A strange and wonderful phenomenon is cropping up at a growing number of shelters and rescue groups around the country. They’re running out of animals.

“That’s probably been one of the top five moments in my life—to be able to stand in a dog kennel area, and just hear the air exchangers. No whimpering, no barking, no breathing. Nothing,” recalls Suzan Bell, executive director of the Bangor Humane Society.

It was March 30, and the Maine shelter was one of many participating in the ASPCA’s Mega Match-a-thon. It was supposed to last all weekend, but they’d had to cut it short.

“The last adoptable animal left our building at 12:30 p.m. Saturday,” Bell says. They’d adopted out 109 animals in a day and a half.

Other shelters and rescue groups are gleefully reporting the same thing—running out of adoptable animals, or smashing their adoption records, thanks to turbocharged events that typically generate hundreds of adoptions, attracting hordes of people with waived- or lowered-fee adoptions, a party-like atmosphere, and the chance to be part of something special.

Mentor Me
Nobody does the “mega” adoption event quite like the Central Oklahoma Humane Society (OK Humane), a foster-based rescue group in Oklahoma City. In 2010 and 2011, the group put on four such events, thanks to a sponsorship from PetSmart Charities.

Each of these “Midnight Woofness” events kicked off at 12 a.m. on a Friday, and continued uninterrupted till 5 p.m. Sunday—a 41-hour marathon. Each event also topped the previous one, breaking national records for PetSmart mega-adoptions: 388 and 490 in 2010, followed by 565 and 586 the next year.

“It’s really about making it fun, and making it cool, getting the community on board with your overall mission of ending euthanasia,” says Christy Counts, OK Humane’s founder and executive director of strategic initiatives. “This is a perfect avenue, because a lot of these people wouldn’t normally go to a shelter to adopt, but they sure will come out to a giant event.
So you’re really just raising awareness of the overall issue, and that’s more important.”

PetSmart Charities was so impressed by the success of Midnight Woofness that it asked OK Humane to help create the Mega Adoption Mentorship Program, in which the two organizations would partner to provide funding and expertise to five shelters or rescue groups each year, so they could create their own events.

Mentorship is only provided for groups that can meet the minimum goal of 200 adoptions, but grants are also available to organizations that want to do smaller-scale, “Super” or “Targeted” events.

It’s Getting Crowded
OK Humane has the huge happenings down to a science. Its template helps create a major event, held over a short, finite period of time, with hundreds of adoptable animals available from numerous adoption groups at once—often the same model used by shelters that participate in the ASPCA’s Mega Match-a-thon or Challenge events.

It takes OK Humane four months of planning, and five core planning teams, to pull it off: logistics, marketing, volunteer management, foster/animal management, and creative. Amy Shrodes, OK Humane’s manager of development, has led the planning for each event.

Everything is broken down into shifts and areas of responsibility. There are training sessions, volunteer orientations, and meetings to work out all the details. The day of the event, OK Humane has 27 staff and more than 350 volunteers on deck, plus roughly 200 dogs and 50-60 cats at any given time.

Typically, as midnight approaches, hundreds of people are already waiting in line. Many of them arrive hours in advance, hoping to adopt a particular pet who they’ve seen on a website that lists all the adoptable animals. Once the party kicks off, people can wander from tent to tent looking at pets, and volunteers are there to take animals from their cages for a little get-acquainted time with potential adopters. Those who are interested in a particular pet...
Crowd Control: Managing the People Flow

Groups that organize mega adoption events typically come away from the experience with some valuable lessons. The most important of these concern how to handle the sheer masses of people that a successful event can attract.

Two county/city shelters in the Riverside County Department of Animal Services in California—Western Riverside and Coachella Valley—partnered with two other municipal shelters in the county for this spring’s Mega Match-a-thon, finding homes for 442 pets.

“For us, really the crowd control and the parking was the biggest thing,” says Kimberly McWhorter, the department’s program coordinator. “The other thing was coordinating the people once they got here, and just the flow of getting them through the system.”

The moment people entered the shelter, they were funneled to an information kiosk manned by staff and volunteers to help direct them. The staff was split up into teams, with a different team handling each of two buildings housing dogs, and one building for cats.

“We changed the flow of our operations,” McWhorter says. Those who wanted to adopt a cat completed the entire adoption in the cat building, instead getting in additional lines for paperwork and to check out. The process worked the same for dogs.

