

2013

No More Homeless Pets® National Conference

Playbook



No-Kill Community:

What Worked, What Didn't,
What's Next

Salt Lake County, Utah



**SAVE
THEM
ALL™**

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Captain Cowpants in front of the Best Friends Pet Adoption Center in Salt Lake City

Community: Salt Lake County, Utah

Key participants in helping the community to become no-kill:

- One large municipal shelter: Salt Lake County Animal Services
- One major rescue partner: Best Friends Animal Society–Utah
- Multiple rescue groups, the Humane Society of Utah, service providers (the No More Homeless Pets in Utah Coalition)

Introduction

Best Friends Animal Society began outreach work in Salt Lake City in the early 1990s. In 1994, Best Friends organized the first Utah’s Week for the Animals, a statewide promotion of adoption, spay/neuter and advocacy that grew to include K-12 humane education curricula and the first Strut Your Mutt, which has since blossomed into a national grassroots fundraiser for rescue groups.

In 2000, Best Friends launched No More Homeless Pets in Utah, a coalition sponsored by Maddie’s Fund that achieved a 51 percent reduction in shelter killing across Utah by pioneering the coalition model and understanding that we could do more together. Since we began, more than 110,000 animals have been adopted into loving homes and more than 261,000 spay/neuter surgeries have been performed.

No More Homeless Pets in Utah introduced the following to Utah (and, in some cases, to the movement): marketing animals through numerous avenues, using retail-style adoption outlets, holding pet super adoption events, conducting high-volume statewide mobile and fixed low-cost spay/neuter clinics, and achieving cause marketing breakthroughs. Cause marketing efforts have included a partnership with Squatters Brewery, which crafted Chasing Tail Ale, and development of a targeted spay/neuter program with Hooters restaurants, called Hooters for Neuters.

Led by Best Friends, the coalition has:

- Ensured the delivery of 261,000 spay/neuter surgeries across Utah
- Achieved an annual statewide shelter intake decrease from 80,738 to 66,628 (a reduction of 17.2 percent)
- Helped 20 shelters across the state achieve and maintain a 90 percent or better save rate in 2013 (as of August 2013)
- Adopted out more than 110,000 pets into loving homes

In 2011, No More Homeless Pets in Utah was re-absorbed by Best Friends and renamed Best Friends Animal Society–Utah, with a special focus on two of the largest agencies in the state, Salt Lake County Animal Services (SLCoAS) and West Valley City Animal Services.

SLCoAS is a government agency dedicated to providing superior support, education, protection and advocacy for all animals and community members via three different provisions: animal welfare and rescue, sheltering and special programs. These services are available to all residents of unincorporated Salt Lake County. They are also provided to cities that contract with SLCoAS (including Salt Lake City, Riverton, Midvale, Holladay and Herriman), a reach that extends to nearly 490,000 residents.

In 2008, management and staff at SLCoAS became no-kill partners with Best Friends in response to a shelter crisis that elsewhere might have gone in another direction. A panleukopenia outbreak in late 2008 forced staff to re-evaluate their euthanasia decisions. It was the catalyst for a lot of conversations about why and which animals were being euthanized, quickly bringing to light the fact that cats and dogs were losing their lives because of treatable illnesses — even when cages sat empty throughout the shelter.

The staff embarked upon an ongoing metamorphosis until a system was developed that both staff and the community understood. They realized that when it came to these decisions, it was important for the administration to be as transparent as possible so the community grasped the reasons why SLCoAS euthanized animals at all. Because shelter issues are community-related, they can only be solved with community involvement.

Since 2009, Best Friends has worked closely with the SLCoAS shelter, partnering with our coalition groups to create programs that help animals, particularly the more difficult-to-save animals, such as kittens, adult cats, seniors and pit-bull-type dogs. We provide staffing grants for key programs in the shelter, such as the Pit Crew and trap/neuter/return (TNR) programs.

In collaboration with the shelter, our staff members help to develop volunteer and foster programs, such as Cat Crusaders, which is designed to increase the number of cat and kitten adoptions at SLCoAS, educate the community on issues facing felines, and engage volunteers in assisting shelter cats and kittens. Volunteers play a crucial role in the program, performing a variety of tasks that help boost adoptions, such as taking high-quality photographs of adoptable cats and pairing them with descriptive bios. A volunteer team of adoption ambassadors spend time with prospective cat adopters, helping them find the perfect match. In addition, the volunteers help with daily cleaning and enrichment and, most important, provide extra care and support to kittens in the shelter.

