



Marshmallow is examined prior to surgery at the Animal Shelter Alliance of Portland's "Elect To Spay" event at Oregon Humane Society in November 2010.

Strength in Numbers

How collaboration and shared data reduced euthanasia rates in Portland, Oregon

BY CAROL BLYMIRE

They may not be sexy, but spreadsheets save lives.

That's what the 10 organizations in the Animal Shelter Alliance of Portland (ASAP) discovered when they joined forces to reduce the area's euthanasia rate. Serving four counties and 2.1 million people in the greater Portland metropolitan area, ASAP slashed local shelters' total euthanasia rate by 65 percent from 2006 to 2012. In 2013, the alliance received a \$1 million recognition grant from Maddie's Fund, a foundation that supports successful initiatives to decrease euthanasia.

How did they do it? How did they get to the point where nine out of 10 dogs and eight out of 10 cats now leave shelters alive,

and no healthy animal has been euthanized since 2010?

It took a deep dig into data and the unique Portland sensibility of open, respectful communication. Shelters have often been fearful of examining and sharing their data—especially euthanasia numbers—but without keeping good statistics and being willing to share them, it's impossible to judge the problem and take an effective, communitywide approach to solving it. Participants in ASAP say that getting started wasn't easy, but working together made all the organizations stronger and allowed the community to achieve a pretty remarkable goal.

Getting Started

In 2004 and 2005, shelters and rescue organizations in the Portland area held a series of meetings to talk about the possibility of pooling efforts and resources. Well-intentioned as it was, though, Britta Bavaresco—a consultant and founding ASAP member—says the initial effort was too broad, unfocused, and, ultimately, had a structure that wasn't working for anyone, especially the city's animals.

In 2006, several leaders of the larger shelters (those that took in more than 1,000 dogs and cats annually, and that already had strong working relationships) attempted to form a different kind of coalition, with the primary

goal of establishing a culture of trust and accountability with one another. They set expectations, made commitments about how frequently they would meet to find common ground on their approach to saving lives, and placed the greater good of the alliance and the community’s animals above individual organizations’ politics and philosophies. Then, they brought in leaders from other area animal welfare organizations, animal control, and the veterinary community, with the express goal of working together on pet overpopulation, reducing shelter intake, and ending unnecessary euthanasia.

“The Mayor’s Alliance for NYC’s Animals and the Metro Denver Shelter Alliance were helpful influences in the early stages of forming ASAP, because both cities had similar challenges to Portland in terms of how the city and region is laid out and how we wanted to work together,” says Joyce Briggs, president of the Portland-based Alliance for Contraception in Cats & Dogs, one of the members of ASAP. “But every city is different, and we had to make our own way to find out what worked best for us.”

ASAP held several strategic planning sessions in 2007, where it developed a three-tiered approach to saving lives:



The community outreach for the Animal Shelter Alliance of Portland’s Spay & Save program has included a booth at “Petlandia,” an adoption event organized by coalition partner Multnomah County Animal Services.

- keep animals (especially cats) out of shelters;
- treat the animals in the best possible manner in the shelter; and
- get the animals out of the shelter, whether by adopting them into homes or transferring them to a rescue or foster group.

With that framework in place, the ASAP leadership committee—made up of executive directors of all partner organizations—appointed their organizations’ operations directors to create and run the

ASAP lifesaving committee, which ensures member shelters assist one another on shelter space issues and transfers. ASAP implemented a system to monitor shelter capacity and issue an email alert to all operations managers when a healthy animal is in danger of being euthanized.

“What works beautifully, even when there’s tension at the table, is that since we’ve formed the alliance—and especially the lifesaving committee—the animals have really become ASAP animals, not one shelter’s animals over another’s,” says Bavaresco.

That perspective didn’t come from nowhere. One of the first tasks at hand for the ASAP partners was merging data so they could set clear goals, develop targeted plans, and effectively track results and success.

Coalitions work best when there is honesty, consistency, and data-sharing among their members. Each ASAP member organization uses different software and data methodology, but with support from Maddie’s Fund, in 2008 ASAP began collecting, merging, and reporting the organizations’ data using the standards defined by the Asilomar Accords—a set of criteria, standardized definitions, and

How Can Other Cities Make a Difference?

