

**The No Kill Advocacy Center Presents**

**Nathan Winograd's**



# **Redemption:**

**The Myth of Pet Overpopulation &  
The No Kill Revolution in America**

**A quick guide to the No Kill Philosophy & the No Kill Equation**

**No Kill:  
Fast  
Trusted  
Proven**



## A Revolution Begins

In the last decade and a half, several shelters in numerous communities have comprehensively implemented a bold series of programs and services to reduce birthrates, increase placements, and keep animals with their responsible caretakers. As a result, they are achieving unprecedented results, saving upwards of 95 percent of all impounded animals in open admission animal control facilities. Some of these communities are in urban communities, and others are in rural communities. Some are in very politically liberal communities, and others are in very conservative ones. Some are in municipalities with high per capita incomes, and others are in communities known for high rates of poverty. These communities share very little demographically. What they do share is leadership at their shelters who have comprehensively implemented a key series of programs and services, collectively referred to as the “No Kill Equation.”

The fundamental lesson from the experiences of these communities is that the choices made by shelter managers are the most significant variables in whether animals live or die. Several communities are more than doubling adoptions and cutting killing by as much as 75 percent—and it isn’t taking them five years or more to do it. They are doing it virtually overnight. In Reno, Nevada, local shelters initiated an incredible lifesaving initiative that saw adoptions increase as much as 80 percent and deaths decline by 51 percent in one year, despite taking in a combined 16,000 dogs and cats.

In addition to the speed with which it was attained, what also makes Reno’s success so impressive is that the community takes in over two times the number of animals per capita than the U.S. national average and as much as five times the rate of neighboring communities and major U.S. cities. In 2010, 91 percent of dogs and cats were saved, despite an economic and foreclosure crisis that has gripped the region. They are proving that communities can quickly save the vast majority of animals once they commit to do so, even in the face of public irresponsibility or economic crisis. This is consistent with the results in Charlottesville (VA), Tompkins County (NY), and others.

Unfortunately, many shelter directors remain steadfast in their refusal to embrace the No Kill paradigm. Among the various excuses for why it cannot be done, the three most common are that there are simply too many animals for the available homes (“pet overpopulation”), that shelters are not given adequate funding by local governments to get the job done without killing, and that the No Kill philosophy is inconsistent with their public safety obligations.

## Rethinking Conventional Wisdom

In the United States, however, review of the data, as well as the experiences of the most innovative, progressive, and best performing shelters nationwide, prove that our movement needs to re-evaluate both the notion as to “who is to blame” as well as “what shelters can do about it.” To put it bluntly, shelters have the ability to save animals who are not irremediably suffering, hopelessly ill, or truly vicious dogs (which, combined, apprise less than ten percent of all impounds), and they can do

so very quickly. And the two most often cited reasons—pet overpopulation and lack of resources—have not shown to be true barriers to success.

## **No Kill Animal Sheltering is Cost Effective**

To begin with, many of the programs identified as key components of saving lives are more cost-effective than impounding, warehousing, and then killing animals. Some rely on private philanthropy, as in the use of rescue groups, which shifts costs of care from public taxpayers to private individuals and groups. Others, such as the use of volunteers, augment paid human resources. Still others, such as adoptions, bring in revenue. And, finally, some, such as neutering rather than killing feral cats, are simply less expensive, with exponential savings in terms of reducing births.

In addition, a 2009 multi-state study found no correlation between per capita funding for animal control and save rates. One shelter saved 90 percent of the animals. Another saved only 40 percent. One community has seen killing rates increase over 30 percent. Another has caused death rates to drop by 50 percent. There was, however, no correlation between success/failure and per capita spending on animal control. In other words, the difference between those shelters that succeeded and those that failed was not the size of the budget, but the programmatic effort of its leadership.

In other words, the amount of per capita spending did not seem to make a difference. What did make a difference was leadership: the commitment of shelter managers to implement a key series of necessary programs.

## **The Data Disproves Pet Overpopulation**

The second reason often cited for failure to embrace and/or achieve No Kill is the idea of pet overpopulation, but the data here has also not borne out the claim. It is important to note that the argument that there are enough homes for shelter animals does not also include any claims that some people aren't irresponsible with animals. It doesn't mean it wouldn't be better if there were fewer of them being impounded. Nor does it mean that shelters don't have institutional obstacles to success. But it does mean that these problems are not insurmountable. And it does mean shelters can do something other than killing for the vast majority of animals.

In the United States, current estimates from a wide range of groups indicate that approximately four million dogs and cats are killed in shelters every year. Of these, given data on the incidence of aggression in dogs (based on dog bite extrapolation) and save rates at the best performing shelters in the country from diverse regions and demographics, better than 90 percent of all shelter animals are "savable." The remainder consists of hopelessly ill or injured animals and vicious dogs whose prognosis for rehabilitation is poor or grave. That would put the number of savable dogs and cats at roughly 3.6 million.

