Peter Marsh says it’s time for animal shelters to work smarter in the battle against overpopulation and unnecessary euthanasia.

A New Hampshire-based lawyer and longtime animal welfare advocate focused on ending shelter overpopulation, Marsh last year published *Replacing Myth with Math: Using Evidence-Based Programs to Eradicate Shelter Overpopulation*. The book, designed for shelter medicine classes, is chock full of data that tell a sobering tale: While the number of cats and dogs euthanized in animal shelters has dropped dramatically in the past four decades, that rate of progress has slowed in recent years.

Fewer animals are being euthanized nationwide because fewer animals are entering shelters, Marsh writes. Research shows that certain communities—such as those with high poverty rates—relinquish more animals to shelters. But Marsh says shelters aren’t taking full advantage of such information by targeting their overpopulation programs to the people who need them most. “For the most part, researchers and people who put together shelter overpopulation programs have lived in separate worlds, isolated from each other,” Marsh writes. “As a result, program designers have rarely made use of research findings to effectively target their programs.”

Marsh hopes to bridge that gap and promote a more data-driven approach to program development with *Replacing Myth with Math*. He plans to publish a companion volume—*Getting to Zero: Using Lessons from Successful Programs to End Shelter Euthanasia in the United States*—within the next year.

Marsh, who works with animal welfare organizations around the country, is a founder of Solutions to Overpopulation of Pets, which helped establish publicly funded pet sterilization programs that dropped euthanasia rates in New Hampshire. In this edited interview, he discusses his work with *Animal Sheltering* associate editor James Hettinger.

**Animal Sheltering**: What was your intent in writing *Replacing Myth with Math*?

**Peter Marsh**: One of them is to get people to recognize that information can be used to design much more effective programs than trial-and-error-, seat-of-the-pants-based programs. I’ve worked now in all 50 states over the last 20 years on shelter overpopulation issues. The most effective programs have been data-driven programs, where people pay attention to not only local shelter data, but research studies, plus information from other programs.

**Animal Sheltering**: How would you say the failure to use data has hampered the efforts to curb overpopulation?

**Peter Marsh**: Oh, it’s been huge. A core assumption of traditional shelters has been—really, going back to the ’50s—that an open-door policy where no animal is turned away is essential. Because if shelters don’t accept every animal that’s presented to them—no matter what
The real problem is that there hasn’t been a real connection between the people that have done the research and implementation of the research into effective programs.

the situation, and no matter if they’re at capacity and had to put down another animal to make room—that enough animals would suffer “a fate worse than death” so that it would be intolerable.

Well, a number of shelters have questioned that assumption, because, really, there’s no data to back that up—there never was. And the shelters that have questioned that assumption have found that in many cases there are alternatives that are better for the animals, and better for the shelter.

For instance, a shelter worker from southwest New Hampshire made a presentation at [Animal Care] Expo in 2000 about a program they had developed called the Rehoming Service for Valued Pets—RSVP. When people contacted them about giving up an animal, they would counsel the person and do an individualized assessment. If you step back and think about it, we have adoption decisions that are individualized, depending on the specific situation of the animal. Euthanasia decisions are individualized. But the admission decisions—which really, in many cases, drive and control the later decisions about adoption and euthanasia—are not individualized at all.

This woman presented the data from their first year, and basically somewhere less than half the animals were admitted to the shelter. As I recall, about 25 percent of the people were able to place their animal with a friend. Another substantial percentage were able to keep the animal with help, because in many cases it isn’t the animal that needs help, it’s the owner—whether it’s a housing issue, or an education issue, or other issues. That’s why the individualized assessment is really critical. And they look at urgency and decide, “Is this urgent for this animal to be admitted?” And another thing they look at is, “Would this animal do well in a shelter? Would it have any prospect of getting adopted?” Those are really key things.

The book presents data from both Jacksonville and Richmond, which have used this individualized approach, to suggest that hey, relook at this conventional wisdom—the fates-worse-than-death assumption—and look at information and develop data.

A second issue where data is really important is [this]: You’ve probably seen the traditional kitten-and-puppy pyramid, spay-neuter pyramid, that has a cat or a dog and then a mountain of offspring. The underlying assumption is that pets that remain intact their whole lives drive cat and dog reproductive rates, and that’s not true. We now know that cats and dogs that remain intact their whole lives account for a small fraction of the animals that are born—less than 20 percent.

So why is that important? It’s important because that 80 percent-plus of litters are born to people that sterilize their pets at some point, after they’ve had a litter or two. [They] typically do that with their own money—that’s the low-hanging fruit. These are people who don’t have to be persuaded. In many cases, they’ve just delayed, and that delay has been tragic. One of the things that they don’t know is that pet mammary cancer kills more than 100,000 cats and dogs in the United States every year. That type of cancer is almost entirely preventable by timely sterilization. It’s just a knowledge deficit that’s really important to correct—and that’s a lot easier, frankly, than convincing people that are resistant to sterilize their pets, or coming up with funding for spay/neuter clinics, or subsidies, or whatever.

There was a [national] study that Alley Cat Allies did in 2007 [of] household cats. And they found the most common reason people that have an intact cat gave for keep-
Shelly Patton
Events Coordinator
Louisiana SPCA

"Thank you so much for making this program available to the New Orleans community. I am convinced that had this been in place prior to Katrina, many more reunions would have happened. Live and learn, sometimes in the most painful ways. Regardless, learn."

Shelly Patton
Events Coordinator
Louisiana SPCA

**SAVE LIVES. RAISE FUNDS.**

Learn how @ Help4Shelters.org or call 310-652-9838, xt. 2

**The Pet PROTECTOR**

Saving Lives Since 1996

24-Hour, Nationwide Lost & Found Hotline
FREE membership for your adopted pets
FREE membership for your staff and volunteers
25% of all renewals will be donated to your shelter or rescue