

“A simple act of kindness
and compassion towards a
single animal may not
mean anything to all
creatures, but will mean
everything to one.”
--Paul Oxtan

Shelter and Operations Evaluation Report for



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History

It is important to begin this audit with a brief look at the recent history of the Niagara Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (NSPCA). In December 2011, the media was contacted and allegations of mismanagement, frequent euthanasia of healthy and treatable animals, and board malfeasance were made. The Board of Directors reached out to the Erie County SPCA right after the New Year and asked for an evaluation of NSPCA be done by ECSPCA staff led by their then Executive Director, Barbara Carr.

At that time, it was shown that in a period of 10 weeks, between 10/01/2011 and 12/15/2011, 573 animals had been euthanized. Further it was established that the Executive Director employed during this time had little interest or information concerning the care of animals under his charge and no knowledge of the numbers of animals being routinely euthanized. Euthanasia reports for the entire calendar year of 2011 showed the euthanasia of 2,501 animals. Among these, the records indicated that 322 were euthanized for aggression, 664 were euthanized for treatable upper respiratory infections, and 140 were euthanized with the reason given that they were geriatric. NSPCA maintained at that time to be a “No-Kill Animal Shelter”.

Results of this investigation included the firing of some staff members, including the Executive Director and the resignation of the organization’s entire board of directors.

The people who then stepped up to serve as members of the board took on an incredible task. The reputation of the NSPCA was at an all-time low, the remaining staff was under scrutiny and staff morale was poor. A group of brave citizens took on this task and got down to the business of board development. This new Board had not even the simplest of board tools when they started. For example, the by-laws uncovered during the 2012 investigation were shocking. They had been so ignored by decades of poor board practices that they included a section that said that a board meeting of the NSPCA could be called by telegraph!

The board worked diligently to rebuild the operations and the reputation of the organization and within a relatively short time hired a new Executive Director. This new Executive Director also took on a mammoth task and worked very hard to save the lives of animals, develop a professional staff, and improve the reputation of this badly damaged organization.

Over the next half dozen years, board members and staff worked diligently to make the organization whole. At all steps along the way, however, they were haunted by the events of 2011 and concern that this history would never be repeated.

One reality for an organization that tries to revamp after a scandal will often be a level of wariness of even the smallest missteps and a reactive response to these missteps.

Consequently, and understandably, the board tended to believe it was important to micro-manage the Executive Director and the organization. In turn, the director micro-managed the staff. In the earlier years, it could be argued that all hands were needed. However, instead of transitioning to

the more traditional culture of a non-profit, the organization stayed the same micro-management course. Later in this report we will look closer at this.

Over the years the organization grew, its reputation improved, and the public became more supportive. The Executive Director felt she had done her job and that the organization was ready for a new direction to make the organization fiscally strong and begin the process of transitioning from an outdated animal shelter facility to a new shelter that could meet the needs of the animals in its care. A two-prong approach was planned. First, the shelter would build a surgical suite and, second, once that was complete, the board would begin a capital campaign for a new facility.

Fund raising at this level had not been an interest or passion for the Executive Director. She felt it was time to move on and for the Board to find a replacement that would be able to move the organization forward with a strong focus on development and fund raising

Subsequently the Board of Directors hired Tim Brennan, a local nonprofit professional, with a fund raising/development background. Mr. Brennan had no background in animal sheltering or animal welfare. Prior to searching for a suitable development professional as the new Executive Director, the board and the Executive Director decided to promote their Cruelty Officer to Shelter Manager to maintain continuity in animal care and welfare. Mr. Brennan came to work August 8, 2018 and shadowed for several weeks. His first official day as Executive Director of the NSPCA was August 31, 2018.

November 2019/euthanasia policy and the euthanasia of Rez

In November of 2019, WKBW, Spectrum News, and the Buffalo News reported that accusations of poor animal care, unjustified euthanasia, and a lack of transparency were made against staff members and some board members. The accusations were made by ex-board members and the former Executive Director. The accusations included a dog being euthanized in his kennel at the shelter, a kitten whose eye had been surgically removed due to a lack of veterinary care, acts of insubordination from the Executive Director towards a board member, lack of proper management of the shelter, and not following policies associated with making euthanasia decisions.

Kathy Paradowski, a former foster volunteer and former Board member, reached out to Barbara Carr to ask Barbara to come to the shelter and do the work that was eventually done. Because Ms. Paradowski didn't have the authority to ask Barbara to do this, she was told Barbara could not consider such a request unless the Board of Directors of the NSPCA made the request. The following day Barbara was contacted by the current president of the Board of NSPCA asking for the help. Barbara reached out to New York State Animal Protection Federation (NYSAPF) Executive Director, Libby Post, about the situation, since NSPCA is a Fed member. Barbara serves as a shelter consultant for the Federation. Post reached out to Mr. Brennan and then spoke with the board's president who asked for the Fed's Education Fund (501C3) to come in and provide shelter consulting services. It is the goal of the Fed and its Education Fund to have well-functioning shelters across New York. It serves no one's purpose to give a wink and a nod to dysfunction.

Once engaged by the Board of the NSPCA, Carr and Post spent three days (December 26-28, 2019) on site as consultants for the audit and reviewed over 150 of pages of emails and other documents sent to them by those making the accusations. Staff, current board members, and those making accusations were all interviewed. Those making accusations included the prior Executive Director, three board members that have recently resigned from the board, volunteers, ex-employees, and one member of the original board from 2012.

Carr authored this report and, at times, makes specific observations in the first person.

What came to a head in November of 2019 seems to have had its beginnings in January 2019 when a dog was euthanized by the NSPCA veterinarian in his kennel. It was also reported by the previous Executive Director that this was the fourth dog euthanized at the shelter without approval of the euthanasia committee. After speaking with the veterinarian, the Executive Director, and the prior Executive Director the following seemed to have occurred:

Observation:

Rez:

A large husky-type dog was admitted to the shelter on 1/9/19 after having been removed from a home on the Tuscarora Reservation by a local rescue group. The rescue group's volunteers could not handle the dog's aggression during transport to their location and called for assistance. An employee of the NSPCA responded and had to use a catch pole to handle the dog safely. The shelter staff gave the dog the name "Rez."

Because there had only been a verbal sign-over to the rescue group by the dog's former owner, Rez was given the status of "stray" at the time of intake at the shelter. During the stray hold time, the behavior staff attempted to work with Rez but the dog's behavior remained very aggressive. The decision to euthanize Rez was made and late in the afternoon of January 23, 2019, the shelter's veterinarian, conducted the euthanasia in the dog's kennel for safety reasons. He administered a high dose of sedative in order to be able to handle Rez without restraint for euthanasia. Fatal Plus (Sodium Pentobarbital) was administered when the dog was fully sedated and calm. Sedation can cause Fatal Plus to take longer to be effective and this was the case for this dog. The veterinarian checked the dog at 10-15-minute intervals and after the first interval administered a second dose of Fatal Plus.

After an hour or so the veterinarian decided to leave the dog in the kennel rather than transport the body to the cooler. The dog was large and, in Veterinarian's opinion, the only people available at that time in the shelter to help would not be able to assist him to move the body.

Later that evening, the NSPCA bookkeeper was at the site doing paperwork. This employee also volunteered with dog enrichment at the shelter and apparently decided to visit the dogs before she left for the night. She found the dead dog in the kennel and was greatly disturbed. She decided to text the Board president Bob Richardson, (since resigned) who was at a shelter board meeting. Tim Brennan, the Executive Director, was also at the meeting. At this point, as the meeting was breaking up, the Board president asked Brennan to accompany him to the shelter.

It is not clear when Amy Lewis was contacted. However, she was also asked to come to the shelter. Once at the shelter, Richardson, Brennan, and Lewis removed the body of the dog from the kennel.

The following morning, Brennan met with both the veterinarian and the shelter manager. Immediate changes were made to the Niagara SPCA's No Kill Policy to clarify the policy. The following was added:

- All non-medical euthanasia must be approved by committee vote.
- The Executive Director will be informed of all planned euthanasia (both medical and non-medical) at least 24 hours prior.
- All euthanasia shall be conducted in the infirmary whenever possible. If, in the rare case, a euthanasia must be performed in the kennel, that kennel will be concealed from all other kennels by draping the front of the kennel.
- Once an animal is euthanized, a member of the infirmary staff will remain with that animal until it is deceased, upon which arrangements will be made to have the animal bagged and placed in the freezer as soon as possible.

This policy was shown to the staff members. Both were asked to sign that they had received and understood the document and the changes. The veterinarian signed this memo on 1/24/2019 and the Shelter Manager signed it on 1/28/2019.

Subsequently, the Board of Directors told the Executive Director that changes to this policy must be made by the Board. Mr. Brennan then forwarded his requested changes to the Board for consideration and passage.

Discussion:

There are several issues in the case of Rez that were looked at by the Executive Director. Included in these were the kennel-based euthanasia, the time of the euthanasia and the idea that the dog's fate should have been directed through the NSPCA's Euthanasia Committee. Each was addressed within 24 hours after the euthanasia of Rez by the Executive Director.

The first problem was scheduling the euthanasia late in the day without the proper staff support. It was specifically planned this way because the decision had been made to euthanize Rez in his kennel for safety concerns and to make certain all volunteers would be gone for the day to not upset a volunteer unnecessarily. The reasoning was sound. However, the planning was not. Prior to euthanasia, the medical staff knew the size of the dog and should have planned accordingly.

Euthanizing a highly aggressive dog without moving it to the infirmary is something every shelter has faced. It is not a common situation and therefore generally has no formal procedure. Generally, euthanasia is performed in an infirmary where there is enough staff present to observe and assist. In this case, once the initial sedation occurred the veterinarian acted alone. In doing so, he had to leave the dog to get more Fatal Plus and then removed himself a few times to continue his work in the infirmary. The veterinarian continued to check on the dog at 10-15-minute intervals. This was not appropriate and once sedation was performed, and once Fatal Plus was administered the dog should have been observed more closely.

Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, authored by The Association of Animal Shelter Veterinarians (ASV Guidelines) indicate a room used for euthanasia must be large enough to handle 2-3 staff and should be well lit and quiet. None of these standards can be met in a kennel. However, staff also has a responsibility to keep humans safe and euthanizing an animal in its kennel is done on rare occasions in the best shelters in the country.

ASV Guidelines also state:

” Animals should not be permitted to observe or hear the euthanasia of another animal, nor permitted to view the bodies of dead animals.”

Clearly dogs in the kennels immediately across from Rez’s kennel and those on either side were exposed to his euthanasia.

