The Benefits of a Pet Evaluation Matrix:
Three Perspectives
2009

Animal Shelter Alliance of Portland, OR

The Animal Shelter Alliance of Portland includes ten organizations. Before developing and implementing the Pet Evaluation Matrix, the only information we had about the animals coming into our systems was how many came in, were adopted, were euthanized and so on. But we didn't know who these animals were. Were they healthy? Could they have been saved?

Today, having the Asilomar categories enables us to know those animals. We're able to focus on transferring healthy animals so we can get to zero euthanasia of healthy animals quickly. Then we can focus our resources on saving the treatable animals next – which of course, we were already doing, but in a less systematic way. And using common categories and definitions allows us to make data comparisons that are genuinely "apples to apples," and puts us all on the same footing.

During the development of the matrix, the "standard of the community" concept was a big challenge. It began with the shelter leaders coming together to create different categories and assigning different health conditions to them.

Then we put together a pet advisory panel, covering four counties and around two million people. We included veterinarians, trainers, behaviorists, and other animal welfare organizations. We had people from downtown Portland and from the rural areas. We looked specifically for people from different economic regions, particularly the veterinarians. Showing our data to the veterinarians really helped get them on board — we've seen great shifts in support from the veterinary community since beginning this process.

Our next step was to hold three big meetings with the panel to go through the matrix, and then take it out to the public. The entire process took around a year. The inclusive nature of bringing other organizations and pet-related industries into the fold, to show we want to be honest and transparent, and make sure everyone knows where the problem lies, was very beneficial. And this process made people in our area aware that we all had a shared mission of saving lives, so that was another big benefit.

Once we had an agreed-upon matrix, we had to put the whole thing together and train staff to use it. That process allowed them to ask questions, and also brought the staffs of different shelters together, both of which improved overall communication and outcomes. For example, we began to see transfer numbers between organizations increase, which has helped euthanasia numbers go down as well.

Another benefit was the transparency. For the first time we're seeing who is transferring animals, and how many. Can we increase the numbers within the coalition? How many healthy animals *are* we euthanizing? How close are we to zero?

The coalition works as a whole, and it's a pleasure seeing how dedicated and committed everyone is. It's become a larger initiative than I think any of us ever imagined.

Richmond SPCA, VA
The Richmond SPCA, in conjunction with Richmond Animal Care and Control and a group of local veterinarians, developed a Pet Evaluation Matrix using the Asilomar Accords definitions. We have the health and behavioral classifications on our website for everyone to view.

The unhealthy & untreatable category is generally misunderstood. Many think this is some sort of branding or death sentence. We don't regard unhealthy & untreatable as unadoptable. One thing that pleasantly surprises us is the number of people who will take on a pet with problems…. pets with both behavior and health issues like serious separation anxiety, FIV, or very shy dogs. Give adopters the information, then what the pet does when he gets home is not a surprise. It helps the adoption stick.

Our combined matrices also help us identify which pets qualify for our Angel Pets and Almost Heaven Hospice programs. Treatable-manageable pets qualify for the Angel Pets program, and we'll provide ongoing care for that specific chronic condition at our cost. For the Almost Heaven Hospice program, we'll place terminally ill pets who are still enjoying a quality of life into foster homes that understand they'll be providing a loving home until that changes.

With respect to the Asilomar criteria, it's nice for a community to have that, because it creates a unified evaluation and shows apples to apples comparisons with other organizations.

Humane Society of Berks County, PA
Using a Pet Evaluation Matrix means you stop looking at euthanasia as one giant can of equal numbers and start looking at trends. It makes for a more manageable situation, and helps you see where to focus your resources first.

We have always been a data-driven organization. The PEM lets us express our numbers to the public more effectively. That's half the battle. It made the definitions a little less assailable, and it's helpful for people to know that this was a consensus document. You may not agree, but you can't just dismiss it.

It's very beneficial to have a model that is being used nationwide. It's not just us coming up with something so people think we're trying to confuse things. Using the Asilomar Accords definitions and tables provides a structure that's clear-cut, easy to understand and implement. Some criticized us for killing everything, and others said we'd gone "no kill," which we're not. People can say whatever they want, but when you publish the numbers, that tells the story.