Around much of the country, shelter cats are still euthanized at disheartening rates. Most shelters struggle to keep up with the number of felines coming in. But while Erie County, N.Y., faces the same struggles as other animal welfare organizations, local groups say they’ve managed to avoid euthanizing a healthy, adoptable cat for more than two years. At the SPCA Serving Erie County, it’s been more than three.

This is remarkable on its face, but it’s even more remarkable when one considers the local realities in Erie County, one of the poorest areas in the nation. The city of Buffalo has close to 29 percent of residents living below the U.S. government-established poverty line, and animal care and control agencies and rescue groups face myriad challenges. They struggle for resources. They struggle to get their messages out to the public. They struggle, most of all, to find room for the number of cats who arrive at shelters and rescue groups. There never seems to be enough room to house these animals, much less get them adopted.

But, somehow, they’re doing it in Erie County. How?

They’re doing it through a remarkable combination of creativity and coalition building among local agencies and organizations. Animal Sheltering spoke with three of the partners in this amazing “cat coalition”—the SPCA Serving Erie County, the Ten Lives Club (a cat rescue group), and the City of Buffalo Animal Shelter—to find out just how their efforts are paying huge dividends for cat welfare and, more important, how they do what they do.

Here are some of the secrets of their success.

Put Cats Front and Center
Why don’t more people go to their local shelters to adopt cats? The answer to that is complex. One factor is that, among the general public, dogs seem to be perceived as
the proverbial “man’s best friend,” while cats are relegated to second-class citizens. Simply put, more people continue to see dogs in a more favorable light than they see cats; they see dogs as loving, faithful companions, eager for love, while cats are seen as aloof and distant. (For more on this issue, go to animalsheltering.org to read “The State of the Cat” in our May-June 2008 issue.)

Another reason is that cats simply aren’t front and center vis-à-vis adoption as are dogs, so the challenge is to put them there. Executive director Barbara Carr says that addressing the cat problem has been her No. 1 priority since taking the helm of the SPCA Serving Erie County in 1993. “I could tell in the early 1990s that we weren’t going to have much of a dog problem, so I focused much of our efforts on cats,” she says.

Like other shelters in the Northeast, the SPCA has had enough space to bring in dogs from other parts of the country to meet adoption needs; Carr says they actually don’t have enough dogs to even fill demand. But cats were another story—especially unsterilized ones. By 1995, Carr had an in-house spay/neuter clinic so that no cat left the SPCA unsterilized. Next, she began to partner with businesses to do off-site adoptions and also offered mobile adoption sites.

The approach—while common now—wasn’t without its detractors at first. “I can remember doing a workshop about off-site adoptions in 1995, and I was practically booted off the stage due to the fact that I would have cats in a ‘retail situation’ and not have people go through the wringers to adopt them,” Carr says. “But our feeling was that that’s how people get cats: because they’re in front of them.”

Since then, Carr has established around 22 off-site adoption centers—at such places as pet retail stores, bookshops, vet clinics, and a store at a local mall. Through those locations, Carr says she has seen the number of cat adoptions increase and the number of intake cats at the shelter decrease. “After about seven years of doing this, we were flat; the number [of intake cats] didn’t go up,” she says. The next year, the number of intake cats went down 2 percent; the second year, it went down 14 percent. Since then, Carr says that the rate has flattened off at a “number I can’t seem to get below. I don’t know what the next trick up our sleeve is to get the numbers down further, but I’m hopeful.”

Be Media Savvy, Affordable, and Creative

Engaging the community and the local media has proved crucial to progress in Erie County. Before the SPCA had such a remarkable success story, it, too, was putting down healthy cats. In 2008, Carr contacted a local newspaper after the SPCA had to euthanize three or four perfectly healthy cats for space. The paper let the public know about the shelter’s plight, running a story about the problem that inspired a donor to come forward with an initial contribution of $10,000 (the donor has gone on to become a regular contributor).

The SPCA used that money to open the off-site adoption center it now maintains at a local mall. Though the store is “branded” through the SPCA, all of the coalition partners have cats there.

The City of Buffalo Animal Shelter has learned to engage the media too, which has helped “tremendously in decreasing our cat population,” says Kelly McCartney, executive director of the municipal agency. Every Tuesday, one of the shelter’s volunteers takes a dog or cat to a television broadcaster in the region, and the news features the animal in a special segment. “We’re also on Channel 4 on a program called Daybreak Sunday,” she says. “We’re trying to get public awareness there and also try to make adoption and spay/neuter as affordable as possible for people and educate them and do what we can do to move the cats [out of the shelter].”

Especially in an impoverished area such as Erie County, low-cost adoptions and spay/neuter programs are critical. The coalition is addressing these needs in a variety of ways. All of the partners have worked together with the veterinary community to establish low-cost spay/neuter clinics for cats who are already in the community, and ac-
According to the SPCA’s surveys, a majority of local vets (around 72 percent) are performing juvenile sterilization. Coalition partners do what they can to encourage people who have semi-owned cats and strays to get the animals spayed or neutered.

