed, when Tompkins County became a No Kill

HOW DOES A SHELTER STOP KILLING?

By implementing alternatives

While shelter leadership drives the No Kill initiative, it is the community that extends the safety net of care. Unlike traditional shelters—which view members of the public as adversaries and refuse to partner with them as rescuers or volunteers—a No Kill shelter embraces the people in its community. They are the key to success: they volunteer, foster, socialize animals, staff offsite adoption venues and open their hearts, homes and wallets to the animals in need. The public is at the center of every successful No Kill shelter in the nation. By working with people, implementing lifesaving programs and treating each life as precious, a shelter can transform itself.



Saving Lives by Partnering with the Community

- ✓ Volunteers
- ✓ Rescue Partnerships
- ✓ Foster Care
- ✓ Neuter & Release
- ✓ Comprehensive Adoption Programs
- ✓ Medical & Behavior Prevention & Rehabilitation
- ✓ Pet Retention
- ✓ Proactive Redemptions
- ✓ Public Relations/Community Involvement
- ✓ High-Volume, Low-Cost Spay & Neuter
- ✓ Compassionate, Dedicated Leadership

community, one out of every four animals spent time in foster care.

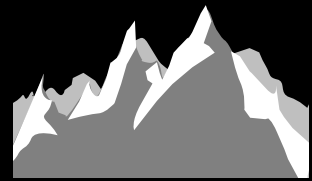
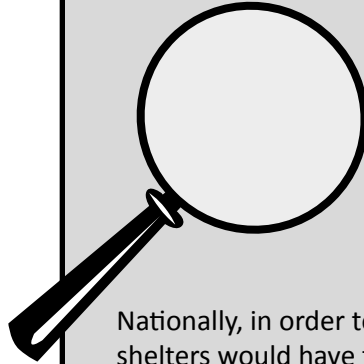
The argument also ignores the fact that a shelter can always add more cages to accommodate population. In Tompkins County, New York, for example, shelter staff and volunteers converted the garage, which housed two vans, into two rooms: an overflow infirmary and a nursery for kittens. Prior to this, the shelter's transport vans, tools to help them in their mission, enjoyed protection from the elements while sick animals and kittens, who *were* their mission, were being killed for "lack of space." There was nothing preventing prior directors from doing the same thing. But by the "shelter overpopulation" argument, the killing of kittens rather than sending them into foster care or adding more cage space was entirely justified. Is that really the standard of care we want our nation's shelters to follow—in essence, no standards at all? In the end, the proponents of "shelter overpopulation" have simply taken the excuses used to justify killing on a macro-scale and reduced it to the micro. But it is the exact same argument, flawed for the same reasons, and equally as unethical.

MAKING THE NUMBERS FIT THE CONCLUSION

Given both the data and experience of successful communities, there is simply no way to rationalize a supply and demand imbalance in shelters. But regardless of the facts, that doesn't mean that shelter killing apologists are no longer arguing that killing is "necessary" because of pet overpopulation. In fact, to overcome the evidence, they have taken to arguing that when calculating the number of animals in need of homes nationally, we must include all the animals living on the street as well, not just the ones being killed in shelters. When you include all the animals living on the street, they argue, pet overpopulation is real.

There are many flaws inherent in this argument as well; the first being that it introduces into the equation a whole category of animals who, while their well-being is important, are not relevant to the very specific discussion of shelter killing for the simple fact that they are not in shelters. While adding the number of animals in shelters combined with the number of animals living on the street would provide a statistic of how many animals in America might not have a human address, that number would not reflect how many animals are under an immediate death threat at their local shelter which is, after all, the killing pet overpopulation has al-

CASE STUDY



Disproving Claims That Adoption Rates Cannot Keep Pace with Intake Rates in Colorado

Nationally, in order to adopt their way out of killing, shelters would have to find homes for roughly 65 percent of the high end of eight million animals entering their facilities annually, or about 5.2 million animals. That is an adoption rate of about 16 animals for every 1,000 human residents. If one uses the low end estimate of six million intakes, it is an adoption rate of only 12 animals for every 1,000 human residents. Is this possible? Yes. Many of the hundreds of cities and towns with save rates in the 90th percentile or better have matched or exceeded these figures. The ones that have not are achieving those save rates despite lower adoption rates because they are saving lives in other ways, such as higher reclaims or more TNR. In other words, it is not that they cannot adopt more, only that they were not required to do so to save lives.

