At Dallas Animal Services (DAS), good relationships with rescue groups have not only saved animals’ lives, they’ve had a wonderful effect on staff morale, says shelter manager Jody Jones. Even though one local rescue group got in “a little over their head” not long ago, taking in more animals than it could care for, Jones says that was in no way typical. It’s “not the norm for that to happen with your transfer partners. Not at all.”

On the contrary, Jones says, rescue relationships have been a huge boon to her shelter, enabling them to save many more animals, and she wanted to make sure that other animal control agencies reading the *Animal Sheltering* got that message loud and clear. DAS loves its transfer and placement partners, and Jones and Mark Cooper, the officer who’s been coordinating the agency’s work with rescues, want to see animal services around the country embrace external placement groups and work toward an institutional culture that treats them as partners.

Delivering that message is one of the primary goals of this story. In the names of all the shelters that have found amazing transfer partners in their communities, let’s say it clearly: Rescue groups, thank you. Every day you help save thousands of animals. The progress the humane field has made in lowering euthanasia rates could not have happened without you. Shelters should no more avoid working with rescues because of the occasional bad actor than adopters should avoid shelters due to one bad experience.

In Dallas, Jones’s agency has worked to welcome local rescue partners. In 2009, Cooper started posting to an area listserv, DFW Cares, to let people know that the agency was open to partnerships. “I reached out to all of them and said, ‘I’m here, I’m your contact, and come on by,’” says Cooper, adding that his commitment to saving lives, and his desire to make the transfer process as easy as possible, has been critical to the agency’s success.

Cooper goes out of his way to make the process smooth. If a rescuer gets stuck in traffic, for example, and calls to let him know that she won’t be able to make it into the shelter to pick up the animal as scheduled, he’ll work with them. “And they don’t always have that with other groups,” he notes. “Certain shelters are like, ‘Be here this time, no later, or the animal will be euthanized.’”

Here to Help
Cooper considers the agency’s rescue partners his friends. They’re all on a first-name basis and have a great rapport. And that’s an attitude that has spread throughout the agency, Jones notes, pointing out that a single staffer can’t do it all by himself. You have to make sure that openness to rescue is part of the organizational culture, she says, and not a system that only works smoothly when the one rescue-friendly staffer is on duty.

**Establishing Your Bona Fidos**

For rescue groups, strutting your stuff to local shelters can help you save more animals

BY CARMIE ALLAN

His bags are packed; he’s ready to go. And you want to help him find a good home. But first, you may need to show the shelter how lucky he is to be leaving with you.
While transforming the system at Dallas Animal Services, Cooper’s been privy to some of the common complaints rescuers have about shelters. His experiences echo what most rescuers interviewed for this story say about their work: They all have good relationships with some of their local shelters, but report that others have treated them badly or seem to view them with suspicion.

It’s a reality that baffles and frustrates many rescuers. Why do some shelters seem fearful about collaborating? Why do some agencies dig in their heels and make things difficult, when it’s so obvious that partnering saves animals’ lives?

The difference is summed up by Ellen Fawl of Purebreds Plus Cat Rescue in California: “If you go to a shelter like the Sacramento SPCA, [their staff] comes to the front and says, ‘How can I help you?’ and they take us through the entire shelter, and we end up taking a dozen cats. But when you go to the other shelter, they treat us like we’re trying to steal something, and we’re there for four hours, and we get the run-around, and we have to sign a million forms and wait.” It’s had an effect on the group’s willingness to pull animals there, she says. “Not one of our foster moms is willing to go out to that shelter anymore.”

In contrast, rescue-friendly shelters recognize that transfer partners help boost live release rates—a top priority for most progressive shelters and the communities they serve. DAS, for example, now works with more than 100 rescue groups, and Cooper says he regularly gets emails from groups who’ve heard how easy the shelter is to work with and want to partner with it.

It’s changed the agency across the board, he says. In the past, field officers bringing in stray dogs would leave them in a cage, and consider their jobs done. Now, though, officers sometimes call Cooper at night to bring his attention to a pooch who’s captured their attention. They’ll tell him what kennel the dog is in, point out the dog’s appealing qualities, and ask him to do what he can to get the animal to a rescue group.

“It’s a total change from how it used to be,” says Cooper. “They realize that these dogs don’t have to be put down.”

