WHAT NOW?

ANSWERING CLIENTS’ QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FATE OF SURRENDERED ANIMALS

BY JAMES HETTINGER
When people surrender animals to a shelter, there’s one question they almost always ask:

“What’s going to happen next?”

In the cases where euthanasia is a possible outcome, answering that question can be a tricky balancing act. On one hand you don’t want to give people false assurance that you’ll easily be able to adopt out the large-breed dog with a history of aggression, or the 15-year-old cat who’s forgotten how to use the litter box. On the other, you don’t want people to come away with the idea that the shelter is the place where animals go to die. Emotions run high whenever euthanasia is part of the mix, making the issue particularly sensitive for everyone involved.

Staycee Dains, shelter operations supervisor for the city shelter in San Jose, Ca., says some clients lower their voice to a whisper and ask, “Are you gonna kill it?” Others can’t even bring themselves to use such blunt language, she adds: “They’ll say, ‘Are you gonna …’ and they won’t even finish the sentence.”

The euthanasia question “comes up in one way or another with almost all but the most casual of stray surrenders,” says Jessica Danyow, director of operations at the Rutland County Humane Society (RCHS) in Vermont.

“And I think a lot of that is because people still suffer from the general misperception that most animals surrendered to shelters have only a short period of time before they’re euthanized across the board.”

At the other end of the spectrum, relinquishers might have the impression that their pet or stray is guaranteed a new home regardless of his medical or behavioral issues, or that he’ll live out his days in the shelter or foster homes. So what’s a shelter to do?

Shelter officials interviewed for this story agree that tactful honesty is the best policy when someone walks through your doors to surrender an animal. It’s also important to treat clients in a nonjudgmental, respectful way, and to ask about the pet-related issues they’re experiencing. A little counseling might solve Peaches’ litter box problem and enable her owner to keep her. Or if Fido’s owner is moving to an apartment where pets aren’t allowed, perhaps a friend or co-worker would be able to take him. By training staff to clearly explain shelter policy and provide some alternatives to surrender, shelters can avoid misunderstandings and help more animals stay in loving homes.

Truth and Consequences

At the Chemung County Humane Society (CCHS) & SPCA in Elmira, N.Y., the staff never guarantees an adoption, and always mentions that euthanasia is a possibility, according to executive director Barbara McLean. The shelter performs regular behavioral and medical assessments to monitor the animals’ well-being. Candidates for euthanasia include animals who are clearly suffering, have a contagious disease, or pose an unacceptable threat to other animals, themselves, or the public. Because the CCHS & SPCA is an open-admission facility, space considerations occasionally factor into a euthanasia decision after other options have been pursued.

Many people ask the CCHS & SPCA to call them before their surrendered animal is euthanized, but McLean says she and her small staff—who take in about 2,000 animals a year—can’t do that. Once an animal is signed over to the shelter, the shelter makes the final decision on adoption. The staff tells clients that if they’re not comfortable with that, they might be better off trying to find a home outside the shelter. McLean says the shelter’s transparent approach aims to avoid situations where someone calls back and is devastated to learn that the animal they surrendered has been euthanized.

The shelter’s role is to be advocates for the animals, but it’s essential to remember the human side of the equation as well, McLean says. “Understand that the people are giving up a loved one,” adds Fran Pack, an administrative assistant at the CCHS & SPCA.

In the case of stray animals, Dains notes that the people bringing them in are “so concerned [about] the welfare of an animal that they were compelled to act,” and they are likely undergoing “a real intense experience in their adult life.” Her staff tries to acknowledge the clients’ concern by thanking them for bringing in the animal, while reassuring them that the shelter networks with a large number of rescue groups, and euthanasia is always the last option.

The Write Approach

When clients ask the “what will happen?” question, there’s usually “a lot of anxiety and fear” behind it, Dains says. Her staff’s response is, “We are going to do everything that we can to help this animal,” and then to start explaining the evaluation process and the possible outcomes.