In 2013, for example, the State of Colorado had a statewide save rate of about 80 percent despite an intake rate of 31 dogs and cats for every 1,000 people, more than double the national average and about four times the rate of Los Angeles. This includes transporting in 13,726 animals from outside the state (12,642 dogs and 1,084 cats and many thousands more from non-reporting rescue groups). It had an adoption rate of about 64 percent (of unreclaimed intake), roughly 16 animals for every 1,000 animals. With a save rate of 90 percent for dogs and 79 percent for cats, Colorado is notable for several things: 1. They could achieve save rates in the 90th percentile for cats with very little effort, 2. They disprove the claim that jurisdictions with high per capita intake rates cannot have high save rates or adopt out more than 15 animals per 1,000 people, 3. Jurisdictions with high per capita intake rates can even impound tens of thousands of animals and still save the vast majority of animals, and 4. Regional pet overpopulation does not exist.

ways been used to justify. Their argument thus becomes absurd: because a cat lives on the street, you must kill a cat in the shelter even though there are homes available for the cat in the shelter. Moreover, the existence of such animals does not impact the demand side of the equation which, as already explained, so vastly exceeds the supply of animals in shelters that it can even accommodate homes lost to commercially-sourced animals such as those from breeders and pet stores, as well as those adopted from the streets. In short, while expanding the supply side of the pet overpopulation argument in this way is an attempt to obscure and confuse the issue, it does not change the conclusion supported by both fact and experience: every year, there are more homes available than there are animals being killed in shelters.

Nor does the implied corollary to their argument stand up, either. Are those who make this argument implying that all animals living on the streets should be brought into shelters and therefore, if they were, pet overpopulation would in fact exist? That, after all, is the inference of their argument. First and most significantly, arguing that pet overpopulation would be real if all free-living animals were admitted to shelters is to introduce a hypothetical and irrelevant scenario into a discussion about a very real problem. For roughly three or so million animals every year, shelter killing is a grave and immediate danger. To argue for the existence of the disproven but primary excuse used to justify that killing based not on what is happening but what might happen based on an improbability—that all free-living animals to be admitted into shelters—reduces a serious and weighty discussion to the realm of make believe.

A genuine commitment to animal welfare requires an honest assessment of reality and the genuine threats which animals entering shelters face. Admitting extraneous, unrelated issues into the discussion is an attempt not to illuminate, but to obscure. And analyzing the validity of historical claims used to justify the systematic killing of millions of animals should not be a sophomoric exercise in rhetoric or debate, but a serious discussion that seeks to inform and influence our positions and actions on behalf of animals in a responsible, thoughtful and fact-based way.

Moreover, those who advocate for animals should oppose any suggestion that animals on the streets would be better off in those places that present the greatest threat to their lives: *the local animal shelter*. Nor would loss of life, though the greatest harm, be the only one such animals would likely face if admitted to shelters. Although the animal protection movement has perpetu-

ated the fiction that our nation's shelters provide a humane and compassionate safety net of care for our nation's homeless animals, the facts tell a very different, very tragic, story. In truth, the first time many companion animals experience neglect or abuse is when they enter a shelter.

Until we reform our shelters, the last place an animal advocate should wish an animal to end up, including those animals who live on the streets, is the local kill shelter. Not only is life on the street safer than a stay in an animal shelter that kills, but the very thing animal shelters are supposed to provide to homeless and stray animals—reunion with their home or adoption into a new one—are more likely to happen to an animal on the street than one entering a shelter. The likelihood of an animal being reunited with their human caretakers is greater for cats, for example, if they are allowed to remain where they are rather than being impounded. In one study, cats were 13 times more likely to be returned home by non-shelter means (such as returning home on their own) than through the pound. Another study found that people are up to three times more likely to adopt cats as neighborhood strays than from a shelter.

