
In the Name of Mercy

by Edward S. Duvin

animalines has often exhorted our movement to meet demanding performance standards, as passion alone is limited unless accompanied by pursuit of excellence. We refer to this integration of commitment with the highest quality standards as “passionate professionalism.” Commercial enterprises must respond expertly to the realities of a fiercely competitive marketplace or perish, but our movement has no such accountability. Moreover, our primary constituency – other beings and the Earth – cannot express objections, and thus our only survival imperative is to elicit adequate financial support from the general public, a populace that is largely uninformed and responds more to style than substance. If our movement spent as much time soberly evaluating our policies and programs as we do polishing our public image, then no doubt the struggle for justice would be on higher ground.

It’s very interesting that the word “development” has an entirely different connotation among nonprofits than in the profit sector. Nonprofits generally refer to development as a fundraising endeavor, whereas for-profits view it as a process for achieving excellence. *animalines* defines development as the progression of an organization towards realizing defined objectives through planned phases. Successful corporations, albeit driven by greed, have more of a handle on reality than our movement, for they realize that although clever marketing can sell a product or service, only quality and efficiency can assure long-term success. Our movement’s purpose is affirming the sanctity of life and Earth, and in many years of assisting nonprofit organizations, *animalines* has yet to encounter a group that has a comprehensive performance assessment program to ensure that stringent quality standards are met.

Nothing illustrates this more vividly than the histori-



cal record of the oldest and largest segment of our movement – the animal shelter community. We single them out for many reasons, not the least being that in most smaller cities and counties throughout the country, they represent the only voice for other beings, a voice that is often inaudible. It’s important to note, however,

that *animalines* could have selected virtually any segment of our movement – grassroots or national, hands-on advocacy, mainstream or radical – and the findings would vary only in degree, not substance. The conclusions drawn from *animalines*’ exhaustive review of shelters are distressing, but the lessons to be derived apply equally to all of us.

animalines characterizes the shelter community as a slumbering giant, not in a derisive sense, but to accurately portray the preset state of this “industry.” Much of what occurs in shelters is so bizarre that it almost defies comprehension, much less vivid description. Let’s begin with the statistical nightmare one finds when examining shelters. Although shelters have existed in this country for well over a century, there is simply no reliable statistical base from which even the most basic information can be derived. One does not have to be an applied statistician to understand the gravity of not having accurate information, for without the existence of reliable historical and contemporary data, it’s literally impossible to draw any conclusions that stand the test of empirical scrutiny. Surrounded by the deaths of millions of precious beings, this industry has demonstrated neither the concern nor the competency to even validate the information upon which it bases life-and-death decisions.

How is it possible that this multibillion-dollar industry never formed an effective national association, funded and administered by shelter members, to properly gather and validate critical information?

Nor has the shelter community established a coordinated national effort to protect the interests of the companion animals they profess to serve. Without any organized pressure from shelters, it's no wonder the U.S. Census Bureau refuses to include household animals, and the lack of this vital demographic data is devastating in terms of effective program formulation and assessment. As a result, a hodge-podge of crude formulas are used to estimate companion animal populations, all of which possess a statistical margin of error so staggering as to render population estimates virtually useless. However, this doesn't deter shelters one iota from predicting and assessing programs on these flawed figures – and, adding insult to injury, they freely (and proudly!) publish “success” stories based on data that would give ulcers to even the most tolerant statistician.

Compounding this statistical farce, the shelter community has yet to undertake a reasonably accurate count of how many shelters exist or even explicitly define what constitutes a shelter. Sadly, due to this limitation, the best a recent national survey could do was estimate a range of between 3,000 and 5,000 shelters. Using the mean figure, this indicates that much widely utilized national shelter statistics carry an astounding 25 percent margin of error – and that assumes accurate sampling and reporting! Given the unreliability of national population and shelter statistics, some shelters have taken local surveys to compile their own data. *animalines* greatly applauds their initiative, but we have spent wakeful nights reviewing surveys that illustrate good intentions but sorrowful execution. Instead of seeking the pro bono assistance of qualified market research analysts, shelters often develop surveys that are so flawed in construction and sampling methods as to be all but worthless.

Those unfamiliar with program formulation and assessment might think we make too much of these statistical shortcomings, but accurate measurement is an indispensable element in developing, evaluating, and refining effective policies. How can we properly

analyze where we have been, where we are at, where we are going, and how we're going to get there without reliable measurement? After hundreds of interviews with shelter personnel and reviewing numerous surveys and program evaluations on sterilization, education, licensing, etc., *animalines* found that poor methodology, incredible error margins, and highly contradictory findings prevented us from drawing any statistically valid conclusions regarding the efficacy of key shelter programs. It's evident that the shelter community either doesn't know enough or care enough to meet even the most marginal professional standards. We intend no disrespect, but from the perspective of the vulnerable shelter animals, one is sadly reminded of the old adage: I can take care of my adversaries, but God save me from my friends.

