

Socially Conscious Animal Sheltering: A Humane, Responsible Approach



Every community should have a refuge that welcomes all animals in need. Unfortunately, under intense pressure to increase “live-release” statistics at any cost, many animal shelters have resorted to harmful

“no-kill” policies, which make statistics look appealing but at animals’ expense.

Shelters with such policies frequently reject animals they consider unadoptable or difficult to place, warehouse animals in cages and crates indefinitely, give them away indiscriminately to anyone who will take them, allow them to suffer and die unassisted in order to keep them out of the “euthanized” column, and engage in other irresponsible practices that result in an increase in suffering and death.

That’s why a growing number of shelters, agencies, and communities nationwide—including Los Angeles County, California; Davis County, Utah; and the Colorado Veterinary Medical Association—are rejecting “life at any cost” policies. Instead, they are embracing “**socially conscious animal sheltering**”—a humane, responsible model that puts the focus on animals’ quality of life instead of on numbers.

Socially conscious animal sheltering is based on these humane and progressive best practices:

1. Making every healthy and safe animal available for adoption.

Indiscriminately releasing seriously ill, injured, or behaviorally unsound animals for adoption puts them at high risk of abuse and neglect. Animals who have exhibited aggressive tendencies are in danger of being exploited as “guard dogs” or being kept chained or caged outside and harmed or even killed after they hurt a human or another animal. Placing potentially dangerous animals in communities understandably makes the public wary of adopting from shelters.

2. Ensuring that every unwanted or homeless animal has a safe place to go for shelter and care.

Animals’ acceptance into a shelter should not depend on their age, temperament, or physical condition—every community must have at least one shelter that accepts all animals taken to it. It’s unacceptable and inhumane to turn animals away. Animals who are rejected from shelters are often abandoned to suffer and die on the streets or drowned, shot, strangled, or killed in other painful ways by people who are desperate to get rid of them.

3. Assessing homeless animals’ medical and behavioral needs and ensuring that they are thoughtfully addressed.

Animals housed in sheltering agencies must be assessed for disease and injury and must have all medical conditions addressed to prevent them from suffering. Their behavioral needs must also be assessed and met, including sufficient enrichment to make them comfortable and to prevent self-destructive, obsessive-compulsive coping behavior.

“As veterinarians, we have a responsibility to prevent and relieve animal suffering. The idea of the no-kill movement is misleading, and often increases animal suffering with unintended consequences. A Socially Conscious Animal Community is a more positive approach to animal welfare that treats animals respectfully and alleviates their suffering. As a board, a socially conscious approach is more in line with our mission of enhancing animal and human health and welfare in the state.”

—Will French, D.V.M., and president of the Colorado Veterinary Medical Association



4. Alleviating suffering and making appropriate euthanasia decisions.

Compassionate euthanasia is an act of kindness for animals who are suffering

without hope of recovery or are unadoptable for other reasons. It is never acceptable to let terminally ill, suffering animals languish in cages until they finally die when peaceful euthanasia could have ended that pain. It is also inhumane and unacceptable to keep animals who are known to be too dangerous to be placed in the community housed indefinitely, causing them to go insane from confinement. Each euthanasia decision is difficult and must take the welfare of the individual animal into consideration.

5. Enhancing the human-animal bond through safe placements and post-adoption support.

Integrating a new animal companion into a family can be difficult. As adoption agencies, socially conscious shelters have a responsibility to support the family. This can mean post-adoption behavioral advice, classes for new animal caregivers, addressing shelter-related medical needs, and being willing to accept animals back if a placement doesn't work out. There are many behavioral issues that can be addressed and modified through training and positive experiences, but other types of behavior are dangerous and cannot be mitigated. And animals should never be placed with people who have harmed humans or other animals in the past.

6. Considering the health, well-being, and safety of the animals in each community when transferring them as well as that of the humans.

Introducing animals into a community affects both the humans and other animals already living there and those living in the community from which the animals came. It's important to introduce only animals who will be able to live in harmony with those already living in the community and to ensure that no new infectious diseases are brought in. It's also vital to try to help the community from which the animals were sent, through humane education and spay/neuter programs. Animals' temperament, health, and needs must be carefully considered when deciding whether to transport them to another shelter. For many animals—especially those who are ill, elderly, very young, unsocialized, or easily frightened—transport can be stressful and even terrifying, and it's not always the humane choice.

7. Fostering a culture of transparency, ethical decision-making, mutual respect, continuous learning, and collaboration.

Socially conscious shelters are committed to full transparency. This can include reporting accurate statistics, sharing policies, and fully disclosing and quickly admitting to mistakes. All decisions must be based on integrity.

We urge you to take a leadership position, protect animals, and promote public safety by rejecting harmful “no-kill” policies and embracing the “socially conscious animal sheltering” model. PETA stands ready to assist shelters in implementing this positive, responsible, and community-friendly approach.

“While we applaud the efforts to decrease the number of animals euthanized, we are concerned that some of those efforts have led to substantially decreased animal welfare. We have seen the ramifications firsthand. ... One of the worst welfare issues that can result from the no-kill movement is the warehousing of animals. When ‘any kind of life’ becomes a greater priority than quality of life, animals suffer.”

—Jennifer Woolf, D.V.M., M.S., and Julie Brinker, D.V.M., M.S.

“Blaming or shaming animal welfare agencies for circumstances beyond their control is unreasonable and has caused great disharmony in the animal welfare field. ... Adopting ‘no-kill’ has also been used as the easier response by both local government agencies and private organizations to community activists, rather than doing the difficult work of delving through the multifaceted issues surrounding the care for unwanted animals. Like any social cause, animal sheltering is a complex issue that cannot be explained away with a polemic slogan.”

—Stephen K. Peeples, SCVNews.com