Life in the Fast Lane

Shifting the most in-demand pets into high gear sends shelter systems revving

BY JIM BAKER

When it comes to good outcomes in sheltering, time is of the essence.

The moment an animal enters a shelter, the clock is ticking—not so much in terms of euthanasia, although that’s a factor in many shelters—but in the sense that while most shelters are good temporary places for pets who need homes, shelters were never meant to become home.

The longer an animal stays in a shelter, the greater the chance she’ll pick up a transmissible disease and suffer from stress, and stress often brings on deterioration of behavior, reducing her chances at adoption.

Not only that, but as her length of stay increases, it takes a toll on the shelter and its other animals, tying up cage space, staff time, and money to fund her food, housing, and other needs. Nobody benefits when an animal spends even one unnecessary day in the shelter.

It’s a problem that Dr. Sandra Newbury has studied closely. Newbury, a faculty member in the Koret Shelter Medicine Program at the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, has worked with Dr. Kate Hurley, the program’s director, to address the problem of animals waiting needlessly in shelters. The concept they’ve developed is called fast-tracking, and it simply means that staff identify highly adoptable animals, and speed their movement through the system by quickly addressing any issues that could delay their quick adoption.

“In other words, the goal for all animals, from a population management perspective, is to figure out how to move them through the system as efficiently as possible, toward whatever is their appropriate outcome. Fast-tracking … is identifying the easiest ones first, and getting them moving as efficiently as they can toward where they need to go,” Newbury explains.

Some in the sheltering field bridle at the idea, says Newbury, but she believes that’s because they misunderstand what fast-tracking is, and how it can help shelters. Sometimes, the initial reaction of staff and volunteers is
that it isn’t fair to accelerate the movement of some animals and not others, feeling that it pushes, say, older pets or those with medical or behavioral issues down the list of priorities.

But Newbury explains that by moving animals who need little preparation in order to get adopted out the door as soon as possible, a shelter leaves more space, staff time, volunteer hours, and other resources for the pets who really need it. So all the animals benefit.

“The idea is not to give every animal the bum’s rush, and sort of push them out of the shelter, or make decisions sooner than you need to. ... What we’re talking about is no wasted time,” Newbury says.

Where some shelters firmly believe in a quarantine period for all animals, fast-tracking proponents question the value of this practice. “What we learn from quarantining, traditionally, is that if we quarantine animals—all of them—coming into a shelter for 7-14 days, they get sick,” says Dr. Elizabeth Berliner, director of clinical programs for Maddie’s Shelter Medicine program at Cornell University.

In fast-tracking, shelters vaccinate animals at intake and conduct a veterinary exam, but rarely quarantine pets.

“Quarantine becomes less and less important the more you are proactive about medical screening and preventive care at intake. ... It’s not part of your normal protocol for every animal. It is an exception for the animal that is at risk,” Berliner says.

The fast-tracking concept grew out of a discussion that Newbury and Hurley had. “We joke about this all the time in presentations,” Newbury recalls. “Our joke is, we realized that five is half of 10. After all our hours in vet school, that’s like the most important realization we’ve ever had.”

She explains: If five cats enter a shelter each day, and each stays an average of five days, then the shelter will need housing for 25 cats at any given time. But if five cats arrive daily, and they stay an average of 10 days, the shelter will need to care for 50 cats each day. It’s all about efficiently moving pets through the system. "If you only have 25 instead of 50 in the shelter at any given time, you can provide better housing, and you can provide better care to all of the animals, and you’re still helping the exact same number," Newbury says.

She and Hurley have spent the last several years consulting with shelters across the country, explaining how fast-tracking works, advising them on setting up new systems, and helping them realize that the less time an animal spends in the shelter, the better for all concerned.

A good example of their innovative work is the Foster On-Deck System, implemented with Newbury’s assistance in 2010 at the Animal Rescue League of Boston (ARL-Boston) as part of an overall strategy to manage the shelter’s cat population. (“The ASV Guidelines in Real Life,” November/December 2011; animalsheltering.org/foster_on_deck.)

“It’s a totally proactive approach to animal placement and flow-through. ... The idea is that everything is all planned in advance, so when kittens show up, you already know who they’re going to go into foster care with,” Newbury says.

The goal is to get kittens out of the shelter quickly—they’re examined and screened for potential problems, then sent right to their fosterers—so they’re not exposed to disease, and they can also get a higher level of care in a foster home. As a result of the system, along with other fast-tracking changes for cats, ARL-Boston was able to lower the overall number of animals in its shelter, which has reduced the incidence of disease transmission, as well as opening up more space for housing each pet. This has al-
allowed them to cut holes in cat cages, so that kittens could have two cages, instead of one.

“There’s a huge benefit to the [foster] cats and to the population in the shelter. There’s a benefit to the foster parents, because it makes communication much more straightforward,” says Dr. Erin Doyle, shelter veterinarian. “It’s a much more structured system, and it’s a much more predictable system for them.”

Checking the Stats
The Wisconsin Humane Society (WHS) in Milwaukee consulted with Newbury a few years ago, when its new executive director wanted to learn more about best practices nationwide. The ideas Newbury shared about fast-tracking were a revelation for WHS staff; she got them thinking about even the most basic shelter metrics in a new light.