Nor is life outside a human home the tragedy it is so often painted to be by shelter killing apologists seeking to justify killing by portraying the alternative as even worse. The risk of an untimely death for street cats is extremely low, with outdoor cats living roughly the same lifespan as indoor pet cats. In a study of over 100,000 free-living cats, less than one percent of those cats were suffering from debilitating conditions. The risk of death is lower and the chance of adoption higher for cats on the street than cats in the shelter. And in countries outside the U.S., neuter and release of dogs is not uncommon and regarded, as it should be, as an infinitely better alternative than impound and death.

Like pet overpopulation, the argument that animals are better off dead than living on the street flies in the face of actual evidence. And just as significant, it also flies in the face of our common experience as living beings who, if given the choice between death at a shelter and survival by our wit, instinct and the chance of benefiting from the kindness of strangers, would choose the latter without a moment's hesitation. Not only would this choice be our natural impulse, the facts show it would be the smart one, too.

With shelter killing being the leading cause of death for healthy animals in America (and therefore the cause of the greatest possible harm to befall homeless animals), the No Kill movement is focused on bringing this very

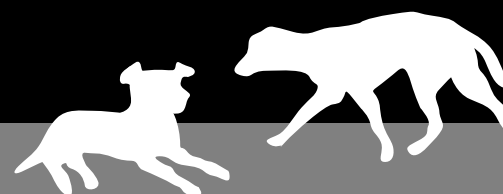
Why? Because we said so...

“...the inner workings of a shelter are more complex than they may appear from the outside.”

- Excerpt from a 2012 statement released by the HSUS Companion Animal Division defending the widespread practice among shelters of killing animals even when there are empty, available cages

For many decades, shelters and their allies at national organizations made bold claims about the necessity of shelter killing without providing any hard evidence to back up their assertions. Why? They didn't need to. Their successful portrayal of sheltering as an industry beyond the laymen's understanding and requiring special "expertise" meant that few dared to challenge their authority or the validity of their claims. Animal lovers, adverse to working in facilities that kill animals and therefore lacking first hand experience to the contrary, were duped into believing these rationalizations because they falsely believed these groups were trustworthy, knowledgeable of the most up-to-date sheltering protocols, dedicated to innovation, and committed to the cause of animal protection. As a result, shelters directors and their allies at national organizations were, until very recently, never asked to provide evidence beyond the anecdotal and circular logic (shelter killing is necessary because otherwise shelters wouldn't be killing) to prove the authenticity of their claims. Tragically, as the No Kill movement increasingly exposes the facile nature of their self-professed expertise, in some cases the audacity of their claims have become even more pronounced, not less, with some shelters and shelter killing apologists making claims about pet overpopulation that even quick back of an envelope calculations reveal to be not just false, but utterly absurd.

Under continued scrutiny for its high rates of killing, leadership at the Houston pound claimed that they must kill animals due to an overpopulation problem so severe, there are 1.2 million stray animals wandering the streets of Houston. But how can that possibly be true? If it was, that would be one stray animal for every two people in Houston or 2,000 per square mile, an absurdity. Such a claim defies experience and credulity.



“Gosh, um, I don’t know that number.”

- Dori Villalon, American Humane Association Vice-President of Animal Protection, KABC Radio, New York City, January 2011

During a 2011 radio interview in which she explained that killing in shelters is necessary because there are too many animals for too few homes available, Dori Villalon, then Vice-President of Animal Protection for the American Humane Association, was asked how many homes become available for companion animals every year in the United States. Her response: “Gosh, um, I don’t know that number.” How can someone claim that there is a supply-demand imbalance in terms of available homes and number of animals without knowing the demand side of the equation? They can’t.