And when it comes to offering incentives for people to adopt cats, they are increasingly creative and pragmatic. For example, on Columbus Day, the SPCA offered cats for $14.92, and the City of Buffalo Animal Shelter has a program where people can adopt older cats for only $10, plus the cost of vaccinations, which are offered at a deep discount thanks to the shelter’s relationship with local vets. Says McCartney, “At the mall store, they’ll often run promotions, and we’ll follow suit and do whatever they’re doing. We can play with our prices, and we definitely offer promotions.”

For the past year and a half, the SPCA has also been offering free adoptions for cats older than 3. In the first year, that reduced the organization’s animal care costs for cats by 6,000 days. Says Carr, “If you figure what it does cost to give away a cat, then yes, it costs us all those adoption fees—but we didn’t have to give care for 6,000 days, so that’s a reasonable tradeoff.” (See animalsheltering.org/measurement for more on calculating animal care days).

Carr’s shelter also offers programs for people to adopt one cat and get a second one free. And during pro football season, people who walk into the SPCA’s mall store wearing a Buffalo Bills jersey can get a cat for the price of whatever number is on their jersey. All of the coalition partners agree that getting creative with cat adoptions is critical to reducing euthanasia.

Accept the status quo for cats? Scratch that!

Carr emphasizes that the success is astounding but temporary, and she stresses the need for constant vigilance to make sure numbers don’t start slipping again.

Farm out marginally healthy cats—such as those with upper respiratory infections, kittens who need to be bottle-fed, cats with simple maladies like broken legs, and even cats with FIV—and rehabilitate them to make them ready for adoption. These are cats who might otherwise have to be euthanized for space.

One of the most prominent local rescue groups is The Ten Lives Club, headed by executive director Marie Edwards. “Our role [in the partnership] is to help the SPCA and the city shelter when they get too many cats,” says Edwards, “whether it’s from a hoarding case or whether it just happens to be a week where everyone is turning in their personal cat. We go there and we pull cats from their cages, giving them an extra 10, 20 cages ... We can then take those cats and adopt them out, and that gives them more room to bring in more cats for adoption, too.”

It’s a major boost for the cat adoption numbers, and takes a load off the overburdened shelters. From January through October last year, Edwards says her group took in more than 1,300 cats, “and I’d say probably a good 500 of them were from the SPCA and the city shelter.”

An extensive network of foster homes helps the group ensure that cats who need a little extra medical or behavioral help can be cared for until they’re ready for adoption.

McCartney notes that the Ten Lives Club has been a major player in the coalition over the past few years, and a big help to her agency. “Being one of the co-
alition partners, they have really been tremendous to the city animal shelter. They may take up to 50 cats a month. ... Most of them are treatable, rehabilitation-ready cats that are sent there until they're healthy enough to be spayed or neutered before I can put them up for adoption. That frees up that space so we can concentrate on our healthy, adoptable animals."

**Never Rest on Your Laurels**

So, is the “cat problem” in Erie County effectively solved? The answer, according to the partners interviewed, is a resounding “no.”

Though the success in Erie County is remarkable, there are many hurdles still to be overcome. Among them is one reality over which none of the partners have any control. “There’s no question in my mind that the economy is having an effect on us right now,” says Carr. “Last year, out of roughly 8,000 animals that were adopted out, around 4,500 were sick [at intake] and had to be treated before they were adopted. That’s very expensive for us, and the reason they’re coming in is that people simply can’t afford their veterinary care or to even feed them in some cases.” On the bright side, though, Carr says that so far, the economy hasn’t affected donations.

Another hurdle is in getting those who already own cats to have them sterilized and thus prevent accidental litters. “It basically starts with education and low-cost spay/neuter,” says McCartney. “We’ve got to be able to reach the community, and people have to be able to afford to spay or neuter their cats.”

While McCartney says that the low-cost clinics are helpful, she acknowledges the inherent difficulty in educating the public when it comes to sterilization. “Unfortunately, I think there are a lot of people who aren’t aware of its importance, and it’s hard to reach those people. And there are a lot of people from different walks of life who, no matter what you do, just don’t believe in spaying or neutering,” she says.

Carr emphasizes that the success is astounding but temporary, and she stresses the need for constant vigilance to make sure numbers don’t start slipping again. “It sounds great that we haven’t had to euthanize a healthy cat, and we’re treating many of the sick ones. But there are still far too many [cats], and if we relax for a nanosecond, the problem is going to happen again,” she says. “Until we get some sort of nonsurgical sterilization—something like where we can go house to house and give a cat a vaccine or something—we’re going to have a problem, and I worry about it all the time.”

And, Carr says, maintaining a presence at the mall is an expensive proposition—costing more than $170,000 annually, primarily for staffing and rent. "If my donations dry up next year, I can’t afford the mall program. All I have to do is lose the mall, and we’d be back to euthanizing healthy cats. Again, we can’t relax, even for a nanosecond." AS

Arianna Ward, the daughter of a volunteer at the city shelter, often visits the resident cats when her mom comes in to help out.