Operations director Matt Witte likens length of stay to a baseball player’s on-base percentage, which measures how often he succeeds in reaching base. “It’s kind of like the critical statistic, in my opinion, that Dr. Newbury was the first to put on our radar.” Length of stay isn’t necessarily more important than the number of adoptions, Witte explains, but he believes it’s a more all-encompassing measurement than adoption statistics. It also speaks to population health, shelter efficiency, how managed intake is working, and other important factors. So while it’s right to focus on adoptions, he says, length of stay is a more unified measure of how his shelter is doing.

Staff felt that the shelter was too crowded, and wanted to address this issue. Newbury explained that the shelter could help the same number of animals each year, but drastically reduce its daily population, if all those animals just stayed in the shelter a shorter amount of time.

“That was just like, ‘Holy cow! It’s so simple, but so brilliant—how did I not think of that?’” Witte recalls.

With Newbury’s help, they turned their focus to the dog population, with the goal of moving dogs through the system faster—not necessarily bringing in or adopting out fewer dogs than in the past, but simply streamlining the process.

Staff arranged the shelter’s dog lodging by category, according to who would most likely be quickly adopted (puppies, very friendly dogs, toy breeds), who would move through the system at a moderate rate, and those who would probably move slowly. They identified the dogs who would be most in demand in the community and gave them priority in everything: spay/neuter surgery, behavior evaluation, extra attention in any media coverage.

Meanwhile, the shelter moved to an owner-surrender-by-appointment system, or managed intake. It also arranged for its incoming transfers to include fewer dogs but to occur more frequently, rather than having to find the capacity to care for transfers of 50 dogs at once. These changes have enabled shelter staff to pace their intake, with dramatic results.

“Being able to look within our shelter, and watch a bunch of dogs check into a fast track on a Monday, and see them all most all moved out by a Wednesday, means we knew how to plan our intake for similarly fast-tracked dogs that could be right on their heels to fill their space,” Witte says.

The shelter’s average length of stay for all dogs was about 9.5 days in 2010. That figure fell to 8.4 days in 2011, and then to 6.5 days in 2012. Meanwhile, the average length of stay for a dog on the adoption floor was 2.6 days in 2010, dropped to 1.5 days in 2011, and is down to just one day in 2012. “We’re very proud of that mark, that we put a dog out on the adoption floor, say, ‘Hey, public, this dog can go home,’ and the average is a day [before] it goes home,” Witte says.

You’ll Love Our Selection
The Animal Humane Society (AHS) contacted Newbury in 2009 to have her tour and recommend changes for its five shelters in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metro area. As a result of the visit, the organization started to implement a fast-track system.
If the initial evaluation isn’t conclusive—typically due to behavioral or medical questions that may need further examination—an owner can take the animal back, or elect to leave him at the shelter for staff to take more time to determine if he’s placeable. Staff will make follow-up calls to owners who request it to let them know the outcome; owners can come back for animals the shelter thinks it won’t be able to place.

Behavior evaluations are done during the surrender appointments, rather than having animals backed up, waiting to be evaluated, Johnson says. If animals are too shy or scared to complete the evaluation, staff give them a few days to settle down before trying again.

The third component AHS put in place, according to Johnson, is a process staff call preselection: Animals are placed into AHS’s adoption centers prior to sterilization, with a note on their cage card indicating they will be sterilized before they go home. Adoption counselors explain to customers that they can place a hold on an animal they’re interested in, the pet will be fast-tracked for spay/neuter surgery, then they can come back to finalize the adoption.

“We had animals waiting days for surgery. By doing this preselecting, these animals don’t wait any longer. They get up to the adoption center, they’re visible to the public, and when they’re selected for adoption, they get fast-tracked and become a priority on the surgery list,” Johnson says. (Newbury and Hurley use the term “open selection” to promote this type of program; the shelters that use it call it by different names, but it’s the same thing, according to Newbury.)

Preselection can also involve shelters putting stray animals on the adoption floor during their hold period, so that’s where staff turned first. The organization developed an objective evaluation tool—a point system based on cats’ age, behavior, and health—that helps them identify highly adoptable felines, so they can move quickly through the system.

Like Witte’s shelter, AHS implemented a surrender-by-appointment process. During these appointments, staff examine the animals and try to let their owners know right then if they can be placed, explains director of animal services Kathie Johnson. If they can be placed, they get an immediate intake exam, are vaccinated, and quickly moved to adoptions.

If staff can tell that an animal is not placeable, staff counsel the owner on other options: Owners can take their pets back, and try to work with a veterinarian or behaviorist to resolve the issues. If they still elect to leave the animal at the shelter, the pet will be humanely euthanized.

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Preselection can also involve shelters putting stray animals on the adoption floor during their hold period, so they’re visible to the public. WHS not only does this, but also posts the photos of animals in their stray-hold period on a “Coming Soon” page of its website, which ignites demand for them.

Dane County’s success. Staff from four organizations—WHS, the Sacramento SPCA, the Michigan Humane Society, and the Humane Society for Southwest Washington—visited AHS’s shelters in August to observe its fast-tracking systems.

“It’s so easy to hear all these things that you can do, but it’s a lot of hard work to get there,” Johnson says, noting that it took AHS nearly two years to implement fast-tracking. “And I’m so proud of our organization, that we were dedicated to doing this, and really dedicated to doing something differently.”