In fact, there are over seven times as many people looking to acquire an animal every year than there are animals being killed in shelters. Pet overpopulation, the main excuse given by national animal protection organizations to defend the killing, does not exist. Shelters can adopt their way out of killing and many have.

Villalon went on to say that to end the killing of animals in shelters, every person in America would have to adopt eight animals and even argued that we could do that this year. She cautioned, however, that we would have to do that every year. But if every person in America adopted eight animals, that number would equal about 2.4 billion dogs and cats, 600-times the number actually being killed in shelters, but for a home.

If we can adopt out 2.4 billion as Villalon claimed, we can surely adopt out the true number: three million. In fact, using the most successful shelters as a benchmark and adjusting for population, U.S. shelters combined could be adopting out almost nine million animals a year. That is three times the number being killed for lack of a home. In fact, it is more than total impounds.

If we increased the total population of animals in American homes who come from shelters by just two percent, we would end the killing. It is a very feasible goal. And many communities are now proving it. But if you are uneducated about the most basic facts regarding the numbers and causes of animals being killed in shelters, you will not see the vast, untapped potential and—ignorantly believing the problem to be insurmountable, inflating the numbers 600-fold and providing the excuse regressive shelters need to kill—you will not even attempt to fix it.

When the person who does that is Vice-President of one of the nation’s oldest national companion animal welfare organizations, a so-called “expert” people look to for guidance, it is unforgivable.

specific harm to an end. We do not need to keep killing shelter animals because there are other animals living on the street. That is a *non sequitur* that groups that defend and promote killing conveniently ignore when they perpetuate this false choice and fallacy in order to justify the killing of those they theoretically exist to protect.

But even if we ignored the illogic, their argument also falls apart in the absence of any concrete data to support their case that when the number of animals living on the streets is factored into the supply side, pet overpopulation exists. No one knows for sure the number of animals living on the street. If those who continue to claim pet overpopulation is real because the number of animals exceeds demand for animals and that this supply-demand imbalance requires shelters to kill animals, the burden is on them to prove it: what is the supply side of the equation? When you are preaching death, when you are promoting death, when you are excusing death, and when—in the case of groups and supporters that actually kill animals—you are paying for and actually doing the killing, the burden to prove its “necessity” is on you. In short, one better know the supply side of the equation before using an argument dependent upon it to justify a mass slaughter. Predictably, just as is true with the traditional notion of pet overpopulation which they have perpetuated for decades, they do not.

In fact, the estimates are, at best, completely made up, ranging as they do from the im-

possible to the absurd, including the claim that there are 1.2 million stray animals in Houston alone, about 50,000 stray dogs in Detroit, and 100 million nationwide.

Though the claim that 50,000 free-living dogs could be found in Detroit was claimed and repeated by many, no one could cite the source of where the figure came from. And then the dogs were actually counted. Preliminary results indicate there are 1,000 to 3,000 dogs living on the streets of Detroit, a fifty-fold reduction in the actual number. In Houston, likewise, the leadership of the city pound told the media that there were 1.2 million homeless animals roaming the streets of Houston, which requires them to kill those in the pound, a *non sequitur*. If there were that many, there would be one stray animal for every two people or 2,000 homeless animals per square mile in Houston, an absurdity. So what is the actual number of stray animals in the U.S.?

Let's look at a worst case scenario. Imagine if the entire country was like Detroit, a city where the infrastructure provided by government has more or less begun to break down. It is poor, bankrupt, suffering from incredibly high unemployment and foreclosure rates, criteria usually associated with lack of spay/neuter and, according to some, high rates of abandonment. Using this extreme example as a norm, there would be just shy of 1,000,000 stray dogs in the entire U.S.—less than what pound leadership claims for Houston alone. Assuming 10 times the number of cats, we're still looking at a number that is less than total demand. And, of course, Detroit is an aberration. It has an unemployment rate twice that of the nation, six out of 10 kids live in poverty compared to two in 10 nationally, and one-third of the city is empty or described as "heavily blighted."

