

Start Spreading the News

New York-based surrender prevention program can make it anywhere

BY JAMES HETTINGER

Why are you surrendering these animals? Is there anything we can do to help?



The rabbi had a problem with Othello.

Othello is one of his cats, who lives in the Brooklyn brownstone the rabbi shares with his family and three other neutered adopted cats who had started bullying Othello.

In response, Othello had begun to isolate himself from the others and act aloof toward his human family. He took to spraying around the home, and the family members lost patience as they found urine on their furniture, clothes, and walls. A medical exam and bloodwork revealed no medical problem. A veterinarian prescribed Prozac, but Othello, declining to join that nation, refused to take the pills.

At wit's end and in danger of getting rid of Othello, the man contacted Pets for Life NYC (PFLNYC), a New York City-based animal surrender prevention program that in 2009

became part of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS).

PFLNYC's professional cat behaviorist, Beth Adelman, explained that Othello was clearly being victimized by the other cats. He wasn't using the litter boxes in the home because he felt threatened near them. She devised a plan of action for the family: Confine Othello in a room of his own with windows, a litter box, and food and water dishes. Visit him daily for games, petting, and gentle talking. Provide a synthetic calming scent. Apply an enzymatic cleaner on the areas where Othello had previously urinated.

Two weeks after implementing Adelman's suggestions, the family essentially had a new cat—one who used the litter box in his room and was happier and more social, confident, and relaxed around people. When he acciden-

tally got let out of his room, the new attitude stuck: Othello shed his outsider status and was accepted by his former tormentors. He now interacts with the other cats in a friendly manner, and thinks inside the litter box.

Thus the cat, unlike his Shakespearean namesake, avoided a sad ending. The rabbi told PFLNYC officials that if he had given up Othello, "I would have regretted this decision to the end of my days."

The Missing Piece

PFLNYC aims to short-circuit such regrets by getting people the advice and services they need before they surrender their pets. Increasing shelter adoptions and spay/neuter are important parts of ending euthanasia, but "another essential part of combating pet homelessness ... is to do surrender preven-

tion," says Joyce Friedman, a coordinator for PFLNYC. "And we feel like that is something that definitely could be done more. It's sort of the missing piece."

Most of the problems that prompt people to consider surrendering pets—from litter box issues to a lack of money for pet food or veterinary care—are solvable, Friedman asserts. Many people thinking of giving up their pets are struggling financially, which leads them to think the solutions are too expensive. PFLNYC extends a helping hand by offering a variety of free or low-cost services.

The program connects eligible low-income clients to veterinarians who have agreed to offer care at a reduced cost. "That's a big issue, obviously, because vet care is so expensive everywhere," says PFLNYC coordinator Jenny Olsen. She recalls one client who was mulling getting rid of her cat because she couldn't afford to treat an ear infection.



Do you need some advice for keeping your cat off the furniture?

Would you like to consult with one of our dog trainers or cat behavior specialists?

"Surrendering your animal for an ear infection ... it shouldn't be that way."

Affordable behavior training is available through the roughly 15 dog trainers and three cat behavior experts affiliated with PFLNYC. They'll do free consultations over the phone, which is often all that's needed to address a problem, particularly with cats, Olsen says. When dog trainers do home visits, they charge the client according to his ability to pay.

PFLNYC provides "a lot of crisis intervention," Friedman says. Foster care or inexpensive boarding can be arranged for pet owners experiencing crises like homelessness, fires, floods, or extended hospital or rehab stays. The goal is to reunite people with their pets after the crisis has passed.

One case that Friedman and Olsen found particularly gratifying involved Daisy, a Brooklyn woman on disability whose home was damaged in a fire that displaced her and her pets: an elderly blind Chihuahua mix, four cats, and numerous lovebirds.

She found a neighbor to take the birds temporarily, but believed she had no other choice but to bring her cats and dog to a city shelter.

When she visited her animals in the shelter, Daisy was referred to PFLNYC, which stepped in and searched for foster homes for all five animals. One foster mom took in the four cats, and Daisy was able to take them back when she rented a room several boroughs away. The birds remained boarded with the neighbor, and Daisy took a long subway ride daily to care for them. Daisy's rented room didn't allow dogs, so her Chihuahua—Paco—stayed with several PFLNYC foster homes for a year.

