



THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

THE HSUS SHELTER ADVOCATE TOOLKIT

Bridging the Communication Gap

The job of helping animals in need, and ultimately achieving the goal of ending euthanasia, is too great to be tackled by one individual or group alone. It requires animal lovers from all walks of life and every philosophical bent to work together to find and implement effective solutions. Unfortunately, nowadays the very people who should be working together to solve problems, those involved in animal sheltering/rescue and the pet-loving public, aren't always able to effectively communicate with each other. Some sheltering professionals dismiss concerns expressed by the public because "they just don't get it" – meaning they don't see the obstacles and challenges of the "big picture" that confronts animal care workers every day. At the same time, the public often feels that shelters callously turn a blind eye to the forward progress being made in the animal care movement, and they begin to believe that shelter workers just don't care.

As the communication gap widens, and people who care about animals find themselves working in opposition to each other, rather than with each other, it is the animals who suffer. Shelters become frustrated with what are, from their perspective, unproductive diversions (like social media smear campaigns, attacks on their personal and professional reputations, etc.), and become more unwilling to work with the public on any level. This distancing in turn reinforces the public's mistrust of the shelter, making them wonder what the shelter is "hiding," and convincing them that the shelter does not deserve their support. This vicious circle of mistrust ultimately diverts everyone's precious time and resources, and drives us further from our goal of ending euthanasia.

In order to re-open lines of communication, we all need to acknowledge a basic premise: animal care professionals can't save lives without support from the public, and the public can't achieve a humane community without the enthusiastic contribution of dedicated animal control professionals. Simply put, we need each other.

Below are just a few of the topics that often seem to present obstacles to effective communication between sheltering professionals and the public; perhaps by hearing and acknowledging each other's perspectives we can increase the odds that we will all move forward together.

	For the Animal Loving Public – What Your Local Animal Sheltering Professionals Want You to Know	For Animal Care Professionals – What the Animal Loving Public Wants You to Know
Finances	Your local shelter/rescue does not receive its operational funds from any national organization – they rely on you, either as a donor or a taxpayer. They need you to ensure that they have the financial resources they need, so they can focus more on direct animal care and less on raising money.	Your donors/taxpayers deserve to get the most from their hard-earned dollars. Part of being a good public steward of the funds entrusted to you is ensuring that you are responsibly saving as many lives as possible.

<p>Statistics</p>	<p>Statistics can be made to paint just about any picture, good or bad. Before jumping to conclusions that your shelter's euthanasia numbers are "bad," ask what the real story behind those numbers is. You may find the background paints a much different picture of how the shelter is operating and its overall commitment to the animals.</p>	<p>The public deserves to know the truth about your community's animal population – good and bad. They need you to be honest about how many lives you are able to save and how many you are not, and how they can help you increase your humane lifesaving capacity. Be transparent, and use the story of your numbers to help educate your community about what you need (money, community services, volunteers, etc.) to help more animals.</p>
<p>The Big Picture</p>	<p>Sheltering professionals see thousands of animal victims each year, and sometimes they have to make difficult decisions that seem to weigh one individual animal's life against a "bigger picture" of all the other animals in need. Before condemning them for a decision about a single animal, look at how many animals are in need in your town, your state, your region, and try to understand their perspective. If they had fewer animals brought to their doors and more animals being quickly adopted, your shelter would certainly have more time and resources to spend on the more challenging individual cases.</p>	<p>The public doesn't see the thousands of animals that come through your doors, just the one they asked you for help with. They deserve to see that you care about each individual animal.</p>
<p>Focus</p>	<p>Quality of life matters! Animals are not goods that can be warehoused indefinitely – they need lots of individual attention each day, not just for cleaning and feeding but for physical and mental stimulation. Sitting in a tiny cage for weeks and months on end hoping for a new home may not be in that animal's best interest.</p>	<p>Outcomes matter! We owe it to every animal in our care to do the best we can to find them a loving home, and it's not ok to euthanize an animal unless you've made every effort to find one. And if you're trying to convince the public that quality of life for each individual animal matters (to explain why you don't overcrowd your facility, for example), make sure you are providing each animal in your care with the highest quality of life possible.</p>
<p>Professionalism</p>	<p>Just because you love animals and have had them all your life does not mean you necessarily have the knowledge and skills required to run a shelter. Today's sheltering professionals must be fluent in animal behavior, veterinary science, population management, disease control and prevention, media and communications, fundraising,</p>	<p>Choosing to make animal care your profession comes with a responsibility to make sure you are as educated and progressive as possible. Just doing things the way they have always been done is not acceptable. You have an obligation to understand every aspect of the sheltering "business", stay on top of trends, and prove to your donors/funders that you are committed to being and staying a</p>

