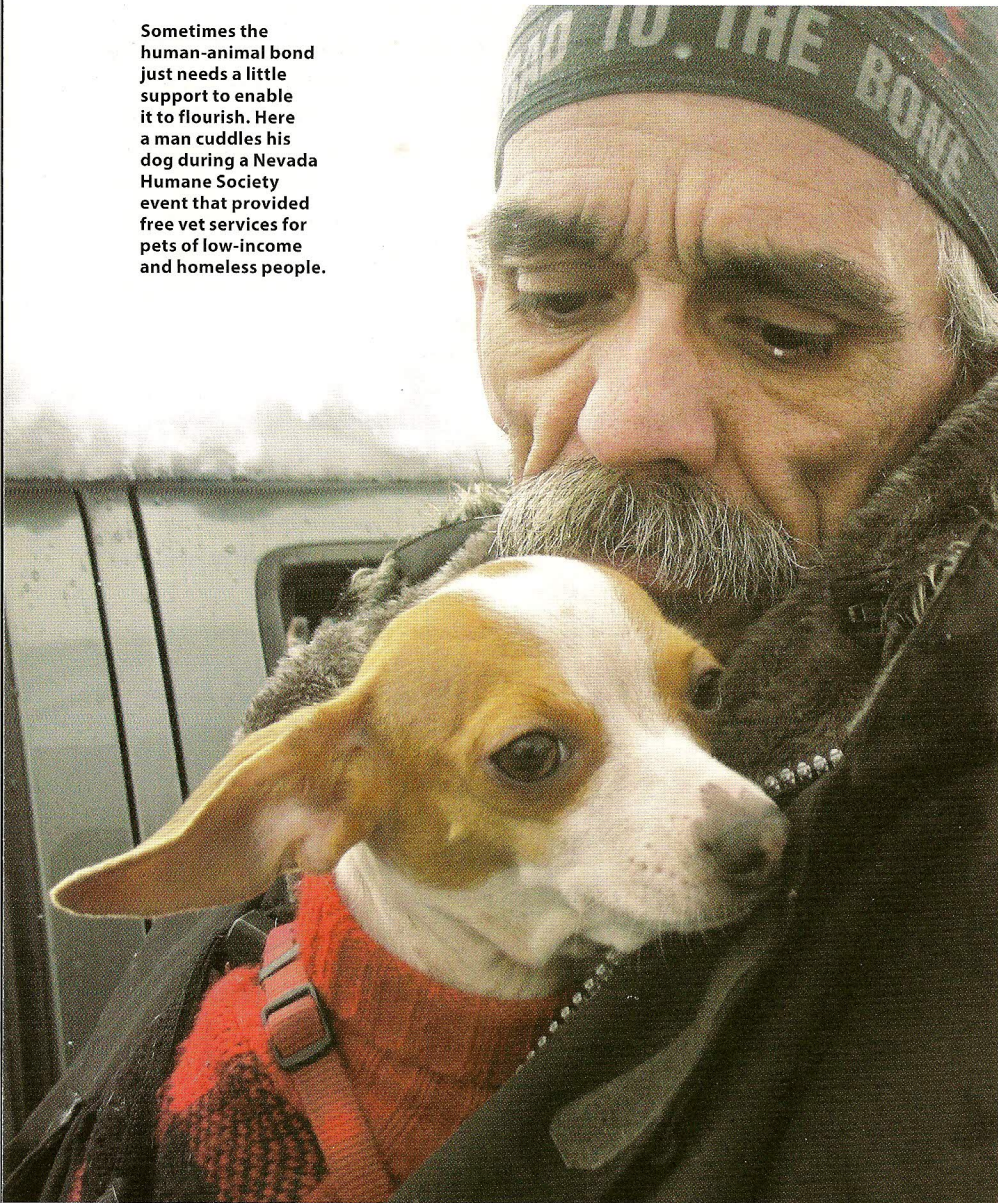


Sometimes the human-animal bond just needs a little support to enable it to flourish. Here a man cuddles his dog during a Nevada Humane Society event that provided free vet services for pets of low-income and homeless people.



