Chasing, hair pulling, and rump-sniffing aren’t typical activities at a singles event, but tonight, they’re de rigueur. This get-together is for rabbits, and this is the language of bunny love.

The most eligible bachelor is a young albino rabbit named Jake, who will have a first date with his future honey buns—three rabbits who have lived together happily for several months. Their owners want to add Jake to the mix and have left the trio at the Columbia, Md., home of Susan Wong for the introductions. As director of the Washington, D.C., rescue group Friends of Rabbits, Wong is an experienced matchmaker.

Like humans, domestic rabbits thrive in the company of their own kind. A singleton bunny may love her owner unconditionally, but her life will be much more fulfilling with a friend to groom, snuggle, and play with. Rabbits can form such strong bonds with one another that when one dies, the survivor visibly grieves.

Not just any friend will do. Rabbits are as picky as humans, and the wrong combination can lead to an unhappy marriage. Only the rabbits know for sure the magic ingredients to a successful relationship, but to their credit, they don’t care about looks or age.

“A lot of people who are adopting a second rabbit make the mistake of picking the one that’s the cutest or matches the first one—the same size, the same color, the same breed,” says Adam Goldfarb, director of The Humane Society of the United States’ (HSUS) Pets at Risk program and resident rabbit expert. “Those things are really unimportant. They should try to find the best match for their rabbit’s personality.”

The easiest way for adopters to ensure a compatible pairing, of course, is to adopt two who have already bonded. But if someone has a lone rabbit in need of a companion, speed-dating is the way to go.

Most rabbit rescue groups have “match days,” when owners can bring their animals to a foster parent’s house to meet adoptable rabbits. During these speed-dating rounds, a bunny spends several minutes alone with each rabbit until he decides which one he wants to take home. Your shelter may not have considered going into the matchmaking business, but having a knowledgeable staff member or volunteer available to arrange dates can help lonely bunnies find proper playmates, and boost your organization’s rabbit adoptions as well.

Single rabbits in Milwaukee can drop in at the Wisconsin Humane Society, where the adoption counselors are experienced at making hare pairs. Most of the rabbits’ owners are experienced as well, says counseling services manager Stacy Juedes.

“Many of the bunnies that come in have recently lost a companion. The owners know that compatibility is important and are doing what’s best for the rabbit.”

Sometimes an adopter may spend hours at the shelter looking for the right combo. “We usually do two or three introductions in one date,” says Angela Speed, director of community relations. The date ends if the adopter’s rabbit doesn’t like what he sees or is getting too stressed; it may take several dates before a new friend is found.

The rabbit rendezvous at Wong’s house was a bit different from the standard date. The bachelor bunny, Jake, was chosen by the human family, not by their rabbits. It’s not ideal, but such arranged marriages work out most of the time, says Wong: “It just takes a little more effort when they don’t get to pick their friends.”

Either way, introductions should take place in a neutral space, advises Margo.
Unfamiliar rabbits often chase and mount grooming each other. Drawing to Snowball, an older male rabbit females. But he ignored the girls and was a greater success rate, so Fiver first met several think he really wanted a playmate."

When Barbara Henderson decided that Fiver, her 4-year-old neutered male, needed a friend, she opted for Wong’s dating service. “I had him for about two years as a single rabbit, and he seemed fine with that,” says Henderson, an HSUS shelter services coordinator. “Then he chewed a huge hole in the wall and started head-butting the cats. I work with a new pair. “I’ll stay up all night if I need to,” she says. If they start fighting, she’ll put them in a carrier and take them for a car ride. “They’re both scared and rely on each other for comfort.” A couple of car rides is usually all it takes for an indecisive couple to take the plunge.

Car rides were unnecessary for Fiver and Snowball (renamed Rorschach). Now at home, Fiver has become extremely protective of his companion. “If one of the other animals gets too close, Fiver attacks,” Henderson says. “He’s pulled fur out of the cats. Rorschach just watches and hops away.”

As for Jake, Wong reports that less than 24 hours after their introduction, he was inseparable from his new sweethearts.

Male-female pairings generally have a greater success rate, so Fiver first met several females. But he ignored the girls and was drawn to Snowball, an older male rabbit twice his size. Within minutes, they were grooming each other.

Not all introductions go so smoothly. Unfamiliar rabbits often chase and mount each other, pull fur, and thump their feet—-it’s their way of establishing a pecking order and learning to speak the other’s language. This behavior usually subsides as the animals grow more comfortable. Brief spats are also normal, but matchmakers watch for serious signs of aggression: flattened ears, raised tails, arched backs. If vicious fighting— including biting and “boxing”—breaks out, the rabbits are separated immediately, and a different candidate is brought in.

Fiver and Snowball were an amiable duo, but they didn’t go home immediately. The next step was the “bunnymoon,” a bonding period that can last anywhere from a few days to several weeks. The two shared a pen for several days, with Wong closely supervising for signs of discord.

Wong typically starts introductions on a Friday night so she has the weekend to work with a new pair. “I’ll stay up all night if I need to,” she says. If they start fighting, she’ll put them in a carrier and take them for a car ride. “They’re both scared and rely on each other for comfort.” A couple of car rides is usually all it takes for an indecisive couple to take the plunge.

