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# Can Garo Alexanian End Shelter Euthanization in New York City?

His "surrender prevention" plan is keeping pets out of shelters -- and euthanasia rates are decreasing.

Dawn Taylor-Church | Dec 3rd 2012 | 0 Contributions



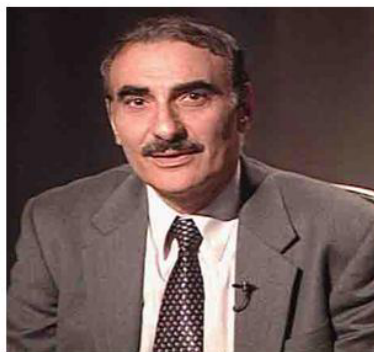
It's hard to take the news that so many animals are still being euthanized in shelters, despite the best efforts of rescue and adoption groups. The most recent estimates from the ASPCA and others report five to seven million pets entering shelters each year, with three to four million of those being euthanized.

But in New York City, euthanasia rates are at historic lows, and that's cause for celebration. Indeed, in 2011, the euthanasia rate for the city's municipal sheltering system was only one pet per 1,000 human population, the lowest ratio recorded in a major metropolitan area.

How is this possible?

The seismic shift in the last few years is largely the result of a revolutionary concept known as surrender prevention, whose leader is Garo Alexanian, the founder and director of Companion Animal Network. I met with Garo to discuss his organization's achievements in partnership with the NYC public shelters, and what it means for animals in the nation's largest city.

Garo was kind enough to invite me to his home in Queens, where I had the sweeping impression of a man immersed in, even consumed by his work. There were boxes of folders, records, and papers alongside three computers running different programs. It was Sunday, and he was fielding calls from program staff about medical and administrative issues. He looked a shade tired. He had been with his staff for a surgery scheduled for 1 a.m. that day. That was on the super-low-cost, full-service veterinary mobile unit, one of the two highly effective surrender prevention programs he has developed.



Garo Alexanian.



Pets For Life, established by Garo in 2005 and managed since 2009 by the Humane Society of the United States, offers a telephone hotline for owners considering relinquishing their pets to a shelter. Under the program, government agencies (including the municipal shelters) refer all animal-related calls to one hotline. Anyone bringing a pet into a shelter for surrender is also referred to the hotline. Trained volunteers try to assist callers and present other possible options and resources.

"There's somewhere around 30 reasons why animals are surrendered," explains Garo, "and to have a game plan for each and every of those reasons ... so that the volunteer call takers know what to say for each kind of situation" is the key to success. He emphasizes the importance of extensive hours in which volunteers can offer immediate help and advice to people who are often frustrated with their animal issues.

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extensive hours in which volunteers can offer immediate help and advice to people who are often frustrated with their animal issues.



The mobile low-cost vet program handles thousands of cases a year.

The mobile vet program was launched in 2009. In its first year, it handled about 1,000 cases, and by its third fiscal year, that has grown to more than 6,000. Garo says it has had a dramatic impact on animal surrender rates. "Up to 50 percent of pets surrendered ... are because of a medical issue," Garo explains. "People couldn't afford the high cost of veterinary services. If you have low-cost services, and they know about it, they will come to you, because they love their animal just as much as anybody does, and if they have some flexibility in the treatment of the animal and the financing of the treatment, at least three-quarters of the time we find that they keep the animal rather than surrendering it."

Having a mobile unit is crucial to providing care to pets in low-income communities, Garo points out: "Poor people do not have cars, so by going into those communities, you're saving all those animals, because they're going to come to you."



This cat's owner could not afford to have her tail amputated after it got an infection, so Garo's group performed the surgery for free.

I wanted to ask Garo about another trend I had noted in the statistics coming from New York City Animal Care & Control, which appeared to show that in the last few years, adoption rates have declined. He confirmed that adoptions have decreased significantly, which he attributed to the economy, but pointed out that the amount of euthanasia went down by about 11 percent because there were fewer surrenders.

This is the salient point for animal shelters everywhere -- and for the animal welfare community -- to consider: Fewer animals entering the shelter system mean fewer animals euthanized. Shelter authorities and advocates have paid so much attention to adoptions, fostering, rescue -- and the spay/neuter message has been extensively promoted -- but that is only part of the solution to the problem.



A day fair offering free vaccinations drew a crowd.

The missing element in most of their platforms has been surrender prevention. For whatever reason, the intake side has largely gone unexamined. As Garo says, "The only thing that works is a combination of all those programs: aggressive adoptions, aggressive spay/neuter, surrender prevention and a hotline, as well as the low cost veterinary services. All four of them together, then you've got something."

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surrender prevention and a routine, as well as the low cost veterinary services. All four of them together, then you've got something."

That "something" is lives saved. In New York City, the result is unprecedented success in reducing shelter euthanasia rates.

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