Record keeping of Rez’s euthanasia at the shelter was also problematic. Record keeping in animal sheltering software is critical important to a shelter’s advancement. In the shelter software used by NSPCA, Petpoint, euthanasia records are reported from two fields in two separate reports. One would be an outcome report where the data would be tracked through the *outcome* field. The second report is called The Asilomar Report, that provides all intake and outcome data and calculates the save rate of a shelter. This report pulls data from *Outcome* and *Intake* fields but also from the *Asilomar Status* field. The Asilomar status indicates the animal’s health/temperament status, Healthy, Treatable, Manageable, or Unhealthy/Untreatable. If an animal’s Asilomar Status is not noted in the record it will not track to the Asilomar report.

When euthanasia is not performed in the kennel, the computer is not there to immediately update the record. I believe the veterinarian forgot to update the computer record, left the shelter, the following day was involved in lengthy discussions concerning this event and only got around to updating the dog’s record on January 25, 2019. As a rule, technicians take care of updating animals’ medical records and, as explained, the veterinarian was working alone after the initial injections of sedation and Fatal Plus. So again, this was not standard operating procedure and can be a cause of concern.

Because of this late entry, the official record of Rez’s euthanasia says he was euthanized on January 25th, not the 23rd. Further his Asilomar status was not updated in the correct field. While this euthanasia appeared in a PetPoint euthanasia report, it did not track properly to an Asilomar report. The issue of Asilomar reports and euthanasia reports will be discussed later in this audit. If technicians generally update records, it is not a surprise that someone forgot to do this. It was a mistake none-the-less.

The response of the Executive Director to this incident was swift and appropriate. Unfortunately, this incident fueled mistrust and suspicion on the part of volunteers, on the part of past and current board members, and past and present employees of the organization. A culture of mistrust quickly grew throughout all these groups and between all these groups.

Euthanasia Committee

Within the last year of the previous Executive Director’s service at the NSPCA, she and the Board developed a policy that she hoped would include using a committee made up of staff and

board members and when appropriate a volunteer to make euthanasia decisions concerning behavior. She did so knowing that these decisions had always been made by herself due to her extensive knowledge of dog behavior. With a change in leadership, she was attempting to ensure that a policy for decisions concerning behavior in dogs would be made properly regardless of the knowledge base of her successor.

Because of the situation with Rez, it was believed that the euthanasia committee and policy was not being followed. The decision to euthanize Rez as well as three others between August 2018 and January 2019 had not gone to the committee for approval. The Shelter Manager, prior to the previous Executive Director's resignation, stated her perception of this policy was that only dogs that had been on the adoption floor at some point, needed to have committee approval for euthanasia.

The euthanasia policy was voted on and approved by the Board on August 22, 2018.

In reviewing this policy, it appears that it was not as clear as it could be and seemed to contradict itself. For instance, it stated in **Section C. Euthanasia for Shelter Animals**, that euthanasia for medical reasons is determined by the shelter veterinarian, and that cats are not euthanized for behavior reasons. But then it says, "The decision to euthanize an animal shall be made by a majority of the euthanasia committee." Is one to infer that this means all euthanasia? Does it exempt medical euthanasia? It does not say specifically, nor does it address, whether dogs with dangerous behavioral problems would be considered for euthanasia by the committee. Prior to the statement "The decision to euthanize an animal shall be made by a majority of the euthanasia committee," there is a full page of behavioral reasons entitled, **Circumstances where euthanasia will be considered**, that indicate 10 separate conditions for which to consider euthanasia. Item 6 in this list states "We will consider a dog that does not like other dogs as long as the aggression is not significant enough for the dog to be proactively aggressive." I'm fairly certain the intent of this item is to exempt dogs from consideration if they simply don't like other dogs. However, that is not what it says. Those with training and experience in animal shelters would understand the problem with the construction of this sentence. But, if one has no experience in shelters, it could easily be misunderstood.

Further, staff at the NSPCA claim that they never received a copy of the new policy. There seems to have been some understanding that there was a committee to make decisions. The shelter manager indicated her assumption was that it only applied to dogs that had never been placed up for adoption. However, in the case of a dog named Roscoe, a dog that had clearly been up for adoption, the committee was not consulted. This dog was euthanized for some serious aggression reasons in October 2018. In the case of Bronson, who was never considered for adoption, the committee was consulted and the dog subsequently euthanized for severe aggression issues in November 2018. These two cases further confuse who understood what and when.

Discussion:

The four cases in question occurred between September 1, 2018 and January 23, 2019. On January 24, 2019 when this issue was clarified for the new Executive Director, a memo was prepared by the Executive Director and signed by the veterinarian and the shelter manager that

they had read the policy, understood it, and since that time, nearly a year, the problem has not recurred.

Unfortunately, the argument of who understood what, when they understood it, and charges of ignoring the policy have continued to resurface and have added greatly to the mistrust between all the players.

This mistrust has set the stage for other accusations of poor animal care, poor communications, insubordination, falsifying records and board malfeasance. Individuals have long since picked a side and become entrenched. All parties maintain that they only have the interest of the animals in mind.

Finding ways to work together will only begin when each person involved understands that “the interest of the animals” is not the only thing driving their anger and mistrust. Each wants to be “right,” they want to win the argument and they want the opposition to be wrong.

Shelter Interior Design and Layout

This section of the report contains observations of the existing facility. It is well recognized that the staff and board members are aware of the limitations of the existing facility and this section is included as a template to help the board and staff when designing the new facility.

General Overview

The first thing one experiences when approaching Niagara SPCA is a sign with the upbeat NSPCA logo. The parking lot is neat and clean, with welcoming signs. The grounds are clean and uncluttered and very nicely landscaped.

The entrance is a vestibule with a few well-maintained bulletin boards. Upon entry into the lobby, there is some odor of animals, but it was not overwhelming. To the right there was a counter and to the left cat rooms. Straight ahead, the mission and vision of the organization is beautifully printed and framed.

Along the front of the building, directly across from the counter, is a bench for patrons on which to sit.

One can access the dog adoption kennels and the cat adoption rooms directly from the lobby. The dog runs are small, and the noise from barking is overwhelming when all the dogs become excited and bark.

In addition to the adoption holding areas there are kennels for stray dogs, a room for holding stray cats, several areas to isolate and quarantine animals, an infirmary, offices, a large meeting room and a staff kitchen. Outside there is a mobile spay/neuter van.

Reception and Lobby Observations:

Upon entering the shelter, there is a sign on the front door letting the public know that only cats that are injured or stray are accepted at the shelter and that owner surrendered cats would be placed on a waiting list.

The customer counter in the lobby is quite high and not welcoming. When employees are sitting only their heads are visible as one walks in. If the staff is doing computer work or any other work that has them looking down, it is easy to understand why the public would not feel welcome.

While it was not observed, I was told, that from time to time, volunteers stand in the lobby and greet the public.

Both intake of animals and adoption of animals takes place at the single counter in the lobby.

Staff members and others that were interviewed during this process commented negatively on the signage pertaining to cat intake.

Some Customer Service staff were not wearing anything that identified them as staff.

There is a pegboard wall marketing the sale of leashes and collars.

Discussion:

First impressions are important. All signage should be welcoming and positive.

When the NSPCA begins to plan for a new facility, separating intake and adoption is essential. People adopting and people relinquishing their pet are always emotional but for very different reasons. The comfort level of all will be greatly improved when adoption and intake are separate.

Separate rooms to make adoptions or surrenders more private would be ideal. There is so much going on at the shelter that it is easy for staff to be distracted or for the adopter or an owner surrendering their pet to miss something said to them. A quieter space allows everyone to relax and be more present during these important conversations.

Unless staff all wear the same uniform, it can be difficult for visitors to know who staff is, who are volunteers, and who are visitors.

Recommendations:

- The sign concerning cat intake could be written in a way to encourage the public to know and appreciate that they are part of the solution, not part of the problem. Consider having the sign say something like “We thank you for understanding the problems of having too many cats in the shelter. We know this is not healthy for cats and while some stray cats and all injured cats will need to be accepted immediately at the shelter, those with homes might easily be cared for by you until the time that we can safely admit them. For most of the year this means just a couple of weeks at the most, but the wait can be longer during the busy summer months. Thank you for your patience and for your commitment to being part of the solution!”
- Consider having an adoption lobby as well as an intake/surrender lobby in a new facility.
- There seem to be a great number of volunteers at the shelter during public hours. Consider having volunteers welcoming the public regularly. A small desk with information about the shelter could be placed across from the front door and a volunteer could attend this desk, greeting the public and helping them navigate the shelter. In that same area the mission and vision statements are displayed. Stopping here visitors would be much more likely to read and comprehend the ethos that direct the organization.
- Consider issuing some sort of identification for staff and volunteers. This could be t-shirts, aprons, tags, or some other item to help identify staff and volunteers. Aprons could be laundered easily, and a supply kept at the shelter to be shared by staff or volunteers. Staff aprons could be one color with STAFF printed on it, volunteers a different color with VOLUNTEER on it. This would be the most inexpensive and easiest option. Aprons have pockets, a great added benefit! Regardless of what uniform style is decided upon, staff should be consistent, all wearing the same type of pants, the same type of shirts, etc.

Animal Housing Observations:

Cats: There are several rooms that house cats. None of the cages in these room meet guidelines established by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV). In fact, very few cat cages through the shelter meet ASV guidelines.

The veterinarian has recently developed zones within the shelter for animals that may have contagious disease or have been exposed to cats with contagious disease. The shelter is old and was not built to handle the spread of disease. The zones worked out for the cat areas have apparently been successful as there were only 4 cats in isolation with Upper Respiratory

Infection. At the time of our visit, there were 203 cats in the inventory of the shelter. Having only four out of 203 with upper respiratory infections is notable.

Cats all seemed to have some enrichment within their cages and there were an impressive number of volunteers actively working with the cats to provide enrichment. This enrichment may also have a good deal to do with the lowered rates of URI as stress is a major factor in cats becoming ill in a shelter.

Dogs: The kennels in the dog runs are all double sided but small. They are in two rows that face each other with approximately a 4-foot walkway between rows. The doors of the kennels are chain link. All kennels are the same size so the 100-pound dog has the same living space as a 10 pound dog. The noise from barking during certain times of the day is overwhelming. With excessive noise, the fact that kennels face each other, and the size of the kennels, there are many stress factors for the animals. Some small dogs are kept in too small cages in the garage area. However, they serve to remove the dogs from the very high stress area of the dog runs.

The staff has a behavior team for dogs that provides enrichment and trains volunteers to provide the same. These volunteers have various levels of expertise and are matched with dogs based on their training. Some dogs are designated as “restricted.” This means they may only be removed from kennels and worked with by volunteers that are considered “restricted” volunteers. There are times when the kennels have many “restricted” dogs. These dogs need enrichment and one on one interaction with humans. But because of their numbers and the lack of trained volunteers, these dogs may get the least amount of out-of-kennel enrichment. However, “restricted” dogs do receive several types of in-kennel enrichment.

