Removing Barriers to Adoption: How Evidence, Innovation and Compassion Grow Pet Adoptions

Introductions

- Cynthia D. Delany, DVM
  - UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program Veterinarian
  - Contracted out to local animal shelter – Yolo County Animal Services (YCAS)
    - Started at YCAS end of 2011
    - Worked with shelter to start new programs focusing on improving outcomes including:
      - Removing barriers to adoption
      - Implementing adoption fee specials and off-site adoption events
      - Improving population management
      - Creating a kitten foster program
      - Creating a community cats/SNR program
      - Increasing shelter S/N capacity with donated surgery rig

- Kelly Lee
  - Yolo County SPCA (YCSPCA)
  - MOU with YCAS for 2 YCSPCA employees to work FT at YCAS
    - YCSPCA employees at YCAS have primary responsibilities for:
      - Adoption facilitation and counseling
      - Rescue/transfer program
      - Lost and Found coordination
      - Community Cats and Barn Cats Program assistance after these programs were started in 3rd quarter of 2012
      - Assistance with behavior modification/training programs
    - Kelly has been working for YCSPCA for 2 ½ years primarily as the Dog Rescue and Behavior Coordinator
    - She also acts as an adoption counselor for the shelter
As a result of these and other programs implemented between 2009 and 2014 Live Release Rate Increases (calendar year basis) have been significant:

- All Cats/Kittens – increased from 26% to 88%
- Kittens Only – increased from 33% to 92%

New Programs at YCAS
Primarily Implemented Between 2012 to 2014

Over the past 3 years, YCAS has implemented programs in all 5 areas of the Million Cat Challenge’s Five Key Initiatives to increase cat live release rates:

- Alternatives to Intake
- Managed Admission
- Capacity for Care
- Removing Barriers to Adoption
- Return to Field

83% of euthanized cats - Euthanized for Non-Medical Reasons

YCAS Initial Euthanasia Risk Analysis
Performed Late 2011 Based on Calendar Year 2010 Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Euthanasia</th>
<th>Number of Cats Euthanized</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FERAL</td>
<td>571</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOO YOUNG</td>
<td>405</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEARFRA</td>
<td>490</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MED COND</td>
<td>186</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIMID</td>
<td>104</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGED</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URI</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIP/PROB/CTA</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HW/AGGRA</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUMANE</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT VET</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHLTR FULL</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIV</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FELV</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1756</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

83% of euthanized cats - Euthanized for Non-Medical Reasons
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May 5, 2015

**YCAS – Changes in Cat Programming**

- 2. Began adoption fee reductions.
- 3. Began more open adoptions.
- 4. Partnered with rescue group to start pilot Kitten Foster Program
- 5. Off-Site Kitten Adoptions
- 6. Expanded veterinary role.
- 7. Phased out field pickup of cats.
- 8. SNR Program Started
- 9. YCAS shelter Kitten Foster Program started.
- 10. Barn Cat program expanded.

**Impacts of Programs on Cats**

- Decreased Intakes
- Decreased Average Daily Population
- Decreased Euthanasia Rate
- Decreased Length of Stay (LOS)
- Increased Adoption Rate
- Increased Live Release Rate

**YCAS CAT INTAKES**

**CALENDAR YEARS 2009 TO 2014**

- 2009
- 2010
- 2011
- 2012
- 2013
- 2014

- 70% Cat Euthanasia Rate
- 72% Cat Euthanasia Rate
- 10% Cat Euthanasia Rate

- 2010
- 2011
- 2012
- 2013
- 2014
- 2015
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May 5, 2015

Average Length of Stay (LOS) Before and After New Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average LOS</th>
<th>Outcome Type</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADOPTION</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIED</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUTH</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESCUE</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTO</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSFER</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YCC RELEASE</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grand Total  | 13.9         | 9.3  | 7.5  | 7.8  | 6.4  | 5.7  |

Percent with This Outcome

OUTCOME YEAR

YCAS CAT OUTCOMES

CALENDAR YEARS 2009 to 2014

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### Summary of Changes - Yolo County Animal Services

**Cats – Fiscal Year 2009-2010 vs Fiscal Year 2013-2014**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>2009-2010</th>
<th>2013-2014</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Live Release Rate</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>193% Increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live Release Numbers</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>1399</td>
<td>104% Increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euthanasia Rate</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>84% Decrease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euthanasia Numbers</td>
<td>1720</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>90% Decrease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake</td>
<td>2501</td>
<td>1596</td>
<td>36% Decrease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOA</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>32% Decrease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of Stay</td>
<td>13.8 days</td>
<td>8.6 days</td>
<td>67% Decrease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Daily Cat Population</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44% Decrease</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### YCAS AVERAGE LOS FOR CATS TO ADOPTION
**CALENDAR YEARS 2009 TO 2014**

