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A NEW BREED OF ADOPTION PARTNER

By Nancy Lawson

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Many shelters and "breed rescue" groups have been at odds for years, but some communities have managed to convert that ill will into constructive partnerships that help homeless animals

Here's a pop quiz: Which of these statements were uttered by a shelter director, and which by a breed rescue volunteer?

- "We have to have mutual respect. Respect doesn't just go one way. I have to respect when they think a dog is not adoptable—usually for severe health reasons or really bad temperament or because the dog has bitten. That's key—they won't place a dog that's bitten, and neither will we."
- "Don't criticize shelters. ...You don't know what situation the shelter's in financially, physically, any of that. Everybody's really doing the best they can. ...If you don't think they're doing the best they can, instead of complaining about it, you need to ... get off your duff and help bring change around. ...And don't even try to change things until you've seen how their policy works and why."
- "A lot of these rescue people... think euthanizing is terrible. Well, that's insane. I agree it's terrible, but trust me, there are too many dogs, and there are not enough responsible homes. There are too many temperament and health issues."

If you answered "shelter director" for any of these statements, surprise!

Here are the real answers: The first quote comes from Lynn Erckmann, a sheltie fan who heads Seattle Purebred Dog Rescue and works with more than a dozen shelters in the greater Seattle metropolitan area. The second is from Pat Tetrault, a dog trainer and Siberian husky lover who places huskies and promotes shelter adoptions in upstate New York. And the last one is from Nancy Nastasi, a poodle person and pigeon rehabber in Detroit who has helped shelters find homes for oodles of poodles.

If you're a shelter employee who's had a difficult time working with breed rescue groups—or a breed rescuer who's unsure of how to build a relationship with your local shelter—the sources of the above statements may have surprised you. But these are the people who "get it." They are among the folks who work hard to become assets to their local shelters, and who recognize that shelters are also assets to them. They know that every animal is special, regardless of the shape of her tail or the stance of her ears or the color of her paws. They understand that an animal care and control agency "rescues" more dogs than any one group can—and that the sheer volume of animals handled by shelters presents daily challenges unknown to most breed rescue organizations.

On the surface, these are simple starting points. But they are also the most important. Successful relationships between shelters and breed rescues rely on a shared understanding of the nature of shelter work and a firm grasp of the rationale behind basic shelter policies. Without such understanding and acceptance, a breed-placement partnership will most likely be doomed from the start.

"I think that until you walk a mile in a shelter worker's shoes, you really don't understand what they're going through every day," says Tetrault. "From their position, I'm not a shelter employee. ... The shelter employee is there in the trenches. ... Then they contact a breed rescue, and a lot of times they're told the dog they have isn't a purebred so that breed rescue won't help them. Or they're told, 'Sorry, rescue's full.' Or rescue comes in [to the shelter] and says, 'It's a dirty place.' And the shelter workers—after they've been turned down so many times—are very reluctant to pick up the phone and waste their time to call. I don't blame them."



Working with Breed-Placement Groups

So you've decided you want to work with a breed-placement group. Or maybe you just want to improve your existing relationships with the groups in your area. What can you do to ensure you're acting in the best interests of your shelter and its animals? Here's a checklist to help get you started.

12 Ways to Become a Responsible Breed-Placement Partner

So What's the Point?

At this point, you may be asking why it's worth all the fuss; open-minded breed rescuers like Erckmann, Tetrault, and Nastasi seem to be something of a rare breed themselves. Historically, many shelters have chosen to steer clear of partnering with breed rescue groups because so many of them are unwilling to take the time to get to know how and why shelters operate. The tension often begins with the name itself: "breed rescue." "Why focus on any one breed?" shelter employees and supporters often ask. "All animals are equally deserving of our help." The second word in the phrase—"rescue"—has led to irreconcilable differences as well; a group that storms into a shelter and claims it's going to "rescue" all the border collies from "death row" is not likely to win friends among those people on the front lines who would like nothing more than to find good homes for all the animals in their care.