Isolation: Cats and dogs share an isolation space.

Discussion:

The dog and cat housing are not adequate at NSPCA. Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) Guidelines are minimum standards and NSPCA should make every effort to meet these guidelines wherever possible now. They should be used as a base when NSPCA is able to build a new facility.

CATS: ASV guidelines suggest that cat cages should be 11sq. ft. at a minimum with at least 2 ft. of triangulated separation between food, resting, and elimination.

A recent article published in *The Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* (2018)20 pages 635-642 states:

“In spite of its importance, poor cat housing has been identified as one of the greatest shortcomings observed in shelters and one that has a substantially negative impact on both health and well-being.”

In many shelters, cats find themselves in last place as shelters seek to house them. Furthermore, providing enrichment to shelter cats is vastly more labor-intensive and time-consuming than it is for dogs. Add to this that cats, generally, have a longer length of stay (LOS) than dogs, (At NSPCA the average length of stay for adult cats in the first quarter of 2019 was 143 days, second

quarter was 67 days and third quarter 96 days) and it becomes clear that the shelter is not doing a good job when it comes to cat housing.

The journal article also states:

“Conversely, just as poor housing can profoundly compromise welfare, good housing can be a powerful tool in promoting positive welfare.”

Many of the stainless- steel cages currently in use could become Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) compliant through installing portals.

Data from several shelters shows that cats in cages have shorter lengths of stay when cages have bars where cats can reach out to visitors and make a connection.

DOGS: Because dogs vary so much in size, a standard size kennel is not recommended in the ASV guidelines. What is recommended is the following:

”Primary enclosures must provide sufficient space to allow each animal to turn freely, to stand easily, sit, stretch, move their head without touching the top of the enclosure, lie in a comfortable position with limbs extended, move about and assume a comfortable posture for feeding, drinking, urinating and defecating.”

Enrichment:

At NSPCA the desire to embrace the No-Kill ideology means housing and caring for more animals with behavior and health issues than in the past. Today, many animals in shelters have animals with behavior or medical issues which results in longer lengths of stays. Even the best shelters are not ideal places for cats and dogs. There is stress, disease, isolation, and no specific “owner” or best friend to these animals.

Enough trained volunteers are critical in this situation. Currently there is no volunteer coordinator on staff for animal care volunteers. These are problems that will be discussed later in this report.

Recommendations:

- If possible, stop using the smallest cat kennels immediately and refrain from their use until portals can be installed.
- Consider putting portals in all stainless-steel cages and use these doubled areas as one housing unit.
- Double cages with portals are appropriate housing. There are several manufacturers for this type of housing. When selecting new cat cages make certain the litterbox area is large enough.
- Many studies indicate that having fewer cats in shelters reduces their length of stay and subsequently more cats can be added. It seems contradictory but shelters that have reduced their capacity by doubling up their stainless-steel cages have not only continued to serve the same number of cats overall but have significantly reduced the LOS of cats in their care.
- Read carefully the ASV guidelines and the article from UC Davis entitled Facility Design, Shelter Animal Housing and Shelter Population Management <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1098612X18781388>

- Isolation for cats and dogs in the same room is a problem at NSPCA. Until a new building is planned and built, there may be no solution. Use this room for both species only when it is necessary to protect other animals from contagious illness.
- See section of this report on Volunteers.

Software and Record Keeping

Observations:

NSPCA uses Petpoint as their animal data software. Apparently, board members and staff no longer working at the shelter have or until recently have had access to this software.

Accusations by a board member this past fall implied the Executive Director was covering up euthanasia and giving false save rates to the board at monthly meetings. The Executive Director was printing the Asilomar Report, an industry standard for data in animal shelters, to distribute at the board meetings. The Asilomar Report shows all intake and outcomes for animals and calculates the save rate based on that information.

The Board member who had become suspicious and distrustful had to have a relationship with a staff member in order to access Petpoint. The board did not have, nor ever asked for, the ability to access the data stored in Petpoint. This relationship between a board member and staff is unprofessional and disturbing.

Again, in the shelter software used by NSPCA, Petpoint, euthanasia records are reported from two fields in two separate reports. One would be an outcome report where the data would be tracked through the *outcome* field. The second report is called The Asilomar Report, that provides all intake and outcome data and calculates the save rate of a shelter. This report pulls data from *Outcome* and *Intake* fields but also from the *Asilomar Status* field. The Asilomar status indicates the animal's health/temperament status, Healthy, Treatable, Manageable, or Unhealthy/Untreatable. If an animal's Asilomar Status is not noted in the record it will not track to the Asilomar report.

When pulling a straight outcome report, the numbers come directly from the Outcome field. Within the choices for Outcome there are adoption, transfer out, died in care, returned to owner, and euthanasia. The Outcome report is structured to simply look at outcomes.

The board member independently ran a report based on outcomes and found that the euthanasia figures in this report were higher than reported to the Board by the Executive Director in the Asilomar Report. Based on these two reports, the board member accused the Executive Director of purposefully under-reporting euthanasia numbers to inflate the save rate of the shelter. He made this accusation for the months of July through October 2019. When confronted with this the Executive Director immediately contacted Petpoint to ask how this could be and received a reply that it had to do with mapping. When I was informed of this particular accusation, I knew immediately what the problem was because after using this software myself since 2007 I was very familiar with how it worked and had had this problem myself.

As part of the intake of animals, there is a field that asks that one of four Asilomar statuses be assigned-- healthy, treatable, manageable, or unhealthy/untreatable. In order for an animal to show up in an Asilomar Report, it must be assigned a status. The reason the Asilomar Report is structured in this way is for sheltering organizations and the public to see in one or two pages how well the sheltering organization is handling all of its animals—healthy and problematic.

Like any report of data, garbage in/garbage out applies. It appears that some staff may have never been trained sufficiently to assign the Asilomar Status, nor understand the importance of that particular field in the software. I believe this to be the case because, unlike the board member who was looking for something wrong, I was just looking. Initially, I compared 2019 records. In doing so, I found that when comparing Asilomar and other Petpoint reports for just intake or outcome, all numbers-- intake, adoption, euthanasia, died in care, returned to owner, etc.--were off. Had the board member looked a bit further, he would have found that intakes for 2019 from the Petpoint intake report showed 1,586 cats and 900 dogs coming into the shelter. Asilomar showed 1,441 cats and 768 dogs coming in. Additionally, had he compared other lines of the Asilomar report with other data reports, he would find they were all off. Again, when checking back on individual records for animals, I found many with no Asilomar status entered in their Petpoint record in 2019.

The next step in looking at this was to go back in time and see what 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015 and 2014 showed. Similar trends in not assigning Asilomar status to individual animals and the resulting discrepancy between the Asilomar report and a straight outcome report were shown.

The following reports were drawn from the full year of 2019 and 2017. The current Executive Director, the one being accused of under-reporting euthanasia to inflate the save rate, began working at the NSPCA in August of 2018.

In the 2019 reports, the Asilomar report indicates euthanasia of 97 dogs and cats, while the direct euthanasia report drawn over the same time period shows 155 dogs and cats. Again, the difference is caused by staff not assigning an Asilomar status to all cats and dogs.

2017 reports show the same issue with the Asilomar report showing a total of 175 euthanasia procedures while the direct report shows the euthanasia of 213 of cats and dogs.

Further verification that the discrepancy was caused by mistakes in assigning the Asilomar status were shown when running additional reports on intake numbers. When I ran the direct intake report for 2019, I found the actual intake was 1,586 cats and 900 dogs for a total of 2,486 cats and dogs while Asilomar indicated a total dog and cat intake of 2,209. The difference is 277 animals that were not assigned an Asilomar status.

Asilomar Animal Statistics

Print Date Thursday, January 2, 2020

Start Date	1/1/2019 12:00 AM
End Date	12/31/2019 11:59 PM
Site	All

Annual Live Release Rate: 95.18%

The Annual Live Release Rate does not include 2 owner/guardian requested euthanasia which were unhealthy & untreatable and 170 dogs and cats that died or were lost in the shelter/care.

	<u>Dogs</u>	<u>Cats</u>	<u>Total</u>
A BEGINNING SHELTER COUNT 1/1/2019	73	171	244
INTAKE (Live Dogs & Cats Only)			
B From the Public	752	1427	2179
C Incoming Transfers from Organizations within Community/Coalition	1	0	1
D Incoming Transfers from Organizations outside Community/Coalition	14	12	26
E From Owners/Guardians Requesting Euthanasia	1	2	3
F Total Intake [B + C + D + E]	768	1441	2209
G Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia (Unhealthy & Untreatable Only)	0	1	1
H ADJUSTED TOTAL INTAKE [F minus G]	768	1440	2208
<hr/>			
I ADOPTIONS	482	1077	1559
J OUTGOING TRANSFERS to Organizations within Community/Coalition	2	1	3
K OUTGOING TRANSFERS to Organizations outside Community/Coalition	10	48	58
L RETURN TO OWNER/GUARDIAN	220	36	256
DOGS & CATS EUTHANIZED			
M Healthy (Includes Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia)	0	1	1
N Treatable - Rehabilitatable (Includes Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia)	0	0	0
O Treatable - Manageable (Includes Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia)	0	1	1
P Unhealthy & Untreatable (Includes Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia)	27	68	95
Q Total Euthanasia [M + N + O + P]	27	70	97
R Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia (Unhealthy & Untreatable Only)	0	2	2
S ADJUSTED TOTAL EUTHANASIA [Q minus R]	27	68	95
T SUBTOTAL OUTCOMES [I + J + K + L + S]	741	1230	1971
<i>Excludes Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia (Unhealthy & Untreatable Only)</i>			
U DIED OR LOST IN SHELTER/CARE	19	151	170

Outcome Summary Report

Print Date Thursday, January 2, 2020

Outcome StartDate	1/1/2019 12:00 AM	Outcome Type	Euthanasia
Outcome EndDate	12/31/2019 11:59 PM	Outcome SubType	All
Species	All	Jurisdiction	All
Age Group	All	TransferOut Reason	All
Site	All	Outcome Status	Completed

Animal#	Name	Species	Primary Breed	Age	Sex	Alter	Outcome Type	Outcome SubType	Outcome By	Recorded By
ARN#	Secondary Breed	Danger	Danger Reason	Jurisdiction	TransferOut Reason	Outcome Date/Time				
Cat							Total Outcomes: 118	Total Unique Animals: 118		
Dog							Total Outcomes: 37	Total Unique Animals: 37		
Reptile							Total Outcomes: 3	Total Unique Animals: 3		
Rodent							Total Outcomes: 2	Total Unique Animals: 2		
Total Count:										160

Asilomar Animal Statistics

Print Date Thursday, January 2, 2020

Start Date	1/1/2017 12:00 AM
End Date	12/31/2017 11:59 PM
Site	All

Annual Live Release Rate: 92.15%

The Annual Live Release Rate does not include 1 owner/guardian requested euthanasia which were unhealthy & untreatable and 163 dogs and cats that died or were lost in the shelter/care.