<table>
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<th>Average Length of Stay in Days</th>
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<td>10.1</td>
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</tr>
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Removing Barriers to Adoption

• The primary change needed for us to remove barriers to adoption was a philosophy shift.
• We love animals and want to give them the best lives possible.
• We often saw and were profoundly impacted by examples of “bad”/irresponsible animal owners.
• We wanted to protect our shelter animals from a bad outcome.
• So, we made it very difficult to adopt to try to “ensure” that the animals would go to an “ideal” home.

We Need to Remember

• We see only a very small portion of the owned animal population.
  – Estimates are that we see less than 6% of owned animals in our shelters (some of whom are actually being redeemed by a responsible owner).
  – For cats this is probably even lower when you account for the large numbers of unowned free-roaming cats we see.
  – Most of the cats we see are brought in as stray and very few are redeemed, so we tend not to interact with a lot of cat owners at our shelters.
  – As a result, we see only a tiny portion of the cat owning public – maybe 2-3% or less.
  – Most cat owners are responsible and do the best they can for their pets and we never interact with them at shelters.
• BUT, our brains have a “Negativity Bias”
• We remember BAD things much more vividly than GOOD things.
• Think of your last “Bad” day, you might have had 98 good things happen and 1 or 2 bad things and you remember it as a bad day.

What Wasn’t Working

• Only 11% of our cats and kittens were being adopted.
• Almost 70% of our cats and kittens were being euthanized.
• We were “protecting” our cats and kittens to death.
• We were “saving” them from a possible less than ideal home (or life living as a free roaming cat) so that we could walk them into our euthanasia room and put them to sleep.
What Wasn’t Working

• What else was wrong:
  – Our Length of Stay to adoption was VERY LONG.
  – Our average on-site cat population was VERY HIGH.
• All of this:
  – Low adoption rate
  – High euthanasia rate
  – Long LOS
  – High average population
• Was bad for our cats
• And, it was bad for us:
  – Bad for the shelter and its employees, bad for the public, bad for our department, bad for our community as a whole.

Things we USED To Do

• Required proof of home ownership (for a cat or kitten adoption too) – often requiring a paid property tax bill.
• Landlord check required if not a home owner.
• Requiring other pets to meet new pets (primarily for dogs) – currently still working on this being more optional than required for dogs.
• Requiring all family members to meet new pet.
• Requiring a full adoption application to be filled out with no “wrong” answers on the application and counseling against adoption if we judged any answers were wrong.
  – Possible wrong answers:
   • Ages of people in the home
   • Other pets and other pets’ medical and S/N status
   • Indoor/outdoor question for cats (fenced yard question for dogs)
   • Declawing question
   • Former pets – bad outcomes, lack of medical care, other issues.
   • Owner lifestyle issues – including work hours.

Things Others Might Want to Reconsider

• Things we didn’t require but others might currently require that might be worth reconsidering:
  – Home visits
  – Veterinary references
  – Background checks
  – Waiting periods prior to animal going to new home
Let He Who is Without Sin......

• How many of us on this webinar (arguably some of the most dedicated animal lovers there are) haven’t fallen into one of these categories:
  – Kept a pet a landlord didn’t know about
  – Had pets who lived together even though they didn’t really get along
  – Let their pet’s vaccines or other medical care lapse
  – Worked long hours outside our home
  – Had young children in your home that might have negative interactions with a pet
  – Lived in a home without a secure, fenced yard
  – Allowed a pet cat to live outdoors or go in and out at will
  – Owned more animals than allowed by city/county

Let’s All Say The Serenity Prayer

No, you don’t have to get a tattoo of it, but it’s not a bad idea.