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The Wisconsin Humane Society doesn’t host bunnymoons, but it does send adopters home with plenty of information, and advice is just a keystroke or phone call away. “We’re pretty confident that the bonding process will go well in their homes. It’s so unusual for a properly matched pair not to bond that I can’t think of one time when that’s happened,” says Juedes.

Rebecca Kingery, an animal care technician at the Animal Welfare League of Arlington in Virginia, agrees. “The only cases I’ve seen that haven’t worked well are when owners haven’t followed our recommendations, like trying to acclimate the rabbits too quickly.”

While many rescue groups won’t bond rabbits unless one has been adopted from the organization, others are willing to provide bunnymoons for a small donation. AWLA works closely with Friends of Rabbits, and if an adopter is having problems or seems unsure about the bonding process, Kingery refers them to Wong for bunnymoon assistance.

Once a bunny bond is forged, almost nothing will break it apart. Not every couple will groom each other or cuddle, and some may bicker, but as DeMello notes, “It’s very rare for two rabbits not to get along in some way.” Occasionally an external stress can touch off fighting. This was the case with Squirt, Inking, and Princeton, peaceful housemates who started skirmishing after their humans had a baby. But a short stay at Wong’s house for some reinforcement and renewal of vows was all that was needed to restore harmony to the household.

Susan Wong—director of the rescue group Friends of Rabbits—feeds some rabbits she has taken in from the Animal Welfare League of Arlington, Va. They’ll stay in Wong’s home while awaiting adoption.

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Family Values for a Different Kind of Family
The Wildlife Aid Brigade works to keep wild babies and their kin together and safe

BY RUTHANNE JOHNSON

Where might you find a shoebox, a sock, chemical hand warmer, a juice carton, a bungee cord, a set of binoculars, and a net all in one place?

Check the kit of wildlife rehabilitator Sue Lunson Farinato. She carries these tools in her car at all times.

She’s not planning to bungee jump into a damaged squirrel nest or present a deer with a new pair of killer pumps. The bungee cord and the juice carton can be used to create a makeshift home for an animal whose nest has been destroyed. The shoebox can hold a small injured animal for transport, and the sock and chemical hand-warmer will keep him warm during the trip. Every item in her tool kit is there for a purpose: Helping her save the lives of wild creatures who’ve run into one misfortune or another.

Farinato, who spends her days as a program assistant in The Humane Society of the United States’ Pets at Risk program, doesn’t stop thinking about animals in her off hours. The tools she hauls around in her trunk are also educational, helping her demonstrate techniques during the specialized training program she developed to teach students the basics of wildlife rescue in the urban environment. Based in Washington, D.C. and formed in 2007, the Wildlife Aid Brigade helps animal shelters and other agencies deal with wildlife-related calls by teaching their staff and volunteers how to handle the conflicts that arise when humans come face to face with the wild in their own yards and attics.

Farinato has been involved in wildlife rescue and rehabilitation for more than 10 years, and she says that while great strides have been made in getting people to resolve conflicts more humanely, our society has a long way to go.

“It takes special knowledge and care when it comes to helping wild animals without harming them,” she explains, “and most people know very little about wildlife—even the creatures who live in their own backyard.”

Wild animals in suburban and urban environments are surrounded by hazards: speeding cars, sharp-bladed lawnmowers, pet attacks. Animals also compete with humans for space, sometimes choosing a warm attic or a chimney for shelter. Most people have little tolerance for animals nesting in their homes, and eviction is an all-too-common solution.

When this is done, parents and their young can be killed, injured, or separated from each other. A homeowner cuts down a tree limb, and the attached squirrel’s nest filled with unweaned babies falls to the ground. A mother duck is shooed out of a backyard while her ducklings scatter and hide in the bushes. A raccoon family is trapped in an attic by a nuisance wildlife control operator who—unbeknownst to the homeowner—kills the mother and her babies after he leaves the property.

Farinato would like to see such problems occur less frequently. People who have conflicts with local wildlife typically call their local animal shelter, police department, wildlife care center, or nuisance wildlife trapper. In 2003, Farinato was asked by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) to participate in crafting and executing a survey tracking incoming wildlife calls for all the major agencies in the D.C. area. The survey documented thousands of wildlife-related calls to these agencies, with a huge spike in calls between April and September—baby season.

It also tracked the results of each call, which typically hinged on which agency received it. Here there was a huge discrepancy: Calls to nuisance trappers usually ended in death for the animal, while calls to wildlife care centers tended to have a much more positive outcome. Calls to animal shelters and other agencies fell somewhere in between.
Volunteers learn to make substitute nests for baby birds whose nests were destroyed or who had fallen from nests too high to reach. Substitute nests often help reunite baby birds with parents.

Animal shelters and municipal animal control agencies are primarily trained to deal with companion animals, and rarely have the time or the training to determine if an animal should be left in the wild or brought in for care, Farinato says. Once an ACO is dispatched to the scene, he will usually scoop up the animal and take it back to the local animal shelter for holding until it can be transported to the nearest wildlife rehabilitation center.

That’s not the worst that could happen, but it’s often not the best option, either: Many of these cases involve perfectly healthy wild babies who merely need to be renested or reunited with their parent. While shelters justifiably euthanize critically injured or sick animals, they may end up euthanizing a healthy animal if nearby wildlife rehabilitation centers have no available space.