These same demographics also tell us that every year, roughly 23 million Americans are considering bringing a new dog or cat into their home, and 17 million of those households have not decided where they will get that animal and can be influenced to adopt from a shelter. Even if the vast majority of those 17 million (upwards of 80 percent) got a dog or cat from somewhere other than a shelter, U.S. shelters could still zero out the deaths of savable animals. On top of that, not all animals entering shelters need adoption: Some will be lost strays who will be reclaimed by their family (shelters which are comprehensive in their lost pet reclaim efforts, for example, have demonstrated that as many as two-thirds of stray dogs can be reunited with their families). Others are unsocialized feral cats who need neuter and release. Some will be vicious dogs or are irremediably suffering and will be killed. In the end, a shelter only needs to find new homes for roughly half of all incoming animals.

From the perspective of achievability, therefore, the prognosis for widespread No Kill success is very good. But let's put all this aside. Let's assume "pet overpopulation" is real and insurmountable. To do that, we have to ignore the data. We also have to ignore the experiences of successful communities. In the United States, to accept the "No Kill is impossible" argument requires pretending the knowledge and the results do not exist.

How does this change our support for the No Kill philosophy and the programs and services that make it possible? Even if "pet overpopulation" were true, it doesn't change the calculus. In the United States, shelters nationally are killing roughly half or more of all incoming animals. To borrow an overused sports analogy: that puts the save rate at the 50-yard line. And although the evidence is overwhelming to the contrary, let's say that shelters can never cross the 90% save-rate goal line because of "pet overpopulation." What is wrong with moving the ball forward? If all shelters put in place the programs and services that brought rates of shelter killing to all-time lows in communities throughout the United States, they can save millions of additional lives nationally, regardless of whether they ever achieve an entirely No Kill community. That is worth doing and worth doing without delay. Because every year they delay, indeed every day they delay, the body count increases.

### **No Kill Animal Sheltering Is Consistent with Public Safety**

And finally, a No Kill community is one where no savable animals are killed. Unfortunately, there are some animals who are hopelessly ill or injured, irremediably suffering, or in the case of dogs, vicious with a poor prognosis for rehabilitation. These animals are not adoption candidates and sadly, at this time in history, they are often killed, unless hospice care and sanctuaries are available. But since the No Kill philosophy does not mandate that vicious dogs or irremediably sick animals be made available for adoption, it is wholly consistent with public health and safety.

In fact, today, No Kill is a humane, sustainable, cost-effective model that works hand in hand with public health and safety, while fulfilling a fiscal responsibility to taxpayers. The success of this approach across the country proves the viability of the No Kill model and the above principles.

# The No Kill Equation

Two decades ago, the concept of a No Kill community was little more than a dream. Today, it is a reality in many cities and counties nationwide and the numbers continue to grow. And the first step is a decision, a commitment to reject kill-oriented ways of doing business. No Kill starts as an act of will.

Following a commitment to No Kill is the need for accountability. Accountability requires clear definitions, a lifesaving plan, and protocols and procedures oriented toward preserving life. But accountability also allows, indeed requires, flexibility. Too many shelters lose sight of this principle, staying rigid with shelter protocols, believing these are engraved in stone. They are not. Protocols are important because they ensure accountability from staff. But inflexible protocols can have the opposite effect: stifling innovation, causing lives to be needlessly lost, and allowing shelter employees who fail to save lives to hide behind a paper trail.

The decision to end an animal's life is extremely serious, and should always be treated as such. No matter how many animals a shelter kills, each and every animal is an individual, and each deserves individual consideration.

And finally, to meet the challenge that No Kill entails, shelter leadership needs to get the community excited, to energize people for the task at hand. By working with people, implementing lifesaving programs, and treating each life as precious, a shelter can transform a community.

The Mandatory programs and services include:

## **TNR Program**

Trap-Neuter-Release (TNR) programs for free-living cats allow shelters to reduce death rates.

## **High-Volume, Low-Cost Spay/Neuter**

No- and low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter reduces the number of animals entering the shelter system, allowing more resources to be allocated toward saving lives.

## **Rescue Groups**

An adoption or transfer to a rescue group frees up scarce cage and kennel space, reduces expenses for feeding, cleaning, and killing, and improves a community's rate of lifesaving. Because millions of dogs and cats are killed in shelters annually, rare is the circumstance in which a rescue group should be denied an animal.

## **Foster Care**

Volunteer foster care is a low-cost, and often no-cost way of increasing a shelter's capacity, caring for sick and injured or behaviorally challenged animals, and thus saving more lives.

