



Teacher Newsletter of The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals



Animal Shelters 411

Like the animals in their care and the communities they serve, animal shelters come in all shapes and sizes. Some concentrate on rescue and adoptions, some on spaying and neutering and others focus on education and raising awareness of the welfare of animals. Regardless of their make-up, the mission of all shelters is to help animals in need. Unfortunately, misconceptions abound about shelters and the work they do especially among children. As educators, you can help shelters help animals by debunking these myths and clarifying the important role shelters play in communities.

What are shelters and who operates them?

Shelters are usually operated by either a municipality or a non-profit organization. Any shelter can use the term “Humane Society” or “SPCA” in their name. These are generic terms that don’t imply that the shelter is part of a larger organization or has special powers. In fact, most humane societies and SPCAs are independent of each other. SPCA stands for Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, as in the “ASPCA” which stands for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Municipal shelters are usually operated by the city or county governments. They employ animal control officers whose job it is to enforce animal-related laws. Although municipal shelters receive money from local governments, most are underfunded, and accept donations to help them care for the animals.

Non-municipal shelters are often called private shelters. Private shelters are run by non-profit organizations and are mainly funded by donations. The ASPCA is not a municipal shelter, but our humane law enforcement agents are empowered to investigate and make arrests in all types of animal cruelty cases within New York State. We rely on donations to fight animal cruelty.

Within the private shelter community are limited-access facilities, often referred to as “no-kill” shelters. These facilities accept a limited number of animals based on

species, age, health, adoptability and space. Once they are at maximum capacity, a limited-access shelter will not take in more animals and will only euthanize animals that are severely aggressive or suffering.

The amount and types of services a shelter provides depends on its resources. Animals may be given medical exams and vaccinations. They may undergo a behavior evaluation to determine what their personality is like and with what kind of family the animal would do best. Some shelters spay or neuter their animals before they are adopted. Some shelters place the burden on the adopters, requiring them to have the animal spayed or neutered by a veterinarian.

Adoption programs match animals with responsible, suitable families. A shelter’s adoption policies are designed to ensure prospective adopters are able to provide a suitable home and care for a pet for his or her lifetime. Potential adopters are often asked to consider several questions before adopting: Why are you adopting a pet? How many people live in your household? Can you afford to care for a pet? Are pets allowed in your home or apartment? What will be the living arrangements for the pet? Though these questions may seem intrusive, shelter workers want what is best for both the animals and the adopters.

Dedicated people work at shelters in a variety of capacities. Some shelters employ animal control officers to enforce animal-related laws and ordinances. The officers can also help people who own animals solve problems before the problems become too serious. Veterinarians, veterinary technicians and animal care technicians take care of the animals' health. Animal trainers and behaviorists evaluate an animal's behavior and train them to become "well-heeled" members of the family.

Humane educators teach children and adults about animals and their needs. They reach children by visiting classrooms, holding summer camps, and working with after school or neighborhood programs. Other staff write articles for newsletters or magazines, help raise funds and work with lawmakers to create animal-friendly legislation. Volunteers are indispensable in making the shelter run smoothly, doing everything from answering phones to cleaning cages and helping with special events.

Despite the best efforts of these dedicated workers, many misconceptions persist about shelters and the animals in their care. Some people think that shelter animals must be either bad or sick, after all many were surrendered by their owners. In fact, there are numerous reasons animals end up in shelters such as unwanted litters, owners not being aware of the responsibilities involved in caring for a pet, life changes like moving to another city or loss of a job and animal cruelty. While problem behavior is one the most common reasons pets are given up, many people don't realize that a high proportion of behavior problems can be solved with training and patience.

Another myth about shelters is that all the animals up for adoption are mutts or mixed breeds. In fact, you will find 20-30% are purebred pets. The truth is that too many wonderful, healthy mixed breeds and purebreds are euthanized each year because there are not enough homes willing to adopt them.



Some people believe that all the animals that enter shelters are killed and that shelter workers don't care about animals. They think the animals are better off on the streets. Most shelter workers truly care about animals. That is the reason they entered this field in the first place. Regrettably, they must make room for the new arrivals that flood into shelters. Euthanizing (putting an animal down) is a necessary and humane alternative to turning animals loose on the streets. Rarely do animals on the streets find good homes. To the contrary, life on the streets often means death by disease, injury or starvation. If an animal is too sick or aggressive, they may also be put down. It is not safe to place an aggressive animal into a home.

Finally, there are the myths surrounding the spaying and neutering of pets: they will become fat and lazy, females should have at least one litter before they are spayed and the animal won't be protective if neutered. Pet overpopulation is a major reason why animals end up in shelters. Having your pet sterilized is every owner's responsibility and a simple way you can help prevent needless suffering. The procedure is safe and many low cost spay/neuter programs are available. The ASPCA strongly recommends sterilizing your pet as early as possible.

Not only do shelters find homes for homeless animals, but they can also be a great resource if you already have pets or are considering adopting. They can refer people to animal trainers and behaviorists, veterinarians and of course other animal parents. Some shelters offer puppy kindergarten and dog obedience classes on their premises while others sell pet food, leashes, toys, etc., with the money going for a good cause. They are great places to find free pet care information often available as printed flyers or on their web site. Contact your local shelter to find out what kinds of programs they offer for students. By helping children learn about the important function animal shelters play in your community, you will be helping build a brighter future for animals and children.

Resources

ASPCA Web sites: aspc.org, animalessons.org, and animaland.org, our site for kids.

For ASPCA-approved educational materials go to aspc.org/catalog or write to ASPCA Education Department, 424 East 92nd Street, New York, NY 10128-6804 and request a free catalog.