"Many wildlife situations call for nothing more than a little knowledge, patience, and time," Farinato says. "This is particularly true when it comes to keeping a baby animal together with its family, but animal control officers don’t have 90 minutes to watch a
fledgling on the ground to make sure it has not been abandoned, let alone the time it takes to renest a baby animal and then wait to see if its parent returns.”

During her eight years volunteering at a local wildlife rehabilitation center, Farinato says, about 50 percent of the animals brought in were perfectly healthy babies who were probably not even orphaned.

For Farinato, the survey results highlighted serious flaws in the system. It was the impetus for her creation of the Wildlife Aid Brigade.

She went to the COG committee and pitched her idea for a volunteer-based program, in which people who’d been trained on proper wildlife response would work out of a local animal shelter. Three shelters—the Animal Welfare League of Arlington, the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria, and Prince George’s County Animal Services—were the first to sign up.

Wildlife Aid Brigade students attend several classroom sessions, including one at a working wildlife rehabilitation center. After the classroom segment, students begin volunteering through their preferred shelter. They do ride-alongs with an animal control officer, answer wildlife-related phone calls, and eventually handle rescue calls in the field—when rescue is actually necessary.

“It was a new approach to take, that we were going to try and leave healthy wildlife in the wild instead of having these babies go out to rehabbers,” says Jennifer Newman, manager of education and community services for Animal Welfare League of Arlington.

Going into her shelter’s third year of participation, Newman says the program has enhanced her staff’s knowledge about wildlife, freed up time for animal control officers to focus more on companion animal calls, and improved public relations. “People seem to really appreciate the time that volunteers give when they go out on a call, and this has helped put us more in the public eye,” she says.

More importantly, Newman says the program has undoubtedly saved animals’ lives, directly and indirectly. “Having volunteers spend time in the field gives the public opportunities to ask questions and to become more comfortable with wildlife living near to them.”

Wildlife Aid Brigade volunteer Regina Evans works out of the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria and remembers a situation that could easily have ended badly, had the nuisance trapper that the homeowner also called arrived first.

A squirrel had made its way into the homeowner’s basement, and when Evans arrived she found it hiding on a shelf lined with the woman’s stuffed animal collection—koalas, bears, ponies, and birds. “It was so funny because every once in a while the squirrel would peek out from behind a stuffed bear to see what we were doing,” says Evans.

Working with another volunteer, she cleared the area around the shelf, caught the squirrel with a net, and released her into the homeowner’s back yard, where she promptly ran up a tree and began chattering. Evans also educated the homeowner, who had no idea about what nuisance wildlife trappers typically do with the animals they catch. “The woman was so grateful for our help that she said wanted to make a donation to the shelter,” Evans says.

Eventually, Farinato hopes to take the training to a national level. If your shelter struggles to handle wildlife calls and you’re interested in learning more, contact Farinato at info@wildlifeaidbrigade.org or visit her website at wildlifeaidbrigade.org.
It didn’t start with a vision, exactly. It started with a bunch of scratchy CDs.

People looking to sell their used CDs would bring stacks of them to Bill Boehm’s store in upstate New York, the CD Exchange, which he operated for 11 years before closing in 2008. The problem was that he couldn’t take them all. “I’m really picky,” Boehm says, noting that he had earned a reputation for selling only like-new merchandise. Sometimes the CDs were simply too beat up to meet his standards. Other times it was a case of too much supply, not enough demand; he’d look at certain titles and say, “I already have 10 of these, and I haven’t sold one in a year, so I don’t need any more.”

Most customers took the rejection in stride, Boehm says, but some “would be like, ‘You know what? I don’t even want these things. Just chuck ‘em for me.’” Knowing that CDs last forever in a landfill, and that even the scratched ones usually play pretty well, Boehm hated to throw them away. So he started keeping a stack of the rejects on the counter next to his cash register, along with a sign inviting people to help themselves.

About four years ago, he decided it would be “cool” to sell those less-than-desirable CDs for a nominal price—say, 50 cents or $1—and donate the proceeds to a charity. Boehm’s wife, Jen, suggested the SPCA Serving Erie County in nearby Tonawanda, N.Y., where the couple had adopted their dog, Mollie.

Boehm christened the program Discs for Dogs, created a website (DiscsForDogs.org), and set up a “Used & Abused” bin in the corner of his store to house the discs. From there, “It just kind of grew. People in the store, my customers, loved it,” he says, estimating that the program raised between $100 and $200 in its first month. When he’d send SPCA officials a check at the end of each month, “They were really happy about it, and it generated a lot of goodwill for my store. … Everybody loves animals.”

Customers began bringing bags of CDs to the store specifically to donate them to Discs for Dogs, and Boehm announced via the website that he would also take donations through the mail. What type of music do people unload most frequently? “All the boy band crap, stuff like that,” Boehm replies, listing ‘N Sync, the Backstreet Boys, and Britney Spears as some of the prime contributors to the Discs for Dogs stock.

Boehm closed his retail store in September 2008 to concentrate on his online business (thecdexchange.com). Luckily for Discs for Dogs, there’s more than one animal-loving used CD store owner in western New York state. Boehm handed the retail portion of the program to his friend Jeff Avery, who runs FrizB’s CD Exchange in Kenmore, a suburb of Buffalo. “He’s kind of a kindred soul,” Boehm says, explaining that Avery, independent of Discs for Dogs, was already selling music-related stickers and posters and donating the proceeds to the Erie County SPCA. Avery says he started that program as a tribute to his late cat Nigel, whom he’d had for 15 years.

