



The Pet Rescue Foundation

WHY TRANSPARENCY?

By Maddie's Fund President, Rich Avanzino

Transparency is one of the cornerstones of the Maddie's Fund philosophy.

Although transparency in the non-profit world generally refers to financial information, when Maddie's Fund talks about transparency, we are referring to shelter data. Transparency to us means tracking and publicly reporting the outcome of every live dog or cat who crosses the shelter threshold.

To achieve transparency, I think shelters should start by collecting and publishing the kind of information contained in the Asilomar Accords Animal Statistics Table. By publish, I don't mean share internally with staff, I mean promote on websites and in newsletters so the whole world can see what's happening.

Many shelters say they don't want to publish their statistics because the organization will look bad. If an agency fears looking bad, something is going on -- perhaps it's not getting enough funding to do the job well, or it's not properly supported by other animal welfare groups or the community. But if the organization isn't getting the resources or backing it needs and large numbers of dogs and cats are dying as a result, shouldn't the public know that? Don't we owe it to the animals to tell the community what's taking place in the shelter system, especially in public animal control facilities?

Not only does the public have the right to know, but once the information is exposed, there is greater opportunity for solutions to be found to reduce the killing. If the community doesn't know what's happening, it can't help.

There was a huge outcry in San Antonio awhile back when the local newspaper revealed a 91% euthanasia rate at Animal Care Services. Angry and embarrassed at their city being labeled one of the worst in the nation for animals, politicians and government officials took immediate action. Among other things, the city bolstered its resource commitment to the animals with a \$900,000 budget increase for 2006, and then invited animal welfare groups to participate in the lifesaving effort. As a result, impounds have gone down, adoptions have gone up, and, after just one year euthanasia has dropped to 82%.

While some shelters worry that publishing statistics will tarnish their image, other shelters and communities that are leading the way in lifesaving aren't publishing their statistics either. Isn't it time for the leaders of our movement to step forward and set an

example? By publishing good statistics, they will spur lifesaving efforts nationwide as shelters across the country strive to reach the bar they have established.

In my opinion, real transparency means *no fudging allowed*. If an organization saved all of its healthy animals except for 25 friendly, healthy pit bulls that were killed because of a local mandate, those animals have to be accounted for and listed as healthy deaths. They can be asterisked (e.g., “the Humane Society saved all of its healthy shelter dogs and cats except for 25 pit bulls who were killed because of a local ordinance prohibiting pit bull placement”). But the organization has to be transparent and account for those deaths.

Another situation that tends to go unreported is owner/guardian requested euthanasia. It’s not uncommon for shelters to euthanize animals at a guardian’s request then exclude them from overall shelter intakes and deaths. In other words, the animals simply don’t show up in public records. I expressed my opinion on this topic a few months ago in another editorial.

Rather than fearing or fighting transparency, animal welfare organizations should embrace it.

When an organization is forthcoming and demonstrates it has nothing to hide, its vulnerability to exposes and allegations is substantially reduced.

If there *is* a problem, the best way to address it is to talk about it. Cover-ups cause people to lose faith and question an organization’s honesty. Refusals to disclose information only make people assume the worst.

Transparency is a big plus even if an organization is less than perfect, because it allows the community to monitor improvement. Going back to San Antonio, 82% euthanasia is not good, but at least the public can see the agency moving in the right direction.

When the public can see that an agency is saving an increasing number of dog and cat lives, it enhances the organization’s reputation, which builds community trust, which increases financial support, which saves even more lives -- and the positive momentum keeps building for the animals.

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