In case more than one adopter wanted an animal, the staff employed a “first come, first served” policy. Once a pet was in a potential adopter’s arms, he or she had first dibs on that animal. “Most people, even if they were like, ‘Oh my gosh, I like that one, too,’ they were more than willing to bend. ‘Well, OK, you can have it,’ rather than, ‘No, it’s mine—I saw it first!’” McWhorter says.

When the Sacramento SPCA had its Certified Pre-Owned Pets event for this year’s Mega Match-a-thon, staff put procedures in place to clarify the process for adopters, says Lesley Kirrene, director of marketing. People were met at a welcome desk, where they were given Meet Your Match forms to fill out, and then briefly met with an adoption counselor, who used the forms to guide them to animals who would be a good fit.

Staff set up large signs directing people to the stations where they would need to go next. To prevent visitors from taking the only cards from individual kennels, staff made one plastic card to stay on the cage, then printed up multiple paper copies for each animal. Adopters brought these copies to where adoption counselors were stationed.

But despite the emphasis on crowd control, the shelter kept its usual adoption counseling in place—and that took time. “People were waiting for hours because of the fact that we weren’t just saying, ‘OK, you like that little terrier mix? Sure, it’s yours,’” Kirrene recalls. And yet, she says, “we had very few people upset by the process, which was amazing to me.”

People who come to mega adoption events are likely going to have to spend at least some time waiting, and organizers often take steps to keep the crowd happy. For Kirrene’s shelter, that means having Starbucks coffee and a veggie tamale available. The Jacksonville Humane Society hires a band, holds drawings for prizes, and has clowns and face-painting for children.

Other shelters have had dachshund races, a tattoo competition in which people showed off skin art of their pets and other animals, and a classic car show to keep things interesting.

Kirrene has one piece of advice for anyone thinking about hosting one of these adoption blowouts. “I’d tell them to be prepared for, I guess we’d call it the ‘best-case scenario,’ which is the line out front,” she says. “If you come up with something unique enough that catches people’s attention—you be prepared. I mean, we were overprepared for our next event.”
So to us, it was about not just the volume of adoptions that weekend, but how could we promote adopting in general, as well as promote all three locations, so that we would get that traffic long after the Mega Match-a-thon weekend,” says Denise Deisler, the humane society’s executive director.

She coordinated the event for all three shelters, plus eight foster-based rescues that participated and were spread out among the locations. Everyone agreed to use the same application form, and to standardize their adoption fees to $25 for dogs or cats ($20 of which covered a mandatory license fee).

The shelters met with the rescue groups in advance, and encouraged them to “prequalify” potential adopters before the event—asking them to take steps to meet the groups’ different criteria (submitting to home checks, etc.)—to streamline the adoption process.

The humane society and No More Homeless Pets had, in the weeks leading up to Mega Match-a-thon, transferred in much higher numbers of animals from the city shelter than usual, and filled up their foster homes, so that they would have plenty of pets available.

The humane society planned to have everything take place outdoors, with tents and tables set up to process adoptions. The organization’s shelter had burned down five years earlier, and its modular units could never handle the crowds that were expected that day. Then bad weather—high winds, rain, and a tornado watch—threatened to derail Saturday’s activities.

But quick thinking and hard work by staff and about 100 volunteers saved the day, as they moved the entire event inside the humane society’s warehouse in less than 30 minutes, and then back outside again after the storms had passed.

Despite all the drama, lines of people were a constant on Saturday, and soon there was a run on avail-
able pets. By the afternoon, there were no more puppies or kittens left to adopt.

The collective goal for the event was 250 adoptions, but by the end of three days, 304 animals had found homes.

For Deisler, the last adoption was the most memorable.

It came five minutes after the event was officially over. Walking through her shelter, marveling at all the empty cages, she spotted a lone dog in a bottom-row cage.

“His name was Mario. He is a 10-year-old, blind shih tzu, who somehow, in all of this shuffle, got lost in the process. So I came flying out to my person that was doing Facebook. I said, ‘Do not close the gate, do not close the doors. Post something about Mario. I’ll pay his adoption fee—I can’t go home, and not have Mario go home,’” she recalls.

“So she posted really fast on Facebook, ‘Gosh, last animal left in a cage,’ put his picture up there, and a woman called us immediately, and asked us if we’d wait. And we waited for her to come down, and adopt Mario. I’m telling you, it was the best [moment] of the whole weekend.”

Staff at the Bangor Humane Society in Maine celebrate a virtually empty shelter after adopting out 109 animals in a day and a half during the ASPCA’s Mega Match-a-thon this spring.


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