Boehm and Avery agree that, in the age of downloads and iPods, CD stores are a dying business, but the Discs for Dogs program continues to thrive. Erie County SPCA executive director Barbara Carr says the program contributed $1,371 in the first 11 months of last fiscal year—without any effort by the shelter. “It goes into the general fund, and we are very, very grateful for it,” Carr says.

Avery says Discs for Dogs is going “unbelievably well,” and one person’s musical trash is often another’s treasure. He notes with amusement that some of his customers shop almost exclusively in the Discs for Dogs bin. When he rings up their purchases, “I’ll say, ‘OK, that’s 20 bucks—three dollars for the store and 17 for the Discs for Dogs program.’ People just really like the CDs they can find, and the price obviously is good.”

When Boehm gets inquiries from animal welfare organizations looking to start something similar, he tells them to call their local CD store and go for it. “I’d be honored,” he says. “… It’s something that could easily be done in any city, really.”

Bill Boehm, owner of thecdexchange.com, started Discs for Dogs, which sells unwanted CDs and DVDs to benefit the SPCA Serving Erie County in upstate New York. Boehm’s dog Mollie “helps” sort the stacks.
Chipping Away at an Old Problem

Study suggests that microchipping and database registration should happen concurrently

BY CARRIE ALLAN

When it comes to progress on the effective use of identification microchips in pets, the U.S. hasn’t been a global leader. But we can take steps to use this technology more successfully, suggest the authors of a recent study published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA).

Seeking to find out more about the microchipped animals coming into shelters and the process shelter staff use to try to locate their owners, researchers collected data on 7,704 microchipped animals who entered 53 animal shelters. Slightly more than half were stray; the remainder were owner-relinquished.

Microchipped strays represented only a small percentage of the overall number of strays admitted across the shelters surveyed. Unsurprisingly, the median percentage of microchipped stray dogs (3.9 percent) was substantially higher than that of microchipped stray cats (0.4 percent).

The presence of a microchip had a significant positive impact on overall return-to-owner (RTO) rates at the shelters: 73 percent of the owners of these microchipped pets were found. The average RTO rate for all stray dogs taken in by the shelters was 21.9 percent; that rose to 52.2 percent for chipped dogs. Feline strays had an overall RTO rate of only 1.8 percent—but chipped stray cats had a 38.5 percent RTO rate.

For chipped animals about whom the shelters contacted the microchip registries (some never got to this stage, as when owner info was in the shelter’s own database), only 58.1 percent were found to be registered. “Although some of the owners who were not registered were found by other methods … this required a substantial amount of additional time for the shelter staff and increased the risk that the owner would not be found,” the authors write.

This points to the need for improvements to the registration process and a need for pet owner education on the registry issue. “The United States,” the authors write, “is the only country in which the implantation of a microchip is often treated as a separate process from registration with a microchip registry.” In other countries, the two services are bound together—so when a person gets their pet microchipped, the owner’s information will be registered in the microchip database at the same time.

Their research also identified other areas in the microchipping process that need improvement. About 20 percent of the shelters scanned incoming animals only once; however, an additional 12.6 percent of microchips were only found because shelters scanned more than once during the animals’ stays. On top of that, 1.6 percent of microchips were found in atypical areas of the animals’ bodies, indicating that the chips had migrated after implantation.

Scanning protocols at shelters “should include scanning at various routine times during animal handling, such as at entry, during medical evaluations, and prior to euthanasia,” the authors write.

To read the entire study and see more findings, check out “Characterization of animals with microchips entering animal shelters” in JAVMA (Vol. 235, No. 2).
Better Options for Horses

In our Sept-Oct 2009 issue, we reported on the ongoing efforts of rescuers working to find good homes for abandoned and surrendered horses. We detailed the cooperative efforts between equine rescue groups, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), and horseman Pat Parelli—a team effort that’s saving lives and changing people’s minds about the quality of the horses who end up at slaughter auctions (“The Long Way Home,” p. 25).

Keeping a horse requires a great commitment of time and money, and in these difficult economic times, some people are struggling with the financial side. Other horse owners keep their animals for the entirety of their lives, but still have to figure out what to do with their horses when the animals eventually become old or sickly.

Some of these folks may have been led to believe that sending their horses to slaughter is the only option. But equine experts at The HSUS advise that is never the case: Anyone who has been managing the monthly expenses of caring for a horse can afford the one-time cost of humane euthanasia and disposal.

Providing a humane, peaceful end to the life of an equine companion is just part of the responsibility of any horse owner, says Keith Dane, director of Equine Protection at The HSUS. “No one likes to think about the death of a beloved companion, but planning ahead is key to understanding your options,” says Dane.

To help horse owners prepare, The HSUS has developed a list of resources for those looking for humane end-of-life options for their equine companions. The list includes state-by-state information on low-cost euthanasia programs, equine crematories, horse cemeteries, rendering facilities and landfills. State agriculture and veterinary contacts and state regulations are also included.