## **Comprehensive Adoption Programs**

Adoptions are vital to an agency's lifesaving mission. The quantity and quality of shelter adoptions is in shelter management's hands, making lifesaving a direct function of shelter policies and practice. If shelters better promoted their animals and had adoption programs responsive to community needs, including public access hours for working people, offsite adoptions, adoption incentives, and effective marketing, they could increase the number of homes available and replace killing with adoptions. Contrary to conventional wisdom, shelters can adopt their way out of killing.

## **Pet Retention**

While some surrenders of animals to shelters are unavoidable, others can be prevented—but only if shelters work with people to help them solve their problems. Saving animals requires shelters to develop innovative strategies for keeping people and their companion animals together. And the more a community sees its shelters as a place to turn for advice and assistance, the easier this job will be.

## **Medical & Behavior Programs**

To meet its commitment to a lifesaving guarantee for all savable animals, shelters need to keep animals happy and healthy and keep animals moving efficiently through the system. To do this, shelters must put in place comprehensive vaccination, handling, cleaning, socialization, and care policies before animals get sick and rehabilitative efforts for those who come in sick, injured, unweaned, or traumatized.

## **Public Relations/Community Development**

Increasing adoptions, maximizing donations, recruiting volunteers and partnering with community agencies comes down to increasing the shelter's public exposure. And that means consistent marketing and public relations. Public relations and marketing are the foundation of a shelter's activities and success.

## **Volunteers**

Volunteers are a dedicated "army of compassion" and the backbone of a successful No Kill effort. There is never enough staff, never enough dollars to hire more staff, and always more needs than paid human resources. That is where volunteers make the difference between success and failure and, for the animals, life and death.

## **Proactive Redemptions**

One of the most overlooked areas for reducing killing in animal control shelters are lost animal reclaims. Shifting from a passive to a more proactive approach has allowed shelters to return a large percentage of lost animals to their families.

## **A Compassionate Director**

The final element of the No Kill Equation is the most important of all, without which all other elements are thwarted—a hard working, compassionate animal control or shelter director not content

to continue killing, while regurgitating tired clichés about “public irresponsibility” or hiding behind the myth of “too many animals, not enough homes.”

No Kill is simply not achievable without rigorous implementation of these programs. They provide the only model that ever created No Kill communities. It is up to us in the humane movement to demand them of our local shelters, and no longer to settle for the excuses that shelters often put up in order to avoid implementing them.

## **Comprehensive Implementation**

To succeed fully, however, shelters should not implement the programs piecemeal or in a limited manner. If they are sincere in their desire to stop the killing, animal shelters will implement and expand programs to the point that they replace killing entirely. Combining rigorous, comprehensive implementation of the No Kill Equation with best practices and accountability of staff in cleaning, handling, and care of animals, must be the standard.

In 2004, for example, one SPCA in a city of 1.5 million people conducted fewer than 200 free spay/neuter surgeries for the pets of the community’s low-income population. Shelter leaders can boast of a low-cost and free spay/neuter program, but 200 surgeries in a large city, with one in four people below the federal poverty line, will not impact the numbers of animals entering city shelters. By contrast, the San Francisco SPCA, in a city with roughly half the population, performed approximately 9,000 surgeries a year throughout the late 1990s, roughly 84 percent of them were free.

Similarly, animal control in another community allowed only employees to participate in its foster care program. The shelter can say it is implementing the programs and services of the No Kill Equation, but it is excluding thousands of animal lovers from participating in the lifesaving effort, seriously limiting how many lives they save.

A shelter committed to No Kill does not send neonatal orphaned kittens into foster care “sometimes,” but rather every time. A shelter committed to No Kill does not merely allow rescue groups access to animals “some of the time,” but every time a legitimate rescue group is willing to take over care and custody of the animal. Indeed, a No Kill shelter actively seeks these groups out and contacts a particular rescue organization whenever an animal meets its criteria.

In short, shelters must take killing off the table for savable animals, and utilize the programs and services of the No Kill Equation not sometimes, not merely when it is convenient or politically expedient to do so, but for every single animal, every single time. A half-hearted effort isn’t enough. It is primarily the shift from a reactive to proactive orientation and from a casual, ad-hoc, limited implementation to a comprehensive one, which will lead to the greatest declines in killing, and fix our broken animal shelter system.

# A No Kill Nation Is Within Our Reach

## Also Available from the No Kill Advocacy Center:

- Adopting Your Way Out of Killing
- On Leadership
- The No Kill Revolution Starts with You
- There Ought to Be a Shelter Reform Law
- The Companion Animal Protection Act

Visit [nokilladvocacycenter.org](http://nokilladvocacycenter.org)

If every animal shelter in the United States embraced the No Kill philosophy and the programs and services that make it possible, we would save nearly four million dogs and cats who are scheduled to die in shelters this year, and the year after that. It is not an impossible dream.

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