



BETTER TOGETHER

Some animal welfare organizations are finding strength in mergers

BY BARRY SILVERSTEIN + ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID POHL

When it comes to the animal welfare mission, shelters and rescues should always be working together, striving to put themselves out of business. Until that happy day arrives, though, organizations are often competing for public attention and donor dollars. And in some cases, they're performing the same roles in communities not far from each other. So when does it make sense to put that "We're all in this together" concept into day-to-day practice?

Organizations can get more done when they collaborate, and sometimes they can be most effective when they combine. In the past few years, there has been a noticeable uptick in shelter and animal welfare organization mergers. In 2013, for example, three Dallas-area groups merged to form the Dallas Compassion Animal Project, two major shelters in Pennsylvania announced plans to merge and form a new organization called Humane Pennsylvania, and the two largest animal welfare organizations in western North Carolina merged under the name Asheville Humane Society.

Animal welfare organizations that merge are often looking to consolidate staff and facilities and combine resources, but those aims are secondary to the main one: the common goal of saving more lives.

While mergers have become a way of life in the for-profit world, they are less common among nonprofits, where the motivation isn't necessarily financial, according to Peter Kramer, fund manager for the Catalyst Fund for Nonprofits. "For-profit collaborations and mergers are driven by financial motivations including cost savings, but charities are unlikely to reap any savings for years, if at all," Kramer wrote in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (Feb. 26, 2013). "For nonprofits, the primary driver to merge or collaborate should be to help them achieve their missions."

Julie Morris, senior vice president for community outreach at the ASPCA, says animal welfare organizations considering a merger need to think about the synergy between their missions.

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**GARY WEITZMAN,
SAN DIEGO HUMANE
SOCIETY**



Organizational philosophies, she says, don’t have to be identical, but groups need “to have some clear expectations, and they have to put that issue on the table.”

In this article, we look at two animal welfare mergers, one in California and one in North Carolina, and look at how the organizations involved shared the common mission of saving more lives.

California Dreamin’

In early 2010, San Diego Humane Society and SPCA and North County Humane Society completed a merger, with the combined organization operating under the San Diego Humane Society and SPCA name. The North County facility, located in Oceanside, Calif., became known as “San Diego Humane Society and SPCA, North Campus.”

The two organizations had already worked collaboratively as part of the San Diego Animal Welfare Coalition, an affiliation made up of area shelters, but North County was looking for ways to expand its resources. San Diego Humane, significantly larger than North County Humane, had the ability to help.

But the two organizations were on opposite ends of the spectrum, according to Gary Weitzman, D.V.M., president and CEO of San Diego Humane Society and SPCA. “We were two very different organizations,” says Weitzman. “Size, employees, policies and procedures, constituents and donors, and culture were all very different.”

Prior to the merger, San Diego Humane had 140 employees, while North County Humane had 40. Today, the organization has 280 employees working at two campuses and a satellite adoption center. Animal intake has doubled, primarily because North County Humane was a contract shelter taking in strays, something San Diego Humane had not previously done. The change in animal population, and mission, required the merged organization to revise and create new protocols to better and more efficiently care for both animal populations.

The socioeconomics of the two areas are different as well, says Weitzman. “The city of Oceanside is a more rural community than San Diego. Oceanside is also just south of Camp Pendleton, so there’s a large military population with unique needs when it comes to animal welfare.”

Camp Pendleton is one of the largest U.S. Marine bases in the world, with a blend of diverse populations from all over the country. In addition, military personnel move frequently, often with very little notice, leaving few options for their pets. San Diego Humane implemented solutions for military families to help them keep their animals, and if military personnel absolutely had to relinquish their pets, the organization wanted to be able to take in their animals as a last resort. The merged shelter developed specific programs to support the troops, including rehab opportunities for them and their animals.

The road to merging was not without its bumps. After entering into talks, both organizations agreed to put the merger on hold for a year, realizing that merging would be a big change for their staff and their communities. Before moving forward, officials needed to carefully consider how joining together would impact both organizations.

According to Michael Baehr, vice president of communications and community engagement, the pause in the talks gave both organizations time to consider what they could achieve together. “That really was a catalyst for re-initiating the discussion,” says Baehr, “and that’s

how the merger was introduced to the community: We can do more together than we could independently.”

When the merger did proceed, “there was an elaborate schedule determining exactly when to talk to staff, when to talk to donors, when to talk to volunteers,” Weitzman says. “Both organizations timed it very precisely so that both heard about the merger and what was coming at the same time. We wanted to manage expectations and fears. That’s a good model for how other organizations can roll out a merger.”

Weitzman notes it has taken a good two to three years for San Diego Humane and North County Humane to become unified. One of the major differences between the two organizations was that North County Humane had municipal contracts for animal control, while San Diego Humane didn’t do any municipal or government-related work.