	<u>Dogs</u>	<u>Cats</u>	<u>Total</u>
A BEGINNING SHELTER COUNT 1/1/2017	92	180	272
INTAKE (Live Dogs & Cats Only)			
B From the Public	785	1560	2345
C Incoming Transfers from Organizations within Community/Coalition	1	5	6
D Incoming Transfers from Organizations outside Community/Coalition	101	7	108
E From Owners/Guardians Requesting Euthanasia	1	0	1
F Total Intake [B + C + D + E]	888	1572	2460
G Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia (Unhealthy & Untreatable Only)	1	0	1
H ADJUSTED TOTAL INTAKE [F minus G]	887	1572	2459
<hr/>			
I ADOPTIONS	611	1152	1763
J OUTGOING TRANSFERS to Organizations within Community/Coalition	2	14	16
K OUTGOING TRANSFERS to Organizations outside Community/Coalition	13	59	72
L RETURN TO OWNER/GUARDIAN	167	24	191
DOGS & CATS EUTHANIZED			
M Healthy (Includes Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia)	0	0	0
N Treatable - Rehabilitatable (Includes Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia)	0	0	0
O Treatable - Manageable (Includes Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia)	0	0	0
P Unhealthy & Untreatable (Includes Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia)	60	115	175
Q Total Euthanasia [M + N + O + P]	60	115	175
R Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia (Unhealthy & Untreatable Only)	1	0	1
S ADJUSTED TOTAL EUTHANASIA [Q minus R]	59	115	174
T SUBTOTAL OUTCOMES [I + J + K + L + S]	852	1364	2216
<i>Excludes Owner/Guardian Requested Euthanasia (Unhealthy & Untreatable Only)</i>			
U DIED OR LOST IN SHELTER/CARE	12	151	163

Outcome Summary Report

Print Date Thursday, January 2, 2020

Outcome StartDate	1/1/2017 12:00 AM	Outcome Type	Euthanasia
Outcome EndDate	12/31/2017 11:59 PM	Outcome SubType	All
Species	All	Jurisdiction	All
Age Group	All	TransferOut Reason	All
Site	All	Outcome Status	Completed

<u>Animal#</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Species</u>	<u>Primary Breed</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Alter</u>	<u>Outcome Type</u>	<u>Outcome SubType</u>	<u>Outcome By</u>	<u>Recorded By</u>
<u>ARN#</u>	<u>Secondary Breed</u>	<u>Danger</u>	<u>Danger Reason</u>	<u>Jurisdiction</u>	<u>TransferOut Reason</u>	<u>Outcome Date/Time</u>				
Cat							Total Outcomes: 128	Total Unique Animals: 128		
Dog							Total Outcomes: 85	Total Unique Animals: 85		
Opposum							Total Outcomes: 1	Total Unique Animals: 1		
Rodent							Total Outcomes: 10	Total Unique Animals: 10		
Total Count:								224		

Software and Record Keeping Observations continued:

There were other issues with data that should be noted to ensure that future data gives the administration the best information to establish programming that addresses homelessness for animals in Niagara County.

Minor issues were found in the inputting of data by staff into the Petpoint animal records. A good example of this was found in Rez's record. At intake, the dog's condition was listed as unthrifty (not in good shape). This dog had been living on his own for a while and, no doubt, he was not in good shape. After some time at the shelter, the staff recognized Rez's aggression towards people. This should have been noted and while there were many memos indicating this, the field for "condition" remained the same. Subsequently when Rez was euthanized the official reason showed as "Unthrifty."

The reason this is so important is that good data can and will direct the programs of an animal shelter in finding better solutions for animals. Conversely, bad data keeps shelters from finding solutions that work.

Discussion:

The shelter's data collection programs should be accessed only by approved staff. NSPCA has been very transparent concerning their numbers with the public over the past eight years. As we can see from the board member's security breach, not understanding what you are doing can lead to extremely erroneous and damaging conclusions. The accusation made by this board member towards the Executive Director were incorrect and highly disturbing. Unfortunately, many just took it at face value.

This accusation was first made at a board meeting. The Executive Director immediately went to the software company for an explanation providing a paper trail. Before the Executive Director could give the board the information, the board member decided to accuse the Executive Director in the press.

At this point, with so many board members, staff members, and volunteers involved in the in-fighting, reasoned thought and discussion was impossible.

Recommendations:

- If not already done, the Shelter Manager should instruct all staff with access to Petpoint to change their passwords.
- Only the Executive Director and the Shelter Manager should be designated as "administrators" in Petpoint.
- An investigation of what staff member assisted the board member in accessing Petpoint should be done. If found, that staff member should be dismissed.
- All staff should take a refresher course on Petpoint and Asilomar with particular attention paid to intake.
- Asilomar status should be put in as part of the intake process. In the case where an animal comes in healthy and becomes ill at the shelter, for instance coming down with an upper respiratory illness, the status should be changed in the animal's record. This does not replace the initial "healthy" status, it simply adds a second status and a record of changes will appear under the tab **Animal Point in Time**.

- Data should be maintained by running monthly reports to determine where there may have been data errors. A monthly report should be made for “inventory” of the shelter animals. This report should be checked animal by animal to make certain the animal is still in the care of the organization, and if not, the outcome should be determined immediately. Clearly, the Asilomar report should be cross checked with direct intake and outcome reports and any mistakes corrected.
- Petpoint has online classes for all aspects of the program. Appropriate classes should be assigned to the appropriate staff who can report their findings at staff meetings. Additionally, there is an amazing community support page where users from around the country ask questions and get answers.
- NSPCA staff members should be curious about what they can learn from their data. If they just input data and the Administration never provides feedback to them with the data results, they have little buy-in for the system. Administration, when beginning a new program at the NSPCA, (as an example lowering the average length of stay for dogs by having volunteers walk dogs with adoption jackets in local parks), should track the progress and share that progress with the staff. It is extremely difficult for staff to recognize growth when their day to day activities seem not to change. When they can see this change through data, they will be excited and energized to take part.

OPERATIONS AND ADMINISTRATION

Intake Observations:

I was unable to observe the intake process. However, the following discussion may be of assistance.

NSPCA prioritizes the intake of stray and injured cats over owner relinquishment. Owner relinquishment is done through a wait list.

The Length of Stay (LOS) for all adult cats at NSPCA in 2019 was 59 days. On average, adult cats surrendered by owners had a LOS of 35 days while stray cats had a LOS of 59 days.

It appeared that the Asilomar status of animals may not always be assigned at intake.

NSPCA, as most shelters do, tests cats for Feline Leukemia (FeLV) and Feline AIDS (FIV).

Discussion:

Sheltering agencies should make every effort to shorten the Length of Stay (LOS) of all their residents. There are three very good reasons for this.

- One is that the longer individual animals stay at the shelter, the fewer animals can receive help.
- The second is that the longer animals stay at the shelter the more likely it is that they will become ill or even repeatedly ill.
- The third and most important is that a shelter is a shelter, not a home. Every effort should be made to get animals into homes as quickly and safely as possible.

The intake process at all shelters is important to the animal and the smooth operation of the organization. The longer an animal is in the shelter the more opportunity there is to be exposed to prevalent shelter viruses. Airborne viruses are prevalent in shelters. The more stressed an animal is, the more likely it is to become infected.

It may be prudent for the NSPCA to lead community conversations on how to effectively handle its stray cat population. In an article from UC Davis, Koret Shelter Medicine Program's resource library the following is noted:

“Evidence is building that lost cats without identification may actually have a better chance of being reunited with their owners if they are left where they are versus brought to a shelter. Lost cats whose owners are not located may also be more likely to find a home if not brought to a shelter, especially if the shelter is full or the cat would not fit criteria for “adoptability.” In one survey, 68% of people who found cats and were unable to find the owner kept the cat, and another 14% rehomed the cat on their own [26].”

In a study done in 2012 by Dr. Emily Weiss, Dr. Margaret Slater, and Dr. Linda Lord entitled Frequency of Lost Dogs and Cats in the United States and the Methods Used to Locate Them it was made clear that lost dogs had a higher recovery rate than cats (Dogs – 93%, Cats – 75%). These numbers refer to all recovery methods.

In addition to the UC Davis article, looking at the data from the study done by Weiss, Slater, and Lord, of how owners reunite with their cats, it is quite clear that cats have a much, much better chance of being reunited with owners if left where they are versus being brought to the shelter:

From: Frequency of Lost Dogs and Cats in the United States and the Methods Used to Locate Them

Question	Number of Cats	Percentage of Cats
What was the primary method used to find the pet (When successful)?		
I found my pet by searching my neighborhood.	16	30
My pet returned on its own.	32	59
I was contacted because of a tag my pet was wearing/my pet's microchip	1	2
Neighbor brought pet home	0	0
I found my pet by visiting/contacting animal control	1	2
Other	4	7
Total	54	100
Refused	1	
What methods were used to attempt to find pet. More than one answer was possible		
Waited for pet to come home	14	78
Searched neighborhood	12	67
Visited shelter	4	22
Hung poster	3	17
Ad in paper	2	11
Posted online	1	6
Called veterinary or other professional	2	11
Other	1	6
Refused	1	

Of dogs and puppies coming to the NSPCA as strays, 42% are Returned to Owner (RTO). Of the 666 kittens and 341 adult cats coming to the NSPCA, only 18 were RTO. That is less than 2%. Basically, the NSPCA cares for 50 stray cats, at an average length of stay of 41-82 days to return just one to its owner. In the meantime, many of these cats would have gotten home on their own if left where they were found. Couldn't these resources be better used? As an example, it would certainly be cheaper to microchip each of these cats, ensuring their return if ever lost again, than to care for them at the shelter.

Our instinct as humans is to protect animals. When we see a stray cat, we worry what might happen to it and we want to do something to help it. Our instinct may lead us to making the cat more vulnerable. Animal shelters, even the best animal shelters, are difficult for cats. Everything about shelters is something that cats hate--from the ride in the car to get there, to being handled by strangers, to being confined in a cage--an animal shelter is a stressful place for a cat. Stressed

cats are much more likely to become ill, which just lengthens the time a cat must remain in a shelter.

There are cats that definitely need to be brought to shelters. Orphaned kittens, injured or ill strays, animals new to living outside when the weather changes dramatically are all examples of when cats may actually need a shelter.

NSPCA currently tests each cat and kitten for FeLV and FIV. Current discussion on this practice suggests changing this practice.