Interested clients in San Jose are handed a one-page “What Happens Now?” sheet. It explains that surrendered...
pets are evaluated for behavioral and health problems, and that those deemed healthy and friendly are sterilized, vaccinated, microchipped, and made available for adoption. It lists four reasons why euthanasia may be necessary, and outlines the client’s rights to reclaim the animal or inquire about his status.

California law allows owners who surrender their pets to reclaim them after a short holding period, provided the pet has not already been placed in a home. The shelter is permitted to make surrendered pets immediately available for adoption, but they must be held for four full business days before euthanasia. Stray dogs and cats must be held for 72 consecutive hours to allow for redemption by the owner. Someone who brings in an animal, owned or stray, may call the shelter’s surrender desk and inquire about the animal’s status, using an ID number assigned at the time of surrender.

The San Jose shelter created the “What Happens Now?” sheets (there’s one for owner surrenders and one for stray animals) because the surrender experience can be so stressful and emotional that people often forget or don’t understand what staff told them at the intake desk, Dains says. Previously, “We would get a lot of calls from people feeling like they didn’t hear what we said, or feeling like we never told them something,” she explains. The printed sheet gives them something to refer back to, as well as staff contact information for follow-up questions. (The sheets for surrendered and stray animals are largely the same, though finders of stray animals have the option of filing a “found report” and keeping the animal in their home.) “We want to give them the impression that no matter what we do with the animal that we’re going to be very thoughtful about it,” Dains adds. “… And that piece of paper demonstrates that.”

In Vermont, the RCHS has also developed a written policy—one that’s part of the owner-surrender contract that people sign. Danyow says the policy essentially says relinquishers should think of the shelter as a last resort, and the shelter expects to be trusted to make the best choice for the animal and the community. Having a written policy helps prevent miscommunication and saves the staff from having to address the issue multiple times. “It also relieved a lot of stress on the staff,” Danyow continues, “because it’s not a comfortable question to ask, and depending on who they’re answering, they can get flustered or uncomfortable.”

A Little More Conversation

The tall order for shelters is to be tactful and empathetic without sugarcoating the possibility of euthanasia.

“There’s always angst” when the euthanasia question arises, says Kathleen Olson, executive director of the Humane Society for Tacoma & Pierce County in Washington state. “We’ve trained our customer service people, when somebody’s calling about an animal with a serious problem, to say, ‘I’m so sorry you’re dealing with this, and this is the reality of what may happen.’ … Staff is trained to be as compassionate as possible, but to always tell the truth.”

Olson’s shelter—the largest in the state, taking in about 12,000 animals a year—hasn’t had to euthanize any dogs for space for the past five years. That’s the good news, she notes, and the shelter promotes itself as a “transition facility” and a great place to adopt animals—one that’s moving closer to its goal of zero euthanasia of healthy, adoptable cats by 2015 (the number of healthy, adoptable cats euthanized dropped from 1,400 in 2010 to 940 in 2011). But the cat population remains a problem, Olson says, “and so we are very honest with people. You’re bringing us two 10-year-old cats that are house soilers—we’re not gonna be able to place them, because they’re competing with younger cats, and cats with no behavior issues.”

Shelters communicate their official policies and procedures verbally and through printed or online material, but leave room for personal discussion of the prospects for individual animals. Olson notes that her staff will explain what it takes for a dog to pass a behavior assessment, and how state law prohibits the shelter from adopting out a dog who has bitten someone. But the shelter considers dogs on a case-by-case basis: For example, a husky was brought in because it attacked the neighbor’s chickens. If that’s the only issue, she explains, the dog could be placed in a home where there are no chickens.

Susan Zeringue, client care supervisor at the Louisiana SPCA in New Orleans, says her staff lets people know that
the shelter is open admission, and that euthanasia is a possibility—which serves as a bridge to the SPCA’s checklist of alternatives to surrender.