The HSUS encourages animal welfare groups, equine shelters, and rescue organizations to pass along these resources to those seeking to make the right decision for their horses—and to notify the Equine Protection staff at The HSUS if they know of other resources that are not yet listed here. Together, we can do more to ensure that horses who’ve been lifelong companions and helpers are provided with a humane and dignified end.

For the list, go to humansociety.org/animals/horses/facts/humane_horse_remains_disposal.html.

Get Smart—and Certified—at HSU

Humane Society University, an affiliate of The Humane Society of the United States, has received a license as a higher education degree-granting institution by the District of Columbia Education Licensure Commission. The HSUS is the first animal welfare organization to receive this licensure.

“Offering Bachelor of Science degrees and graduate certificates makes sense in today’s world of complex human-animal relationships,” says Robert Roop, Ph.D., president of Humane Society University. “The interdisciplinary curriculum offered by HSU is unmatched by any other licensed scholastic body in the world.”

HSU offers Bachelor of Science degrees and graduate certificate programs in animal studies, animal policy and advocacy, and humane leadership, as well as professional instruction on everything from animal sheltering basics to fundraising to combating compassion fatigue and illegal animal fighting. Professional development courses are offered as in-person workshops throughout the country; online courses are available as well.

For more information, visit humansocietyuniversity.org.
Stemming the Tide of Pet Overpopulation in Alabama

Former ACO Donald Kendrick is a one-man band, spreading the word about spay/neuter and connecting pet owners to low-cost options in their area

The day that Donald Kendrick had to euthanize 52 healthy cats and kittens to ease overcrowding at the Blount County Animal Shelter in Cleveland, Ala., the animal control officer decided that there had to be something better to do with himself.

That “something better,” he decided, was to retire from animal control and spend his time combating pet overpopulation at its source by setting up Spay Alabama, a clearinghouse of low-cost spay/neuter resources throughout the state. In a single phone call to the toll-free line, pet owners can get contact numbers for low-cost options in their areas.

With funding from Spay USA and Maddie’s Fund, the clearinghouse opened in October 2007 with one person—Kendrick—fielding calls. The phone has been ringing off the hook ever since; by the end of 2008, more than 2,000 calls had come in. The 2009 numbers will be even greater.

Today Spay Alabama is still a one-man show, run out of Kendrick’s house in Hueytown, just west of Birmingham. But Kendrick won’t use an answering machine, preferring to answer every call himself. “Some of the callers are on the fence already about whether they’re going to [spay or neuter], whether they can afford it,” he says, noting that the majority of callers have more than one pet in need of spay/neuter. “If they call and just get a message, that may be the end of it, so I try hard to be available.” This means having his cell phone and his little black book with him at all times, even while feeding his “gull friends” during a September beach vacation.

Kendrick draws the public’s attention to the tragedy of pet overpopulation with spay/neuter campaign materials and customized public service announcements provided by The Humane Society of the United States as part of the post-Katrina initiative to improve the lives of Gulf Coast cats and dogs. The heightened awareness and ease of accessing information, combined with the opening of three high-volume, low-cost clinics in Birmingham, Montgomery, and Dothan in the last two years, have given the spay/neuter campaign in Alabama an enormous boost; more than 13,000 surgeries have been performed by the Alabama Spay/Neuter Clinic in Birmingham since it opened in June 2008.

Spay Alabama is also the beneficiary of The HSUS’s annual Spay Day USA event. A $5,000 grant to the organization from the Doris Day Animal Foundation allowed 200 pets to be spayed and neutered as part of the 2009 promotion, and, due to Kendrick’s tireless efforts to publicize the event, the state has landed on the top 10 list for most Spay Day surgeries in the two years Spay Alabama has participated. In 2007, only 620 animals were spayed or neutered, and $1,255 was raised to support the spay/neuter program; in 2009, with Kendrick fueling the fire, 1,655 surgeries were performed, and $6,010 was raised.

Realizing that feral cats are a significant part of the feline overpopulation problem, Kendrick uses his contacts to assist colony caretakers with trap-neuter-return, pointing them to agencies in their area that work with ferals. Where no resources exist, he steps in to arrange trapping and transporting. “A few months ago I went 100 miles to a very rural area and trapped 23 cats in one morning,” he says. “These people wanted help, and they were willing to do what we asked them to do.” Kendrick trains caretakers on managing colonies with DVDs and educational material from The HSUS’s Feral Cat Program.

Kendrick’s ultimate goal is to put himself out of business. “The sooner the better,” he says. “It’s not about empire-building.”

In his spare time, Kendrick—who does all of his work for spay/neuter on a volunteer basis—travels around Alabama speaking to city councils, mayors, “whoever will have me,” about why spay/neuter programs are critical for saving lives and taxpayers’ dollars.

He credits his successes to having the time to devote to his mission and knowing how to appeal to his audience. “Some folks, all they care about is money. If you show them in dollars and cents that it’s the right thing to do, it catches on.”

He recalls the time he spoke to a county commission, and could tell his audience wasn’t that interested. “Half of them were asleep,” he says. “I said, ‘I’m here to help you save money and get reelected.’ They woke up and listened to what I had to say.”

Go to humanesociety.org/spayday to organize or find a Spay Day event in your community.
Dealing with Death
Study identifies coping strategies for staff stress related to euthanasia

BY JIM BAKER

Vent your feelings. Alter your emotional attachment level. Know that euthanasia is sometimes the best option.

