

PETA Wants Houston to Kill

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In a recent issue of the *Houston Chronicle*, Daphna Nachminovitch of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) unfairly attacks me and essentially asks Houston to continue its decades-old policy of killing the vast majority of animals in its shelters (“No-kill shelters are no good”). For those who are not familiar with PETA, this may seem strange. After all, why would an organization who argues it is wrong to eat animals, experiment on animals, use animals for entertainment, or hunt them for sport, promote the killing of animals in U.S. shelters? But PETA does promote it and has for some time.

In Seattle, Washington, PETA sided with a shelter even after a 15-member citizen advisory committee, local veterinarians, outside consultants (including myself) and a team of veterinarians from the Veterinary College at the University of California at Davis found animals left for days with no food or water, animals left bleeding in their kennels with no medical attention, deplorable conditions and mismanagement at all levels. The King County council ignored PETA.

After Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania officials announced that they were going to implement a pilot project of neutering rather than killing unsocialized free roaming (feral) cats, PETA argued that the cats should continue to be killed. Pittsburgh officials declined.

When former Atlanta Falcons Quarterback Michael Vick was arrested for dog fighting, PETA urged the court to kill all the dog victims. The court refused. Today, the dogs are in sanctuaries and loving new homes. Several are now even therapy dogs, bringing comfort to cancer patients.

Now in Houston, after officials announce they are considering a review of operations to increase lifesaving, PETA once again goes on the attack. Like their counterparts in Seattle/King County, Pittsburgh, and the federal courts, Houstonites should ignore PETA too. Unfortunately, many animal rights activists blindly follow PETA’s lead, whitewashing killing even in the face of No Kill alternatives and the success. They do so because they see PETA fighting for the right to life of other animals—animals in circuses, on factory farms, in research laboratories, and in other industries. Yet, when it comes to companion animals, they have an entirely different standard. They not only call for the deaths of dogs and cats in shelters, PETA kill dogs and cats themselves—nearly 2,000 per year.

In 2006, PETA put to death an astonishing 97% of the animals they impounded—finding homes for only 12 of the 3,043 animals they claimed to rescue. That’s not a typo. Out of 3,043 animals impounded, they found homes for only 2 cats, 8 dogs, and 2 rabbits despite \$30 million in annual revenues and a membership base of millions that includes some of the most ardent animal lovers in the nation.

Despite records rates of lifesaving in shelters which take in thousands more animals at a fraction of PETA’s budget; and despite that new figures report that rates of shelter killing across the U.S. dropped to their lowest levels ever as more shelters embrace the No Kill philosophy, PETA’s killing shows no sign of subsiding. In 2007, PETA killed roughly 91% of the animals they impounded, taking in 1,997 and putting 1,815 to death. A paltry 17 were adopted.

On top of this, few activists who follow PETA’s lead on the companion animal issue are probably aware that the founder of PETA, Ingrid Newkirk, formerly held a job killing homeless dogs and cats at the Washington Humane Society, a shelter with a poor record for saving lives and the subject of historical public acrimony for its over-reliance on killing.

In 2005, moreover, PETA employees were arrested and prosecuted for obtaining animals from shelters, veterinarians, and private individuals after promising to find them homes, only to put the animals to death

without ever even putting them up for adoption. The animals were killed in the back of a van within minutes of being picked up and thrown away in supermarket dumpsters. Although they were acquitted of animal cruelty because PETA is legally allowed to kill animals as a shelter, this did not change the testimony of a deputy sheriff involved in the investigation who told reporters that PETA employees assured the shelters "they were picking up the dogs to take them back to Norfolk [Virginia, PETA's headquarters] where they would find them good homes." In addition, a local veterinarian stated that the "cat and two kittens I gave [PETA] last week were in good health and were very adoptable, especially the kittens." He also stated that "these were just kittens we were trying to find homes for. PETA said they would do that, but these cats never made it out of the county."

The manager of the supermarket whose dumpster was used stated that the PETA employees "just slung the doors [open] and started throwing dogs ... beautiful cats. I saw a [dead] beagle last week that was pregnant ... last week it was 23 or 24 dogs ... it's happened to us nine times ... they drove straight from there, straight here, and disposed of the dogs in 30 seconds."

It is time that people cease relying on the advice of individuals like Nachminovitch and organizations like PETA which have a wanton disregard for the value of companion animals, while they profess a point of view about "the necessity of killing" based on obfuscation, misrepresentation, and trumpeting the cause of failure.