Nurturing the Bond

A sympathetic ear can go a long way to keeping pets in homes

BY BONNEY BROWN

The sheltering and rescue field is all about the human-animal bond. Adoption programs aim to facilitate and enhance the bond between people and pets. We rely on the strength of this bond to drive the donations that make our work possible. But equally, we know the frustration of seeing

the bond strained to the point of people surrendering their pets.

From our perspective, it can be easy to see what people could have done differently to prevent hitting a crisis point with their pets. It's a natural step from there to making assumptions and judg-

ments. However, the underlying problem is often not a lack of caring and love, but rather a lack of knowledge and resources. Anyone working at a shelter surrender desk has witnessed the tears and heartbreak of people giving up their pets; clearly we are not the only ones feeling the pain.

In some cases, the human-animal bond just needs a little support to enable it to flourish.

At the Nevada Humane Society (NHS), an animal help desk handles over 20,000 calls and emails each year. Beata Liebetruht, now manager of Carson City Animal Services, was the first NHS animal help desk manager. Her strategy was simple: Focus on offering options in a positive way that brings out the best in people.

When owners contact NHS about surrendering a pet, they are connected with someone who is trained to offer compassionate support, ask questions, listen carefully and provide personalized advice. Sometimes the answer is for the pet to come to the shelter, but in many cases there are alternatives.

In 2008, the first full year of the program, countywide shelter admissions dropped by 8 percent at a time when many communities saw increased intakes due to economic hard times. More than half of callers who were planning to surrender one or more pets to the shelter were willing to try alternatives.

While solutions usually include advice or practical assistance, you can never underestimate the value of a bit of encouragement and emotional support, says Liebetruht. The goal is to engage the person in solving the problem.

The same principle applies to pet retention at its most basic level: working with your organization's adopters to ensure successful placements. During her seven years volunteering with Anjellicle Cats in New York City, Heike Klassmann has learned to counsel adopters through the stresses of having a new pet. This can mean helping

Tips for Togetherness

Whether you're answering calls for a pet helpline, meeting with people face-to-face in a community outreach program, handling intakes at your shelter or answering calls from adopters, these tips from Beata Liebetruith, manager of Carson City Animal Services, can help you be more successful at keeping pets and their people together.

- Listen. Give people the chance to tell their whole story before you respond. Chances are they will then be willing to listen to you.
- Be nonjudgmental. Often callers tell us that they have been scolded by other rescue organizations that they reached out to for assistance.
- Practice empathy. Try this approach: "I am so sorry to hear about your dilemma. That sounds like a tough situation. Let's see what we can do to help you out."
- Use your powers of persuasion. The goal is to buy some time and get the individual involved in finding a solution, encouraging them to take small steps at first.
- Focus on the three Es (educate, encourage, enable) throughout your interactions.

them resolve behavior issues that otherwise would land the cat back in a foster home. But oftentimes, Klassman says, her role is "just to calm people down. It's more about people's therapy than the cats' behavior."

Having a sympathetic person an adopter can call with any concern, no matter how seemingly trivial, is key to the organization's success, says Klassman. "We prevent

a lot of cats from being returned because of totally minor issues."

Whether you're recruiting a volunteer or hiring a new staff member for a surrender prevention role, the biggest re-

quirement is that they like working with people, says Abby Volin, HSUS rescue group coordinator. It's not necessary for them to be completely savvy about pet behavior issues—only that they be willing to learn.

That's because the human-animal bond often depends on another type of bond: the relationship your organization builds with the people it serves.

"If someone knows you're going to judge them, they're less likely to come to you," says Volin. "They're going to think their only option is to surrender the pet." ■

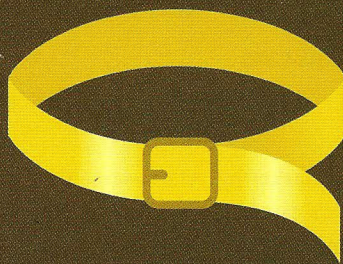
Bonney Brown is the president of Humane Network and former executive director of the Nevada Humane Society.

Senior content editor Julie Falconer contributed reporting to this piece.



When Growler (shown here with Vonice Reed, cat care manager at the Nevada Humane Society) became injured, his owners couldn't afford the vet bill. NHS patched him up, neutered him and returned him to his home.

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