

Misinterpreting the San Francisco Model

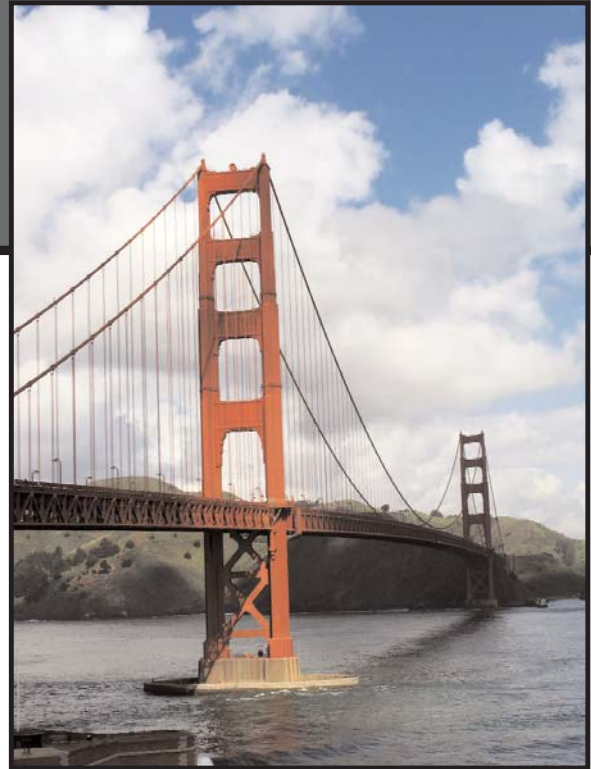
Why programs and services
~ *and not collaboration* ~
are the real lessons from
San Francisco's success.

The buzzword in sheltering today is “collaboration.” Activists who are tired of the killing in their communities are trying to get all parties to the table to agree on a joint campaign for change. These efforts are promoted and encouraged by many funding agencies, including some of the largest foundations in the country.

Collaboration is being promoted because these agencies are looking to the city of San Francisco as a roadmap to saving lives. In 1994, the city and county of San Francisco became the first community in the nation to end the killing of healthy dogs and cats in its animal shelter system. An agreement between the city's Animal Care and Control Department and the private San Francisco SPCA ensured a home not only to each and every healthy dog and cat, but to thousands who were sick or injured but treatable. In addition, a citywide preference for neutering over impounding and killing also reduced the death rate for feral cats by 73% and for underaged kittens by 81%.

By the year 2000, roughly 74% of all dogs and cats (nearly three out of four) were being released alive, either back to their owners or to new homes. This achievement was over twice that of any other major urban city and approximately three times the national average. This year, San Francisco expects that over 80% of all impounded dogs and cats will go home alive.

Unfortunately, most people misunderstand the San Francisco model, or offer various excuses for their inability to replicate its success. While



shelters continue to kill large numbers of animals in the face of lifesaving alternatives, the primary reason for the failure for those who have desired to emulate “the San Francisco model” is the fundamental misinterpretation of what actually allowed San Francisco to succeed in its efforts. And it was not - as many people have been led to believe - a collaboration between the San Francisco SPCA and the San Francisco Animal Care and Control Department.

Most agencies mistakenly assume that No Kill is not possible without a large private shelter subsidizing the work of a municipal animal control agency. This view has even been adopted by former administrators of the San Francisco SPCA. They focus on the “partnership” aspect between the private SPCA and the public pound. As such, they tend to emphasize collaboration at the expense of programs, even though it is actually the latter

which accounted for San Francisco's success.

Collaboration is Not Always Key

This is also the primary reason why national foundations who fund such partnerships are not achieving their desired success. To them, collaboration is not just an important piece of the puzzle, it is the only piece. That is why a focus on collaboration at the expense of programs is a recipe for failure—as the fiasco of the “Asilomar Accords” aptly demonstrates. These Accords are an agreement endorsed by many national organizations including the Humane Society of the United States. And while the Accords focus on building collaborations, they allow shelters to work actively against No Kill by killing rather than sterilizing feral cats, keeping volunteers out of the shelter, and using temperament testing to unfairly label dogs “unadoptable.” In fact, none of the programs that made San Francisco successful are endorsed by the Accords. In some cases—like TNR for feral cats—these were actually voted down. In the end, all are left to “local decisionmaking” which can and often means opposition and continued killing.