Indeed, to make her point, Nachminovitch claims No Kill is akin to warehousing animals. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, No Kill is the opposite of hoarding, filth, and lack of veterinary care. In 1998, for example, No Kill advocates in California pushed a major animal shelter reform package through the legislature. One aspect of the reform was the requirement that shelters had to be open when working people could visit, work with rescue groups to place animals, and provide care to impounded animals, including socialization, nutrition and veterinary care. The law was uniformly supported by No Kill shelters and rescue groups around the state. It was, however, opposed by the types of shelters PETA champions.

To imply that No Kill by definition means filth and hoarding, therefore, is a cynicism which has only one purpose: to defend those who are failing at saving lives from public criticism and public accountability by painting a picture of the alternative as even darker. The philosophical underpinning of the No Kill movement is to put actions behind the words of every shelter's mission statement: "All life is precious." No Kill is about valuing animals, which not only means saving their lives, but means good quality care. By denigrating No Kill as akin to animal hoarding, these groups appear to be arguing for nothing more than a nation of shelters firmly grounded in killing—a defeatist mentality that is inherently unethical and antithetical to animal welfare.

But Nachminovitch knows this so she engages in subterfuge. If you can't attack the message, attack the messenger which is what she attempts to do. She argues that shelters I am associated with have record rates of animals dying in their kennels as a result of warehousing. This is nonsense. In New York, a shelter I worked for, deaths in kennels dropped 90% after new policies involving cleaning, vaccinating, and care policies were implemented. After a new director took over, the Charlottesville shelter Nachminovitch condemns based on "reports" of employees who were fired for killing animals rescue groups were willing to save (one of those staffers had a history of cruelty to animals), the death rate dropped 75%. In Reno, Nevada, the number of animals being killed and/or getting sick in the shelter has been steadily declining since new No Kill policies were implemented, with adoption rates increasing by as much as 84%.

The only example Nachminovitch cites for her flawed proposition where she actually provides any data are for shelters in the City of Los Angeles, which I have been an ardent critic of, have never worked with, and have nothing to do with either me or the policies I advocate. Indeed, I too publicly condemned the Los Angeles shelters on December 26, 2007 at www.nokillblog.com, almost one year ago. I deplored archaic and barbaric policies which resulted in "high numbers of animals dying in kennel, which evidences lack of oversight, poor care, and neglect by shelter personnel." To try and link me with the shelter is the height of obfuscation. It is a lie.

But more and more dog and cat lovers are seeing through Nachminovitch's acts of desperation. PETA is losing out to the voices of animal welfare advocates, true animal rights activists, and everyday pet lovers who are increasingly standing up and voicing their opposition to catch and kill policies that unnecessarily condemn millions of dogs and cats to death every year. Type in "PETA kills pets" on Google and you'll get—according to Google—"about 127,000 hits in 0.26 seconds." Clearly, a light of truth and compassion shines, which PETA's darkness cannot overcome.

And that is good news. As is the increasing success of the No Kill movement nationally. Over the past five years, several animal control shelters in communities across the United States have embraced not only the No Kill philosophy, but the programs and services which make it possible. As a result, they are achieving unprecedented lifesaving success, saving in excess of 90% of all impounded animals. In the history of animal protection, this news is seminal, as it harkens the fulfillment of the chief goal of the companion animal movement—ending the killing of savable animals in U.S. shelters. The formula for saving lives of over four million dogs and cats, and hundreds of thousands of other animals, has been discovered. And we should be working feverishly to ensure that this formula is replicated in every community across the country.

From the perspective of achievability, the prognosis is very good. And we have seen this in action in various communities. Some are urban, some rural, some in the North, some in the South, some in what we call "liberal" or "blue" states, and some are in conservative parts of the country (at least one is in the "reddest" part of the "reddest" state.) Demographically, these communities share little in common. What they do share, however, is shelter leadership committed to saving all the lives at risk. If Houston follows their lead, it too can achieve unprecedented success.

But let's put this aside. Let's assume, as PETA does, that we could never save the majority of lives at risk in shelters. To do that, we have to ignore the experiences of successful communities. We have to pretend they do not exist. How does this change the calculus? Shelters nationally are killing roughly half or more of all incoming animals. That puts us at the 50 yard line. And although the evidence is fairly overwhelming to the contrary, let's say the Naysayers are right (data, success, and reality be damned) and we can never cross the goal line. What is wrong with getting, say, to the 20 yard line or 10 yard line? If all shelters put in place the programs and services of the No Kill Equation, the model which brought rates of shelter killing to all time lows in communities throughout the U.S., we can save millions of lives nationally, regardless if we ever achieve a No Kill nation. Even if you do not believe that a No Kill nation is inevitable as I do, that is worth doing and worth doing without delay.

Because every year we delay, indeed every day we delay, the body count increases. And while delaying may please the pet killing apologists at PETA like Nachminovitch, most dog and cat lovers, when armed with the facts, find it abhorrent.

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