

No Kill Equation - Pet Retention Programs (a “keep them out” element)

Earlier this year, a person or persons left two dogs at a non-profit no kill shelter under the cover of darkness. Each dog was in a new crate and each had a new collar. One was a 10 year-old unaltered male. The other was a 15 year-old unaltered female, presumed to be the male dog’s mother. The female dog had a raging infection. The dogs were discovered early the next morning when volunteers arrived at the shelter. Both dogs had to be rushed to a veterinarian but both were saved. The people who did this put their entire trust in the people running the no kill shelter to save the dogs.

The point of this story is not to assign blame to those who would do such thing. The point is to say two things. First, our ties with animals are emotional. When we are backed into a corner, we often don’t think clearly and we engage in irrational behavior. Second, when the municipal shelter is not seen as a place of refuge or rescue, people will often knowingly break the law in order to avoid taking their animal to the shelter or seeking the advice of the shelter staff. They would rather risk arrest and hope for the best.

All of this leads us to the subject of pet retention programs. Although municipal shelters are referred to as open admission, that does not mean that they should simply accept owner surrendered animals without any questions asked and make the process too easy. When shelters do that, they learn nothing about the history of the animals and they lose wonderful opportunities to keep animals where they belong: in existing homes. Studies have shown that simply having animal surrender counseling leads people to keep their pets more than half the time.

Pet Retention Programs keep animals from entering the shelter at all by helping people overcome obstacles, whether they are short term or long term. They do it by getting people to slow down, think clearly and articulate why it is they think they cannot keep their pet. These programs include intake counseling, pet food banks, trainer referrals, grants for veterinary care, short-term foster plans and having a Pet Help Desk. Yes. There are people who should never have pets. But the vast majority of people who have pets love them and want the best for them. It is worth the time, effort and some degree of cost output to work to keep animals in their homes as opposed to accepting those animals too easily, only to hold them and then destroy them.

In a no kill community, the family referenced above which chose to break the law by abandoning dogs at a no kill shelter in the middle of the night would have an alternative: they could seek the help of the local municipal shelter to work to overcome obstacles and keep those dogs at home through medical care and owner education.