Eventually, the city completed repairs to Daisy's home, and she was reunited with her entire animal family. She keeps PFLNYC up-



dated with current pictures of her pets. To further show her gratitude to the program, Daisy adopted two older Chihuahuas who had lost their guardian due to illness.

PFLNYC's other services include assistance with pet-related landlord-tenant disputes, free pet food and supplies, trap-neuter-release for free-roaming or feral cats, advice about shedding and allergy problems, referrals to low-cost spay/neuter providers and transport to sterilization surgeries, and guidance and support for all sorts of issues—like telling someone how to bottle-feed the newborn kitten they've just found.

The program has grown in the four-plus years since Friedman and Olsen met as volunteers who would talk to people in the lobby of an Animal Care and Control of New York City shelter in Brooklyn. Back then, Olsen recalls, the program was essentially run by its founder, who had one low-cost veterinarian and a hot line available on limited days and hours. Today, PFLNYC utilizes about 20 vets, and has two hot lines staffed by volunteers 12 hours a day, seven days a week—handling as many as 500 calls a month. The number of animals that PFLNYC has assisted (by providing services that either prevented surrenders or improved the animals' care in their homes) grew from 2,100 in 2008 to 4,162 in 2010.

Trying This at Home

Now, Friedman and Olsen are looking to train shelters as well as individual animal welfare advocates and small nonprofits to develop surrender prevention programs in their communities. The idea appears to be striking a chord:



Do you need advice for resolving a pet-related dispute with your landlord?

Their presentation at this year's Animal Care Expo in May drew more than 200 people.

To figure out which services to offer at first, look at the most common reasons for surrenders at your shelter, Friedman advises. If clients' inability to afford veterinary care is a top reason, start recruiting local vets—you might start with those you know have worked with the shelter in the past. You can explain how providing low-cost services might help bring the veterinarians new clients while helping keep pets in their homes. To help sweeten the deal, mention that participating vets will be publicly thanked on the shelter's website or in its newsletter. (PFLNYC can supply drafts of informational and "thank-you-for-joining" letters.)

If behavior problems are driving relinquishments, you might focus first on recruiting a humane dog trainer or cat behaviorist. If you're already affiliated with one, see if she'd be interested in helping with surrender prevention. "Think about your current contacts, introduce them to this innovative-type program, and ask them for further professional trainer contacts," Friedman says. PFLNYC can help with this as well; the program offers free training over the phone to train your volunteers to give basic cat behavior advice to clients. PFLNYC trainers can also reach out to their professional contacts in your locale to talk up the program idea to them.

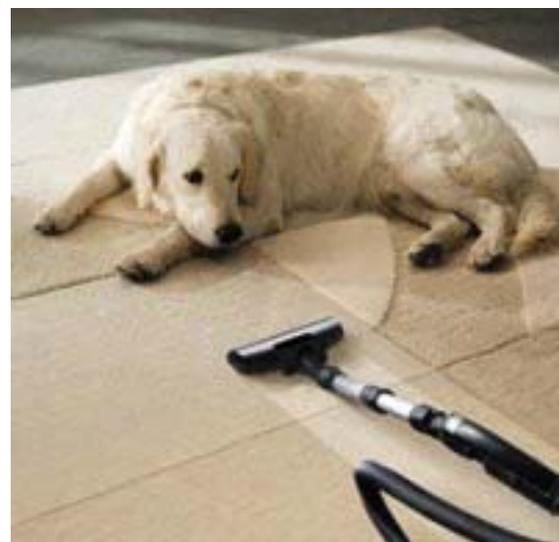
Many law firms do pro bono work and will welcome the opportunity to do it for animals and their guardians, Friedman and Olsen have found. PFLNYC can offer advice on how to recruit lawyers.

To grow your volunteer base, post recruitment fliers at the shelter and anywhere that animal-friendly people gather, including pet stores, vegetarian restaurants, and vets' offices. You can also get the word out through social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and email alerts to local animal advocacy lists.

The preventive nature of the program can help attract volunteers, Friedman notes. While many people see the value of fostering a shelter pet and finding him a new home, that process can seem like an endless cycle, she explains. Some volunteers will find it appealing to attack the roots of shelter overpopulation rather than its consequences. "To keep those animals out of the shelter to begin with is something that's very rewarding."

PFLNYC can guide you through the training of your volunteers and share its volunteer manual, which Olsen says started at five pages and has grown to 82.

