



Richmond SPCA: Foster to Surrender



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In 2001, the Richmond SPCA identified kittens and puppies too young or too ill to place for adoption as one of the animal populations most at risk for euthanasia. Since shelter space and staff were both stretched to the limit, the organization decided to take a chance and engage the public as partners in a life-saving venture.

When individuals brought in puppies and kittens, Richmond SPCA staff invited them to foster the animals until they were strong enough and healthy enough to go onto the adoption floor. Creating this program involved major shifts in attitude within the organization and across the community and played a major part in the organization's overall effort to create a No Kill community in Richmond.

Stats

In 2006, 700 animals went through the Foster to Surrender Program. 85% were kittens.

At the height of the 2006 breeding season, the Richmond SPCA had 91 puppies and kittens in the program.

How Cool is That?

Who doesn't warm to the idea of saving an orphaned puppy or kitten from almost certain death? The Foster to Surrender program educates the public about the homeless pet problem and gets them personally involved by giving them the chance to save the litters of puppies and kittens they find rather than just turning them over to the shelter where they have very little chance of survival. The program has been a huge success and has resulted in a higher number of young kittens and puppies surviving their critical first months.

Adopt or Adapt

The Foster to Surrender program costs very little to implement and shows immediate results. It also has tremendous public appeal. This program would make a great starting point for any organization interested in developing a collaborative relationship with the public to reduce euthanasia.

Richmond SPCA: The Whole Story

Foster to Surrender

In 2001, the Richmond SPCA was actively seeking ways to end the killing of healthy, homeless animals in their own facility and throughout the city. One group of animals at risk for euthanasia in what was then an open admission shelter was kittens and puppies too young or too sick to go up for adoption.

With space at a premium and staff stretched to the limit, the Richmond SPCA decided to turn to the public for help. Instead of simply taking in the animals and then, all too frequently, having to euthanize them for lack of space or watch them get sick and die, the Richmond SPCA staff began asking the people who brought the animals to the shelter to foster them until they were old enough and strong enough to be altered and put out on the adoption floor.



What's Behind the Program

According to CEO Robin Starr, the Foster to Surrender program essentially creates a second shelter by engaging the public in the care of specific groups of animals. When an individual brings in owned or found kittens or puppies too young or too sick to be put up for adoption, the admissions staff asks the person to foster the animals for two or three weeks. There is no formal screening process and the only real requirement is that the animals must be kept indoors.

The animals are examined by the in-house veterinarian who performs the standard tests, administers the first round of shots and prescribes any needed medications.

In addition to providing the foster caregiver with any prescribed medications, the Richmond SPCA offers to provide all the supplies needed to care for the animals: food, formula for bottle-fed kittens; litter boxes, litter, crates etc. According to Starr, many caregivers actually provide their own supplies.

During most of the year, caregivers are given a return date. Because the fostered animals come back ready to be immediately altered and put on the adoption floor, and puppies and kittens go quickly, space is usually not a problem. During peak breeding seasons, when space does become an issue, caregivers are told that they will be called when space becomes available – usually within three weeks.

Foster to Surrender is part of the Richmond SPCA's Project Safety Net, a sweeping program agenda, adapted from programs at the Monadnock Humane Society (West Swanzey, NH) and Maricopa Animal Care & Control (Phoenix, AZ), to keep animals out of shelters.

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Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

- People

The Foster to Surrender program requires little or no additional staff time. One person, a member of the admissions staff or a volunteer, keeps track of the animals in the program. Someone must be available to examine the animals when they are brought in, administer vaccinations, and prescribe medication. This is best done with in-house veterinary staff, but it could be done using outside veterinary services. According to Starr, any additional staff time should be weighed against time that would otherwise be spent euthanizing the animals or caring for them in-house.

- Up front costs and start-up funding

According to Starr, the costs of starting a Foster to Surrender program are minimal. The Richmond SPCA doesn't track the expenses separately because the animals are viewed as normal intake and existing admissions and medical staff handle the program. Costs of treatment can run between \$3 and \$12 per animal – no more than it would cost to treat them in-house – less if medical complications are avoided by keeping the animals out of the shelter. Most caregivers provide their own supplies, further reducing the cost. Starr estimates that the cost of saving the animals is comparable to or less than the monetary cost would be to euthanize them – and that doesn't take into account the very real emotional cost of euthanasia.

Timeline

According to Starr, setting up the program didn't take any time at all once the staff had been retrained to look at the public in a new way. That essential process took about six months.

Step by Step

Here are the steps the Richmond SPCA took to establish the Foster to Surrender program.

1. They retrained the staff.

Foster to Surrender was perhaps the most dramatic example of the Richmond SPCA's successful partnership with the public in the creation of a humane community. Turning vulnerable puppies and kittens back to foster caregivers willing to shelter them through a critical period in their lives required a whole new level of trust. Preparing the staff to interact with the public in this new way took about six months of intense training. Some staff members, unable to make the shift, left the organization.

2. They engaged the public.

According to Starr, animal welfare organizations are partly to blame for the public's refusal to take responsibility for the animals. "For decades, we've trained the public to think they can just drop off unwanted animals and we'll take care of things – that caring for the animals is our job", she explains. At the Richmond SPCA, in order to move toward No Kill, they had to get the public to view animal welfare as a community concern. They had to get the public to understand and embrace the idea that people are part of the problem but can also be a large part of the solution.

