



*The Pet Rescue Foundation*

## **The Best Shelter Is a Humane Community**

By Robin Robertson Starr, Executive Director, Richmond SPCA

Many wonderful changes for the Richmond SPCA have happened recently. On January 7, 2002, we began operating under our partnership with the City of Richmond, Richmond Animal League, FURS and Angel Dogs. On that date, the Richmond SPCA also ceased taking the lives of healthy animals— a moment we have long worked for. What a remarkable change has occurred in the optimism and morale of our staff! Our new procedures seem to be working beautifully so far. The transition has been smooth thanks to the careful planning of our terrific staff and the support and cooperation of the fine people with our partner organizations. The most interesting thing to me is that the response of the public, even those seeking to relinquish a pet, has been so positive.

A very different philosophy about human nature underlies our new procedures. The traditional way in which we used to operate was premised on an assumption that most people may not be trusted to do the right thing by the animals in their care. I have long heard animal welfare advocates of the old school say that, if shelters do not accept every animal brought to their door on the spot, the person bringing the animal in is likely to do something very irresponsible and inhumane to the pet. I have always found this theory unacceptable because I simply think better of human nature.

Are some people callous and irresponsible about their pets? Of course. But are most people that way? I have never believed so and our experience since we instituted our new procedures makes me feel vindicated in that belief.

When people contact us to relinquish a pet now, they are told that they need to make an appointment to relinquish a pet. That will take a while since we no longer kill a pet to whom we have already given shelter in order to take in another one. We offer them a variety of other options under our new partnership program “ Project Safety Net.” If the problem is the pet’s unacceptable behavior (as is the case with the vast majority of relinquishments at shelters), they are offered retraining help to see if the problem may be addressed and the pet kept in its home. If there is no choice but relinquishment, they are offered assistance in re-homing the pet themselves.

There always is the option of relinquishing the pet at one of the government shelters but we are finding that few people take this option. Of course, if someone ever indicates to us that he will do the pet harm, we immediately take the pet in (and, by the way, inform law enforcement officials of their threats). Most of people, however, agree to work with us in one of the ways we offer or to wait for an appointment. Very few of them ever indicate that they would wish us to take the life of another animal to make room for their own to come in.

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There is no doubt that some people can be very cruel in their treatment of our companion animals. But most people care about animals and will do the right and responsible thing if we give them the information they need about how to do that. By deciding to trust our fellow man, we are able to immediately stop a great deal of the carnage and focus on providing the tools – both education and pet population control – that will truly address the problem within a few years. The old system, which operated on the belief that we had to provide people with the immediate option all the time to get rid of their pet, assumed the worst about people. Now that we ask people to be humane and responsible about their pets, we are finding that they almost always rise to the occasion and are, thereby, becoming part of the solution. They are actually helping us to provide our pets with the best shelter of all – a humane community.