



THE CAT FANCIERS' ASSOCIATION, INC.

World's Largest Registry of Pedigreed Cats

ADVOCACY IN ACTION

"WHY CAN'T I HAVE THAT KITTY?"

Shelter policies mean some animals needlessly die

Every week thousands of cats and dogs are killed in animal shelters across the country. Shelters and rescue groups often claim there are simply too many animals and too few homes. However, experts have noted there are homes available. "Based on the average lifespan of existing pet dogs and cats, every year more families are potentially looking to bring a new dog or cat into their home than currently enter shelters¹." The supply of owned cats available for adoption is so small that the taking in of free roaming stray cats is necessary to even maintain the owned cat population². Yet shelters continue to kill adoptable animals.

There are many reasons shelters give as to why they kill pets rather than place them in homes. Shelter restrictions on pet adoptions are often rigid and based on myths, prejudices, bureaucratic rules, and lack of common sense. How else would you explain rules that prohibit adoption to families with children, or with other pets at home, to renters, low-income families, seniors, students, military, working people, families with swimming pools or other "undesirable" homes³. Many animal-welfare workers treat adoption interviews "like the Spanish Inquisition," says Pierre Barnoti, executive director of the Montreal SPCA⁴. Rejection rates for prospective pet adoptions run high at some shelters. One group noted that 60% of their applicants were rejected⁵! It's no wonder that many people looking for pets refuse to go to animal shelters.

Some of the more common myths as to why cats must be killed rather than adopted are discussed below. Each is taken from information provided publicly by an animal control agency, shelter or rescue group.

Myth #1, Feral Cats Must Die. Feral cats and unweaned kittens make up the majority of shelter killings in many areas. Often these groups overlap, as the kittens may be the product of feral mom cats who abandoned the kittens when humans approached. Several major animal groups support the shelter position that: "...humane euthanasia of homeless companion animals is preferable to the...slow, painful deaths they face when they must fend for themselves outdoors⁶." But is death always preferable?

A recent study commissioned by Alley Cat Allies shows that 81% of the U.S. population favors humane alternatives, such as simply leaving a "stray" cat where it lives, over killing⁷. Even if the stray cat were certain to die in two years being struck by a car, the overwhelming majority of people, 71%, would still prefer to let the cat live⁸. When return is not possible, placement in barns, stables, warehouses or other locations will allow the cats to live. Despite the public support for TNR (Trap, Neuter, Return) and other humane alternatives, many shelters refuse to consider options other than death for feral cats. Shelters would rather kill them, stating: "...no cats will be placed just to function as barn cats or mousers."

Myth #2, Children and Pets Don't Mix. Most shelters require that the primary adopter be an adult; 18, 21 or even older, such as 25. The minimum age required for other members of the household varies. In one recent celebrity matter a dog was rehomed without permission of the adoption agency. The new home

was unable to even apply for the dog, as they had children aged 11 and 12, and the agency would not consider homes with children under 14 years.

The more enlightened approach is more balanced. Some shelters have a sliding scale for mixing kids with cats and dogs, depending on the age of the pet, the children and the family circumstances. Other shelters may allow children of any age to be in the household, as long as they can observe an interaction between the child and the pet check for appropriate behaviors. The presence of a child in a prospective adoption home should not be an automatic death sentence for a shelter cat.

Myth #3, Working People Should Not Own Pets. Shelter hostility toward working people takes many forms. Some have detailed financial requirements that make it difficult for working people to qualify. Adoption hours may be scheduled so that few working people can adopt. Some openly refuse to adopt cats into dual income homes. The theory is that if both adults work outside the home, the cat may become bored and unhappy when both are at work.

Cats are self-sufficient creatures more than capable of amusing themselves for short periods alone. A few toys and some room to play should be enough to avoid killing the cat for lack of home. If some cat honestly can not function by itself, instead of killing it for lack of a home, why not adopt two together so they can keep each other company?

Myth #4, Students, Military, Seniors, the Poor and Renters Should Not Own Pets. The goal in any placement is to provide a home for life for the cat. Unfortunately, some shelters take this to an extreme and use any excuse to find a home too unstable for a pet. Yet we have all heard stories of a poor or elderly pet owner who feeds their cat while they can barely afford to feed themselves. Love and care for a pet is not limited by socioeconomic status.

A more creative approach would be to use some imagination to pair up home and pet when special circumstances arise. For example, seniors may be the perfect placement for that older dog or cat who is hard to adopt and would otherwise be killed at the shelter.