Key Factors for Coalition Success:

- Communicate openly
- Meet regularly
- Acknowledge and accept differences, but find common ground
- Data, data, data
- Include the veterinary and animal control communities in your efforts
- Set attainable goals before setting bigger-reach goals; small victories build foundation for bigger success
- Give leadership members clear roles
- Encourage and facilitate staff-to-staff interaction and collaboration
- Thank volunteers often
- Use your local community’s strengths to your advantage
- Be patient—true, long-lasting change takes time

[life preservers]

formulae for determining live-release rates in shelters.

“Until you’re speaking the same language, you can’t really craft a peace agreement or battle plan, and Asilomar gave us a common language,” says Sharon Harmon, executive director of the Oregon Humane Society.

While data-integration is difficult and time-consuming, it gave the staff at each organization something to work on together, and ASAP leadership believes it allowed them to feel part of the bigger task at hand.

When the data was collated, the results surprised no one. ASAP needed to start tackling the region’s euthanasia rate by addressing the cat population.

Spay & Save

Nearly 80 percent of animals euthanized in Portland-area shelters are cats. Briggs deduced that an important five-year strategy for decreasing cat shelter intake would be to spay and neuter an additional 10,000 cats per year. The alliance decided to target those efforts to those who most needed them.

“People who have fertile cats are the ones who can’t afford to get them spayed or neutered,” says Harmon. “It’s directly tied to income, particularly those who make less than \$35,000.”

ASAP created a program called “Spay & Save.” For those who meet the income requirements, it costs only \$10 to spay or neuter a cat. For those whose incomes are slightly higher, there is a



The Animal Shelter Alliance of Portland’s Spay & Save program holds quarterly “spay days” at Oregon Humane Society (OHS), offering free spay/neuter surgeries for cats of qualified low-income families. OHS uses a lobby as a staging area, attaching fliers to carriers to help clients spread the word about the program to family and friends.

sliding scale of payment for the procedure. After pilot-testing Spay & Save in two high-intake, low-income ZIP codes, ASAP members implemented it communitywide in February 2010. They used a variety of outreach tools including mailers, community events, signage in Laundromats and grocery stores, social worker outreach, door hangers, posters in methadone and walk-in health care clinics, Craigslist ads, and ZIP code analysis for targeted flier distribution at apartment complexes and mobile home parks.

“We’re not sure why or how, but of all the marketing we did, the Craigslist ads were the most successful,” says Harmon. “We’re still trying to figure that out.”

The organization also worked with feral cat caretakers and other cat groups in the region to bring in as many cats as they could for spay/neuter and release. Since the program’s inception, more than 35,000 cats have been spayed or neutered in five clinics within ASAP’s partner network. Cat intake has declined by nearly 30 percent, and the cat live-release rate has increased from 49 percent in 2006 to 78 percent in 2012. Spay & Save costs \$150,000-\$200,000 annually, with funding from PetSmart Charities, individual donors, and contributions from ASAP member organizations.

Collaboration at All Levels

“Relationships are everything,” says Harmon. She acknowledges that the area’s culture of cooperation and open communications gave them a leg up. “This is Portland! We like to talk, and we’re collegial and supportive. We’re starting with a culture that already embraces communication and teamwork.”

As former executive director of PetSmart Charities, Briggs saw the coalition-building trend starting years

Resources

- To learn more about the Animal Shelter Alliance of Portland (ASAP) and how collaboration might work in your community, go to asapmetro.org.
- Maddie’s Fund (maddiesfund.org) publishes a variety of studies and articles about increasing lifesaving efforts for dogs and cats in the “Maddie’s Institute” section on its website.
- Check out Shelter Animals Count, a new, collaborative initiative to create and share a national database of sheltered animal statistics, at shelteranimalscount.org.

ago. Whereas some communities have gotten mired in divisive battles over philosophy and approach, others have recognized the value of putting aside their differences—and that value is recognized by grant-making organizations. “Because organizations can accomplish more working together, national funders began offering special incentive grants to alliances and coalitions to work together to make change,” Briggs says. “Here in Portland, our individual goals across the groups were very much the same, so working on them together just made sense.”

Managing administration and funding has been as important as managing goals. Because of its ready infrastructure, Oregon Humane Society serves as administrative head of the group, overseeing the single ASAP staffer, Anika Moje, and acting as fiscal agent for the alliance, since it’s not a standalone 501(c)(3).

Partner agencies contribute equitably rather than equally, and ASAP shelters collaborate on staff training, software, and sharing behavior and medical resources whenever possible. For example, on-call veterinarians at the Oregon Humane Society address urgent questions from the public during weekends when other partner shelters might not have medical staff available. In the past six years alone, nearly 2,000 cats and dogs have been transferred each year between ASAP shelters.