A shelter volunteer coordinator is an ideal person for PFLNYC to coach, because similar programs will likely use volunteers. But Friedman and Olsen will mentor anyone who wants to start a program by providing guidance, sending them materials, hosting



Can we help you house-train your dog?

conference calls, and using their contacts with HSUS state directors to help recruit local volunteers.

You don't have to start big. You can make do without an office, but you'll need a flier and a hot line.

The flier (or large poster, if there's space!) can be posted near the shelter's surrender counter, asking people to call the program before they make the decision to surrender their pets. Fliers can also be posted at other shelters and rescue groups as well as supermarkets, Laundromats, doctors' offices, and social service agencies. Front-line shelter staff can also help by mentioning the availability of the program to people coming in to give up their animals.

Initially, you might not have the staff or volunteers to answer the phone live—but that's OK. All you need is one volunteer with a cell phone and a voicemail message telling callers they've reached the pet surrender prevention program, and their call will be returned on the same day. As you recruit more volunteers, calls can be forwarded so that designated volunteers pick up on certain days.

PFLNYC can provide samples of all the necessary materials, including fliers on specific pet issues such as allergies and affordable spay/neuter, applications and agreements for boarding and fostering, and intake forms to help volunteers track each case.

Taking the Show on the Road

Daniela vonArx of Minnesota welcomed the help. She founded and runs Foster My Pet, a nonprofit organization for pet owners in distress and on public assistance in the Twin Cities region.

A native of Switzerland who volunteered at shelters, vonArx says she has plenty of compassion for people who are facing the possibility of surrendering their pets. Working part time at a Twin Cities humane society, she saw people who felt they had to give up their pets, but didn't want to. The idea of breaking the human-animal bond because of temporary problems, problems that can be fixed, "is just something I never wanted to accept as being an answer," she says.



Bullied by his fellow cats and unwilling to use the litter box, Othello was on the verge of being surrendered. But some commonsense advice from a Pets for Life cat behaviorist helped turn him into a happy and well-socialized cat.



Paco, an elderly, blind Chihuahua mix from Brooklyn, spent a year in Pets for Life NYC foster homes after his owner's home was damaged by fire.

Seeing no surrender prevention help available locally, vonArx decided to start her own group—despite having no background in business. She began doing research and sought advice about insurance and legal matters. To file for tax-exempt status, she had to create a business plan, which raised a ton of questions. "I made phone calls to the whole world," she says, seeking advice from veterinarians, pet owners, rescues, and other animal welfare organizations.

In starting a program, you need to utilize more than your heart, she says. "You're going to have to use your head, too."

Many of the calls vonArx receives are from people needing services other than

foster care, such as advice on pet behavior, care, and aggression, and owners' disputes with landlords or neighbors. She tracks every call and follows up on many cases, spending hours on the phone and on the Internet. Her program is evolving into a miniature version of PFLNYC, and she is grateful that someone suggested she contact Olsen and Friedman.

She credits PFLNYC with helping her develop two planned additions to Foster My Pet's services: a helpline that will offer low-cost visits by behavior specialists, and an education program focusing on instructing pet owners in basic animal care and training.

Such services are part of the series of safety nets for animals that The HSUS hopes to create as it works to reduce euthanasia nationwide, says Adam Goldfarb, director of The HSUS's Pets at Risk Program. The first "net" focuses on giving new pet owners everything they need to properly care for their animals, he explains. But if a problem such as a behavioral issue arises and the animal is in danger of being surrendered, a Pets for Life-style program can step in to help the owner find another solution.

"We want to be there for an animal at every phase of their life and provide help for them one way or another," Goldfarb says.

While efforts to reduce euthanasia have traditionally focused on spay/neuter and adoption, Goldfarb notes, "We still need to, and we still can, prevent a lot of those animals from coming into the shelter in the first place." In an ideal future, he adds, shelters would be largely empty transitional facilities, reserved for animals who have experienced a terrible problem like the death of an owner, or who got lost but will soon return home.

Overall, Olsen and Friedman find their work extremely satisfying. "We get a lot of cases, and that can be overwhelming sometimes, but it is very rewarding," Olsen says. "We have a lot of success stories." **AS**

For more information about Pets for Life NYC, visit humanesociety.org/pflnyc. Email Jenny Olsen at jjolsen@humanesociety.org or Joyce Friedman at jfriedman@humanesociety.org.