Myth #5, Unweaned Kittens Must Die. Most shelters lack the capacity to hand feed kittens and kill unweaned kittens as soon as they arrive. The better approach is to have foster care programs that have volunteers care for the kittens short-term until they are old enough to place. This both saves the lives of the kittens and provides more exposure in the community to draw in potential adopters. Your shelter may refuse to adopt to college students and military because they may not be able to commit to long term ownership. What about making them part of a voluntary foster-care program for unweaned kittens? That way the kittens can live, but the students or military can have the pleasure of a pet without the responsibility of a permanent adoption⁹!

Myth #6, The Longer the Application the Better the Placement. Adoption applications may be one page, or several pages taking hours to complete. Some shelter adoption applications are so intrusive that they recommend you make at least 1 1/2 hour available just to complete the forms. Multiple trips to the shelter are often necessary, as few people carry a copy of their deed or a notarized copy of their lease with them.

However, there is no empirical evidence that the more extreme restrictions on adoption result in fewer returns. "Research has shown that an open adoption where it's really easy to adopt a pet is just as successful at placing pets and having them not returned as a super restrictive program¹⁰."

The situation for dogs at shelters is equally problematic. Shelters often restrict by breed, by dog size, or perceived personality. Some shelters require specific height fencing, some prefer walking on a leash for human/dog bonding. Some shelters kill dogs of certain breeds, regardless of adoptability?

Many shelters have failed in their mission to place cats for adoption and they are killed needlessly. The deterrents to shelter adoption take many forms. It may be shelter location, badly scheduled or near non-existent adoption hours, lack of community outreach, lack of foster care programs, dilapidated/unsanitary (or just depressing) facilities, unreasonable adoption restrictions, unnecessary paperwork or just bureaucratic inertia. However, the net result is the same. What can you do to help? Visit your local shelter and become familiar with their policies and programs. Push for progressive alternatives to killing such as mobile adoptions and foster care programs. Challenge failed shelters policies such as "black listing" families with children, renters, seniors, military and others who could provide good homes. Propose community programs such as TNR for feral cats. There are homes out there for the cats coming into the shelters, it's time to stop the killing.

There is also new thinking coming from some progressive shelters that are increasing their adoptions and their success with animals staying in the new home. Programs to determine people's lifestyles and the temperament of cats can be better matched so the adoption meets expectations. Many shelters no longer abide by the myths for not adopting to some people. For example, National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy relinquishment studies showed that cats/dogs received as a "gift" had a low risk of shelter relinquishment. New-owner training classes and post-adoption services help people handle problems. Watch CFA Fanc-e-Mews for future articles about shelter programs that are helping to save pets now.

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¹ Redemption - The Myth of Pet Overpopulation and the No Kill Revolution in America, by Nathan Winograd, p 161.

² "Owned cats produce only 40.6% of the kittens necessary to sustain zero population growth of owned pets.... Without the adoption of kittens from the roaming population into the ranks of owned cats, the owned pet cat population would decrease at a rate of 8.5% per year." San Diego County Survey and Analysis of the Pet Population, <http://nationalpetalliance.com/sdsolution.htm>

³ One rescue group rejects people who feed their pets the most popular brands of pet food, instead of "natural" brands.

⁴ Globe and Mail - Pet adoption rules: 'like the Spanish Inquisition' by Rebecca Dube, October 18, 2007. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com>

⁵ StarNews - Some say shelters' standards for pet adoption are too strict, by Amy Hotz, August 13, 2006 <http://www.starnewsonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060813/NEWS/608130370>

⁶ Humane Society of the United States: Common Questions About Animal Shelters and Animal Control, http://www.hsus.org/pets/animal_shelters/common_questions_about_animal_shelters_and_animal_control.html See also, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Euthanasia: The Compassionate Option, <http://www.helpinganimals.com/Factsheet/files/FactsheetDisplay.asp?ID=39>

⁷ Alley Cat Allies, U.S. Public Opinion on Humane Treatment of Stray Cats, September 2007, page 1, <http://www.kintera.org/TR.asp?a=aqLHIWNALhIUK9J&s=jkISK6OKJfIYI9MWH&m=kwJWKeP3KqIbH>

⁸ Id at page 2.

⁹ Thanks to Nathan Winograd for this suggestion.

¹⁰ LA Times, "Fur flies over DeGeneres' trouble with rescue group" by Carla Hall, October 18 2007