“That was a gigantic culture shift for us,” says Weitzman. “We were an organization that could really manage our intake and accept relinquished animals from the community, and all of a sudden we were faced with city contracts that required we take in thousands and thousands of stray animals.”

In the first two years, he says, the change hugely altered the animal population for the whole organization, with the shelter in San Diego filling with animals from Oceanside. Stray animals tend to need more medical and behavioral care than animals relinquished by owners. Each animal is under San Diego Humane’s care for an average of 30 days, and some stay much longer. The organization had to reevaluate operations protocols to ensure it was providing the same level of care to a larger number of animals. This led to investing money in the newly acquired facility, and in fact, a year after the merger, San Diego Humane opened an additional location in Oceanside, moving cats into a separate facility and adding space for 500 to 650 additional animals at the North County location. The organization provided more quality housing for each animal, lessening the chance of diseases spreading, and resulting in a healthier population.

San Diego Humane had always done humane law enforcement, Weitzman notes, but “this was field ops. It was a huge change of thinking.” This was the first time in decades that San Diego Humane had to do animal control. The switch required training officers, hiring dispatchers, and developing contracts.

Beyond adjusting to the changes in the nature of the work, San Diego Humane also had a challenge in helping the 250 employees feel like they were part of one integrated organization. Management wanted to have all staff at each campus trained to talk to each other and the public in a consistent way about the or-

ganization’s overall mission. It took more than a year to do this, but Weitzman believes the results have been positive for both the staff and the community.

Weitzman notes that the merger required a philosophical and an infrastructure adjustment. “We had to figure out how to manage and how to staff it. We’ve put millions of dollars into the buildings and grounds for the shelter in Oceanside so it can mirror our central campus in San Diego and work as one integrated network.”

“The merger has changed our organization for the better, and I know it’s helped the animals in both our communities,” he adds. “We’re taking care of three to four times the number of animals since the merger. We’ve upgraded the facilities, renovated a great dog park in Oceanside, and added hospitals, education programs, and community services that didn’t exist before.”

Weitzman views the merger in a positive light. “We exist in an environment of limited resources, yet most organizations have an incredible wealth of knowledge and experience. We need to share that wealth and partner with each other, and we should consolidate our resources, which leads to a better return on investment for our donors and constituents.”

Any group considering a merger should recognize that the path won’t be easy, Weitzman says. It will require challenging conversations about philosophies, finances, staffing, and much more. “But if you’re able to



work together and do the best thing for your community, everyone will be a winner. In Oceanside, the biggest winners were the animals—and that’s the whole point.”

Collaboration in Carolina

In 1997, a small group of animal activists in western North Carolina resolved to do something about the high rate of euthanasia in local shelters. They named their fledgling organization Animal Compassion Network (ACN). Early in their work, they struggled to convince shelters to release animals into their foster program.

One of those shelters was the Buncombe County Animal Shelter, representing the city of Asheville and surrounding communities. Constantly overcrowded, the shelter operated out of a rundown former county maintenance garage. Asheville Humane Society (AHS) ran the shelter under a contract with the county. Often forced to euthanize animals for lack of space, AHS became a primary target of ACN, whose founders strongly endorsed a no-kill philosophy and were seeking to improve the situation by fostering and placing animals for adoption, funding low-cost spay/neuter, providing a pet food assistance program, and sponsoring transports of animals to shelters in the North and Midwest.

The two organizations regularly butted heads. But in 2008, everything changed. That’s when the Buncombe County commissioners approved an aggressive five-year goal: zero euthanasia of healthy adoptable animals throughout the county. The two organizations formed a coalition with other local animal welfare groups and launched a communitywide public awareness campaign.

In late 2010, in a unique public/private partnership, a new Buncombe County Animal Shelter was constructed using public funds, right next door to a new Asheville Humane Society Adoption & Education Center, built with private donations. Asheville Humane Society continued to run the county shelter under a county contract.

In May 2013, the Asheville community was greeted with news of a merger: Animal Compassion Network was joining forces with Asheville Humane Society. How

did something that would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier come about?

Katherine Shenar, president/CEO of AHS during the change, says she always thought it would make sense for Asheville’s two largest animal welfare groups to unite. One of her first questions for Eileen Bouressa, executive director of ACN, was, “Why don’t we merge?”

“I truly believed that we would have a greater impact in saving lives of homeless animals, being responsible stewards of donor dollars, and having a combined message to the community that could engage them in a much more powerful way,” Shenar says. “As our relationship developed, I continued to sort of tease Eileen and ask her the same question year after year. She said a lot of things would have to change in their organization to come to the table, given our history in running an open-admission facility.”