With so much good being done through collaborative relationships between shelters and rescues, it’s a mystery to many why any shelter—especially one that’s still euthanizing for space—would hesitate to get involved with a good rescue partner.

But some of these shelters do have reasons, or at least a history that might explain their concerns. Understanding what those reasons might be can help rescues make their case. By providing shelters with evidence of your high animal care standards and successful placements, you can persuade them that—given the importance of saving animals’ lives—the occasional bad apple should not spoil the whole bunch.

**Shelter Fear Factor #1: Partnering With a Potential Critic**

“There are so many rescue groups that have a reputation of badmouthing the shelters,” says Lauren Fox, head of All Breed Rescue & Training in Colorado. “And that has been something I’ve made sure was clear within the organization—to my volunteers, to my board members, to the humane society—that when other groups are on that bandwagon of badmouthing the, quote-unquote, kill shelters, that’s not going to do any good for anybody.”

When Fox took her current position at All Breed Rescue & Training, she knew that there had been some bad blood between the former head and the director of the local shelter. So she asked him out to lunch and explained that there was a new sheriff in town. “I sat down and said, ‘Our goal is to help you. That’s what we do—we’re here to help you reduce your euthanasia numbers and reduce the stress on the staff when they feel like there’s a dog who’s just not appropriate for the general public, or has some special medical or behavior needs, and the toll that takes on your staff to put that dog on the euthanasia list.’”

Staying out of the nasty political battles that have surrounded Miami-Dade County Animal Services for the past few years has helped rescuer Carol Johnson stay focused on what matters to her, and has helped preserve her good relationship with the shelter. “What I want to do is go there, get my dogs, and get out,” says Johnson, who works with Golden Rescue South Florida. “These people who send these horrible nasty emails, I just don’t get involved in all that.”

Some shelters do deserve criticism, and if you’ve tried to work with management to improve standards of care but gotten nowhere, sometimes going public is the only way to initiate change. But you may need to decide...
where you can do the most good—because few shelters will feel good about releasing animals to people who are trashing their work in the media the next day.

Johnson admits she doesn’t always agree with every shelter policy. But, she says, “If there’s something I’m not happy about, I will tell them. I really try to pick my battles. I think that it’s better for the dogs—I could go in there and scream and yell and be an ass, and who’s going to suffer for that ultimately? It’s the dogs.” In return, Johnson says, she’s found the shelter is open to the complaints she’s raised with them and tries to work on making improvements.

Shelter Fear Factor #2: What’s Behind that Door?
Part of shelters’ recalcitrance may be fear of the unknown.

Consider the visibility factor: Most shelters are public institutions, open to members of the public who come to adopt, surrender, or volunteer. This visibility tends to guarantee that if there are ongoing problems at an animal shelter, the public will find out.

With rescues, though, it’s different. Many rescues are run by single individuals out of private homes, so shelters often have nothing but a reputation to go on. And newer rescues don’t yet have much of a reputation. It can be a Catch-22: Sometimes a rescuer can’t pull animals until she proves herself and develops a good reputation, but she can’t get a good reputation till she pulls some animals and places them, thus proving herself.

If you’re a new rescuer and you’re sensing hesitation from a local agency, invite a shelter representative to visit your home or wherever the animals will be housed. Several rescuers interviewed for this story pointed out that rescue groups often do adopter home visits themselves, assuring adopters that the visit is nothing personal and merely a precaution to ensure an appropriate home environment. A rescue trying to prove its bona fides should offer that option in a similar spirit. Not all shelters will take you up on it, but many will find the offer itself reassuring. Barbara Richardson of Texas-based Homeward Bound Animal Rescue asks rhetorically, “You got the nerve to tell someone that you need to come into their home to check where one dog is going, and you won’t let a shelter come in to see where your 10 dogs are?”

Home visits don’t need to feel like an invasion. If you can invite a representative from animal control or the local humane society for coffee once or twice a year, you can show them how well your animals are doing, chat them up about other issues, and get some caffeine into your system in one fell swoop.

