

Gaining Momentum: The No-Kill Philosophy in the 21st Century

The Center for Animal Rescue and Adoption



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Most leaders of the movement would describe the no-kill philosophy as a commitment to ensuring that every dog and cat who is ready to be placed has the opportunity to live in a safe, loving home for its lifetime. To do this, no-kill organizations emphasize increasing in the demand for shelter pets and reducing the supply being born when tackling the problem of too many animals and not enough homes. Innovative adoption and spay/neuter programs are essential to reaching this goal.

Supporters of this philosophy point out that no-kill doesn't mean a complete end to euthanasia. But no-kill does end the killing of dogs and cats as a management tool to control pet overpopulation. No-kill means that no healthy, adoptable animals will be killed simply because they are homeless.

“When we reach the juncture where adoptable (healthy) shelter animals can be guaranteed a home throughout the nation, Maddie's Fund will then focus its resources on funding programs to rehabilitate the sick, injured and poorly behaved, knowing that when these animals are whole again, there will be a home waiting for them,” according to Richard Avanzino, president of the foundation that has put \$240 million behind creating a no-kill nation.

The evolution of a no-kill nation happens in stages. First, save all “adoptable” animals – dogs and cats at least 8 weeks old who are healthy and reasonably well-adjusted. This category includes animals that may be elderly, deaf, blind, scarred, disfigured or disabled. Then, save all “treatable” animals – dogs and cats who could become adoptable with reasonable medical treatment or behavior modification. This category includes sick, injured, traumatized, infant and unsocialized animals.

For “non-rehabilitatable” animals, euthanasia may still be the most humane alternative. These animals may be suffering from an incurable, painful disease or injury, or they may have a history of vicious behavior so severe and irreversible that they pose a threat to public safety. In San Francisco, a community that is already saving its adoptable and treatable animals, the euthanasia rate is less than 5 percent – all non-rehabilitatable animals for whom humane euthanasia was the only option.

The Birth of the No-Kill Movement

The road of the no-kill movement has been long, with many strides being made just in the last decade. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the standard way of dealing with stray and abandoned dogs and cats was to round them up from the streets to the shelters and kill the ones that were not reclaimed.

Early in the 20th century, grassroots efforts to rescue and find homes for homeless pets began to emerge. Individuals or small, informal groups took animals into their own homes to care for them at their own expense. Because they were not organized in a single cohesive movement, these rescuers were considered rebels of the animal welfare establishment.

Some of these well-intentioned rescuers became overwhelmed with the number of animals in their care and were dubbed “animal hoarders” or “animal collectors,” putting a negative connotation on other rescuers.

For more than 100 years, the traditional role of shelters was “street cleaning,” and animal rescue was considered a fringe movement. Even in recent years, major national organizations continue to describe the killing of homeless animals as humane “euthanasia” and defend it as a necessary component of animal welfare.

Within the last 25 years, independent animal rescuers began to establish formal humane organizations to provide high-volume animal adoption services and lifetime care sanctuaries. But these anti-establishment groups remained largely unconnected, and the principles of the no-kill philosophy were widely misunderstood.

In the early 1990s, some major developments in the no-kill movement sparked national attention. The San Francisco SPCA, led by then-president Richard Avanzino, made a radical policy change and established a working model of collaboration with the local animal control agency. Around that same time, animal rescuers began to mobilize by organizing the first national no-kill conference in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1995.

“One of the reasons that a national meeting was so desired is that none of the national organizations which hosted animal welfare events had acknowledged or invited no-kill people to attend,” says Linda Foro, founder of Doing Things for Animals and organizer of the first conference. “The issues of no kill were not represented on the agendas, and those no-kill people who did attend were often poorly treated by others registered.”

To open a dialogue about no kill and encourage collaboration, the retreat welcomed groups regardless of organizational policies and drew 75 people from 18 states. The event also attracted the attention of the animal welfare establishment, with the second annual conference in Denver being co-hosted by the American Humane Association, led by Ed Sayres, then director of the organization’s Animal Protection Division.

With interest in the no-kill philosophy among mainstream animal welfare groups growing, the 10th annual conference in St. Louis, now coordinated by The Pet Savers Foundation, is expected to attract a record number of attendees.

A Revolutionary Idea Takes Hold

As the movement grows, no-kill philosophy is becoming more widely accepted. Rescue groups are becoming more sophisticated, and more shelters are transitioning away from traditional operations.

“The bottom line is, the no-kill movement represents a paradigm shift, a revolution, if you will, in the way we consider and treat companion animals,” says Avanzino. “No-kill shelters have chosen a path different from traditional shelters. Their priority is on life, and they refuse to sacrifice an animal because society says there are too many. It’s a commitment that directs organizational policy.”

The no-kill movement will bring American society to the point where the homeless animal population is reduced to a steady, predictable number Says Foro: “No-kill terminology will fall into disuse, since the concept will be commonplace.”