In a survey of animal shelter employees from 62 shelters in the United States, these are among the many coping strategies that euthanasia technicians recommend for dealing with euthanasia-related strain.

The survey, recently published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA), sought to identify and evaluate coping strategies advocated by experienced shelter workers who directly participate in euthanasia. Experts from The Humane Society of the United States helped the authors identify 88 shelters across the country where euthanasia is performed; staff at 62 shelters agreed to participate in the survey.

The survey asked: “What recommendations would you give to someone who is just starting out in this career field? That is, what would you tell them to do, or not to do, to deal with the euthanasia-related aspects of this job?”

Coping strategies suggested by 242 euthanasia technicians were summarized into 26 different coping recommendations, which were then grouped into eight larger categories: competence or skill strategies, euthanasia behavioral strategies, cognitive or self-talk strategies, emotional regulation strategies, separation strategies, get-help strategies, seek long-term solution strategies, and withdrawal strategies.

In the coping recommendation “Vent your feelings”—advice provided by 15.7 percent of workers—some examples of survey responses were: “Cry,” “Get your feelings out,” and “Talk about your feelings.”

In the coping recommendation “Alter your emotional attachment level,” which 15.3 percent of staff provided, some survey responses were: “Do not get attached to any animal,” “Not to take things personally, but still have compassion,” “Do not become uncaring. ... Do not build up a wall,” and “Treat each one as you would your own [pet].”

The third-highest coping recommendation that staff offered, “Know that euthanasia is sometimes the best option”—provided by 14.1 percent of employees—includes survey responses such as: “Try to remember that they’re not getting hit by cars or slowly starving to death,” and “The animal is better to be euthanized than to possibly go to a home where they might be mistreated or thrown out on the street to fend for themselves.”

Identification of coping strategies recommended by staff, the authors write, can benefit the animal protection field in two ways. “First, it elucidates the strategies that experienced euthanasia technicians may be recommending to new employees, and shelter managers may find this information useful for discussion and training. Second, it provides insight into euthanasia technicians’ responses to euthanasia.”

To read more about the study’s methodology and results, see “Euthanasia-related strain and coping strategies in animal shelter employees,” in JAVMA (Vol. 235, No. 1).
During the past two years, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) assisted local agencies with 24 puppy mill raids, resulting in the rescue of more than 5,000 dogs—puppies and their poor breed-exhausted mothers—from the hideous conditions found in these factory-style breeding operations.

The job could not have been completed without extensive, on-the-ground assistance from local shelters, especially with the placement of the animals after seizure. Removing large numbers of animals in a short period of time can be a challenge for local agencies to handle alone, and in these cases, The HSUS was ready and prepared to help. Likewise, The HSUS relies on similar collaborations with shelters and rescue groups to take in seized animals in order to rehabilitate and place them in loving homes.

Now those essential relationships are being made official. The Emergency Services Placement Partners (ESPP) program is for organizations or agencies that want to work with the animals rescued in HSUS-assisted cruelty raids. The HSUS is seeking to welcome new organizations to the team, solidify relationships with groups that have previously expressed interest, and formalize existing relationships with organizations that have stepped up to help in the past.

Want to help us put puppy mills out of business and find good homes for dogs who have never known anything but a wire cage? Check out the new program at animalsheltering.org/espp.
Andy O’Brien doesn’t give up easily—even when his job drives him up a tree.

O’Brien, a humane officer with the Marin Humane Society in Novato, Calif., was working the swing shift—3 to 11 p.m.—on a Sunday last summer when he got an emergency call. Monique Bricca of nearby San Rafael said a crow was hanging upside down in her backyard, his legs tangled in fishing line, 40 to 50 feet in the air from a branch in a pine tree.

After 5:30 p.m. on his shift, O’Brien is on his own, covering the whole of Marin County by himself. After responding to other calls, he got to Bricca’s home around 8:30 p.m.

Using his flashlight, he located the bird in the tree and could see it was still alive. O’Brien contacted the San Rafael Fire Department for help, requesting a ladder.

“They were super helpful; they brought a couple of fire trucks out. Sometimes they kind of laugh it off—you know, ‘What? You want to go up there to get a bird?’ And I’m like, ‘Well, that’s what I do: You put out fires, I rescue animals,’” he says.

O’Brien duct-taped his knife to an extension pole he carries with him, one that has a small net at the end. He climbed the ladder and tried three times to reach out to cut the fishing line to free the bird, but the pole had too much give to it.

So he and the firefighters assembled a pole using lengths of white PVC pipe that could be fitted together, his knife attached to the end of it. And O’Brien climbed the ladder again.

“I was hanging on by one arm wrapped around a tree branch, and sometimes they kind of laugh it off—you know, ‘What? You want to go up there to get a bird?’ And I’m like, ‘Well, that’s what I do: You put out fires, I rescue animals,’” he says.

O’Brien had cut the bird free, but rather than falling into the net below, the crow righted itself and swooped off over a neighbor’s fence, out of sight.

“I figured, ‘Well, I got him down, he flapped his wings, he glided nicely away, he’ll be fine.’” And so O’Brien and the firefighters left the scene, figuring they’d done their best.

But that’s not the end of the story.

The following day, a call came in about an injured crow at the house next door. O’Brien figured it was probably the same crow he’d released the night before.