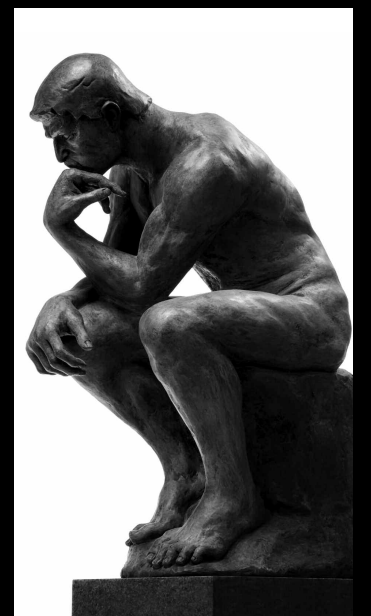
On top of that, many community cats do not need a home and are not "homeless" as they either have homes but are allowed outside or they are not social to humans (the outdoors is their home). In the case of the latter, recent studies from the veterinary community confirm that they are in no way suffering because of it. Nonetheless, when you add these cats and dogs to the total numbers, we're still dealing with a figure that is less than total demand, so the math still does not hold up. Even so, it is irrelevant. For those who do actually enter shelters—an estimated three million animals a year who are dying but for a home—there are plenty of homes available if, instead of killing them out of convenience, shelters better promoted the animals and then actually kept them alive long enough to find homes through comprehensive adoption campaigns.

ACCEPTED ON FAITH

So given that there is so much information and experience working against the notion of pet overpopulation and given that to believe in pet overpopulation is to accept the excuse that allows for the killing of millions of animals every year, why do people who claim to be animal lovers not only cling to it and either work so hard to maintain it or to try to revive its fading supremacy through rebranding? There are three primary reasons.

First, until very recently, pet overpopulation was an unquestioned gospel within the animal protection movement. Repeated *ad infinitum* as means of explaining shelter killing and distinguishing it from other forms of animal-killing, such as hunting, by virtue of its "necessity" (especially since this form of killing was being done by those who claimed to be a part of the animal protec-

A genuine commitment to animal welfare requires an honest assessment of reality and the genuine threats which animals entering shelters face. Analyzing the validity of historical claims used to justify the systematic killing of millions of animals should not be a sophomoric exercise in rhetoric or debate, but a serious discussion that seeks to inform and influence our positions and actions on behalf of animals in a responsible, thoughtful and fact-based way.



tion movement itself), its prevalence and undisputed authority for so many decades gave it the appearance of truth rather than what it was all along: a mere hypothesis, and one that, when subjected to scrutiny and weighed against the evidence, collapses like a house of cards. Nonetheless, the universal acceptance of pet overpopulation that dominated the animal protection movement at one time—a groupthink mentality that accepted it as an *a priori* truth outside the bounds of investigation or analysis—meant that to ultimately question its precepts was regarded as heresy, opening up those who exposed its fallacies to condemnation, scorn, and allegations of fraud.

The motives of those who seek to expose the lie at the heart of the killing have been maligned and misrepresented, creating a climate of suspicion within the animal protection movement not only about those who question the doctrine, but the very act of questioning it at all. Why? Because if pet overpopulation is a myth, then the killing being done in shelters is unnecessary, and those who do that killing—friends and colleagues within the animal protection community itself—are behaving unethically and irresponsibly towards animals, a troubling and deeply unsettling conclusion that for many people within the animal protection community is better left unreached. Sadly, for many people who know and support organizations and individuals doing the killing or which provide them political cover, such allegiance is more important than the lives of the animals they are supposed to represent. To them, pet overpopulation, the historical narrative which has shielded those people from accountability, must not be exposed as a lie, and anyone who tries to do so should be condemned.

THE LIMITS OF SPAY/NEUTER

The second—and probably more ubiquitous—reason that some animal activists are resistant to the idea that pet overpopulation is a myth is because they irrationally fear that if the public finds out the truth, the public will no longer spay/neuter their animals, which they view as critically important. Why do they believe sterilization is so critically important? Because, like the belief in pet overpopulation, they have been told over and over again, and for years on end, that it is.