To further increase adoptions, Best Friends' marketing department frequently releases promotions that offer lower adoption fees so the shelter's animals are more attractive to the public. Stipends are pro-

vided to incentivize rescue groups to help with special-needs animals at the shelter. And we showcase the shelter's pets in a retail environment, giving them a better chance to find their forever homes.

To reduce shelter intake, we fix pets of low-income families for free. To help community cat caregivers, we provide humane traps, free spay/neuter vouchers and winter homes for outdoor cats. In times of crisis, when large numbers of animals enter the shelter unexpectedly, we are prepared to provide hands-on support as needed. And in 2013, we launched our most ambitious project to date — a kitten nursery designed to save the estimated 500 unweaned kittens who enter the shelter annually.

SLCoAS sterilizes, vaccinates and microchips every animal who comes into the shelter, and also provides dentals and other surgeries in addition to spay/neuter. SLCoAS recently hired two veterinarians who work together to provide the best of medical care to animals in the shelter. In 2012, disease was the number one cause of death of cats in the shelter, so the vets are now striving to better treat upper respiratory infections, calicivirus, panleukopenia and other communicable diseases. In addition to the full-time veterinarians, SLCoAS also has two full-time veterinary assistants on staff. The shelter's goal is to provide animals with the veterinary care they need before they leave the shelter.

SLCoAS achieved a 91.2 percent save rate in December 2012 and continues to work to meet and maintain that no-kill status. The shelter has been very fortunate to have a strong strategic partnership with Best Friends Animal Society. Additionally, the community and community leaders are very supportive of new initiatives that will help to maintain a 90 percent save rate.



Shelter policies around euthanasia

Focusing on achieving no-kill meant revising the established approach to euthanasia.

WHAT WORKED:

- Treatment versus euthanasia:** A constant concern in the beginning was that if SLCoAS chose to treat rather than euthanize sick animals, the impact on the operating budget would force financial cuts in other areas. Medical and food costs did increase, but costs for disposal of euthanized animals decreased.
- Increase in employee morale:** One welcome and inevitable side effect of the transition to no-kill has been that employee morale increased while turnover decreased, something that also has significant economic benefit. Training new staff costs money and time, so the revolving door of new employees was one way the shelter's resources were being drained. The position of animal care specialist was once a high-turnover job in the shelter; since the transformation, it's no longer considered an entry-level position, but rather one that leads to kind and gentle animal care.
- Staff input:** Engaging staff in the decision-making process has had a tremendous influence on overall success. Employees input each animal's behavioral information — both good and bad — into a database, so all pertinent data is available when a dog or cat is evaluated for euthanasia. Clearly, this is a weighty responsibility that the staff does not take lightly; accurate and honest feedback is essential if the animal is to receive a fair review. Moreover, the entire process operates under the transparency of including staff in euthanasia decisions.

WHAT DIDN'T:

- **One-person decisions about euthanasia:** A single individual has typically held the power to choose who lives and who dies, a situation that caused several problems, including burnout, mistrust and the targeting of certain animals. Cultivating an informed, compassionate team has liberated SLCoAS from its autocratic system and replaced it with one that's both judicious and equitable.
- **Having strict protocols:** SLCoAS developed protocols pertaining to which behaviors were addressed and what illnesses were treated, but staff soon realized that such an approach prevented animals from being individually evaluated. The protocols were revamped and now staff can review each animal in relation to available resources. For instance, highly contagious yet treatable diseases, such as ringworm, used to be an immediate death sentence because for most of the year, sufficient space to isolate the afflicted animals wasn't available. But in winter, when the shelter is the least populated, there's more opportunity to isolate and save these lives.

The new protocols were also instrumental in SLCoAS being able to treat and ultimately find homes for two dogs diagnosed with MRSA, a bacterial skin infection resistant to some antibiotics. Staff isolated the dogs and donned HAZMAT suits (a necessary precaution because the infection is highly contagious) to bathe them with a special skin treatment.



Salt Lake County Pit Crew partnership with Best Friends Animal Society

In 2008, the save rate for pit bull terriers in the shelter was 59 percent, way below the 89 percent average save rate for other dogs in the shelter. SLCoAS knew something had to be done, so in 2009, it started the Salt Lake County Pit Crew. The program is working. From January to August 2013, SLCoAS' average save rate for pit bull terriers was 86 percent and the overall dog save rate was 95.6 percent.