Bouressa recalls that, when she was first asked about merging, “there was absolutely no hope of it. ACN was an organization with a dedicated no-kill philosophy, and at the time, Asheville Humane was still struggling to get the programs that are in place today that save so many lives.”

One major reason attitudes began to change was Buncombe County’s selection as an ASPCA Partner Community, one of only 10 such communities in the nation. AHS and ACN had to work together to reach a common goal: dramatically increase the live-release rate at the county’s shelter.

Being in a partner community “sometimes forces groups to work with each other more closely,” says the ASPCA’s Morris. “The key of the partner community is to look at live release and saving animals as *community* animals and not say it’s agency A’s animals or agency B’s animals. Asheville Humane Society has been very forward-thinking in working with other agencies in trying to embrace the partnership.”

A merger can make for a proverbial “bigger bowl” for your community’s pets.



Bouressa saw real progress as a result of the ASPCA partnership. “There came a moment, for the first time, when I thought merging was possible,” she says. “It stopped being so much about who they are and who we are, and it started becoming about the animals of Buncombe County. ... We started partnering with them as often as possible. Gradually, because of that partnership, and also the personal relationships that had been building amongst the staff, merging seemed possible.”

The change at Asheville Humane was tremendous. “When we began the ASPCA partnership, we started with a live-release rate of 35 percent,” says Shenar. “We have had, in the past four years, an 85 percent increase in our live-release rate. ... As we’ve grown and evolved as an organization with our programming strength and moving into the new facilities, I think ACN recognized that we were a much different organization in terms of our effectiveness and our ability to save lives.”

Even as Bouressa and Shenar began to discuss the possibility of joining forces, Bouressa thought she might have difficulty introducing the idea to her board of directors.

The turning point, says Bouressa, was a meeting between herself, Shenar, and Sue Barnett, one of ACN’s founders. Barnett, who helped start ACN to combat the county shelter’s high euthanasia rate, recognized that great strides had been made by both ACN and AHS. “Our partnership led to much better and cordial relations,” says Barnett. “We just started working together, and we decided that we all want the same thing, so we thought we’d stop duplicating efforts and work more closely together.” Now Barnett holds a seat on the board of the merged organization, along with two other former ACN board members.

“I think one of the key points of this merger going through was everyone’s ability to take away their ego and truly allow the best thing for the animals to come first,” says Bouressa, now vice president of development and community programs at AHS. “What a beautiful thing to have come full circle, from ACN forming almost in spite of Asheville Humane, and now we’ve merged into one organization, doing the exact same work.”

Shenar recalls a meeting where Angie Wilt, ACN’s director of operations, commented that the two groups agreed more than they disagreed. “All of a sudden we realized that we had so much more in common, and that we could accomplish so much more together, and the things that made us different were not insurmountable,” Shenar says.

Once the boards of each organization agreed to the merger, they developed a plan to make it happen. ACN

needed to close a facility and relocate staff to the AHS adoption center. Supporters of each organization had to be told about the merger at the same time. Both organizations thought it was important for ACN to retain its identity within AHS, since ACN was well-respected in the community. ACN became a “department” of AHS, focusing on such efforts as animal transport, low-cost spay/neuter assistance, and providing pet food for those who can’t afford it.

The two groups had their eyes wide open, says Morris. “They worked with each other in the past, they knew each others’ philosophies, and they knew how they could bring them together.”

Morris urges organizations considering a merger to thoroughly examine every aspect of each other’s operations. “The first question to ask,” says Morris, “is ‘Why are you merging—what are you looking for?’ Oftentimes it’s because of financial situations, sharing administration, reducing infrastructure duplication, pooling resources, both in terms of finance and human capital. A lot of times it’s to enhance the mission. Think about what you are hoping to accomplish: Figure out what’s in the plus column, what’s in the minus column, what’s to be determined. Do your due diligence. Make sure there’s full financial disclosure. Discuss board expectations. There should not be any surprises. Sit down and have a clear discussion about mission and philosophies.”

Wilt, now director of the Animal Compassion Network department of Asheville Humane Society, sees good communication as a key component of a successful merger. “I believe that is what facilitated the ease of our transition. Be sure to have a well-laid-out plan as to how things will move forward once the merger is announced. All of the pre-planning really paid off in the end.”

“Put your community first and the animals first, and let that guide your approach,” says Shenar. “Once you do that, everything else is possible. What separated you from the beginning, whether it was a philosophical or geographical issue, there’s a way to work around it. It’s not easy, but I can certainly say it’s one of the most powerfully impactful things you can do to save lives in your community.” ■

In October 2013, Katherine Shenar left Asheville Humane Society to become senior vice president of communications and community engagement at San Diego Humane Society and SPCA, replacing Michael Baehr.

Barry Silverstein is a freelance writer with an interest in animal welfare and rescue. He and his wife are longtime volunteers and foster parents for Asheville Humane Society.