

# The Evolution of a No-Kill Approach to Animal Welfare

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“Whose interests does shelter euthanasia serve? The traditional answer asserts that animals are the beneficiaries—it alleviates suffering and protects helpless creatures against fates worse than death. Based on this belief between 20,000 and 30,000 mostly healthy companion animals daily are ushered out of this life. In the face of those numbers still alarming even if improved over recent years, the question of whose interests it serves and the validity of euthanasia’s guiding assumptions deserve reexamination.”

-Craig Bestrup, Ph.D., author and former Executive Director of the Progressive Animal Welfare Society (1997)

The reexamination of animal welfare in the United States began in 1989 when Ed Duvin, a long-time animal and political activist and historian of social change, wrote an article titled “In The Name of Mercy.” Commenting on his article, Duvin said:

When I finally wrote ‘In the Name of Mercy,’ it did not take long to recognize that I had struck a nerve. This was the intention, as ‘Mercy’ was crafted to produce discomfort with the status quo — so much that never again would millions of companion animals be ‘euthanized’ as a matter of routine (Duvin 2013).

In 1990, Alley Cat Rescue founder, Louise Holton helped bring trap-neuter-return on a larger scale to the USA as a means of changing the way feral cats were managed and viewed by society. Wrongly considered pests, these cats were labeled “dangerous and a nuisance” by some environmental groups and, as a result, were trapped and killed. ACR is committed to the development of viable no-kill policies. We agree with Duvin that when shelters kill companion animals, they turn a blind eye towards the “damaging long-term effects of devoting most of their energy to collection, processing, and killing, [while] leaving sparse

resources for bold preventive measures” (Duvin, 2013).

In 1994, Lynda Foro established the non-profit organization, Doing Things for Animals (DTFA). DTFA began publishing an annual directory of and running an annual conference for humane organizations whose missions were to provide humane education that would help end the tragedy of killing healthy, adoptable animals.

In 1993, the San Francisco SPCA, under the direction of Richard Avanzino, created the “Feral Fix Program” (“Feral Cat Advocacy: Deep Roots Continue to Blossom in the Bay Area,” 2006). Free vaccinations and sterilizations were made available for all feral cats in San Francisco, five days per week.

All those who work in the humane and animal welfare movement would like a no-kill country. We should therefore all be working together towards the goal of no-kill. Let those of us who are able to take in a small number of animals and who do not euthanize healthy animals work with agencies that are overwhelmed by the numbers of animals brought to them. If all the groups and concerned individuals worked togeth-

er, if all those who place animals in homes spayed or neutered them before adoption, if all the feral cat caregivers could be given the resources to sterilize their colonies, it would go a long way towards achieving this ideal of a no-kill society.

Unfortunately, two other problems exist in the U.S. that are not easy to solve — the dumping of companion animals and individuals not spaying or neutering their animals, which creates litters of unwanted kittens that overwhelm shelters each spring. The two most common reasons people relinquish companion animals are due to a move or a “no pet policy” at their new residence (Endo, 2018). Other common reasons include behavioral issues, no time to care for the animal, death or illness in the



Alley Cat Rescue

*Working with outdoor cats where they are, out in nature, is more humane than bringing them to a shelter, where they will likely be killed.*

family, and divorce or having a new baby. The economy also plays a large part in why individuals abandon companion animals. The loss of a job, foreclosure on their house, and the inability to pay bills forces many families to give up their animals. And upon learning their local shelter is full and fearing their cat will be euthanized, they often release the cat outdoors hoping she will have some chance at survival.

As a compassionate society, it is our re-

sponsibility to use all available resources to address each of these problems in order to progress toward being a no-kill nation.

## Will Community Cats Suffer if We Don't Take Them to Shelters?

Dr. Kate Hurley, head of the shelter medicine program at U.C. Davis, initially believed outdoor cats should be rounded up and taken to a shelter, where they would of course be killed. But today she travels to conferences to speak on why this practice should end (Hurley and Levy, 2013).