“We consider it a counseling situation. ... We actually get up from the desk, in most situations, and come and sit face-to-face with them,” Zeringue says. “... We start with, ‘Well, what brought you here?’ We ask some of the questions, instead of telling them right off the bat what they need to do, or what they should have done. ... We ask them point blank: ‘Do you want to keep this animal? Let’s talk about what we can do to help you if you do want to keep it.’”

To create even more opportunities to counsel people, the SPCA this spring was planning a mid-year switch to an appointment system for relinquishments. One difficulty in trying to work with someone who has entered the shelter to surrender an owned animal, Zeringue explains, is that “at that point, they’ve had their last day. They’ve had their last treats, their last walk. They’ve got it in their mind, they’re ready to do it, and it’s traumatic to try to challenge them to go back out with the same animal, knowing that they might have to go through the whole process all over again if they fail.” The shelter won’t turn away walk-ins, but by asking people to make appointments, Zeringue hopes to buy time to connect with people in advance to discuss the alternatives to surrender.

The Wisconsin Humane Society has switched to an appointment system for intake of both dogs and cats in the last two years, and it’s enabling the shelter to gather more data and do more proactive counseling, says client services manager Alison Fotsch. Shelter staff talk to people when they call to make the appointment, then in a reminder call, plus a possible face-to-face meeting at the shelter—so clients may have multiple conversations with various staff members over time, Fotsch explains. Getting those conversations in has allowed the shelter to have “a lot more success in helping people keep their animals, and helping people find alternatives to surrender to a shelter,” she says.

No clients are turned away at the door, she adds. “Obviously it’s an emotional experience for everyone, and you’re not looking to make that harder for someone, so we still accept walk-ins.”

Clients surrendering animals run the gamut from those who regard their pets as “trash” or “a nuisance” to those who might have lost their home and are truly heartbroken about surrendering, Zeringue says. While some interactions are difficult, she tries to instill in her staff that “you need to treat people with dignity and respect, even if they’re not respectful and dignified when they’re interacting with you.” Staff, not knowing all the details of clients’ lives, is in no position to judge them, she notes.

That approach is both good manners and smart public relations, Zeringue says, because a dissatisfied customer will tell his friends and neighbors about his bad experience at the shelter. “You have to remember that you’re not just talking to that person,” she says. “You’re talking to that person’s entire network of people.”

When an incoming dog is not a viable adoption candidate—a large-breed dog who has shown aggression toward people, for example—staff at the Louisiana SPCA will recommend that the client sign a waiver for euthanasia, Zeringue says. “That way, we’re not holding the animal unnecessarily in an unknown environment.”

Some clients are clearly in denial, Zeringue adds: They’ll bring in a dog who has attacked other dogs and children, for example, and insist that he’s a good dog and a strong candidate for adoption. Told that all adult dogs must pass a behavior assessment before adoption, they’ll insist, “Oh, he’ll pass, he’ll pass,” she says.

Some people, having heard of the Louisiana SPCA’s good local reputation, drive an hour or two to visit the shelter, and then are surprised to discover that it’s not a no-kill facility, Zeringue explains. SPCA staff are honest and forthcoming about euthanizing for space, and in letting people know that some breeds have a greater chance of adoption than others, she adds. “It’s just the hard truth of it.”

Shelters contacted for this story say honest answers to clients’ questions about euthanasia—coupled with information on ways to avoid surrender—can help produce better outcomes.

“Bearing in mind the responsibility to the welfare of the animal is a good thing when you’re making your policies,” notes Danyow. “Is it fair to take in an animal that’s in obvious pain—suffering renal failure, something like that—and smile and say to the person, ‘Oh, we’ll find him a good home? No, that’s not fair. It’s not fair to anybody.”

Resources
To check out San Jose’s information sheets for relinquishers, go to animalsheltering.org/sanjose_info_sheets.

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—SUSAN ZERINGUE, LOUISIANA SPCA