From the Koret Shelter Medicine Program's Library:

Shelters have felt a responsibility for many years to test all cats for retroviruses (Feline Leukemia Virus and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus) prior to adoption. The hope was that testing could ensure shelters were placing healthy cats up for adoption and also that the viruses might be eradicated through shelter testing efforts. However, increased information about the tests and the diseases has led to the shelter medicine community making recommendations for shelters to discontinue routinely testing all cats for FeLV and FIV. (See full article attached)

Recommendations:

- Examine closely the protocol for intake and consider establishing protocols that would allow animals to be available for adoption in a much shorter time.
- Work closely with the Niagara County Legislature to pass a law cutting hold time to three days. Reach out to the NYSAPF and the SPCA Serving Erie County on strategies and legislation.
- Consider testing for Feline Leukemia (FeLV) on only cats coming from situations where FeLV is more common, such as
 - hoarding cases,
 - cats that may have lived outdoors most of their lives and
 - cats that show evidence of fighting with other cats, such as lacy ears.

There has not been one test that has shown a positive result at NSPCA in over a year. It is an expensive test and one that the shelter may want to consider discontinuing.

- Review with intake staff the assignment of Asilomar Status and why it is important.
- Consider a new approach to caring for stray cats.

Adoptions Observations:

I was unable to observe the adoption process in total at NSPCA. I did see one in progress. However, I was told that there is an application and references are checked on potential adopters of dogs but not cats.

Discussion:

Since the late 1990s, animal shelters across the country have adopted a more “Open Adoptions” approach when rehoming animals. This removes many obstacles from adoption, increases adoptions, and does not increase return rates. It improves the reputation of the shelter and allows adopters to feel more a part of the life-saving efforts of the organization.

Open adoptions are built on trust and respect and recognize that there are very few black and white rules when matching people and animals. The goal is to find “YES” to as many adoptions as possible. For example, a cat adoption prospect may be turned down because the adopter is simply looking for a mouser. This is, however, a perfect opportunity for cats who are more difficult to place, such as, unsocial cats or cats who don’t like other cats. If they are placed in such a home, chances are they will become social with their owners and the magical bond between pet and animal may occur.

Using veterinary statistics to establish the number of owned cats and dogs in Niagara County, there are 159,180 owned cats and dogs (86,658 dogs and 72,522 cats). Given all the different ages of animals placed by NSPCA and that the average placed pet lives 10 years, NSPCA places approximately 1,500 animals in the county per year. This means NSPCA placed at least 15,000 of the pets living in the community at any given time. In other words, roughly 10% of pets in the community are coming from the shelter. 90% were successfully placed in homes without the shelter performing pre-adoption landlord checks or asking whether or not the adopter engaged a veterinarian. 90% of the community’s pets are in their homes without owners filling out any application. 90% are in homes, without having to answer the question, “Do you rent or own?” That’s the way it should be.

Unfortunately, over the years, shelters focused on failed adoptions or reasons for pet relinquishment and used this information as their guide for what an adopter should look like. An older person bringing a young animal to a shelter because it is too rambunctious means shelters adopt the rule not to place young animals with older people. Other age groups routinely bring pets in for the same reason, but older people are easy to recognize. Someone brings in a pet they received as a gift...no adoptions of gifts become the rule. Surprisingly studies have shown pets given as gifts are much less likely to be relinquished to a shelter than pets acquired at shelters!

Moving to a policy of open adoptions is a process. It takes time and thought.

No doubt there have been people who have said that they are happy NSPCA is “so thorough” but that does not mean the public likes it. It only means that these few people do. This is another example of how when something occurs a few times it becomes the reason for doing it all the time.

Open Adoptions rely on conversations rather than applications. All the information you need to have a successful adoption will be found in a good conversation. The conversation creates a relationship between the adopter and the agency that an application cannot. This not only encourages adopters to become donors but ensures that in the future they will consider adopting more family pets at NSPCA.

Recommendations:

- Begin the process of moving towards a more open adoption policy
- Find ways for the staff to embrace change rather than fear it.
- Have staff learn to rely on real data rather than perceived reality.
- Develop a more friendly, open adoption program. There are many ideas available through Animalsheltering.org, ASPCApro.org, and Maddies.org. This should be a priority.

- One excellent program to look at is Adopters Welcome developed by the Humane Society of the US.
- ASPCApro.org offers the following articles and webinars: Conversational Adoption Counseling, Dakin Humane Society's Progressive Adoption Programs, and Creating Adoption Processes that Truly Support Saving Lives.

Volunteers

Volunteer Program Observations:

Currently there is no volunteer coordinator at the NSPCA. The position was eliminated for budgetary reasons during the fall of 2019.

There are three types of volunteers at the NSPCA. These are volunteers that work with cats, volunteers that work with dogs, and volunteers that work outside the shelter at events. One staff member who has other duties is currently handling the volunteers that work outside the shelter.

Some of the cat and dog volunteers have concerns that are not currently being addressed. These include lack of veterinary care information and feedback, lack of trained volunteers for the restricted dogs, some volunteers being asked to sign a confidentiality agreement, that the spread of a panleukopenia outbreak was not handled correctly by the veterinary staff, and that the Executive Director lacks follow through.

Volunteers also say they are not treated respectfully by some staff.

Discussion:

With the number of volunteers working at the shelter, the position of volunteer coordinator should be re-established and filled.

A volunteer coordinator can recruit volunteers, establish rules, establish job descriptions, create appropriate training, keep records of volunteers and the hours they serve, celebrate the efforts of the volunteers, remove volunteers, and institute volunteer schedules. A Coordinator acts as a resource for the volunteers who are really unpaid staff. A Coordinator can see to the concerns of the volunteer, research any recommendations given by a volunteer, communicate with the Executive Director for decisions concerning recommendations of the volunteers, and appropriately respond to volunteers' concerns, recommendations, complaints, and praise.

Volunteers generally work a 3-4-hour shift. They have many more hours in a day to think about their job and the animals they are helping. They have time to worry about the individual animal and they often seek resources and information that might help. This is a valuable resource that needs to be protected, trained, and utilized by the shelter staff. Volunteers advice may be great advice, it may also be difficult for the shelter to use due to resources of time, equipment, and knowledge. However, when the shelter cannot use the advice (or when it can) this needs to be communicated effectively to the volunteer and the volunteer needs to be thanked and recognized for the contribution.

An individual concern that was voiced to the consultants during the site visit involved the grooming of cats. One of the volunteers had noticed that a particular cat was matted and did not represent itself in the best light for adoption due to its appearance. That day the volunteer was at her pet groomer and asked if the cat could be brought there to be groomed. The groomer readily agreed to provide this service for any cat at the shelter in need of grooming. Excited, the volunteer returned to the shelter and due to a lack of a coordinator went directly to the Executive Director to ask for permission and guidelines to follow through with this idea. The Executive Director replied that he might know someone who would do this as well and said he would check

and follow up with this initiative. He never did. The volunteer was disappointed and rightfully angry on behalf of the cats in need.

Another concern on the part of volunteers is feedback on the medical issues some shelter animals have. Case in point was, Happy, a cat that had gingivitis and that volunteers were concerned about.

The cat was admitted as a young, 1-3-year-old, owner surrendered, neutered male cat on October 4, 2018. His initial exam included vaccinations, deworming, FeLV/FIV combo test. Happy was put on Depomedrol, an anti-inflammatory steroid and Clavamox, an antibiotic on 10/5/2018 for treatment of gingivitis. On that date, his record notes the following “Patient has redness along gum line. No other redness noted in the oral cavity, evident plaque and tarter noted, missing some teeth, Alert and responsive, eating, no coughing, sneezing, no nasal discharge or ocular discharge noted.”

On 12/28/2019 veterinary notes showed, “Patient still showing some signs of redness in the gums, is eating well, has not had any antibiotics or steroids since October and is doing well. Dental rads would be beneficial, and full mouth at least partial mouth extractions might be helpful. With the patient eating and signs not progressing, will make available for adoption and make sure the owner understands that the gingivitis is lifelong and may or may not be clinical.”

Presumably Happy was then taken to the adoption floor around 12/28/2019 where volunteers began to provide him with daily enrichment and care. Some volunteers had worked with the cat in the medical areas prior to this and were aware that the cat had some dental issues.

Volunteers became concerned over the next few weeks about Happy’s gingivitis and would send notes to the veterinarian on a frequent basis. They felt they were ignored, and that the veterinary department was not taking them seriously. They believed that the cat was not eating but the staff at NSPCA said he was eating well. The longer this went on the more frustrated and suspicious volunteers became that Happy was not being treated correctly for his dental problem. Staff were rude to the volunteers and what developed over time because of cases like this, were very poor communications, rules about volunteers going into medical areas, and a general suspicion of one another.

The veterinary department felt they were being questioned unnecessarily and responded with less information, rather than more.

On January 17, 2019 the senior cat volunteer went to the staff veterinarian and offered that the volunteers would pay to send Happy out to a veterinary hospital that could do X-rays and extractions if necessary. The veterinarian notes in the record, “Was approached by Joe, stated that he and a few other volunteers wanted to pool their money to get Happy dental rads and extractions, told him that sounds great. Explained to him that I agree, dental rads would be great, and if knocking the patient out for rads, then extractions should be done at the same time. Since he is eating, signs aren’t progressing, don’t have dental radiology unit, and extractions may or may not help with the redness, he was cleared to go up for adoption and would educate the owner. So is great if want to get that done for Happy”. Subsequently Happy was taken to an outside veterinary hospital for dental X-rays and extractions on 1/28/2019. Happy was adopted on 2/22/2019.

There were other concerns on the part of the volunteers regarding the veterinary care of animals at the shelter. It is extremely difficult to determine whether or not their concerns were warranted or whether the veterinary staff did the most they could with the resources available. What is clear, though, is that the communication between the two groups has become very poor and hurtful. As this is a problem between paid staff and volunteers, (and by the way not a particularly unique problem within a shelter), I feel that the solution must be driven by the paid staff. The staff veterinarian needs to lead the rest of the medical staff to find solutions to improve the relationship between volunteers and the veterinary staff. However, volunteers will have to be open and forgiving for anything to improve.

There is a talented group of volunteers at the NSPCA. They are very worthy of consideration, training, and appreciation. If this does not happen, volunteers will leave, and their talent will go with them. That would be a great loss for the shelter.

