

Sailing Through the Changes

Lessons learned at Nevada Humane Society

BY BONNEY BROWN

On a cold morning in January 2007, I arrived at Nevada Humane Society (NHS) as its new executive director. At the time, NHS had been in existence for 78 years and was a traditional animal shelter with a contractual agreement to take in all owner-surrendered pets from Washoe County. But public expectations had been changing rapidly, and when the shelter's long-established euthanasia policies drew some stinging and sustained public criticism, the board of directors decided it was time to move in a new direction. They hired me to make dramatic improvements to their live-release rate of animals.

Our new organizational goal was to see that all animals entering the shelters in our county would be placed back into the community, excepting (of course) those animals who were too sick or injured to be restored to good quality of life, or those who posed a risk to public safety. This meant that we needed to successfully treat the sick, injured, and underage animals and find good homes or rescue group placement for

the more challenging old, homely, and quirky animals who arrived at both NHS and Washoe County Regional Animal Services (WCRAS). (WCRAS picks up lost pets and handles redemption and enforcement, but does not offer pet adoption services. NHS shelters owner-surrendered animals, transfers in 85 percent of those not redeemed at WCRAS for adoption, and provides spay/neuter and other public services. Two other smaller local shelters also provide pet adoption services in the community.)

We developed a two-pronged plan to realize our new lofty goal:

1. Dramatically increase the number of animals leaving the shelters alive through adoptions, foster care, and community partnerships.
2. Substantially decrease the number of animals needing to come into the shelters in the first place through spay/neuter services, trap-neuter-return (TNR), and pet-retention programs.

To lay the foundation for this plan, we invigorated our staff's approach to their



Veterinarian Diana Lucree examines an especially adorable pooch. Part of Nevada Humane Society's approach involves providing subsidized veterinary care to pet owners who may be struggling financially.

work with four principles to guide their decision-making and daily work:

- Create lifesaving solutions for the animals.
- Involve the community in our work.
- Deliver quality customer service.
- Provide excellent care to the animals.

Needless to say, it was challenging to fully live up to these principles, but they were there as a clear benchmark for all of us, and were a great help in establishing organizational priorities.

In short order, the management team and I set about aligning what we did in our daily work with the organization's new priorities. The shelter used to close at 4 p.m., restricting adoption opportunities for working people, so we shifted the hours the shelter was open, keeping the same amount of total hours, but staying open until 6:30 p.m. For the first time in the organization's history, we opened for adoptions 363 days a year (closing only on Thanksgiving and Christmas). The volunteer program was revamped to be more flexible and welcoming. The foster care program was expanded (at the peak, roughly 3,000 animals each year spent some time in a foster home).



Young visitors to NHS meet a resident pooch. When the shelter encouraged local residents to adopt, the community was quick to respond.

We also created a free Animal Help Desk to be the face of our efforts to enable people to keep their pets. This was key—it currently handles more than 23,000 calls and emails annually. Initially, the most common calls were about animal behavior problems, but as the economy deteriorated, calls from people who were losing jobs and homes became more frequent (see p. 32 for more about this work). Requests for help with feral cats, wildlife, and pets in need of veterinary care the owner can't afford remain common reasons for calls.

We embraced the local TNR group and worked to improve relations with rescue groups. We redesigned animal flow processes and created effective cleaning and animal health protocols so that animals were more efficiently (and healthily!) ready for adoption. Adoption processes became more open and conversation-based. At the same time, we implemented a vigorous pet adoption marketing campaign, including attention-getting promotions. We brainstormed ideas with staff to come up with concepts that would draw media and public attention. The Doggy Palooza, Cat Convention, Adopt a Mini-Panther, Furry Speed Dating, Wheel of Fortune, and Petzilla events were just a few of our favorites.

There were plenty of challenges, lots of hard work, and a few ruffled feathers—change is never easy—but the results were well worth it. Our pet adoption numbers hit all-time highs. We placed more than 10,000 animals in the peak year (before the number of incoming animals began to decline). We worked closely with our partners at WCRAS, which is headed by an ex-Marine, Mitch Schneider. Mitch once told me, “Once a Marine, always a Marine,” and he lived up to their can-do spirit. Under his leadership, the agency's return-to-owner rate for dogs rose to 60 percent, and he employed technology to further save lives—from promoting microchipping to creating an efficient new dispatch center.

We were able to increase the communitywide save rate for dogs to 92 percent almost immediately and made steady progress for cats, reaching our goal of saving all healthy or treatable dogs and cats after two years. Equally important, we sustained that 92 percent communitywide live-release rate for five years. (Both WCRAS and NHS scrupulously counted every animal picked up or brought in to either shelter regardless of age, temperament, or health—no category of animal was excluded from the statistics.)

People are often curious to hear more about the community that sustains such a high live-release rate, wondering if it may be some particularly strong spirit or financial wherewithal that allowed this success. Washoe County is home to 420,000 people, and it includes the cities of Reno and Sparks, with an additional 6,500 square miles—most of it high desert. It's a beautiful place to live with great weather, but it's had its difficulties. Nevada has had high foreclosure and unemployment rates for prolonged periods since the 2008 economic downturn. The number of animals coming into shelters per capita—39 incoming dogs or cats per 1,000 residents—was double that of many cities.



In her columns for *Animal Sheltering*, Bonney Brown, former executive director of the Nevada Humane Society in Reno, will explore the changes the shelter made to facilitate saving more of the community's animals.

Reno was dubbed the second-drunkest city in the U.S. by *Men's Health* magazine; it has been mocked by the television sitcom *Reno 911* and even one of the Muppets' movies. To add insult to injury, a *Saturday Night Live* host quipped, “According to a new list, the least-happy city is St. Petersburg, Florida. But that's only because Reno, Nevada, finally killed itself.” This prompted a local reporter to suggest a new slogan for Reno: “At least we're not Detroit.” Reno-ites do have a sense of humor.

In spite of the community's many real challenges, when we asked for support and encouraged people to adopt, they stepped up in droves to help the animals. In my early days at NHS, people would often tell me that the support would dry up, that it could not be sustained. To the contrary, it has grown. It seems that compassion is more like a muscle that gets stronger with use rather than a finite substance that gets used up. And the results of that compassion, the 92 percent save rate for dogs and cats, has become a point of community pride.

This fall, I handed NHS off to the capable hands of a new executive director and its seasoned management team while I launched a new organization called Humane Network. Diane Blankenburg, who oversaw the remarkable adoption marketing, community outreach, and development at NHS, joined me in this effort. Together, we aim to help other communities dramatically improve their live-release rates for homeless pets. Mitch Schneider, now retired from WCRAS, works with us as well.

Through this new *Animal Sheltering* column, I'm looking forward to sharing some of the programs and strategies that worked well for us at NHS and other ideas we are discovering through our new work in communities around the country. Ideally, I will share some ideas that will make a difference for you in your efforts to save more lives. ■