While the job is certainly made easier if all parties are willing to work together, collaboration only works when animal control or private shelters are dedicated to the No Kill endeavor. If they are not, a focus on collaboration can actually delay lifesaving efforts or even doom them altogether. In such cases, the effort at coalition building detracts from the real impediment to saving lives: reforming the animal shelter or regime change within those agencies that continue to cling to outdated models of sheltering.

In fact, to call what occurred in San Francisco a partnership is to elevate form above substance. The San Francisco city shelter was hardly a willing

participant, and had to be brought to the table by threats of public initiative and external pressure. And, in the end, it never fully embraced the paradigm, choosing to expend its energy on efforts to downplay the success of San Francisco and belittle No Kill achievements.

And while the large national organizations continue to push the idea that all humane societies and animal control agencies are interested in the same goals, the facts frequently tell a different story—one of intransigent, reactionary policies that cause animals to needlessly die even in the face of lifesaving alternatives as demonstrated by No Kill success in progressive communities nationwide.

Programs and services such as Trap-Neuter-Return for feral cats, foster care for sick, injured, unweaned or traumatized animals, and working with rescue groups.

The focus on collaboration at the expense of reforming animal control agencies who are not implementing those programs is a recipe for continued killing. Indeed, the success of San Francisco was a two-part strategy that has been largely ignored, and is not

reliant on a private SPCA or humane society or willing collaboration.

That strategy involves: Reducing the intake of homeless dogs and cats through various programs, but most notably through spaying and neutering initiatives; and, Implementing a series of programmatic initiatives for animals already impounded.

Reducing Intakes

The first prong of the model involves responsibly reducing impounds so that more

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resources can be used to provide care for individual animals. Fewer animals impounded also mean less strain on foster homes, cage and kennel space, volunteer and staff attention, and other overall efforts to save lives.

This was accomplished, in part, through a series of pet retention programs that helped owners overcome behavioral, medical, and environmental obstacles to keeping their pets. But, in the final analysis, the primary mechanism for reducing impounds involved subsidizing the cost of spay/neuter for the community's low income pet owners, for targeted human demographics (e.g., the homeless, the poor, the elderly) and for targeted pet populations (e.g., feral cats and pit bulls). The success of this approach cannot be overstated. In the 1980s, San Francisco impounded over 20,000 dogs and cats per year. By 2005, that number was just over 7,000, despite community population growth to 800,000 human residents. In comparative terms, that is less than one dog or cat for every 1,000 human residents. The national average is about 15 dogs and cats for every 1,000 human residents. And many communities have intake rates more than two times that average. In short, a commitment to high volume low-cost public spay/neuter has resulted in an intake rate over 30 times lower per capita in San Francisco than many communities. This strategy does not depend on whether the agency is public or private.

Increasing Lifesaving

The second prong involved shifting from a reactive and traditional public health orientation to a proactive and community based adoption and rescue agency. In other words, animal control must place much more emphasis on its animal "care" functions and balance it with its animal "control" duties. By asserting a unique identity, having autonomy in its

operations distinct from those of a health department or police agency, and by putting itself on more equal footing in scope and service with private animal welfare organizations, animal control can save more lives.

In San Francisco, this involved putting in place programs and services that had a measurable lifesaving impact, rather than basing shelter responses on tradition or longstanding public health model practices. These included a volunteer and foster care program, offsite adoption programs and others.



Exporting the Model

In 2001, this model was exported to Tompkins County, NY where it was implemented at a shelter that served as the animal control authority for the county. The agency took in all dogs and cats (including vicious and feral animals), and was staffed with New York State peace officers charged with enforcing local animal

control ordinances and State anti-cruelty laws.