He drove out to the house, and sure enough—it was the same crow he’d freed earlier. The bird’s feet were still entwined in fishing line, but at least the crow was still alive. He cut away as much as he could of the line, then delivered the bird to WildCare in San Rafael, an urban wildlife rehabilitation center.

There, the staff tried to get the bird healthy and back into the wild, but unfortunately fell short. He was treated and appeared well on his way to release, but was found dead in the center’s pre-release aviary on July 30, according to Melanie Piazza, director of animal care.

Necropsy results were inconclusive. He had hemorrhaging in the kidneys and spleen, but there was no way to know if that came from the bird’s ordeal hanging upside down or from possible trauma in the aviary. He could have been startled at night by something and flown into a wall.

“The plan was to give him time in the aviary to be sure he was 100 percent back on his feet again, so to speak, before release. … Everyone was incredibly sad that his story ended this way. We all had plans for a grand release for him after he survived such an ordeal,” Piazza says.

Bricca remains impressed with O’Brien’s efforts.

“It was really an amazing act of bravery; Andy was not going to give up until the crow was free. I do think this was above and beyond the call of duty, and Andy should really get some recognition for it,” she says.

O’Brien says that’s simply what his job entails.

“That’s why I’m in this business—I want to save what I can, no matter how small it is. It doesn’t have to be a dog or a cat … it can be a bird, too.”

Caws for Alarm
Humane officer branches out to attempt daring, aerial rescue to free trapped bird

Andy O’Brien, a humane officer with the Marin Humane Society, undertook a risky rescue last July to free a crow dangling upside down from fishing line, about 50 feet high in a tree.
Each year, while millions of Americans slave over their Forms 1040, nonprofit animal shelters are working on their Forms 990.

The annual return that certain federally tax-exempt organizations have to file with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) underwent a major redesign in 2007. The process has gotten a little more complicated for nonprofits, and that has some shelter administrators scrambling to get up to speed on the changes.

The form provides the IRS and the public with a window into an organization’s mission, programs, and finances.

With some exceptions, federally tax-exempt nonprofits that have incomes of more than $25,000 have to file a Form 990. So do all 501(c)(3) private foundations, no matter their income level.

Unlike an individual’s taxes that are due April 15, there’s no one date when all Forms 990 have to be submitted to the IRS. Rather, a nonprofit’s filing date is determined by the end of its fiscal year—the 12-month period for which the organization plans to use its funds. Each filing organization has to file “by the 15th day of the 5th month after” its fiscal year ends.

Organizations can also receive up to two 90-day extensions of time to file.

Starting with tax returns filed in 2009 for 2008, nonprofits have to file the redesigned Form 990 that requires them to go into much greater detail about possible conflicts of interest, how board members and staff are compensated, financial accountability and steps taken to prevent fraud.

“We are actually, for the first time in anyone’s memory here, filing for an extension with the IRS,” says Chris Roesner, director of finance at Lollypop Farm, the Humane Society of Greater Rochester (N.Y.).

“We have elected to put off the filing for as long as possible to make sure we have the best new guidance from the IRS, and that our Form 990 is as accurate, and paints us in as good a light, as possible.”

Roesner says he has other friends working in the sheltering field in cities like Denver, Detroit, and Miami who are also filing for extensions on the Form 990, so that they can gain a better understanding of how to comply with its expanded requirements.

That’s something that Stephen M. Clarke, Form 990 redesign project manager at the IRS in Washington, D.C., is hearing a lot of these days.

The IRS has received a record number of requests for extensions, Clarke says, pointing to the new form as the likely reason. He expects the number of extension requests to drop next year as organizations adjust.

The previous version of Form 990 was way out of date, according to Clarke; it hadn’t been substantially changed since 1979.

“It was mostly a financial report with yes-and-no answers and numbers, so we realized we needed to redesign it to capture a lot more information about organizations, to provide a more complete picture of their activities, their operations, their governance, their transactions, their relationships—to help us and help the public determine whether each organization is organized and operated exclusively for tax-exempt purposes,” Clarke says.

Form 990 now consists of an 11-page core form—only two more pages than before—that must be completed by each filer. But it also has 16 accompanying schedules, many of them new. Some of these don’t apply to shelters, such as Schedule E for schools and Schedule H for hospitals.

The IRS added one page and a new schedule that gives filers more opportunity to provide explanations and narrative responses to the form’s questions.

Major changes include a front-page summary that provides a snapshot of key financial and operating information, a governance section, and revised compensation and related organization reporting.

That all translates to more work for shelter administrators charged with filing the form. They—and, presumably, the certified public accountants that many shelters hire to assist them in this process—are having to dig deeper and provide more detail than in the past.

“There are a lot of questions on how the organization is governed,” says Denise Nosek,
vice president and chief financial officer at the Nebraska Humane Society in Omaha.

Form 990 is publicly disclosed information; anyone can ask to see a copy of a tax-exempt organization’s filing. And one of the goals of the recent redesign was to increase the form’s transparency, making it easier for an outsider to understand the financial workings of nonprofits like shelters.

Nosek approves of the changes, saying that they will prove useful for foundations that want to evaluate the shelter when it goes to apply for various grants.

She added that the new Form 990 isn’t necessarily harder; it may, however, take a few days longer to provide all the requested information.