In fact, spay/neuter has been the cornerstone of companion animal advocacy for decades precisely because it does not threaten those running shelters. Whereas the other programs of the No Kill Equation—such as foster care, comprehensive adoption programs and proactive redemptions—place the responsibility for lifesaving on the *shelter*; spay and neuter places the responsibility on the *public*. Unlike those other programs, therefore, steril-

ization has been and continues to be the one program of the No Kill Equation to which every shelter director and every large national group pay homage. And that is also why so many animal activists argue, as they have been schooled to do and despite no evidence to prove it, that spay and neuter alone is the key to ending the killing. But is it true? In fact, it is not.

Consider:

- In many communities that have ended the killing of healthy and treatable animals, including those with very high per capita intake rates, they did so virtually overnight (the vast number of communities did it in six months or less) and before a spay/neuter program was put into place. Though long hailed by the animal protection movement as the one and only “solution” to shelter killing, the communities that have ended the killing did not do so through spay/neuter.
- The reasons historically given for why animals are dying in shelters are false. Animals are dying in shelters not because there are too many of them, but because of how shelters are operated: killing animals out of habit and convenience, even when there are empty cages and often within minutes of arrival.
- The demand for animals nationwide outstrips the supply of animals in shelters as much as ten-fold.

That does not mean that spay and neuter is not important. It is. While it is true that statistics show that there are enough potential homes for the animals in shelters, this does not undermine the lifesaving impact of such services. Indeed, regardless of the number of potential homes, the fact remains that the animals are not getting into those homes. Shelter killing currently claims the lives of 2.7 million healthy and treatable animals every year and shelter killing remains the leading cause of death for healthy dogs and cats in the United States. Low-cost, high-volume spaying and neutering helps to decrease the number of animals entering shelters who would face an unnecessary and untimely death. Such programs therefore should be supported.

Moreover, continued promotion and availability of high-volume, low-cost spay/neuter is a means to reach stasis in shelters where adoptions equal intakes, making the achievement of a No Kill nation even easier to achieve. This is important because the lower the intake, the easier it is for even unmotivated, ineffective and uncaring directors to run a No Kill shelter. We want to eliminate those communities with high intake rates needing thoroughly committed and hardworking leadership to stop killing. Moreover, if spay/neuter allows a community to

drop intakes significantly enough that they are unable to meet adoption demand, they can begin importing animals from high-kill rate jurisdictions and save those lives, too. Until all communities are No Kill communities, this is a very good thing to happen.

But despite the role spay and neuter plays in helping a community more easily achieve and sustain No Kill, the fact remains that despite the privileged position spay/neuter has historically enjoyed within the animal protection movement, it alone has never created a No Kill community. In fact, communities with very high per capita intake rates have achieved No Kill without a comprehensive public spay/neuter program. We cannot neuter our way out of killing and no U.S. community ever has. That honor belongs to the No Kill Equation as a whole, a series of programs and services which require a shelter to harness a community's compassion and which therefore also prove that in order to succeed, a shelter must embrace rather than alienate and condemn the people in the community it serves.

The No Kill philosophy recognizes that far from being the cause of shelter killing, the community is the key to ending it. It recognizes that while some people are irresponsible, most people are trustworthy and will do right by companion animals if we explain how they can do so. To the extent that spay and neuter is one of the programs that helps a shelter more easily achieve No Kill, that positive outcome is enough to encourage most people to do right not just by the animals, but by the shelter which shares their values and which they want to support and enable in its success. We need not fear monger with pet overpopulation and by extension, the threat that animals will be killed—or even actually kill them—to get people to do the right thing. When we make it easy for the public to do so—such as making spay/neuter affordable—most will. And studies and experience prove it.

Finally, believing that spay/neuter alone holds the key to ending the killing fails to recognize the most essential and tragic truth about animal sheltering in America today: we already have alternatives to killing, alternatives that the vast majority of shelter directors simply re-

But what about pit bulls?