The combination of subsidized spay/neuter for pets of low-income owners, feral cat, and pit bull populations, combined with proactive community based programs also allowed Tompkins County, NY to realize reduced impounds of key populations, as well as a corresponding increase in lifesaving rates. These efforts resulted in a dramatic 75% decline in the shelter death rate in a period of three years.

In 2005, the animal control authority for the City of Philadelphia endorsed and took measures consistent with the "San Francisco model" and also realized its benefits. After an implementation and transition phase, this has resulted in a better than 30% decline in shelter killing in only eight months—a five year average for most communities. Prior to implementation, the shelter was killing roughly 88% of all impounded animals. In Charlottesville, the local SPCA and animal control authority saved almost 7 out of 10 cats and 9 out of 10 dogs last year

using the same model. In other words, a focus on programs trumps a need for collaboration, although the latter can reduce the timeframe of success. (This should not be mistaken with rescue groups and feral cat organizations. Working with these groups is key to lifesaving success.)

Nonetheless, any model that reverses them—that elevates collaboration over programs as the Asilomar Accords and some foundation strategies do—will fail, as aptly demonstrated in the last few years of several nationwide No Kill attempts and coalitions that were long on promise and short on results.

The success of San Francisco, Tompkins County, and increasingly Philadelphia and Charlottesville, VA show the efficacy of the programs approach. In short, the model works. If implemented with rigor, any community can and

will achieve No Kill, regardless of outside funding or the existence of a broad-based coalition involving all agencies in the community.

To the extent a shelter isn't implementing this model, animals are needlessly being killed. And because No Kill advocates must represent the interests of the animals, they must first demand these programs, and then fight for them. The first step to success is often the hardest one of all—a hard working, compassionate animal control or shelter director not content to regurgitate tired clichés or hide behind the myth of “too many animals, not enough homes.”

Unfortunately, this one is also oftentimes the hardest one to demand and find. But find him or her we must. Because the public wants No Kill, the animals deserve it and if it requires regime change to get it, we must fight for that too.

Top 10 Strategies for Saving Lives

1 Ignore Conventional Wisdom

Advice that comes from the old-guard organizations is often mired in the past and not terribly effective. Look around, stay flexible, think creatively, and act boldly—even if it is not on the “approved” list of big-shelter practices.

2 Where There's a Will

No Kill begins and ends as an act of will. Do not ever accept that killing is a legitimate and appropriate “solution” to homeless pets. Stay focused, work hard, make sure there is a direct, lifesaving effect with the programs you implement. You'll get results.

3 Know Thyself

How many animals coming into the shelter are neonatal kittens and puppies? How many are dogs with behavior problems? How many are sick? What types of injuries are most common? Different problems need different solutions.

4 Free to Good Shelter

Volunteers are the lifeblood of any organization, providing endless enthusiasm, hard work, and TLC for the animals no shelter could afford to pay for or be without.

5 There Goes the Neighborhood

If people can't or won't come to the shelter, take the shelter to them. Conduct off-site adoptions at every community event or simply set up shop at corner malls, stores, and neighborhoods.

6 In Foster Parents We Trust

If you trust them enough to bottle-feed baby kittens for four weeks around the clock, trust them to adopt or find homes for them on your behalf.

7 Yes, We're Open

Staying open after 5 pm on weekdays and all day Saturday and Sunday to give working people a chance to reclaim lost pets or adopt new ones doesn't necessarily mean more hours, just different ones.

8 Hear ye, Hear Ye

Spread the word! Having an offsite adoption? Saved the life of an injured pet? Get those press releases out! Staying in the public eye raises awareness, increases the number of homes, and brings in donations.

9 Do As I Do

Shelters should not add to their problems or kill the offspring of pets they themselves adopt out by placing breedable animals in the community.

10 Ask for Help

Ask, ask, and ask for help—for money, for volunteers, for homes, for rescue groups, for foster parents. Speak to community groups and ask them to support your lifesaving work by opening their hearts, homes, and wallets to needy animals.