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Earlier we lamented the absence of an effective national association – comprised of shelter members – to establish credible statistical procedures, initiate vital research projects, coordinate media campaigns, and generally bring shelters into the sunlight. By combining resources, shelters could utilize their collective strength to forge a formidable alliance. Keeping in mind that reliable data is not available, we estimate on the basis of the latest national survey that there are some 4,000 animal control and humane society shelters, with a combined budget of 2.7 billion dollars and a paid staff of almost 50,000 employees. This means that if shelters contributed a mere one-tenth of the percent of their annual budget, 2.7 million dollars would be available to establish and fund a national shelter association. A myriad of crucial projects could be undertaken, such as developing more acceptable non-invasive birth control options, and the shelter industry could finally begin to evolve into a force for life.

Perhaps the most troubling dimension of the shelter community is the prevailing mentality regarding the unconscionable death toll, what *animalines* refers to as an assembly line of slaughter. Even some of the most “progressive” shelter directors and boards

define their preeminent responsibility as preventing suffering on many levels, for although euthanasia cannot be completely avoided at the present time, it borders on the obscene to describe the killing of many millions of innocent and healthy beings as a merciful act. Whether picked up on the street or surrendered at the shelter, the vast majority of these animals experience the kind of psychological trauma and terror that we find so abhorrent for caged laboratory animals but tolerate in our own facilities. Some are exposed to various forms of physical mishandling and abuse, and all suffer from the anguishing ordeal of being processed and warehoused in a foreign and frightening environment. Euthanasia might be a relatively painless end to this journey of terror, but each death represents an abject failure – not an act of mercy.

Shelter personnel incessantly proclaim they have no other choice than to kill, but this assertion cannot withstand careful scrutiny. Indeed, the argument that shelters are merely innocent caretakers and the sole blame lies with “irresponsible pet owners” is not only self-serving, but preposterous on the face of it. We’ve already elaborated on the absence of a reliable statistical base upon which to formulate and assess programs, but this only skims the surface of operational deficiencies among shelters. Management practices regarding strategic planning, program development, resource utilization, and community outreach are woefully deficient, even in most of our largest and wealthiest shelters. Employee screening and selection is an embarrassment by any standard, and some shelters screen potential adopters with more diligence than their own employees – and then express great surprise when internal abuses occur. Sound management programs alone could significantly reduce the incidence of euthanasia, but there’s no incentive for creative evolution when killing is perceived as an acceptable and merciful act.

Perhaps the most remarkable management feature of shelters is their almost total preoccupation with internal operational components at the expense of community and youth education. How can they have the audacity to primarily blame the public for the killing when only some 4 percent of the total shelter budget

is spent on education! We hasten to add that this disgraceful figure includes both community outreach and in-school programs, and this combined total represents the lowest percentage of any budget category. Since only about 3–4 percent of companion animals are adopted from shelters, this indicates that some 96 percent of shelter resources are expended on 4 percent of the overpopulation tragedy! So we pose this question to shelter personnel and boards: If more than 16 million homeless companion animals are being killed every year, and shelters assign the lowest budgetary and operational priority toward overpopulation education, then who is the major contributor to the vicious cycle of suffering and death?

Certainly the public is not an innocent bystander, but shelters cannot hold others morally culpable until they have fully met their own responsibility to educate the public. Due largely to sparse and painfully ineffectual shelter outreach efforts, most of the public has little or no understanding of the horrendous magnitude of the overpopulation tragedy. Compounding the problem, when the public is reached, the message they receive is “sanitized” with enough euphemisms to fill the Grand Canyon. Why isn’t the unadulterated truth, stripped of any veneer, imaginatively and assertively brought to the public? Perhaps the unvarnished truth would make some uncomfortable, but that is precisely what we should be doing – removing the killing from behind closed doors and informing the public about their role in the massive slaughter of our so-called closest companions. The breeding of companion animals, including pure breeds, must be made to carry no less stigma than wearing fur, as those who breed for any reason are complicit in perpetuating the confinement and killing of precious beings. After 123 years, there can be no justification for the failure of shelters (and the larger movement) to make all forms of breeding as unacceptable to the public as fur is rapidly becoming.

The most potent and cost-effective outreach vehicle is the development of a creative volunteer program. Were shelters to place a high priority on this area through attracting, training, and skillfully utilizing a volunteer outreach corps, they could begin the transition from killing site to a community resource center.

A true shelter should be a place where life is affirmed, both in teaching and practice, not a building permeated with the odor of death. Talented and well trained volunteers are the key to the four principal components of effective outreach: efficiently reaching target population segments; establishing credibility among that targeted audience; articulating a clear and compelling educational message; and, finally, follow-up programs toward achieving an enduring attitudinal shift. Volunteers are particularly useful in gaining public credibility, as they can establish critical connections in areas where they already have easy access and respect – family, friends, professional peers, civic groups, etc. Organizations such as the United Way learned long ago that neighbor to neighbor and professional to professional communication opens doors and elicits cooperation unattainable to even the most skilled “outsider.” How many more millions must die before shelters – and all of us – begin to establish professional outreach programs?