Many shelters are reaching out to CPAs to better grasp the changes to the form. Roesner, though, has found it even more helpful to be a member of the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators (SAWA). He attends its conferences and regularly participates in its listserv. “I can put a question on the listserv, and I can get qualified answers of what my contemporaries are doing within a matter of hours,” he says.

Resources
The new Form 990, schedules, instructions, and related background information are available on the IRS website IRS.gov/eo.

Information on the website includes: a five-page document titled Background Paper—Summary of Form 990 Redesign Process; a longer document titled Background Paper—Form 990, Moving from the Old to the New; and five mini-course audio programs that provide an overview of the redesigned form and schedules.

Also available on IRS.gov/eo is a one-hour video program, Tax Talk Today, which highlights major changes to the form and other helpful hints on how to complete it.
Who wants to be a millionaire? Barbara Carr’s dream came true in July when Maddie’s Fund Pet Rescue Project awarded shelters and rescue groups in Erie County, N.Y., a $5 million grant. Carr, the executive director of the SPCA Serving Erie County in Tonawanda, noticed that her shelter’s adoption and euthanasia rates were better than a Utah agency that had been awarded a grant and submitted an application on behalf of a countywide coalition of animal welfare groups and veterinarians, according to The Buffalo News. The millions will be paid out in installments and shared with Buffalo Humane Society, City of Buffalo Animal Shelter, HEART Animal Rescue and Adoption Team, The Spay/Neuter Clinic of Western New York, Second Chance Sheltering Network, and Ten Lives Club. Lynne Fridley of Maddie’s Fund noted that the grants are difficult to get, and recipients have to show “tangible, life-saving results” as a requirement for renewal. The funds are earmarked for expanding adoption and spay/neuter programs that will ultimately eliminate the euthanasia of all healthy, adoptable cats and dogs in Erie County in five years.

Reducing program. The pitter-patter of little feet will be much softer in the state of Delaware, thanks to the opening of a high-volume spay/neuter clinic at the Delaware SPCA headquarters in Stanton. In lieu of a ribbon-cutting ceremony, an “unleashing” was held in September for the facility named after longtime supporter Jane Haggard. The shelter is going full-force to reduce euthanasia rates—the rate was cut by 53 percent in 2008, according to a press release, and the new clinic’s staff aims to spay or neuter 7,200 animals in the first year of operation.

Snips and snails and puppy dog tails. Tail docking, ear cropping, and debarking are no more at Banfield, The Pet Hospital, which announced in August that it will no longer perform these procedures on dogs, reports USA Today. With more than 730 hospitals and 2,000 veterinarians throughout the U.S.,
the Portland, Ore., corporation’s decision is a significant win in the animal welfare movement’s effort to end these purely cosmetic and unnecessary surgeries. Several states, including Illinois, New York, and Vermont, have tried to pass legislation outlawing the procedures, but have been stymied by the American Kennel Club, which states they “are acceptable practices integral to defining and preserving breed character and/or enhancing good health.” Both the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association (HSVMA) and the American Veterinary Medical Association oppose the practices; the HSVMA is also strongly against declawing for cats when it provides no medical benefit for the animal.

Hands down. The electronic billboard overlooking Times Square in Manhattan is prime real estate for advertisers, grabbing the attention of thousands of passersby every day. In August, the billboard featured an ad from The Paw Project, an anti-declawing group based in Santa Monica, Calif. The slogan read, “If You’re For Declawing, Raise Your Hand,” accompanied by the image of a human hand with the end of every digit cut off. The photo requesting posters to display in their lobbies, and owners are calling and e-mailing to say they’ll never declaw their cats,” says Jennifer Conrad, D.V.M., who founded the organization to educate the public and campaign for anti-declawing legislation. The Paw Project also raises funds for corrective surgery on lions, tigers, and other big cats who have suffered pain and deformity as a result of being declawed. Go to pawproject.org for more information.

Oh, behave! Your own psyche may be a complete mystery to you, but here’s a chance to get into the heads of the cats and dogs you care for. Multnomah County Animal Services in Troutdale, Ore., is holding its second annual Masters in Behavior conference in Troutdale March 6–8. International experts in animal psychology, welfare, and behavior will hold seminars on feline and canine personality and temperament, behavior assessment, shelter enrichment, kitten adoptions, and other topics designed to reduce stress, increase stimulation, and boost adoptions at your shelter. Go to co.multnomah.or.us/dbcs/pets/ for registration information.

What does a rain cloud wear under his pants? Thunderwear! While you’re ROTFL, we want you to know that thunderwear is for real ... for dogs. The Associated Press reports that capes, unitards, even ear muffs are being touted as alternatives to drugs for easing a pet’s anxiety during a thunderstorm. The “sheep suit,” a snug-fitting coat designed to keep show dogs’ coats neat before competition, and the Anxiety Wrap employ “hug therapy” to calm a canine, much like a swaddling blanket can calm a fussy baby. Sound-canceling dog ear muffs and Thunderbands work along the same principle and have the added benefit of dampening the noise that sets a dog off. The Storm Defender cape lined with anti-static fabric supposedly reduces stress by discharging the static electricity in the fur that freaks the dog out. Results are variable, according to comments on a story about the cape at does-itwork.msnbc.com, but many owners agree that wrapping is effective, whether it’s done with a fancy commercial product or your old Metallica T-shirt. 🎸