“To be successful and make these transfers work, our staffs all have to know each other, get along, and work together,” Harmon adds. “We all have each other’s cell phone numbers, and everyone calls to ask for help or offer space. We all have the same goal in mind: no euthanasia.”

To ensure ASAP shelters are consistent in how they evaluate and assess the condition of dogs and cats, the Lifesaving Committee trains shelter staff on the Asilomar Guidelines and Pet Evaluation Matrix.

Relationships with county and city animal control and the veterinary community are an important element of the ASAP program and are built into its structure.

“Early on, even before our big data-merging efforts, we built on and brought into the alliance relationships many of us have with the Portland Veterinary Medical Association and the Southwest Washington Veterinary Medical Association,” says Briggs. “We involved them in helping diagnose the region’s challenges around euthanasia, and did a survey of veterinarians about our proposed cat intake strategies. By doing that, we were able to proceed with our plans having their blessing, which is not to say there was 100 percent agreement, but we’ve walked forward hand-in-hand, and they’ve been very supportive.”

Engaging the Broader Portland Community

One area where ASAP hopes to grow and increase education is in its efforts to reach

Get the Stats

- 44,435 cats and dogs taken into Portland-area shelters in 2006
- 2006 Live-Release Rate: 62 percent
- 2012 Live-Release Rate: 85 percent

Since 2006:

- total euthanasia down 65 percent
- treatable euthanasia down 89 percent
- unhealthy/untreatable euthanasia down 39 percent

Since 2010:

- ZERO euthanasia of healthy cats and dogs

out beyond the animal welfare community and engage the larger Portland-area population, letting the public know that euthanasia is a community issue, not just an issue for animal welfare groups to manage and respond to.



Washington County Animal Services officer Dave Hewlett loads cats for a Spay & Save transport to the Cat Adoption Team.

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—reported by Humane Society of Vero Beach, FL, Animal Sheltering Magazine July 2007



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Animal Shelter Alliance of Portland members:

- Alliance for Contraception in Cats and Dogs
- Cat Adoption Team
- Clackamas County Dog Services
- Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon
- Humane Society for Southwest Washington
- Multnomah County Animal Services
- Oregon Humane Society
- Portland Veterinary Medical Association
- SW Washington Veterinary Medical Association
- Washington County Animal Services (Bonnie L. Hays Small Animal Shelter)

ASAP Mission: End the euthanasia of healthy, social, and treatable dogs and cats in our local shelters by collaborating on spay/neuter programs, committing to educational and outreach efforts, and promoting humane alternatives for feral cats.

“Certainly a next step for us—and this is where I don’t think we’ve done a good enough job yet—is bringing the community into this, because it’s getting harder to adopt out those animals that aren’t perceived as ‘the perfect Cadillac,’” says Bavaresco. “We have to educate better that animals with treatable or highly manageable conditions are wonderful pets, and we’ll give potential owners all the tools they need to take care of them.”

“Portland loves being green,” she adds, “and the city [government] has done a great job at getting the city behind recycling and other ‘green’ initiatives. What I’d like us to do is create the equivalent of that for the animal community. To have the people of Portland say, ‘I am proud to live in a community where no treatable, rehabilitatable animal is euthanized.’”

ASAP has already had some great successes, though, and it’s been rewarded for those. In May 2013, Maddie’s Fund honored its work, and gave the six bricks-and-mortar shelters in the alliance a \$1 million award in recognition of their accomplishments in reducing their euthanasia rates. The award is given to communities that, through collaboration and replicable initiatives, have saved all

healthy shelter dogs and cats for multiple years and can demonstrate the ability to sustain those practices for years to come.

Strategic planning is on every ASAP member’s calendar for early 2014. A few of the items on the agenda are how best to invest the \$1 million gift from Maddie’s Fund, how to build on the successful Spay & Save efforts, further data analysis, expanding the foster network, and the possibility of building a nursery for bottle-feeding at-risk kittens.

“There’s so much to learn every time we gather and evaluate our statistics,” says Bavaresco. “Looking back, saving all the ‘healthies’ was fairly easy. Saving all the ‘treatables’ has become challenging in terms of space and resources. So, we need to spend time with the latest data and see who exactly are those animals still being euthanized and create programs or tools to reduce our euthanasia rate even further. We’ve come such a long way, but there’s so much more we can do.” ■

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