The shelters that want to see your housing space are likely just trying to avoid any potential problems. Because in the rare case when something does go wrong, it can go badly wrong. Several cases handled by The HSUS over the past few years provide examples: A rescue/sanctuary in Florida was holding 700 cats who had to be removed and placed by multiple cooperating agencies. A rescue in Mississippi had 163 dogs, most of them mangy and suffering from untreated wounds. And that Texas rescuer who was “a little over her head”? Jody Jones was being kind in that description.

Richardson, who has been rescuing dogs for nearly 20 years —“they call me the Queen of Mange,” she jokes—still gets angry talking about that case. A woman many in the rescue community had known for years got overwhelmed. There were some signs of trouble; for example, she started having people drop animals off at her vet’s office rather than her home, but nothing really rang any alarm bells.

While it’s not a common occurrence, some rescuers have become overwhelmed and slipped into hoarding—as seen at this property in Mississippi, where more than 100 animals, many suffering from disease and untreated wounds, had to be removed from filthy conditions.

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But one day, Richardson got an email from the woman at 5 a.m., saying that animal control had been to her house, and asking Richardson whether she had to let them in. “And I said, ‘Well, no, not without a search warrant, but you know my stance on that—if you don’t let animal control in your house,
there’s obviously a problem,” Richardson recalls. “And sure enough …”

Police and the SPCA of Texas pulled more than 100 animals from that property in Duncanville. “And let me tell you, you should have seen these conditions,” Richardson says. “These dogs were in crates that were rusted shut. There was poo and pee everywhere. There was one picture of a dog that was literally trying to rip its way out of a metal cage.”

Not in Your Backyard
The case was a nightmare for any animal lover to confront, and the tragedy goes beyond the animals who were directly affected. Such cases usually require the intervention of animal control, adding more animals to their cages and increasing their burden. Such cases can also make them nervous about working with any rescue groups. And when shelters that are still euthanizing avoid working with rescue, it can cost animals’ lives.

Horrified by the case and concerned about the potential consequences, Richardson—along with several other rescue groups and shelters in the area—have been meeting to discuss developing explicit standards of care they can all agree on. They’ve made attempts to do this in the past, Richardson says, but the meetings had broken down. But she thinks that this case bothered people enough that they’ll have the momentum to get consensus. The group is working on developing a code of conduct and standards based around the Five Freedoms, and Richardson says she’s hoping most groups will agree to allow members of the coalition to visit their property annually.

James Bias, executive director of the SPCA of Texas, thinks it’s a promising development. “I think any policing is going to thing—would be alleviated. “So many rescuers are operating under the radar, and are afraid to let people know what they’re up to, even if they’re doing good work,” she says.

Be Your Own Best Advocate
In places where no official certification process exists, it’s smart for rescues to consider what they can do collectively to ensure their own high standards for care are being met, and that they have a mechanism to demonstrate those standards to local shelters. Coming together to develop shared standards is a big, long-term project—one that may benefit from an outside facilitator. It may be worthwhile for groups that operate in communities where relationships between shelters and rescues are still tense, or where recent hoarding cases may have made shelters nervous.

Saddened and angered by the euthanasia that still happens at many shelters, many rescues are inspired to do their work specifically to combat those death rates. They spend their own money and time and energy to help shelters get their live release rates up. Most shelters are more than grateful for help from any group that’s helping save animals’ lives responsibly.

Take DAS, where Jones says that relationships with rescue have really changed staff morale. “It empowers staff to have an outlet, to be able to feel attached to that animal and its outcome as opposed to having to shut down those feelings, and close them off as an animal control person,” she says. “If this is a good dog and you’ve got an outlet or a resource within your organization, it makes you walk a little taller and feel a little prouder.”

Conversely, the odd case where a rescue adds to the problem is likely to have a chilling effect on collaborative efforts. The effect may be disproportionate, but is usually based on a shelter’s real fear of putting its animals in harm’s way. “If [the shelter] has to go into a home that was a rescuer and pull out 200 sick and dying cats, they’re not going to be happy with rescue,” says Fawl. “It goes both ways. We have to find ways to be above board as rescuers.”

As a rescue group, one of the smartest things you can do is share stories and pictures of your successful placements with your shelter partners. It lets them know the animals you take in—like Ella and Moxie, adopted through Lost Dog and Cat Rescue Foundation—are finding great homes.

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For more tips on showing shelters what a great partner you’ll be, go to animalsheltering.org/rescue_strategies.