

The Ideal Animal Shelter Director

In the current world of animal sheltering, hiring a director to take a shelter or animal control facility in a new, life-affirming direction requires organizations to broaden the field of candidates. To find the right person, a shelter must recruit for success. And that not only means avoiding candidates with multi-year sheltering experience - which too often means an over-reliance on killing - but rethinking our entire approach to shelter leadership.

Until April 2005, the Charlottesville-Albemarle SPCA, an agency which contracts for animal control in Charlottesville, Virginia, was the target of criticism for what some in the rescue community saw as unnecessary killing. But then it all changed.

In their search for a new director, agency trustees did not hire someone with years of sheltering experience. In an era which has historically been dominated by reactionary policies, "sheltering experience" often brings a mindset of "how we have always done it." In other words, it brings an over-reliance on killing. Instead, the Charlottesville Board of Directors sought someone with passion for animals, and specific skills which could be transferred to a shelter environment. They chose a lawyer with a business background. And the results have been dramatic.

Their new Director explains:

The Charlottesville-Albemarle SPCA changed the way it operated and began implementing No Kill programs. In 2005, we saved 87% of our dog population and 67% of our cat population, the result of adopting the "can do" philosophy of No Kill. We doubled the number of animals placed in foster care from the previous year. We also treated and found homes for many sick and injured dogs and cats, as well as older, blind, deaf or animals with 'special needs.'

But the Charlottesville SPCA thinks it can do better. Most directors would be content with saving nine out of ten dogs and seven of ten cats. But

Charlottesville's director isn't like most. She embodies the spirit of No Kill which is always demanding improvement.

For the first half of 2006, 95% of the dogs left the shelter alive. If that holds, Charlottesville, VA will become the safest community in the U.S. for dogs. As for cats, saving seven out of ten makes them the envy of most communities in the nation. But, once again, she strives for more.

As Charlottesville works to save more dogs than anyone else and widen the safety net for cats, the secrets to their success are not hard to figure out. And it starts at the top. Combined with a series of programs and services that make up the No Kill Equation (See No Kill Sheltering Vol. II, Issue 4, July/August 2006), the City of Charlottesville is proving that when it comes to homeless dogs and cats, a committed director can do better than the two prong strategy of failure championed by the architects of the status quo: adopt some and kill the rest.

Recruiting for Compassion

Unfortunately, there is no list of compassionate directors to choose from. But that does not mean a community must settle for the status quo. To get the right person, a community needs to broaden the field of candidates—to remove the requirement of animal sheltering experience in order to make the job description as inclusive as possible.

Too many shelters insist on multi-year experience

running shelters or animal control facilities. Unfortunately, this can bring set methods and short-sightedness that prevent innovation in lifesaving, good public relations and increasing community support. It also shrinks the pool of pro-No Kill and qualified applicants, many of whom would otherwise bring a fresh perspective and innovation to shelter operations. It does not take long to learn the basics of running an animal shelter.

The information needed to obtain No Kill success is readily available to any director serious about saving lives. If a shelter director failed to create No Kill in their previous community, why should it be believed that he or she will succeed elsewhere? If a shelter director presides over the killing of the majority of shelter animals in their current occupation, why would their performance be different in a new community? Humane societies, SPCAs and animal control agencies throughout the country need to stop rewarding failure by hiring directors who have not had lifesaving success elsewhere.

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To eliminate recycling directors who continue to fail, job descriptions should eliminate the requirement of specific *shelter experience*, seeking instead specific *skills* (accountability, working in a team environment, leadership, financial responsibility, management, bottom line results) that can be transferred to the shelter environment.

That is exactly what occurred at an agency that takes in approximately 25,000 animals each year. The job description summarized what they were looking for as follows:

Animal Services is looking for an innovative and dynamic individual who brings skills, enthusiasm, and accountability to animal care and control. It is not

essential that the successful candidate have senior management experience of an animal shelter or animal control facility. Animal Services is looking for someone with specific and transferable skills (working in a team environment, leadership, financial control, management, bottom line results) that can be transferred to the shelter environment, such is found in other professions (business, law, veterinary medicine, public administration, public relations, etc.).

Beyond the normal advertising shelters do to hire (a job announcement in the local daily newspaper, through the state Department of Labor, and through other government channels), the position should also be sent to the Office of Career Services for all local veterinary colleges, law schools, and MBA programs (and those of neighboring states and nationally known schools) since they maintain communications with alumni who have the skills being sought and who may also be contemplating a career change.

Since the ideal shelter director has a rescue orientation, and in order to begin the process of improving relationships with the rescue community and cultivating their buy-in, the job

description should be sent to local rescue groups so that they can circulate it among their members and make it publicly available through their own public relations channels.

Moreover, because the shelter belongs to—and is paid for by—the community, a citizens committee made up of local animal welfare groups and rescue groups (whose interest is first and foremost saving lives) should be created to meet and greet potential candidates and offer their opinion as to the candidate’s fitness for the position.

And, finally, once hired, they should be held to the one result that matters—how many animals go home alive.