

Sunday Column – The Future of Animal Welfare For publication 7.2.17

Animal shelter boards and management all over the country are beginning to consider how their missions will change once pet overpopulation is no longer a problem. This topic has been coming up lately in our regional and national meetings and a few weeks ago I was asked to complete a related survey.

In Georgia, we are beginning to realize that this day is just around the corner. In fact, “No-Kill Georgia by 2025” is our official goal. Animal welfare organizations all over the state are working together to make this a reality. It is happening right before our eyes in both small and large cities and even some of our most rural counties.

Not too many years ago reliable data was almost non-existent. This made it hard to know how we compared to other parts of the country. Animal control agencies operated by private contractors won't typically share their data so the best you could do was extrapolate whatever solid data you can get your hands on. Today we have “Shelter Animals Count”, a nationwide data base that already has nearly 100% participation in several states. We will soon go from educated guesses to hard data we can use to measure our progress.

The Northeast has been at this for more than two decades, starting in the mid-90s when they began to implement the “11 Point No-Kill Equation”. In some regions they have to import animals from our Southern states to fill the demand for pets.

The key component of the “No-Kill Equation” is increased access to spay/neuter. Without it no-kill status is unobtainable. Unfortunately, from 2012 to 2015, a handful of veterinarians in Alabama successfully squashed legislation that would have permitted their peers to be employed by nonprofit animal welfare organizations. If the bill had passed it would have dramatically increased access to low-cost and free spay/neuter to the working poor and to families living below the poverty line.

Increased access to spay/neuter works and it is why intakes at Columbus Animal Care and Control are less than half of what they once were. PAWS Humane has provided over 45,000 spay/neuter surgeries in our city of 200,000 souls effectively ending the days of unbridled growth in the pet population.

It was disheartening to read last week that intakes at Lee County Humane Society have doubled compared to this time last year. I know how hard TJ and her team work and how dedicated they are to saving lives.

The sad reality is that we will never adopt our way out of pet overpopulation. We can give our dogs and cats away and it still won't get us there. We may as well try digging to China with a teaspoon.

This isn't rocket science folks. It is simple mathematics. Until we make spay/neuter accessible both geographically and economically, we will have too many pets and not enough homes.

Alabama's animal welfare workers are running as fast as they can desperately trying to keep up with the daily onslaught of incoming animals. Where are the board members of these organizations and why aren't they lobbying their state legislators to fix this mess?

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.