Recommendations:

- With the number of volunteers working at the shelter, the position of volunteer coordinator should be filled.
- A coordinator should follow these steps in establishing any volunteer position and repeat with the next needed position, then repeat, etc. The position of cat enrichment volunteer is used as an example.
 1. Write a mission statement for this position. Include what you are looking to address and achieve. A sentence or two is enough.
 2. Establish your goals for this position. Include how many volunteers will be needed, how many hours they need to commit per week, how you hope to affect LOS for cats, how you hope to affect the health of the cats by enrichment, etc.
 - a. Volunteers want to play a role in facilitating change. With setting measurable goals your volunteers will achieve goals and their success can be celebrated. Goals should be **SMART** – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Timed-based. An example might be to shorten length of stay. Look at LOS of owner relinquished cats for the past month and the month a year previous and compare. See how LOS has been improved with the enrichment program in place. LOS is extremely relevant to the good operation of an animal shelter. The goal to shorten LOS is time-based as you may measure whatever period you wish, winter, kitten season, months, quarters.
 3. Establish a strategy to recruit and maintain volunteers. This can be used for all future positions. Include resources needed for recruitment, volunteer engagement, volunteer communication and volunteer recognition.
 - a. **Resources**- what program expenses might you have? Feathers, toys, special treats, volunteer identification, etc. What resources/grants might be available? Feline Fanciers Association? Jackson Galaxy Foundation? What staff time will be needed? What training will be required and is there a staff member to do this? Should the cat enrichment volunteer team have a Facebook page or other technology to communicate with one another?

- b. **Recruitment** - Recruitment is essential. How will you recruit these volunteers? Advertising on social media? Recruitment posters where cat lovers might be like veterinary offices, pet supply stores?
 - c. **Engagement** – Engaging your volunteers is the backbone of your volunteer program. While using opportunity matching - finding cat lovers to be cat enrichment volunteers - you ensure engagement. Engagement also means some sort of supervision and feedback to these volunteers. And, always say thank you. When volunteers feel useful, prepared, and appreciated, they are more likely to engage in your cause and become committed volunteers and donors.
 - d. **Communication** – Establish a simple, clear system of communication that allows you to share information effectively. Also, consider volunteer management software or see if Shelter Love software has a volunteer component.
 - e. **Recognition** – Always acknowledge your volunteers, from a simple thanks each day to an annual banquet for volunteers, there is much you can do to thank and recognize your volunteers. Establishing this along with these other steps ensures it will happen. It's easy to forget and you don't want to be guilty of this. Consider having steps for your volunteers to achieve, hours worked benchmarks, and for those achieving a great deal, consider having a special title for them, like Top Cats! And, treat them to a pizza party or ice cream social.
4. **Develop and manage these new relationships**. Establishing good relationships with your volunteers is critical. With an organized program, you are off to a great start. Just allowing someone to walk into the shelter, wanting to volunteer, with no program, no rules, no training, and no knowledge that you even have a need for the service they want to give, is a recipe for disaster. A thoughtful process will be key.
- As soon as financially possible, the Board should consider hiring a professional volunteer coordinator.
 - Check for good articles or webinars at ASPCApro.org and Maddiesfund.org.
 - Look at other shelter's cat enrichment programs.
 - Have the veterinary staff and the animal care staff receive training on working effectively with volunteers
 - Establish a program of communication between the veterinary department and the volunteers so the volunteers know what is happening with animals they have medical concerns over. This program needs to satisfy both the veterinary staff and the volunteers.
 - The Executive Director should be very careful making promises to volunteers. If he says he will do something, he needs to follow through.

Training and Other Professional Education Observations:

Currently the staff at the shelter has an Executive Director without an animal welfare background, a manager that has no management experience, a veterinarian whose background is in private practice not shelter medicine, and front-line staff with no customer service training.

The Board has not budgeted money for training or professional associations dues. The shelter does not subscribe to professional magazines, nor does it take part in free on-line webinars in the animal sheltering field.

NSPCA has joined the Association for Animal Welfare Advancement and the New York State Animal Protection Federation but has not taken part in much that is offered through these two groups. The Executive Director has reached out to his counterpart at the SPCA Serving Erie County and so has the shelter's Veterinarian, for advice and insight.

No staff that was interviewed had gone to a regional or national conference to network with other groups and to learn what is new in the animal sheltering field.

It was reported during the shelter visit that plans were being made to provide the Shelter Manager with some management education in the near future.

The staff seemed largely unaware of sites like aspcapro.org, animalsheltering.org, maddiesfund.org, sheltermedicine.com/library, or other industry sites.

When asked by the consultants to run a shelter portfolio report from Petpoint, no one was aware of that report. Even with the software available to the shelter, curiosity had not led any staff to explore the many learning options made available through Petpoint.

Discussion:

Curiosity and follow through on curiosity are what separates most shelters from the great shelters. There is so much information available for shelter professionals to access. This takes time and the commitment to do so. But mostly it takes curiosity.

If shelter professionals already knew everything there would be no need for shelters. We would have solved all the problems out there for dogs and cats. Every day, shelter professionals are faced with problems. Problems concerning animal care, animal health, administration, volunteers, ethical issues, fund raising issues, social media can all be a part of the every-day experience of being employed at an animal shelter.

The more education the shelter worker has, the better the response will be to problems. When a shelter worker is better educated, fewer problems will emerge. The more educated an animal welfare professional is, the easier it is to know where to find answers, who to call with issues, how to develop data to find solutions and how to work with a board or the public, or someone who is critical of the shelter.

The Board of Directors has let the organization down by not being proactive for their staff in providing educational funds. The Executive Director fell short by not finding more resources on his own to further educate himself and the staff.

At the end of the day, curiosity and a drive to learn have had to take a back seat because the last year has been filled with accusations and mistrust. Nonetheless, education, exposure to ideas, reading articles, and taking webinars are and will be critical to the success of this organization.

Recommendations:

- The Board of Directors should amend the budget to include funds for as many staff as possible to attend the Maddie's Conference at Cornell this summer. More information

can be found at <https://www.aspcapro.org/training-conferences-events/aspca-cornell-maddies-shelter-medicine-conference>.

- If possible, consider sending the Executive Director to Animal Care EXPO in May. For more information visit <https://www.animalsheltering.org/>
- Staff needs to find their curiosity. Start reading more of the information on the Petpoint site and take some classes there as well.
- All staff should become more aware of sites such as aspcapro.org, animalsheltering.org, maddiesfund.org, theaawa.org.
- Veterinary staff should become familiar with <https://www.sheltermedicine.com/>.
- NSPCA should begin to network with their counterparts at other organizations they find on the sites listed above.
- The shelter manager should be attending management training.
- The Executive Director should consider asking different staff members to take available webinars and report out to the rest of the staff at staff meetings.
- Customer service training is available and should be mandated for any staff that works directly with the public.
- Subscribe to the magazine Animal Sheltering. Order several copies to be delivered so that all staff are exposed to it. When it arrives monthly hand it out to various department heads and ask them to share.
- Dr. Brown should consider reaching out to Elizabeth Berliner at Cornell. Dr. Berliner heads up the shelter medicine department of Cornell and could serve as a great resource.

Customer Service

Customer Service Observations

While on site customer service appeared to be pretty good but staff readily admitted there were problems. It was noted that when visitors came to the shelter no one greeted them properly. The one greeting I did see involved a staff member nearly shouting from her seat behind the counter, “Looking for dogs? Straight ahead to the kennels Hon.”

The first day I arrived at the shelter, it was before the staff was situated at the lobby counter. When they had arrived and were seated behind the counter, I walked by three times and no one acknowledged me. No hellos, can I help you, Hi--anything. They just looked down and ignored me.

The shelter manager had been accused of being harsh, rude, and sometimes crude. Those complaining said this served her well when she worked in the field but was problematic in her new position. I observed that she was trying very hard to be pleasant and helpful. Over the three days she was pushed heavily with questions and demands and remained calm and helpful throughout. She stated that she had worked hard at changing her “field” behavior and felt she had made great strides.

The Executive Director has shown poor judgement in his correspondence and interpersonal actions with Board members and the public. He has been very defensive when criticized or when his staff was criticized. It should be noted, however, that when his behavior was to be helpful or when he offered feedback, or explanation, he was accused of being “slick” or “manipulative.”

Discussion:

First impressions are important. When visitors arrive at the shelter and are not greeted, offered help, or receive an introduction from the staff--“Hi, I’m Sally, how can I help you?” This lack of communication makes the potential adopter, donor, volunteer, feels unwelcomed and it is uncomfortable.

Staff can rarely know for sure why someone has stopped at the shelter. Are they there to adopt? To surrender? To ask a question or give a donation? Every visitor should be greeted and offered help. It does not count if the greeting is made from someone sitting down behind a high counter.

A common theme in animal shelters is “Us versus Them.” Front line staff become angry with the public as a result of some people’s bad behavior. When this happens, staff to staff interactions generally reinforce this attitude. In some cases, shelter staff will even encourage and reward behavior in their co-workers that is rude and unacceptable. Constant training and reminders are needed to help staff remember that people coming to an animal shelter are kind and generous folks. It is not uncommon to hear staff at shelters say that they like animals more than people. When hiring staff, if the potential employee says anything like this it should be a red flag to not consider the applicant.

Prior to the site visit, I received copies of many documents including copies of emails written between the Executive Director and Board members. I also received copies of an email sent by someone very unhappy with her experience when trying to adopt from the shelter and the

Executive Director's email response. In both cases, the writers to the Executive Director were rude and inappropriate. But, that is not an excuse for the Executive Director's response to also be rude and inappropriate. In fact, any complaints the Executive Director receives should immediately be viewed as an opportunity. This opportunity, no matter how rude the complainant is, can help the shelter improve.

Customer complaints are timeless. No matter the size, nature, or success of your shelter, you'll always have at least a small percentage of people who aren't happy with what you do. The idea that you can't please everyone is as true today as it was a century ago.

But never before in history has it been easier for customers to complain. To criticize a shelter, clients don't have to take the time to talk with you. They can simply pick up their phone, type a few angry sentences, and hit send—via email, review sites like Yelp and Google, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, or any number of online forums and discussion boards.

And, unlike the old days, clients of the NSPCA have many options for attaining a pet--rescues, the internet, breeders, etc.

Since a customer service is the backbone of any successful shelter, you can't afford to turn off a client. To prevent this from happening, it's important to first understand what might be causing your clients to say, "I'm not ever going to support your shelter again."

To understand you must first listen. Try to take it off the computer and talk directly to the person making the complaint. If the complaint comes in the form of an email, make every effort to find a phone number and call the person back. If there is no phone number, use email to get the number:

"Hello, thank you for taking the time to let me know you had a problem at our SPCA. I would like to talk to you in person about this. Would that be possible? If so, please send me your phone number and a good time to reach you. Thank you again for reaching out to me. We cannot improve if we don't know what we are doing wrong."

When you do get to talk to the person making the complaint, do not rush the conversation. Let the person talk until they stop. And when they do, apologize and assure them you will look into it, and offer a solution. Once you have acted, follow up and let the client know what has been done and again thank them for their help.

The apology is the most difficult, but it is necessary. It may be just saying "I'm so sorry you had this experience."