In a discussion through the No-Kill Maddie's Fund Foundation, Hurley and Levy argued against long-standing assumptions that nothing but suffering and untimely death await outdoor cats not admitted to shelters. The veterinary experts cite growing evidence that these cats not only survive on their own, but that feral cats brought to TNR clinics are generally healthy; less than one percent require euthanasia for disease, trauma, or other incurable conditions (Wallace and Levy, 2006).

They also noted veterinarians find less than 10 percent of cats have a medical condition on intake at shelters (Wenstrup and Dowidchuk, 1999). Though community cats have a higher risk of infection by parasites than owned cats, they have an equal risk of contracting feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), and a lower risk of feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) (Lee et al., 2002; Luria et al., 2004). (Refer to “Health Care for Feral Cats: Guidelines for Colony Caretakers” for more information on viral diseases.)

Additionally, in what Hurley and Levy call “the most complete long-term study of

community cats in a TNR program” (Hurley and Levy, 2013), researchers believed the cats in a TNR'd colony lived an average of three to five years. Yet after the 11-year follow-up period, the cats still living on the property had been there for an average of seven years, meaning they live longer than expected (Wenstrup and Dowidchuk, 1999).

Most community cats are being cared for in some capacity, with feeding being the most common activity. According to a survey done by the American Pet Products Association, about 14% of U.S. households care for unowned outdoor cats (APPA, 2019). Free-roaming cats are sometimes so well cared for that it is not unusual for cat lovers to adopt them into their homes from the streets.

However, as Hurley and Levy point out, though adult cats are able to thrive in the community, kittens are often not as lucky. A study found 75 percent of feral kittens died within six months of birth (Nutter et al., 2004) - a terrible statistic that TNR could tackle by decreasing reproduction. “The bottom line,” says Dr. Hurley, “[is that] traditional sheltering is not an effective tool to eliminate or protect community cat populations” (Winograd, 2013).

According to data collected by PetPoint Industries and supplied to ACR by Dr. Andrew Rowan, 319,900 cats were euthanized in shelters in 2021, which is roughly 11.5 percent of all cats taken to shelters that year. Though euthanasia rates have been decreasing over the past decade, the overpopulation of domestic animals remains a concern, and several factors are at the root of this problem. Despite growing campaigns promoting the spaying and neutering of companion animals, some guardians — as many as 15 percent in the U.S. — still do not have their pet cats fixed (“Pets by the Numbers, n.d.”). However, the percentage of pets (cats and dogs) in underserved communities that are not fixed is much greater at 88% (“Pets by the Numbers,” n.d.) as people in those communities face



Louise Holton

*Community cat in Mount Rainier, MD*

challenges such as lack of access to transportation and lack of access to veterinary care. The end result is many unintended litters and many more cats and dogs who need homes.

Unfortunately, guardians often find that they cannot take care of their animals. The majority of companion animals relinquished to shelters, perhaps as many as six to eight million animals a year (Scheer and Moss, 2011), are turned in by their caretakers. Alley Cat Rescue receives calls every day from individuals looking to give up their cat(s) for a number of reasons: the person is moving, the person brought in another companion animal who does not get along with the cat, the arrival of a baby, behavioral issues, medical issues, financial constraints, or the person simply no longer wants the cat.

Along with the overabundance of animals being born and abandoned, there are simply not enough animals being adopted from shelters. Every year, 17 million Americans get a new companion animal, with fewer than half - only 40 percent of dogs and 43 percent of cats - being rescued from shelters or rescue groups (“Pets by the Numbers,” accessed 2022). Because of this, res-

cue groups and shelters often deal with a huge number of animals and a shortage of available homes.

Alley Cat Rescue and other organizations are working hard to form partnerships with locally-run shelters to improve the situa

tion for community cats. *Animal People* stated that the introduction of TNR into the U.S. contributed greatly to the reduction of killing of cats in shelters (Faunalytics, 2012). We strive for a day when no healthy cats — domestic, stray, or feral — are killed in U.S. shelters.