According to some, even if pet overpopulation is a myth, people will not adopt out “pit bulls” regardless of how many homes may be available and thus shelters have no choice but to kill them. The truth, however, is that shelters saving upwards of 99% of dogs are saving all the healthy and treatable dogs we classify as “pit bulls,” too. As such, the myth that no one will adopt them is simply untrue. In fact, “pit bulls” consistently rank in the top three “breeds” in terms of adoptions. Of course, recent research shows that shelters misidentify breeds as much as 75 percent of the time. Moreover, as used by shelters, law enforcement agencies and even courts, “pit bull” is not a breed of dog. It is, according to a leading advocacy organization, “a catch-all term used to describe a continually expanding incoherent group of dogs, including pure-bred dogs and mixed-breed dogs. A ‘Pit Bull’ is any dog an animal control officer, shelter worker, dog trainer, politician, dog owner, police officer, newspaper reporter or anyone else says is a ‘pit bull.’” In both cases, they tend to over-include dogs in the “pit bull” category. Despite this, communities across the country are saving them anyway. Claiming you cannot adopt your way out of killing “pit bulls” cannot be true given that it has already been done and accomplished with far more dogs than accurately qualify as such.



fuse to implement. And how can you save animals in a shelter run by a director who simply refuses to stop killing? Moreover, lamenting that we would be finally able to end the killing if only everyone sterilized their animals or could be forced to do so is like wishing that a historically popular but ineffective remedy for a particular disease would work when a cure has already been found. Not only does such an attitude perpetuate ignorance and helplessness by failing to acknowledge a genuine solution that already exists, but it siphons energy that should be directed towards implementing the real remedy into mourning the failure of a hopeless one. How does that help animals?

It doesn't. Indeed, the notion that we must continue to promote the myth of pet overpopulation—which condones and enables killing—in order to encourage people to spay and neuter—which has only ever been important because it is a means to prevent killing—is an inversion of priorities. It is to encourage the disease and forsake the cure in favor of the medicine.

And not only does spay and neuter ignore the needs of the animals who are already in the shelter and under an immediate death threat, leaving them with no protection from killing of any kind, but reducing every issue to a failure to spay/neuter is exactly what the regressive shelter director and the large, national groups which fight No Kill want animal activists to do: point the finger of blame anywhere but on those who are actually doing the killing. Those who love animals must stop giving them the luxury of this out. We don't need animals to disappear from the Earth before we can do right by them. Instead, we should be demanding that those we pay to care for homeless animals with our tax and philanthropic dollars provide them the care, kindness, and a loving home that is their birthright.



Every animal lover has a responsibility to recognize that we don't need to figure out how to end the killing anymore. It is no longer a mystery—the No Kill Equation provides the answer. Our job now is to make sure the roadmap we already have is implemented in every shelter in America.

PET OVERPOPULATION AS POLITICAL COVER

The third and final reason that people cling to the myth of pet overpopulation is because they have a vested interest in an excuse which condones killing. This includes directors who run poorly performing shelters. It includes government bureaucrats in these communities who are supposed to oversee these shelter directors but refuse to hold them accountable for their performance. It includes national organizations whose companion animal divisions are staffed by or run on the advice of former shelter directors and employees who themselves failed to save lives when they worked in shelters. They are therefore not only threatened by No Kill success, but they are also committed to shielding their friends and colleagues still working in shelters from greater accountability. It includes the supporters of those groups whose identity is so wrapped up in that support that they not only reject any criticism of the groups no matter what

the evidence, but take such criticisms as a personal affront, thus willfully enabling killing through an unhealthy, codependent relationship that puts their own narrow self-interest before the lives and well-being of animals. And lastly, it includes the heads of organizations who claim to support No Kill, even claim to be striving toward No Kill, but who rely on the myth of pet overpopulation to justify their five- and ten-year No Kill plans in light of communities which have achieved it virtually overnight.