When a person complains and that complaint is heard and dealt with, the person will be more pleased with the organization than if there was never a problem in the first place.

Try not to perceive complaints as threats, even if the complainer does make a threat. For example, "I'm telling everyone I know, I'm calling the media, I know your boss." Find ways to just listen and acknowledge that the person is angry. In the case where the person complaining becomes extremely abusive or uses foul language, it is appropriate to say, "I'm sorry but I can't allow you to use this language with me. I'm hanging up now and I hope you will call me back when we can discuss this without foul language, thank you." And then hang up.

Never engage in name calling, threats yourself, or foul language. Stay calm and listen.

Recommendations:

- Have all staff that engages with the public attend ongoing customer service training.
- Staff that continually fall back on bad behaviors with the public should be reassigned to jobs that do not involve the public or they should be let go.
- Staff members should learn to watch for their peers' burn out point and find ways to help. For instance, if someone is dealing with a difficult person, and getting nowhere and is beginning to lose his or her patience, find a polite way to interrupt. For example, "Sally, Jimmy needs your help with a cat." and insert yourself into the conversation. "So sorry to interrupt, I see you are having a hard time, how can I help?" Sometimes just a new face will calm things down.
- The Executive Director should practice calm responses to complaints. Find every complaint you can and practice listening, apologizing, offering solutions, thanking, and following up. You will make good friends and loyal supporters of those that start out furious with you. It can be very rewarding. In addition, if you really listen you will find ways to improve your organization.
- Try to remember, the shelter does not belong to the staff or the Board, it belongs to the community. You are only able to serve the animals of Niagara County because the public wants you to. Be grateful.

Board of Directors and Executive Director

Board and Executive Director Observations:

Meetings were held between the Executive Director, and the consultants, and current board members over the three-day site visit. The consultants also met with three previous board members who were very dissatisfied with the way the board and the Executive Director had operated in 2019. This dissatisfaction led to their resignations and taking their concerns to the media.

Three members of the board resigned in November 2019. There are a few new board members. **It is important to note that the bulk of the behavior recorded below happened prior to mid-November 2019.**

Throughout these discussions, it was clear to the consultants that both the present and past Boards micro-managed the Executive Director and other staff at the NSPCA. The Board, not really understanding its role and responsibilities, created policies that were actually operational procedures. Board should develop policies such as how finances are managed and funds are invested, making sure there are no conflicts of interest and all board members sign COI forms, determining the mission, vision and values of the organization, and, in terms of a shelter, whether it is an open adoptions facility. By comparison, day-to-day operational procedures are staff-driven. Examples are the cleaning procedure for kennels, adoption protocols, handling cash, ordering food and supplies, etc. Also, the hiring and firing of staff, other than the Executive Director, is the direct purview of the Executive Director.

NSPCA Board members incorrectly involved themselves in day-to-day operations. Some of the examples of this are:

- Telling the Executive Director to fire certain staff members
- Asking to see personnel files
- Having the veterinarian attend a board meeting to explain why he listed particular reasons for euthanasia, and
- Deciding on the protocol for adoption of highly desirable dogs.

Conversely, several previous board members stated that the Executive Director was too involved in operations since he was hired to do fundraising. Clearly, the Board felt they should interfere with day-to-day operations and, in fact, felt it was their duty as Board members to interfere. At least one past board member had acted as an in-shelter volunteer during her board service.

Board members accused one another of malfeasance and of not being transparent. They accused one another and the Executive Director of lying. Board members also accused Executive Director of hiding the case of Rez from the board for two months until it was discussed at the March 2019 meeting. He was also accused of lying and insubordination.

The words “never,” “always,” “constantly,” and “not once” were used frequently during these interviews. There was a remarkable amount of, “I was told by so-and-so, that so-and-so said (or did) the following.”

There is now a new board with new leadership. The current president of the board is a no-nonsense individual who tends to forge ahead expecting others to work at her pace.

Discussion:

There is no question that the Board of Directors of the NSPCA was over involved in the operation of the animal shelter. There is also no question that board members on both sides of each issue believe fully that they are right, and the opposition is wrong. The rather constant inquiries concerning complaints that came from friends, or friends of friends, or relatives of someone, were inappropriate.

When answers to these inquiries were not satisfactory, board members moved quickly to blame the administration for doing a poor job. The Executive Director dug in his heels and said he would not entertain any more of their complaints without written or verbal substantiation that also included names and dates. This further angered Board members. The situation continued to break down. Some board members began to actively look for issues and began meeting with others that were dissatisfied.

The Executive Director became insubordinate with some board members. His ability to work with the complaints of shelter visitors was negatively affected. Many of his responses to inquiries were rude, and even nasty.

It became a mess and the result became a he said/she said argument. All involved—the Board, Executive Director and staff leadership—got off course to the detriment of the animals.

While at the site visit, the NYS Animal Protection Federation Education Fund's Executive Director, Libby Post, conducted a board training. It detailed how a successful board should run. It was well received with newer board members relieved and renewed in finding that what they had thought board service should be prior to joining the NSPCA Board, was indeed what they should be doing. The older board members responded positively to this reminder of what their job is and should be in the future.

When I first met with the President of the Board, she was one that used the always/never language. I questioned her about this whenever it happened and by the end of the three days, I found that she had changed her perspective. A good sign. Her enthusiasm for getting things done needs to be tempered with the understanding that others may not be where she is. She needs to practice patience as the leader of the NSPCA if she wants those following her to understand and support where she is going. Or if they don't, the opportunity to question and change the direction.

Several previous board members and some others had accused the Executive Director of not reporting the incident of Rez's euthanasia for two months. Let's take a look at the timeline to get a better understanding.

- It was only after the January 2019 Board meeting that the Executive Director knew anything about this case.
- The February meeting was cancelled due to a fund raiser held that month.
- The very next meeting in March was when the Executive Director talked with the full board about the January incident.

The accusation doesn't look good, but the explanation seems fine. This is another example of how the board was involved in micromanaging an issue. The Executive Director took appropriate action immediately following this issue. However, some board members believed they should have been immediately contacted about this shelter operations incident. However, this was an operations issue, not a board issue.

At one point, the board members that believed the Executive Director's job was limited to fundraising, decided among themselves that the job should be split. The current Executive Director would be entirely limited to fund raising and would have a co-Executive Director to manage shelter operations. These board members were quite offended that the Executive Director did not jump at this opportunity.

In reviewing the job description given to the Executive Director, the first paragraph states:

“Responsible for overall management and leadership of the organization.....Must be well versed in the operations and policies of the shelter”

Fund raising is not mentioned until page 2 of the description.

The accusations of insubordination certainly have merit. The responses to Board members, even if their concerns were inappropriate or overblown, were rude, inflammatory, and inappropriate.

Recommendations:

- Board members should continue to take advantage of any board development opportunities.
- If opportunities do not present themselves, the president of the board should research what may be available.
- If not now members, the Board should see that the organization joins the New York Council of Nonprofits. There is a wealth of information and opportunities for nonprofits at this group. For more information go to <https://www.nycon.org/>.
- Take advantage of what is available through NYCON and other organizations to make NSPCA the best it can be.
- The Board should be extremely careful to make certain they are doing the job that is expected from a board and not micromanage the staff of the NSPCA.
- If possible, any involved in this crisis who have acted poorly should try to make amends. There have been a lot of hurt feelings.
- The Executive Director should seek help in the area of more professional communications with others. There are many techniques that one can employ when in a stressful situation to make certain it does not get worse. Effective leaders need to be great at this.

Conclusions

The core belief of the humane movement has always been just two words. BE KIND.

One would have to look hard to find an individual in this crisis that has embraced this core belief. Sadly, in general everyone involved in this is a kind person. They have just lost their way.

In trying to be humane advocates for animals, they have forgotten how to be humane with one another. Observing the players in this situation is like observing a bad marriage where the parties blame each other for their own behavior. It can only work to destabilize the marriage or in this case the NSPCA. As stated in the introduction to this report, all parties involved claim to be fighting for the animals but clearly, they are more interested in proving the “other side” wrong.

So here it is. You are all wrong (and you are all right). About something. Now please stop. Your concern for the welfare of animals has to mean you learn to work together and if you can't do so, it is imperative that you remove yourself.

Is everything perfect at the NSPCA? Of course not. No organization is free of problems and as problems are fixed, new ones always emerge. A good organization is always a work in progress. It never stands still. It changes, it grows, sometimes it goes backwards. The good ones take any backward movement and learn from it.

It is my hope and my belief that NSPCA can take lessons from this crisis and apply them to a better future.

The talent on the board and on the staff is also a work in progress. This is not a bad thing unless they become complacent and stop looking for ways to grow. Each individual involved needs to see errors as opportunities to grow. Attached is an article that speaks directly to changing errors from a problem to an opportunity.

Some current opportunities I see:

- A new staff without preconceived notions on how things are done
- New Board members that are ready to learn
- A veterinarian who is very excited about getting to know others in this field and improve the welfare of the animals in his care
- A manager who has been rewarded for being nasty in her previous job learning to be kind
- An active animal welfare community that is not afraid to make their points known
- A community that wants a great shelter

And on that note let me remind the Niagara County Community that you have a responsibility to this shelter if you want it to be great. You must be generous with your time and money. And, with your words as well.

Attachment 1

Why are some shelters no longer testing all cats for FeLV and FIV?

Last updated: 2019-02-06

Author: Dr. Erica Schumacher

Document type: FAQs

Topics: Shelter Population Management, Infectious Disease, Community Cat Resources

Species: Feline

Shelters have felt a responsibility for many years to test all cats for retroviruses (Feline Leukemia Virus and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus) prior to adoption. The hope was that testing could ensure shelters were placing healthy cats up for adoption and also that the viruses might be eradicated through shelter testing efforts. However, increased information about the tests and the diseases has led to the shelter medicine community making recommendations for shelters to discontinue routinely testing all cats for FeLV and FIV. Dr. Schumacher delves into the many reasons behind this change.

Question:

I understand there is a recommendation to discontinue retroviral testing of all healthy cats prior to adoption. We want to do the right thing but don't want to endanger the cats in our care. Ever the analytical/evidence-based thinker, I'm seeking some references to support this practice. Can you point me in the right direction?

Answer:

Thank you so much for your question! You are correct, many shelters are making the shift away from routinely testing every cat for Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) prior to adoption based on recommendations from shelter medicine specialists. This is typically a multi-factorial decision for shelters, with some reasons resonating more heavily than others, depending on the organization's mission and resources. Let's discuss the main reasons testing all shelter cats is no longer recommended and then dive into the details (with references).