	marketing, volunteer management, social networking... all of the skills needed to operate a pet store, veterinary office, non-profit organization (and government agency, in some cases) and for-profit corporation at the same time. To say that you could do a better job because you care more discounts their years of sacrifice, commitment and dedication.	leader, not just in your organization but in the field as a whole.
Philosophy	Not everyone cares for animals the same way – the fact that your dog sleeps in a crate at night doesn't mean you love him any less than your neighbor who lets hers snuggle up under the covers. Likewise, animal care professionals can have different approaches regarding the type of animals they help, the groups they work with, the programs they offer, etc. The best communities are those that can respect each other's differences and complement each other so that there is a suitable safety net in place for every animal in need.	Not everyone cares for animals the same way – the fact that one group is open access and another group is limited access does not mean that one cares for animals more than the other. The best organizations are those that can respect each other's differences and help complement each other so that no animal falls through the cracks. Personal differences, negative history and bad blood need to be put aside in favor of collaboration and community-wide problem solving.
Trust	You need to trust that animal control professionals really do care about animals, and don't enjoy having to kill them – in fact, quite the opposite is true; sheltering professionals suffer tremendous psychological impacts from the difficult burdens they carry. They need to be seen as partners in bringing an end to euthanasia, rather than the cause of the problem.	You need to trust that the public is not just made up of potential abusers and acknowledge that most people care about animals every bit as much as you do. They may lack some of the education and information that you have (things that are "common sense" to you, like the importance of spaying/neutering and the link between puppy mills and pet stores, may be completely foreign to people outside our field), but that doesn't mean they are ill-intentioned or ignorant. The public deserves to be given our trust and respect and needs to be seen as partners in bringing an end to euthanasia, not the enemy.
Productive Change	Tearing down an organization and the individuals working within it can actually cost animal lives, by preventing shelters from focusing on their care and well-being and diverting precious time and money. It is always easier to tear something down – be it a person, a building, an organization, just about anything – than to build something up. Real animal heroes do	The public wants change – they want agencies that care about animals, that are committed to saving lives, and that are not interested in "business as usual." Sheltering professionals need to constantly assess how and where they can improve, be open to new ideas and suggestions, be brave enough to make change wherever possible, and be honest about the obstacles to achieving success.

	<p>the hard work of reducing the number of homeless pets and helping those in need find new homes; they don't hide behind name calling on the internet or furthering personal agendas, and they certainly don't encourage their community to stop supporting local animal services.</p>	<p>Perhaps most important, shelters need to ask for help when they need it and create ways for the public to engage and be part of the solution.</p>
<p>Expectations</p>	<p>Your local shelter didn't create the pet homelessness problem in your community, and they can't solve it alone. Even the most state-of-the-art, expertly staffed, and well-financed shelter can't fix all the myriad social and economic problems that cause people to bring pets to their doors. The community itself must have resources in place to provide accessible spay/neuter services, pet friendly housing, behavioral assistance, pet food banks, low cost vaccinations and veterinary care, lost pet recovery assistance, pet acquisition counseling, pro bono legal assistance for landlord disputes, feral cat colony management and community cat care resources, and all of the other pet-related services and programs needed to reduce the number of pets that end up in need of shelter care in the first place.</p>	<p>Shelters have spent decades trying to convince the public to "do the right thing" and bring animals to us instead of abandoning them – yet now we often condemn them for it and call them irresponsible. We can't have it both ways. We need to be honest with the public about what we can and cannot do, and work with them to address the larger community needs that are resulting in pet homelessness.</p>