What Can’t We Control

• We can’t control whether or not people get pets.
• We can’t control if people tell us the truth or not.
• We can’t control what kind of pet owners people are going to be.
• We can’t control the universe — bad things can happen to good people and their pets.
What Can We Control

• We can control whether or not people are allowed to get pets from us (and save their lives).
• Remember, we are not the only game in town
  – 2012 study showed only 26% of cats were acquired from shelters.
  – Even fewer pets are acquired by people in low-income and under-served communities, estimates show 3% of pets acquired from shelters in a Pets For Life survey in these communities.
• Excellent resource – HSUS’s new “Adopters Welcome” book.
What we Can Control if We Help People Get a Cat From Us

• Whether people get a cat that is already spay/neutered, current on vaccines, microchipped.
• Whether people get some guidance and advice on selecting an appropriate pet.
• Whether people get education and advice on how to introduce their new pet to their home and provide it with medical and behavior care/training.
• Whether people have a resource if they need help, to avoid the pet ending up back in the shelter in the future.
• Getting back a healthy, adoption-ready animal if for any reason the adoption doesn’t work out.

What Did We Do at Yolo?
Implemented “Open Adoptions”

• The goal was to focus on helping people to adopt (rather than trying to prevent them from adopting).
• We still use an adoption application but use it as a conversation starter.
• The goal is to talk to the adopter, help them make the best adoption choice and provide them with guidance, resources and advice about their new pet.
• The goal is to be less judgmental, more helpful and give adopters a positive adoption experience (and a great, lifelong pet).

Other Steps We Took to Remove Adoption Barriers

• Increasing accessibility:
  – Shelter hours/adoption days, adoption locations.
  – Increasing friendliness of shelter – staff and volunteers.
  – Discounted cat adoptions – fee waived, 2 for 1 on kittens, or 1 kitten with a free adult mentor cat (studies, including Weiss 2009 found no increase in return rates for animals adopted at reduced fees)
  – Allowing volunteers to act as adoption counselors to staff off-site adoption events
  – Special adoption promotions and advertising of adoptions – social media, on-site, press releases, participating in bigger events
  – Not declining adoptions for pets as gifts (studies show no difference in retention/attachment or even greater retention for pets given as gifts)
  – No special restrictions associated with holidays
    + Including black cat adoptions around Halloween no longer restricted or discouraged.
Once Adoptions Increased

- We could implement a shelter-based kitten foster program
  - Now that we knew we would be able to find homes for the kittens when old enough.
- We started offering some cats for adoption that were a little more shy or cat reactive.
  - Previously they would have had to go to rescue or be euthanized.
- We have now started to offer for adoption some cats that historically would not have been made available (and based on very low historical adoption rates they wouldn’t have previously been adopted or at least not without an excessively long LOS)
  - Senior cats
  - Cats with treatable but long-term illnesses like hyperthyroidism
  - Very special medical needs – like FIV positive cats
- We are still careful to manage our population and balance fast track and slow track cats offered for adoption but have more flexibility and alternatives in how we manage our population.

Will Returns Skyrocket?

They didn’t for us.

RETURNS AS % OF ADOPTIONS
YEAR
CAT ADOPTION RETURNS
YCAS 2009 to 2014
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
Grand Total

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>RETURNS AS % OF ADOPTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What About Returns?

• Remember, a return shouldn't be considered a “failure”
  – If the animal is returned to the shelter it’s an opportunity to learn more about the animal and the adopter and make a better match for each the next time.
  – If the adopter chooses to rehome the animal themselves this should also be okay with us. They know the animal and they likely know the new owner so may be able to make a very good match.

Our Goals

1. Be a resource for adoption.
2. Not be a barrier to adoption.
3. Remember what we want to accomplish:
   • Save lives
   • Get pets in homes that are spayed/neutered, vaccinated, microchipped
   • Educate people about pet ownership
   • Conserve resources for other areas (like SNR, TNR, foster care programs, low-cost public spay/neuter, etc.) – by minimizing LOS and population on-site – while still maximizing live release rates.

Circle of (Shelter) Life

- Analyze Current Outcomes
- Set Goals
- Explore Perceived Barriers
- Overcome Barriers
- Look for “Low Hanging Fruit”
Do you have any questions?

Cynthia D. Delany, DVM
cddelany@ucdavis.edu

References and Resources

- UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program – www.sheltermedicine.com
- Million Cat Challenge – www.millioncatchallenge.org
- Maddie’s Fund – www.maddiesfund.org
- University of Florida – Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Program – http://sheltermedicine.vetmed.ufl.edu/
- HSUS, “Pets by the Numbers.” humanesociety.org/issues/pet-overpopulation/facts/pet_ownership_statistics.html
- ASPCA. "If We Only Adopt to "Perfect" Pet Parents, We're Not Really Making a Difference...” explorap.org/if-we-only-adopt-to-perfect-pet-parents-were-not-really-making-a-difference%22e2%80%9d.