However, the hold times are longer and the shelter struggles with deteriorating behavior in the dogs because of long-term confinement. So in 2013, SLCoAS focused on improving resources to alleviate the boredom and stress of dogs in the shelter. Each day, the dogs spend time socializing in play yards. This monitored interaction not only makes these shelter dogs' lives happier and less stressful, it also gives the shelter staff a lot of information to pass on to potential adopters and helps the staff see which dogs need more specialized attention.

A team of animal behavior specialists work with animals individually to give them skills that make them more attractive to potential adopters. The ability to respond to cues such as sit, shake and stay goes a long way when dogs are being introduced to potential new families. To help keep the dogs stimulated when they're alone in their kennels, the specialists give them enrichment tools such as Kongs and popsicles.

Also, in 2013 SLCoAS participated in outreach events that involved leash exchanges. SLCoAS takes the used leashes, which are sometimes just ropes or belts, and replaces them with new collars and

harnesses. SLCoAS also established a Pit Crew Emergency Fund with Utah FACES (Friends for Animal Care and Effective Solutions). The fund is designated for pit bull-type dogs who enter the shelter with some type of injury.

Finally, SLCoAS is looking into making its 30-hour per week staffer a full-time employee to accommodate the demands of the program.

WHAT WORKED:

- **Spay/neuter resources:** SLCoAS provides free spay/neuter at its own clinic for pit bull-type dogs.
- **Events:** The Pit Crew holds numerous events throughout the year to promote adoption of pit bull terriers and provide dog care and training resources. The events educate the public about these dogs, dispelling myths and misperceptions; offer free vaccinations and microchips; and provide effective tools to help people socialize their dogs and keep them safe.
- **Volunteer support:** Volunteer support for the Pit Crew is a huge part of what makes the program work. The volunteers assist in getting dogs adopted by helping to stage events, taking photos of adoptable dogs and writing adoption bios.
- **Play groups:** Having the dogs participate in play groups alleviates the stress from longer hold times and provides crucial socialization with other dogs.

WHAT DIDN'T:

- **Different adoption requirements for pit bull terriers:** There was considerable concern about the negative publicity generated by a particular pit bull adoption, so a strict adoption protocol was enforced as a way of offsetting the criticism. New requirements for pit bull adoptions included dog-to-dog introductions, additional documentation from landlords and proof of insurance. However, SLCoAS staff realized they were doing exactly what they asked the public not to do — treat pit bulls differently from other breeds — so the new requirements were eliminated.
- **Behavior assessments:** These were replaced with consistent notes from the staff on how the dogs interact each day in play groups and with volunteers, staff and potential adopters.
- **Training for the public:** Initially, the shelter offered Canine Good Citizen trainings to the public and adopters. But the shelter found that it was competing with trainers in the community and dismantled the program.



TNR partnership with Best Friends Animal Society

In 2012, Best Friends provided the staffing needed for the shelter to operate a jurisdictional-wide trap/neuter/return program based on Utah's innovative Community Cat Act. Under this program, SLCoAS spays or neuters, vaccinates and ear-tips any community cat who enters the shelter, then releases the cats back to their neighborhoods.

Best Friends works to prevent future impounds by reaching out to communities and providing free spay/neuter for any community cat in the area. From January through August 2013, Best Friends funded the spay or neuter surgeries of over 1,400 community cats in the county and the shelter released more than 800 cats who would have been killed without the program in place. Thanks in part to these programs, cat shelter deaths are down by over 630.

WHAT WORKED:

- **Being proactive about finding relocation options:** Because some community cats can't be returned to their original environment (e.g., because the building where they were living is being torn down), it's important to start looking for relocation options the moment a TNR program is launched. Preparing in advance prevents the situation from being overwhelming.
- **Changing ordinances:** The ordinances that relate to community cats were changed so that caregiver registration was not required in order to release cats back into a community.

WHAT DIDN'T:

- **Having the cats spayed or neutered by the shelter veterinarians:** To minimize the holding time for community cats, all of them are spayed or neutered by an external high-volume clinic.



