



Animal Shelters Deserve Our Support

We all know there is no such thing as “perfection”, meaning something without any flaws. Perfection is a wonderful ideal for which to strive, but it is impossible to actually achieve. There are two reasons we will never achieve perfection: The first one is pretty easy. We all make mistakes. Nothing more needs to be said. The second reason though creates bigger problems. Perfection will never be attained because we can’t agree on what defines a “perfect” state. In other words, it is the fact that people have differing opinions on what is right, or perfect, and therefore we can never actually reach perfection because someone will always disagree. Now, what happens when something has a “flaw”? We write bad reviews, encourage others not to buy the product and try to change the product to be perfect in our eyes. But is that fair? To decide, let’s look at the two reasons things are perfect.

The first reason something isn’t perfect is because it is broken or doesn’t work correctly due to human error. Someone made a mistake and so a product or service doesn’t operate as it should. You buy a coffee mug and the handle falls off as soon as you lift it. One could make a strong argument that giving a poor review or trying to change this product would be a good thing to do. Using the “reasonableness” test, I believe most people would agree that a coffee mug handle falling off is not desirable so trying to make a change is a good action to take. So far so good.

Let’s look at the second reason something is deemed imperfect. The product works as it says it does, but in someone’s opinion, it doesn’t do a good job, therefore we should write a bad review and try to change it. Is this fair? Let’s say our coffee mug has a sturdy handle, but it is smaller than other coffee mug handles. I like big handles on my coffee mugs, so I don’t like this mug and therefore need to tell the world it is not a good mug and I need to tell the manufacturer to make the handles bigger. What is the take away by these actions?

The reader of the review doesn’t know how big the reviewer’s hands are or if they just like really big handles. The reader sees a negative review and naturally assumes the handle will be too small for them as well. Perhaps the manufacturer has coffee mugs with larger handles and just needs to produce more of them or increase their promotion. Changing the current product may not be necessary and in doing so we are harming the reputation of this manufacturer. Let’s take this thought process and apply it to animal shelters, which are animal welfare organizations that operate a physical building to accept and care for homeless animals.

Animal shelters have long been referred to in many ways, from “doggie jail” to a “necessary evil”. But why is this? Yes, I understand the synonymous nature of a dog cage to a jail cell and that even the nicest shelters aren’t a good long term home for a pet, but is it really fair or true to use these terms? Isn’t the goal of every person at a shelter to get pets into new homes as quickly as possible? Isn’t it true that humans are in jail for doing something wrong while pets are in shelters for simply not having a home? Why aren’t we comparing animal

shelters to shelters for homeless people instead of prisons? And most importantly, why are we starting to see a wave of articles saying we should house homeless animals primarily in foster homes and animal shelters should only have animals that aren't yet a good fit for the home environment.

Some people believe that animal shelters should go the way that orphanages went, which is to house all of the homeless animals in foster homes except for those extreme cases where a home cannot be found for a particular pet. I have been working in the shelter world for over 20 years and I can tell you I would much rather have an animal in a home instead of a cage, but I would argue the aforementioned process of keeping animals in homes is actually in place. Furthermore, this new dialogue is creating unintended consequences for the very animals we want to help.

To understand, let's look at how shelters operate today. Animal shelters are operated by one of two kinds of organizations. They are operated by nonprofits called humane societies or by municipal departments called animal control agencies. While there are different policies and procedures each kind of agency must follow, the actual day to day caring for their animals is pretty much the same. Therefore, I will refer to both as "shelters" in this article.

Shelters receive their animals in several ways. The most common are:

- Stray - a domestic animal loose in a community with no person controlling him/her
- Owner Surrender - a owner turns their pet over to the shelter
- Impound - an animal is legally taken from an owner by law enforcement
- Transfer - an animal is transferred from one animal welfare agency to another

When animals are accepted into a shelter, they are placed in the appropriate living unit. This could be a kennel, a cage or even an open room. Many shelters have what is called a foster program. These are volunteers who house one or more of the shelter animals in their home until such time that it is adopted or returned to the shelter. The more foster homes that are signed up equates to more animals that can be placed in a temporary home instead of the shelter. The number of foster homes is dependant on:

- The number of people willing to accept a shelter animal into their home
- The resources available at the shelter to run the program
- The number of animals which are sound enough medically and behaviorally to be in a foster home.

Some shelters have over one hundred foster homes while others have very few, if any, but the system already exists to keep animals in homes whenever possible. So why change the narrative and what harm does this do?

Changing the narrative from shelters as the primary housing to foster homes being the primary housing of homeless animals is a marketing tool. As you can see from what I just wrote, the flow of animals goes through a shelter and to a foster home, while the new initiative wants to change the flow and have the animals go directly to foster homes and then those that aren't appropriate for that setting would go to the shelter. This seemingly simple change is much more palatable to the public because homeless animals would now be going

to a loving foster home first instead of the dreaded shelter. But here is the kicker, changing the story doesn't make the outcome any better, and in fact for many animals it will make the outcome much much worse. Let's look at a situation from both points of view with an example.

ABC Shelter can care for a total of 150 animals.

- Of these, 50 are dogs and 100 are cats
- ½ of each are up for adoption at any given time
 - This means there are 25 dogs and 50 cats available for adoption
- ABC Shelter also has 20 foster homes, 10 for cats and 10 for dogs.

You are looking to add a new pet to your family and want to adopt a rescued pet. You visit ABC Shelter's website and see a few pets you would like to visit to possibly adopt. You notice two are being housed in foster homes and are instructed to contact the shelter to arrange to visit those pets.

As a potential adopter, you view ABC Shelter and their foster homes as the same organization. The people running the shelter have decided which animals are placed in foster homes and which ones stay at the shelter, but the "quality" of animals is the same.

Now, let's look at this same situation under the new narrative, which is that adoptable animals are housed in foster homes and animals that can't be housed in foster homes are at ABC Shelter. With only 10 foster homes for dogs and 10 foster homes for cats, ABC Shelter will have 15 dogs and 40 cats at the shelter which are available to be adopted, but the public has been told animals at the shelter "have issues". Even if ABC Shelter explains the situation, the public narrative is that adoptable animals are in foster homes and the shelter only houses those that aren't a good fit to be in a home. So here is what happens.

- People are less likely to visit the shelter to adopt meaning adoptable animals will not get new homes as quickly as they could,
- The reputation of animal shelters will get worse instead of better and.
- More healthy animals will be euthanized.

I am not trying to be melodramatic, just realistic. In those situations where there are enough foster homes to house all adoptable animals, then the risks lower greatly, but this is not the situation. There are not enough foster homes to hold all of our adoptable pets and even when an individual shelter does have enough, this can change daily. People stop wanting to foster completely, they go on vacation, they get a new pet and want to take a break, etc. One day there are enough homes and the next there aren't. But the number of foster homes really isn't the issue at hand. The issue at hand is that we aren't changing the current system, but just the narrative. And in doing this, animal shelters which already suffer from a "modest" reputation at best, will now be looked at even worse.

What we need to do is promote animal shelters as:

- Places that save animals
- Places where dedicated individuals, staff and volunteers alike, work tirelessly to help animals
- Places that are often under-resourced and need the public to contribute their time, money and voice to help fill the shared mission of all agencies.

The use of foster homes is a wonderful practice and I hope more and more people step up to provide this service to their local shelters. I am 100% in favor of getting as many animals as possible into foster homes, but just as important is to enhance the reputation of animal shelters and not further deteriorate how the public views the work they are doing.