

Building a Brighter Future, One Shelter at a Time



In my travels on behalf of The HSUS, I've been getting to about 40 states a year. Whenever and wherever I can, I visit local animal care organizations, including wildlife rehabilitation centers, sanctuaries, and horse rescues.

But animal shelters are the largest category of operations that I see. I go to learn about their programs and their needs, spot trends in our industry, and find out what's impeding their progress. We estimate there are about 3,500 brick-and-mortar shelters in the country—about half of them private charities, and the rest government-funded animal care and control agencies. Animal Sheltering is designed precisely to serve this community, along with rescue groups and others carrying out lifesaving work for animals, by giving them the best information to advance their work and to strengthen their sense of shared purpose.

But in spite of many shared goals, our movement is nothing like a national corporation. We're not McDonald's or Safeway or Jiffy Lube; the thousands of individual enterprises in our movement look and behave differently from community to community. We are separately owned and operated facilities, and we are uneven, in just about every sense of the word.

In fact, in a good number of our nation's 3,100 counties, there are no shelters at all, and the local police typically handle the animal complaints and cases. Such gaps in the humane infrastructure all but guarantee that the needs of animals in the community will not be met, even if law enforcement personnel have the best of intentions. The lack of training and resources, and the inability to conduct outreach and to attract and manage volunteers, means that there are too many missing ingredients for a successful program.

In other communities, the organizations that do exist often struggle. They're short on funds and staff and operate from uninviting and out-of-date buildings. They're making do, but they're overwhelmed and under-supported.

But in a growing number of places, I am happy to say, I've noticed something of a building boom in our field. There are beautiful new shelters—public and private—being constructed throughout the country. Typically, these new facilities represent a tremendous upgrade. They allow more natural light to enhance the atmosphere, they have better airflow systems, they have sound barriers or a physical separation between the dog and cat holding areas, and a range of other design elements that reflect the newest thinking in animal care. They're built not just to provide greater comfort for the animals, but also for the staff, volunteers, and public visitors.

I've been to more than 1,000 shelters, and I've seen the good and the bad. But I'm delighted that there's a definite momentum toward better buildings, a higher degree of professionalism, and better results for the animals. The Association of Shelter Veterinarians' Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, too, give us a powerful tool to create shelters that embody the national focus on saving more animals' lives. We'll never succeed in our work if regular people don't want to come to shelters, believing that these facilities are unappealing. Part of our marketing effort must be to attract new supporters by creating an atmosphere that conveys need, but also hopefulness.

One positive trend I've seen is the surge in partnerships between shelters and local rescue organizations. In the past, I saw too much division, and little cross-pollination between these groups. Now, there's increasing cooperation and collaboration, and I know some shelters that are working with more than 100 rescues in their communities—groups that are relieving shelters' load by placing or fostering animals, encouraging adoptions, and saving lives. Everybody benefits.

I also see many shelters being proactive, reaching out into the community to find people where they are. Shelters are conducting adoption events at malls and other public settings. In my neighborhood in Washington, D.C., the Washington Humane Society parks its adoption truck squarely in front of one of the busiest Whole Foods Market stores in the country, resulting in more adoptions and greater visibility for the organization and its issues.

The goal of pet welfare groups is clear: an end to the euthanasia of healthy and adoptable animals. In order to get there, we need to deploy a hundred tools and to apply best practices. As I travel around the country, I am seeing efforts to take these steps, with more lifesaving work going on than ever before. Our goal is not far off if we take the right strategic approaches.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wayne Pacelle". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Wayne Pacelle, President & CEO
The Humane Society of the United States