Kitten nursery partnership with Best Friends Animal Society

In the spring of 2013, Best Friends–Utah teamed up with SLCoAS to increase the save rate for neonatal kittens. These kittens are at high risk for being killed because they are too young to take care of themselves and are weeks away from being weaned, spayed or neutered, or eligible for adoption. Therefore, neonatal kittens require intensive staff attention and care. In an effort to save them, a kitten nursery was created in a modular housing unit behind the shelter. SLCoAS provides the medical care and Best Friends–Utah manages the nursery with one full-time staff person and many trained, dedicated volunteers. The volunteers work in two-hour shifts to feed the kittens, clean the kennels, do laundry and enjoy some kitten snuggles.

The nursery is set up to provide 24-hour care to unweaned kittens, nursing moms with kittens, and kittens who are weaned but are too young for spaying or neutering. As soon as the moms and kittens are stable, they are either placed in foster homes, sent to rescue groups, or placed for adoption at the Best Friends Pet Adoption Center or through the SLCoAS adoption program.

The partnership between Best Friends–Utah and SLCoAS has been key to the early success of the kitten nursery. A joint team of staff from both organizations meets regularly to monitor the program, make adjustments and improvements, and ensure that the needs of these high-risk kittens are met. The goal of the nursery is to save an estimated 500 kittens each year. Since the nursery opened in March 2013, more than 500 kittens have received care there. The impact on the cat save rate is noticeable: In March 2012, the cat save rate was 84 percent. In March 2013, the first month the kitten nursery was open, the save rate hit a high of 94.6 percent.

WHAT WORKED:

- **Coding system to help volunteers:** Having a simple color-coded pawprint system helps volunteers know the individual kitten's feeding plan and development phase at a glance.
- **Medical logs:** It is very important to keep a medical log so that all volunteer observations can be recorded and followed up on.
- **White board:** It has been very helpful to install a white board with each row and kennel represented so that information regarding each litter can be easily communicated between volunteer shifts.
- **Designating supplies to each litter:** To minimize medical issues, supplies aren't re-used. For example, baby bottles used by a litter are discarded when the kittens in the litter graduate to eating on their own.
- **Minimizing burnout:** The task of answering the 24-hour emergency phone is rotated among team leaders to minimize burnout.

WHAT DIDN'T:

- **Limited room:** Having only one room for kitten arrivals makes disease management very challenging.
- **Exposure to too many people:** We needed to develop strict rules regarding shelter staff and volunteers looking for cuddle time (again, to manage disease risk).



Adoption elements

Creative adoption promotions and programs have been initiated to save more lives in Salt Lake County. In 2013, Best Friends opened the Best Friends Pet Adoption Center, which adopts out animals from SLCoAS, in Salt Lake City's Sugar House neighborhood. Also, SLCoAS is looking to add satellite adoption centers at local malls and large shopping centers, and possibly provide alternate hours for adoptions, vaccinations and sterilizations.

In addition, SLCoAS is improving the process of matching pets with the right people. The behavior team evaluates the animals and their behavior, and then categorizes the animals according to their behavior. Volunteers are trained in the skills they need to work with dogs with different levels of behavior to give the dogs the skills they need to make them more adoptable. Staff members use the information provided by both the volunteers and the behavior team to recommend adoption matches to prospective adopters. These efforts by SLCoAS staff and volunteers have helped keep the shelter's return numbers low. The shelter has a 100 percent satisfaction guarantee and, in the event that an animal is not a good match, the staff work with the adopter to find a more suitable match.

WHAT WORKED:

- **Partner shelter adoption events:** After an influx of cats in late 2011, SLCoAS began partnering with Best Friends–Utah to hold well-promoted, on-site adoption events one weekend every quarter. The events are an easy way to bring attention to animals who have been in the shelter long-term and are also less expensive than large-scale, off-site adoption events.