3. They developed a contract.

The foster caregiver is asked to sign a very simple contract formalizing the relationship.

Foster caregivers agree that the animals belong to the Richmond SPCA and must be returned at the end of the foster period to go through the standard adoption process. (Caregivers are, however, encouraged to line up potential adopters and they may adopt the animals themselves). The contract includes a waiver, in which the caregiver agrees to "hold the Richmond SPCA harmless from any direct or consequential damages" arising out of the foster care agreement.

4. They established a process for dealing with medical emergencies.

Foster caregivers are provided with a number to call during the day for medical concerns as well as an after-hours emergency phone number. Most issues are handled by in-house medical staff; however, after hours, the staff may instruct the caregiver to take the animal to an area emergency clinic. Caregivers are instructed not to use their own veterinarians. They agree to be financially responsible for any medical care not pre-authorized by the Richmond SPCA medical staff.

5. They developed a tracking system.

Starr advises that animals can be tracked by computer using any of the commercial shelter software programs. If a computer is not available, all that is really needed is a separate drawer where files of the animals are kept while they are in foster care.

6. They lined up the needed supplies.

The supplies for the Foster to Surrender program are taken from the organization's general shelter supplies inventory. Starr advises, however, that a special donation drive for Foster to Surrender supplies would be a good way to raise public awareness.

7. They identified staff member(s) to examine animals, give shots, prescribe medications, and educate caregivers about care and feeding.

Starr advises that a program like this works best if there is an in-house medical facility. Contracting with outside veterinarians could work but it would be logistically challenging and more expensive.

Results

The Numbers

In 2006, 700 animals went through the Foster to Surrender Program. 85% were kittens.

At the height of the 2006 breeding season, the Richmond SPCA had 91 puppies and kittens in the program.

Critical Factors

Overcoming the fear: Most people want to do the right thing, but shelter staff are often afraid to ask and to trust. According to Starr, you have to push past the fear.

Thinking Outside the Box

According to Starr, the most important feature of the Foster to Surrender program was the shift in attitude that enabled the staff to partner with the public to provide the best possible care for a very vulnerable group of animals. At the time, trusting the public to be part of the solution was a novel approach.

How They Feel About What They Did

According to Starr, this program is easy to start and has many benefits: less illness in the shelter, quicker turn-around, greater control over intake and shelter population, and – ultimately more adoptions and less euthanasia. In addition, the program gets the public involved. “By asking people to foster animals until they are well enough or old enough to enter the shelter and go up for adoption, we allow them to experience the magnitude of the problem, assume some responsibility for it and recognize that they can be part of the solution”.

Some Words of Wisdom

What Worked

- Giving puppies and kittens immunity before they enter the shelter.
Shelters are tough environments for very young animals. Diseases like URI and parvo are a real threat to their survival. By taking ownership of the animals, administering the first round of shots and then keeping the animals out of the shelter until they can receive the second round of shots, have spay/neuter surgery and go right up for adoption, the Richmond SPCA greatly increases the chances that the animals will make it into their adoptive homes without becoming ill.
- Making sure people understand the commitment up front. People do want to help, but it's important for them to understand the guidelines.

Be Prepared For

- The challenge of changing staff attitudes.
Old attitudes die hard. Some staff members won't be able to make the change.
- Rejection.
Some people will say No and that's OK. Many more will say Yes.
- The occasional failure.
Occasionally a foster caregiver won't bring the animals back or return phone calls. Some animals die in spite of the best efforts of the caregivers. In 2006, 12 of the 700 animals that went through the program didn't make it; but the number of animals saved far outweighs the failures.

Richmond SPCA: Thumbnail Sketch

Richmond SPCA
Robin Starr: CEO
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www.richmondspca.org



The Richmond SPCA is a No Kill humane society dedicated to the principle that every life is precious. Since 1999, the organization has worked to make Richmond one of the safest cities in the United States for homeless animals. In addition to adopting a new and progressive operating model that includes aggressive pet retention, rehabilitation, adoption, spay/neuter, and humane education programs, the Richmond SPCA developed cooperative arrangements with the City of Richmond and other area sheltering organizations to create an environment in which all animals ending up in shelters would have a much stronger chance for survival. As a result, no healthy homeless cat or dog died in Richmond in 2006.

The Richmond SPCA is currently partnering with the ASPCA on Mission Orange, a national initiative to train and support other cities across the country interested in becoming humane communities. To learn more about the ASPCA's Mission: Orange, go to (link to M: O overview). To read the whole story of the City of Richmond's journey to humane community status, go to Richmond SPCA: Creating a Humane Community – One Step at a Time.

Stats

From Oct. 1, 2005 to Sept. 30, 2006, the Richmond SPCA:

- Saved the lives of 4,325 animals through adoption, re-homing and behavioral assistance programs. (as of July of 2007, 13,832 pets' lives had been saved since the organization became No Kill in 2002)
- Rehabilitated approximately 2,300 sick and injured pets
- Achieved a citywide save rate of 76%, giving Richmond one of the lowest euthanasia rates in the country
- Spayed or neutered 11,017 animals in their on-site clinic
- Delivered 8,512 hours of humane education to area school children and 3,060 hours of adult education

Staff

43 full time. 43 part time

Operating Budget

\$3.3million

Business Type

501(c) (3) nonprofit