For such groups, pet overpopulation is a tool used to distinguish their community from those that are already successful, a means of obscuring the truth by portraying their community as more challenging than those that have already succeeded, even though, in truth, the thing that sets successful communities apart from theirs is a greater commitment to implement alternatives to killing and a greater determination to overcome the resistance of those who stood in the way.

THE CONCLUSION

We can end the killing and we can do it today. And in hundreds of cities and towns across America, we've done exactly that. A true advocate who loves animals does not respond to that news with indignation, scorn, anger, apoplexy, by shooting the messenger, or by attempting to obscure the issue for others with irrelevant and unrelated tangents, all of which have characterized the response by some within the animal protection to this seminal, groundbreaking, and what can only be described as good, news. A true advocate celebrates and then shares that message with everyone they know who loves animals, too, so that the pernicious and persistent myth at the heart of the killing—the lie that is responsible for a systemic slaughter of millions of animals every

year—will finally be recognized for what it is. Anything else is unethical. It is enabling shelter killing. And it is turning a blind eye to a solution that will spare millions of animals from losing the one thing that is, as is true for each of us, more precious to them than anything else: their lives.

About the data: *The data analysis came from a number of sources, including national surveys and studies conducted by or on behalf of Maddie's Fund, HSUS, Mintel, draftFCB, the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, Out the Front Door, and Petsmart Charities. It includes data from shelters that have statewide reporting such as Virginia, Michigan, North Carolina and California, among others, and a database of about 1,100 organizations, almost one-third of the U.S. shelter total.*



HOW SHELTER KILLING BENEFITS THE COMMERCIAL BREEDING INDUSTRY

Many people do not want to visit a shelter where they have to meet animals who face possible execution. Killing shelters are disturbing, unsettling places to visit for those who care about animals, not to mention the fact that the more a shelter kills, the more draconian its adoption policies, the more dirty and neglectful it is

likely to be, and the more hostile and poor its customer service—all driving the public away from shelters and into the arms of the commercial pet trade.

On the other hand, when we reform shelters, we not only make them safe for animal lovers to work at, but we

make them safe for adopters, too. During the height of one city's lifesaving success, at a time when the shelter had seven offsite adoption venues every day throughout the city in addition to their main shelter, there was not a single store selling dogs left in the city. The shelter had out-competed them and they all went out of the animal selling business. In another community, potential adopters faced two main choices: they could buy a kitten at a pet store for \$50 or they could adopt one from the shelter (with an offsite adoption venue in the same mall) for \$30.

Unlike the pet store, the shelter adoption included sterilization, vaccinations, a free bag of cat food, a free visit to the veterinarian of the adopter's choice, a free identification tag, a discount at the local pet supply, free grooming, a free guide to caring for their new kitten, free behavior advice for life, a discount on their next cup of coffee, the satisfaction of knowing they saved a life, and, during the Christmas season, a volunteer dressed as Santa Claus would deliver the kitten to their door. The pet store eventually approached the shelter about working together by having them do cat adoptions in their store. Instead of selling animals, they began helping the shelter find homes.

The same thing is beginning to happen in central Texas, where No Kill reform efforts in various shelters are reducing the demand for purposely bred animals, as a local advocate explained:

If more Americans adopt dogs and cats from shelters rather than acquiring them from alternative sources like pet stores and on-line sellers, demand for commercially bred animals will necessarily decline. In fact, we've seen this come true in Central Texas: at least one large-scale breeder gave up in the face of increased competition from progressive area animal shelters and turned over his keys to a shelter to find homes for his animals... By saving shelter pets' lives, No Kill policies and programs eat into commercial breeders' profits.

If we reform our shelters, this could also be the story of every American community. Widespread No Kill success in our nation's shelters would not only save the lives of millions of shelter animals every year, it—combined with legislative efforts to regulate, reform, close down, and eliminate their markets—would drive a dagger to the heart of the puppy and kitten mill industries.



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**A NO  KILL NATION
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