- **Off-site pet adoption center:** In May 2012, Best Friends and SLCoAS brought a new twist to a proven idea — partner together to operate a pet adoption center in a destination shopping center. Best Friends would operate the center, which would feature dogs and cats available for adoption from the shelter. Each day, the center showcased 10 dogs and 15-20 cats. In 2012, 328 cats and dogs found homes out of a space that measured less than 800 square feet. The two organizations are continuing this partnership, but now at Best Friends' new pet adoption center and headquarters in Sugar House. As of the end of September 2013, 271 dogs and cats from the shelter have found homes through this partnership.
- **Fast-tracking certain adoptions:** Some animals move more quickly than others on the adoption floor, a reality that SLCoAS now capitalizes upon by assessing and sterilizing the highly adoptable residents before all others. Adopting out the “easy” animals as quickly as possible opens up space for animals who require additional resources.
- **Promotional pricing:** SLCoAS continues to have very positive response to reduced adoption fees, making it an effective tool for thinning the shelter population of certain animals.
- **Modified “satisfaction guaranteed” policy:** The shelter’s policy of taking back any animal at any time has encouraged more people to adopt; the absence of judgment and criticism removes the stigma attached to returning an animal. SLCoAS considers it an opportunity to learn more about that dog’s or cat’s home experience, which helps staff make a better match in the future. People who bring back an animal within 30 days of adoption are given a 30-day fee credit to encourage them to choose another pet.

WHAT DIDN'T:

- **Too much information up-front:** Counseling took an average of 30 minutes per adoption, and often several follow-up phone calls from adopters seeking more support. Once staff realized that adopters preferred having shorter counseling sessions with more resources in their information packets, the counseling process was pared down to 10-15 minutes of face time at the facility accompanied by a wealth of helpful take-home material. At adoption events, the process is further streamlined by showing a looping PowerPoint presentation containing all adoption counseling information.



Rescue Partner program

In 2011, only 5.6 percent of SLCoAS cats were going to its rescue partner groups. The Rescue Partner program was developed to include incentives for groups that accept SLCoAS animals into their organizations. Now, in 2013, the shelter is releasing 20 percent of its cat population to rescue partners.

WHAT WORKED:

- **Dedicated staff member:** SLCoAS re-allocated an existing position to bring a full-time rescue and foster coordinator on board, which has been instrumental in increasing live release rates. The coordinator works directly with rescue group partners, giving them a single go-to person with whom they can build trust and an ongoing relationship.
- **Focus on fewer animals:** In the past, email blasts sent a few times each month typically showcased a dozen or more animals. Recipients were inundated with too many bios and photos to focus on any

one dog or cat. Now, the maximum is three animals per mailing, with more in-depth bios and several photos of each pet.

- **More information:** Rescue partners wanted more information about available animals, so SLCoAS now includes full medical and behavior records with all email pleas.
- **Incentives for rescue partners:** Rescue partners were quite vocal about the expenses (e.g., spay/neuter, grooming, dental or medical treatment) associated with taking shelter animals. SLCoAS began offering incentives to offset these costs, including free sterilizations, medication, grooming and dentals. SLCoAS staff also started allowing rescue partners to choose easier-to-place animals if they took a more difficult-to-place one. For example, a rescue partner who commits to taking a harder-to-adopt dog, such as a senior Labrador with diabetes, is welcome to also take an easy-to-place pet, such as a puppy. Rescue partners can retrieve any animal at any time, but they have to select a program resident first if they want the accompanying incentives.



Volunteer programs

Volunteers have played a big role in making SLCoAS' no-kill efforts successful. From the Pit Crew to the kitten nursery and everything in between, volunteers are essential to achieving no-kill. Best Friends helps the shelter recruit and train the volunteers needed for the Cat Crusaders program, especially those for the kitten nursery. SLCoAS staff can then focus most of their time on recruiting and training the volunteers who support the Pit Crew and attend local events on their behalf.

WHAT WORKED:

- **Categorization of dog behavior:** The shelter's behaviorist categorizes dogs according to behavior. Easily handled dogs with no behavioral problems wear green collars. Dogs with moderate behavior problems wear orange collars and difficult-to-handle dogs with more notable behavior issues wear red collars. Volunteers must pass certain levels of training to give them the needed skills to help the dogs they're working with. For instance, some volunteers are green-level trained, some orange-level trained and some red-level trained. The shelter has a white board that the volunteer coordinator updates daily with information about which dogs have been walked and what kinds of medical or behavioral issues have been observed. This procedure helps to ensure that every dog is getting the enrichment he or she needs.
- **Senior Sitters:** SLCoAS is working on a new program called Senior Sitters. Senior animals who are having difficulties in the shelter go home with foster families over the weekend to give them a break from the shelter environment. If the animals are still deteriorating in the shelter environment, SLCoAS has more options to help them, such as long-term foster care, drug therapy and specialized behavior modification classes. The combination of all these things is helping to keep the dogs happy and adoptable.