1. The FeLV/FIV in-house tests are less accurate when testing all healthy cats.

- **No test is perfect. This fact, combined with the low prevalence of these diseases (<3% nationwide), means that the chance of a false positive result increases when testing all healthy cats.**
 - Here is a helpful calculator to illustrate the chances of false positive and false negative results when disease prevalence, test sensitivity and specificity are taken into account. Try this exercise: enter a disease prevalence of 3% and use the sensitivity and specificity for the FeLV IDEXX SNAP test from their website (98.6% and 98.2% respectively). If you test 1000 cats you will see that 17 out of the 47 cats that test positive do not actually have FeLV. That means that over 36% of positive results are actually false positives. In areas with a prevalence lower than

- 3% the number of false positives increases. On the flip side, a negative test is very reliable – however, see the next point.
 - The accuracy of diagnostic testing also falls dramatically when tests are used as screening tools on healthy animals rather than being driven by indications in the history or clinical signs that suggest the particular disease.
- **Test result interpretation is complex.**
 - For the cats that do test negative, we can only say that they are negative at the time they were tested. It takes at least 30 days from the time of infection with FeLV to test positive on a SNAP test and it can take at least 60 days for a cat infected with FIV to develop enough antibodies to cause a positive result on a SNAP test. Therefore, if a cat were infected just prior to intake to the shelter, they would test negative but could actually have the disease. While this would be a very uncommon scenario due to the low prevalence, in order to account for this time frame, testing should occur at least 60 days after the last known exposure, which would be best completed by the adopter’s veterinarian.
 - Even when testing is done within the appropriate time frame, negative and positive results are very difficult to interpret. FeLV is a complex disease; cats that test negative on an in-house test may still be infected and later show signs of disease. Cats can also test transiently positive and later test negative. In some cases, it is thought the virus may still be present but the clinical significance of this is not yet fully understood. FIV is less difficult to interpret. Negative tests are more reliable but a positive test may result from previous vaccination (depending on the test used) or maternal antibodies.
- **All tests are not created equally.**
 - There is a significant difference in accuracy between the types of tests available. Although the IDEXX SNAP test outperformed three other point-of-care tests in a [2017 study evaluating sensitivity and specificity led by Dr. Julie Levy et al](#), it was noted that all available tests have some intrinsic level of inaccuracy (see resource section at bottom of page).

2. Effect on Resources

- **Cost of test.**
 - Testing all cats can easily run into the tens of thousands of dollars, not including cost of syringe, alcohol, time for testing, etc. Given the issues with accuracy of testing, complexity of test result interpretation and the uncertainties around disease course, very often shelters find those resources could be better spent to promote animal health in other ways. Think of all the things your shelter could use that money for that would be more beneficial for the cats and staff (installing portals, for instance!).
- **Staff time and length of stay.**
 - Drawing blood, running the tests, interpreting the results, entering the results into the medical record, etc. are time consuming activities that can only be performed by a limited number of trained medical staff. This can create a bottleneck where cats wait for testing, leading to increased length of stay and greater health risks for all cats.
- **Increased care days.**

- A cat with a label of FeLV or FIV positive will likely stay in the shelter longer. Their path to adoption may be delayed by waiting for follow up testing (which may not provide any further clarity) and the decision-making after a positive result is obtained, and they may take longer to get adopted once made available. This delay means a longer length of stay in the shelter and everything else that comes along with that (shelter crowding, stress, increased disease). It is important to remember that because there are fewer resources to go around, these things affect ALL the animals in the shelter, not just the one that tested positive.

3. Consequence of (potentially inaccurate) label of FeLV or FIV status

- **Inefficiencies to the system.**
 - Gathering information that cannot be effectively interpreted confounds decision making, wastes resources, and interferes with maximizing the life-saving capabilities of the shelter.
- **Euthanasia of cats testing positive.**
 - As we come to understand more about the complexities of disease course and the weaknesses of testing, we recognize that euthanizing test positive cats likely results in needless euthanasia of cats that would have remained healthy.
 - Even in shelters that have successful adoption programs for cats that test positive, prolonged time to adoption results in longer length of stay/more care days (as explained above).
- **False sense of security.**
 - If the test is negative, it can give adopters a false sense of security. The concept of incubation periods and exposure can be difficult to convey during an adoption, when people are already overloaded with information and excitement about their new pet. Although chances are that a cat testing negative is truly negative (due to low prevalence of the disease), some cats may have been exposed prior to intake and could develop FeLV or FIV after adoption. Adopters may see that the cat tested negative and be surprised to see a positive result if the cat is re-tested several months later.
- **Decreased staff morale/increased burnout.**
 - This is especially true in those shelters that euthanize cats that test positive for FeLV and/or FIV.

So, who should be tested?

The FeLV/FIV in-house tests are useful diagnostic tools when used in the intended circumstances. We do recommend testing cats with a clinical portrait supportive of these diseases (bite wounds, abscesses, dental disease, lethargy, etc.). When used on cats with clinical signs consistent with FeLV or FIV, the test results are more reliable. This is because the prevalence of the disease increases in ill or unthrifty cats. Return to that calculator and play around with different prevalence values to see how an increase or decrease affects the predictive value (the chance that a positive or negative test result is true) of the test.

What about cats in group housing?

For both FeLV and FIV the risk of transmission between adult cats is extremely low unless crowding or immunosuppression is present. Cats develop age-related immunity to FeLV in particular and as noted in Greene's Infectious Diseases of the Dog and Cat "experimental infection of adult cats is difficult if not impossible in healthy adult cats." A 2014 study by Dr. Annette Lister found no transmission of FIV between cats when housed together in a rescue home over a period of months to years. Ensuring low-stress housing and monitoring of group housing to avoid agonistic interactions where cats may incur bite wounds is recommended. Practices for group housing that optimize wellbeing and limit retroviral transmission (among other health concerns) include the provision of adequate space (>18 sq ft per cat), limiting group size to fewer than 4-6 cats, and avoiding co-housing of unrelated kittens. We should also keep in mind that a negative test can give us that false sense of security. As mentioned above, a negative test does not mean the cat is truly not infected- they may have been recently exposed.

Shelters should encourage cat adopters to establish a relationship with a veterinarian who is best suited to develop a health plan for their cat with his/her new lifestyle and other individual considerations and risk factors in mind.

I know this was a lot of information, but I hope this has been helpful to you. Please feel free to reach out with further questions!

Erica Schumacher, DVM
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Attachment 2

How to Change Your Mindset to See Problems as Opportunities

Dwelling on problems causes stress and hampers productivity. What if you could train your brain to see problems as opportunities? Here's how!

Talk to any successful entrepreneur, or any professional with a positive attitude, and you'll find one key trait in common: all of them have a unique mentality that allows them to handle challenges differently. Rather than seeing problems as burdensome forces of opposition, they see problems as opportunities--opportunities to learn, grow, improve, or adjust in a way that leaves them better off than before the problem existed.

This simple mentality has many benefits. First, it reduces the burden of stress that usually accompanies any new problem--because the problem is viewed in a positive light, it's less intimidating. Second, it contextualizes the problem. Because the mind immediately starts thinking about the effects and potential responses to the problem, it can be broken down and analyzed easier. Third, it encourages growth--this mentality forces you to adapt and improve on a constantly recurring basis. Finally, it's self-perpetuating. Every problem you view or solve this way makes future problems easier to handle, forming a positive cycle of reinforcement.

Unfortunately, there's no magic switch you can flip in your brain that suddenly makes you see all your problems in this light. If you want to adopt this mindset, you'll have to take the time to retrain your brain. It is possible, though it will take consistent effort over an extended period to see the results.

Accept That Problems Are Inevitable

Most of us react negatively to problems when they take us by surprise. You're on your way to work on a route you always take, and you get a flat tire; this event is completely unexpected and can make you feel like the day is ruined. However, your work commute almost always has some kind of problem in it--they're usually just so small you don't notice. For example, there might be extra traffic, you might have forgotten something at home, or you might not have enough of a charge on your mobile device to listen to music. Even a rogue red light can interfere with your commute.

Problems are a given--only the intensity of the problems are a variable. If you can learn to accept problems as a normal, regular, and completely unavoidable part of life, you'll have taken your first step toward handling them with more grace and objective understanding.

Steel Yourself to First Impressions

Our first impressions often define our reactions to new situations, so in order to start seeing problems as opportunities, you have to avoid making first impressions altogether (which is easier said than done). Let's take the flat tire incident in the above section; your first impression might be "I'm going to be late" or "This is going to be a pain," or "This is going to cost me money I haven't budgeted." These first impressions immediately illustrate the problem in a negative light, rather than what it is--a neutral situation. Prevent yourself from forming these immediate thoughts by simply thinking of the problem itself: "I have a flat tire."

Practice this on small-scale problems, like spilling a drink, and work your way up. It's our instinct to form first impressions, especially in urgent or problematic situations, so you'll be fighting against nature on this one.

Distance Yourself From the Problem

Once that initial reaction stage has passed, you can focus on distancing yourself from the problem. We often have a highly self-centered view on the world, leading us to think of all the bad ways a problem could affect us. But if you think of the problem as a separate entity, unrelated to you, you'll do a better job of tempering your emotions and thinking about the problem objectively. One helpful strategy to do this is to describe the problem as if it were happening to a friend: "Bob has a flat tire. He needs to pull off to the side of the road and either put on a spare or call a towing company." This helps you avoid the ego-centric emotional reactions that typically arise.

Learn to Objectively Evaluate the Threats and Consequences

Your next step is to isolate the real threats and consequences of a problem from your exaggerated or imaginary ones. Doing so will help you shift your focus from seeing the problem as a burden or as a destructive force to seeing the problem as a neutral force that allows you to take action. Whenever you face a problem, make a physical or mental list of all the significant negative consequences it will have. Solidifying a comprehensive list will typically illustrate that your problem is not as destructive as it seemed on the surface; our brains are wired to imagine worst-case scenarios and exaggerate potential threats so we can over-prepare rather than under-prepare. In the modern world, this evolutionary programming is less helpful.

Ignore Reactions, Focus on Improvements

Finally, you'll need to train your brain to think of your response to a given problem as an improvement, rather than a blind reaction. For example, in the flat tire incident, it's easy to think "I have a flat tire. Now I have to fix it." This is a direct reaction to the situation. Instead, try to think of current and future improvements: "I have a flat tire. This will give me a chance to use my spare." "I have a flat tire. I should buy tire sealant to have on hand in case this happens again." Over time, you'll gradually start seeing problems in terms of the potential improvements they illustrate, rather in terms of the actions they demand of you. Again, as with any mental shift, start out with small scenarios and gradually work your way up to larger ones.

You're always going to have problems in your life, whether they come up as personal issues, professional challenges, or flat-out bad luck that ruins your day. If you can train your mind to view these problems as opportunities for growth, you'll become far more adept at handling them quickly, efficiently, and with less stress.