The direction seems to be working for the city: Having announced in 1999 that it aimed to save the life of every healthy homeless animal in the city by 2008, the city got there early. According to the SPCA, no healthy animal has been euthanized in Richmond since 2006.

“I really like looking back at the capital campaign that the Richmond SPCA undertook between 1999 and 2002,” says Tabitha Hanes, the shelter’s director of communications. “The motto of that campaign was ‘The best shelter is a humane community.’”

Hanes says that approach represents the shelter’s belief that the community must be engaged as a partner in the quest to get to zero euthanasia.

With events like its annual Dog Jog and 5K Run, the Richmond SPCA promotes the idea that pets should be treated as members of the family.

In Virginia, Challenging the Status Quo
The Richmond SPCA engages its community as a partner in the quest to get to zero euthanasia

BY NEWTON HOLT

As pet lovers, most of us see our animals as furry children. It’s a notion that suggests a deep commitment — after all, most new parents wouldn’t drive their baby back to the hospital, ask for the obstetrician, and say, “I’ve had it!” after the kid’s first bout of earache or sassiness.

The problem continuing to drive relinquishment, according to Robin Robertson Starr, CEO of the Richmond SPCA, is that many people still don’t think of their pets as true family members. “It’s become too pervasive in our society to see pets as disposable. We don’t kick family members out of our families for unwanted behavior — although we may want to,” she laughs.

To that end, when the Richmond SPCA went limited-admission in 2002, the shelter switched to an appointment-based relinquishment system — there’s a waiting list to surrender animals — and initiated its Project Safety Net, a series of programs and services designed to reduce animal relinquishment. By offering services in behavior and training, helping owners find pet-friendly housing, assisting low-income families in meeting their pets’ needs, taking in transfer animals from municipal shelters in the area, and — most importantly — involving the community as a partner, the Richmond SPCA aims to create a philosophical shift in the region it serves.

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“Of course, people will still make the wrong decision,” Hanes says. “But it’s getting easier.”
treated as a partner in efforts to get to no-kill. “We’re not able to get there as a single organization, and we need each and every member of the community to behave more compassionately in order to reach the goals that we all have.”

Changing the Mindset
As most shelter folks know, behavior issues are among the top reasons people relinquish their pets. And according to Starr, relinquishment—not patience, training, and rehabilitation—has become the norm in American society. Go ahead and buy that dog, cat, bird—if it “acts up,” you can always take it to the shelter.

Have shelters unwittingly contributed to this notion of easy come, easy go? For decades, many shelters feared that if they made relinquishment more difficult, the animals might suffer when owners—put off by delays or guilt-tripping at the intake counter—chose to simply abandon them.

But as some shelters shift toward surrender-by-appointment systems and waiting lists, many are wondering whether those fears are part of longstanding shelter mythology, much like the now-discredited idea that pets given as gifts wouldn’t stay in the home. Flipping those old fears on their head, some might argue, perhaps we shouldn’t be looking at these approaches as making the surrender of animals more difficult, but as making holding onto animals easier, encouraging people to honor their commitments.

Starr says that in 2002 a “fundamental shift” took place in the way her organization operates. “We stopped focusing on just how many animals we could take in and started operating in a way that was consistent with our moral philosophy—to encourage responsible pet ownership and to encourage the community to be our partners in saving lives.”

The concept of partnering runs throughout the SPCA’s approach, even into a role that many shelters and rescues have considered themselves uniquely qualified to perform: rehoming services. For people who do feel compelled to give up an animal—or who are considering it as a possibility—the SPCA helps them do so without bringing the animal into the shelter. It allows individuals to list animals for private adoption on the SPCA’s website, and offers advice to owners on how to evaluate adopters. The only requirements for participants are that the animal be sterilized and up to date on vaccinations—services the shelter will provide if needed.

Many people decide to go that route. “They want to find a home for their pet privately and don’t want their pet to ever enter a shelter,” says Hanes. “We also have people who contact our admissions team about surrendering a pet, and while they’re waiting for an admissions appointment, they take advantage of that opportunity, because they understand that they’ll be able to have a connection with the potential adopter if they’re able to place them privately, and also that it’s a much less stressful transition for their pet to go directly into another home.”

Keeping Animals in Happ(ier) Homes
Of course, the ideal option is that a pet will stay happily in her current home, and that’s the outcome toward which most components of Project Safety Net—which Starr calls an “umbrella term” for all that the organization does to help people see their pets as true family members—are geared.