Another crucial outreach instrument is youth education. This area receives abundant platitudes about youth representing the future, but it invariably receives the lowest budgetary priority. Even accounting for the unreliability of shelter statistics, *animalines* was stunned to see recent survey results indicating that shelter personnel reach more people through Pet Facilitated Therapy (PFT) programs than youth and adult education presentations combined! Whether or not one shares our profound reservations about PFT, this misallocation of resources is unfathomable and reflects the prevailing myopia within the shelter community. Our movement has to begin anew with each generation because we fail to effectively reach the preceding one, and the animals and the Earth pay dearly for this refusal to invest in the promise of a brighter day. Why? Primarily because shelter personnel and others in the movement

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become mired in daily operational and fundraising activities, blinding them to the vision of planting life-affirming seeds in fertile soil.

Our central point is that even if one shelter animal is euthanized, then there is a clear moral imperative to exercise every conceivable outreach vehicle. Overpopulation is essentially a product of ignorance and indifference, and only innovative and aggressive community and youth education programs offer the promise of breaking the vicious cycle. As mentioned earlier, shelters will never stop the slaughter if they continue allocating 96 percent of their resources on treating symptoms and a mere 4 percent on fundamental causal factors. Shelters cannot wait for the public to knock on their door, as they must take the initiative by approaching every school, media outlet, club, civic organization, professional association, shopping center, and wherever people will listen. Shelters represent the last line of defense for millions of vulnerable beings, and if they fail to wage a full-scale educational war on behalf of these beings, then they cannot rightfully call themselves a shelter – which, by any definition except our movement’s, is a safe haven.

Shelters have not only been remiss in their own educational efforts, but also in failing to use their collective influence on other powerful interests, namely, veterinarians and pet food manufacturers. More pet food is sold in this country than baby food, and some of our nation’s largest and wealthiest corporations reap tremendous profits from this lucrative market. As *animalines* has written in the past, while shelters allocate pennies for public education, the pet food industry spends millions of dollars through the media glorifying the birth of a new litter – all the while stacking their immense profits on the bodies of our dead friends. How does the shelter industry respond to this outrage? The vast majority of shelters are only too eager to accept pet food industry funding for PFT and other promotional projects while never raising an objection to their avaricious marketing practices and

arrogant indifference to the overpopulation tragedy. Instead of joining together to pressure pet food companies to alter their commercials and establish a fund for alleviating overpopulation, the shelter community obligingly accepts the blood-stained crumb thrown their way. What better means of exercising leverage over the pet food industry than the collective pressure of 4,000 animal shelters (which include some 2,500 humane societies), but concerted pressure would require organization and determination – both of which are sorrowfully lacking in the shelter community.

Closer to home but equally critical, shelters have failed to effectively enlist veterinarians as responsible humane educators. Veterinarians have consistently dictated the terms of their relationship with the shelter community, and those terms have been self-serving in the extreme. Just as veterinarians have seldom taken the lead in exposing egregious abuses in laboratories, slaughterhouses, and factory farms, their record is equally lamentable in addressing companion animal overpopulation. Veterinarians must do more than simply participate in low-cost spay/neuter programs, as they interact with far more companion animal “owners” than any other institutional source, and the interaction often occurs at a crucial educational juncture. Instead of the deferential posture shelters generally assume, they should meet the local veterinarians and actively promote those who agree to educate their clients – both verbally and through shelter literature – about the staggering dimensions of companion animal overpopulation. Veterinarians represent the foremost authority in the public’s mind. And they must be pressured to use that authority to responsibly sound the alarm. It’s essential that shelters and other concerned groups freely publicize the names of cooperating veterinarians – as profit seems to be the language veterinarians understand best.

We recognize that shelter personnel work in the trenches and are often overwhelmed by the daily operational pressures of coping with overpopulation. All we are asking, however, is merely that they shed their myopia long enough to embrace the full range of creative possibilities, for when it comes to precious lives, today’s reality cannot serve as tomorrow’s excuse. Institutional inertia does not give way easily, but it must give way. We reach out to our friends in the shelter community with respect, and ask only that they demonstrate the same respect for companion animals by categorically rejecting the prevailing shelter value system – a convoluted system that places a higher operational priority on “painless” execution than preventative education. Shelters will continue to be nothing more than processing plants until they begin the transition from sanitation dumps for the public’s unwanted “baggage” to vital community education centers. Shelters cannot continue to be slaughterhouses and friends of animals cannot continue killing healthy beings in the name of mercy. A new and larger vision is needed, a vision in which shelters hold themselves accountable for meeting demanding performance standards that preserve life – not destroy it.

This article was originally published in animalines in 1989. Ed Duvin, often referred to as the “father” of the no-kill movement, is known for his writing and public speaking on the humane movement and other social change movements, as well as his extensive nonprofit consulting. Ed has served as the associate director of In Defense of Animals, the driving force behind the creation of the Center for Respect of Life and Environment, and founder of Project ZERO (which is committed to achieving a new ethic for companion animals) and Walking the Walk (which promotes management standards).