One of the most important elements of the program is a free behavioral help line. Starr and her colleagues worked with animal trainers to establish this resource, which pet guardians may call to get advice. That service, she says, has been tremendously successful. “Many times, when people would come to us to surrender their pets due to unwanted behavior, we instead convinced them to work with one of our training staff to address the underlying behavioral problems,” she says. She recalls a “wonderful family” that adopted a black Lab mix several years ago—a dog who immediately started to display aggressive behaviors. The dog repeatedly knocked down the family’s school-aged daughter by jumping up and tugging on her backpack and also would “guard the bed, barking ferociously at anyone who tried to come near it.”

The family was ready to give up. But they worked with the Richmond SPCA’s behaviorists, and the dog learned to act more appropriately. He remains a part of that family to this day.

The Richmond SPCA makes adopters aware of the behavioral services it offers, and Starr’s convinced that the program has saved...
Numerous animals from relinquishment. The help line is available to anyone, not only to those who’ve adopted from the SPCA, and those who need more than an over-the-phone consult can get in-person help.

As the community has become more aware of and engaged in the shelter’s philosophy, says chief operating officer Tamsen Kingry, staff have seen a shift in the direction of calls they receive: fewer from frustrated owners at the end of their ropes, wanting to come in that very minute to drop off a misbehaving pet, and more from those who are having issues and want to figure out how to deal with them.

In the decade of Project Safety Net’s existence, people have become aware of its programs and services, says Kingry. “It used to be that folks would call seeking relinquishment or to talk about surrendering a pet, but now, increasingly, folks are calling specifically for more information about those programs that are going to provide them an alternative to relinquishment.”

Breaking Down the Bond Breakers
Hanes says that the shelter hasn’t seen a spike in relinquishments due to people losing their homes to foreclosure, but the SPCA created a resource just in case: a booklet that lists every pet-friendly rental property in the area. It includes information on weight restrictions, breed restrictions, deposits required, and how many animals are allowed per unit, for example, to help moving families find the best place for them and their pets.

The impact the shelter has seen from the lousy economy, she says, is that more people are struggling to provide the basic care their animals need. The shelter has a pet pantry to provide supplemental pet food supplies to those who need it, and in 2009, the shelter created a wellness clinic that provides basic care to the pets of low-income community members, offering rabies vaccines, heartworm treatment, flea and tick prevention, and other basic annual vaccinations.

That service has been so popular—and needed—that the shelter recently expanded it, says Hanes. It could see that the community needed not only that service, but much more. The clinic “was consistently booked out several weeks in advance. We started out doing it one Monday a month, then moved to every Monday, and then every Monday and Saturday due to demand,” she says. In March, the SPCA launched its full-service Clinic for Compassionate Care, aimed at helping the same audience. Starr says she considers the low-cost clinic and the pet pantry “probably the most fundamental piece of Project Safety Net.”

A community-based approach to reducing euthanasia means engaging and partnering with other animal groups to ensure that reduced intake at one facility doesn’t simply shift the burden to other area groups. In 2001, Hanes notes, nearly 100 percent of the shelter’s animals came in as direct owner relinquishments; after a decade of the new approach, 70 to 75 percent come as transfers from government shelters, with the remainder coming directly from owners. Through a grant from Maddie’s Fund, the Richmond community reported across-the-board statistics from 2006 through 2010, and Hanes says that the SPCA’s admissions team “is in constant communication with those shelters so we know their needs and that we’re able to be responsive to helping them manage their cage space as well.” As the shelter’s slogan puts it: “Every life is precious”—not just those of the animals with the good fortune to end up at the Richmond SPCA.

“Over decades, this country has created a mindset that you could simply get rid of your pet, and we’ve worked very hard to get the community to use the services we offer,” says Starr. “The process of changing existing concepts and getting people to adapt to a process that demands a greater sense of responsibility is tough. But I think that with a little bit of explanation and effort on our part, people respond positively, even though shifting ways that have become traditional and comfortable is always challenging.”

Challenging, yes. But as the Richmond SPCA is showing—day by day, animal by animal, family by family—not impossible. AS

For more about the Richmond SPCA’s community partners, check out animalsheltering.org/richmondpartners.

Richmond SPCA CEO Robin Robertson Starr, right, has helped spearhead the organization’s efforts to convince people that pets shouldn’t be viewed as disposable. Mitzi, the dog presented by Starr and SPCA board chairman Allen King at an event in April, was adopted later in the evening.