First impressions can make or break a relationship between a breed rescue—or, more accurately, a breed-placement group—and a facility that provides refuge for thousands of animals each year, says Aline Summe, director of the Kenton County Animal Shelter in Ft. Mitchell, Kentucky. "We get a little bent out of shape when they become rather snobby about their dogs being in our facility—as if this was the worst place they could ever be," Summe

says. "That's definitely not a good sign for us."

Beyond the problem of initial interactions lie deeper issues that have caused many shelters to shy away from entrusting their animals or their organizations' reputations to external adoption groups. First, there's a well-founded fear that some groups are not really what they claim to be—that the name "rescue" is really just a facade for a breeding operation, an animal-hoarding situation, or a dealer who sells animals for research. Some shelter employees also wonder how they can ensure responsible placement of the animals released to rescues. Lastly, many, if not most, shelters would rather place purebreds directly, in this way dismantling little by little the false but all too common notion that purebreds don't end up homeless.

While all of these concerns are legitimate, they do not have to get in the way of good relationships with responsible groups. By establishing formalized programs that include screening, monitoring, and follow-up of placement group activities, shelters can ensure they are becoming involved with trustworthy organizations. At the same time, breed-placement groups will be far more impressive and helpful to shelters if they formalize their procedures and make an extra effort to understand a shelter's mission and policies.

This may sound like a huge time investment; it often is. Some agencies do find that in their regions, trying to develop and maintain partnerships with external adoption organizations is more trouble than it's worth. At the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria (AWLA) in Virginia, purebred placements are already high, and the process of screening individual groups to ensure their legitimacy is just too time-consuming, says Director of Community Relations Megan Brooks.

To AWLA and other shelters, it's also a question of credibility and reputation. "When somebody brings an animal to us, we feel like they're entrusting the animal to our care," Brooks says. "A lot of people come from counties away or states away because they just like how we do things. We feel they're putting faith in us, and we feel like we'd be breaking that faith by turning around and giving our animal away to somebody we don't even know."

While many shelters prefer to retain total autonomy over the placement of their animals, they've also found that partnering with local dog lovers can reap benefits far beyond just the obvious help with adoptions: Good breed-placement groups will promote shelter animals to those who contact them, advertising your facility to an audience that otherwise may never have sought your services. Good breed-placement groups will also provide free behavior and breed-specific medical advice, a bonus when a Norwegian elkhound or an Italian greyhound shows up at your front door. Good breed-placement groups provide another avenue for helping you educate the community about responsible pet care. And, with the help of good breed-placement groups, you can steer more of your community's dog owners away from backyard breeders and pet stores—and toward shelters and other humane organizations.

"There'll be some instances where we'll never agree," says Virginia Beach SPCA Community Outreach Director Dale Bartlett, who acts as a liaison between his shelter and local breed-placement groups. "But we're just trying to find some common ground so that we can find homes for as many animals as possible. ...As long as the animals are going into the right homes, that's what matters."

"But what's wrong with the word 'rescue'?"

The mission of a shelter is to "rescue" animals and provide them with refuge, but groups claiming to rescue dogs from animal care and control facilities are casting a negative light on the very places that protect animals the most. A "rescue" group is rescuing animals from the tragic results of pet overpopulation, not from shelters themselves. To address this terminology problem and change public perceptions, some shelters are using the terms "community adoption partners" or "pet-placement partners" when describing groups that help place, promote, and care for animals. For breed-specific groups, the term "breed-placement group" is also appropriate. The HSUS not only supports the use of these terms but also recommends them; for this reason, this article uses "breed-placement group" in the place of "rescue group" wherever possible.

Rare Breeds Indeed

Sometimes the right home is no home at all, a concept that quickly distinguishes responsible breed-placement groups from those that may not share a shelter's mission, says Jennifer Davis-Yates, volunteer coordinator for Wayside Waifs Humane Society in Kansas City, Missouri. "If we feel like it's truly not an adoptable animal—I mean we feel that strongly about it—how are they going to be able to change that?" she asks. "Like if it's an animal who's had a biting history. That's where I find the difference between a rescue that's very levelheaded and reasonable, and one that is not. A reasonable rescue group would say, 'I would have done the same thing. There's no way I could have placed that animal.' "

Davis-Yates recalls the recent case of an 11-month-old Neapolitan mastiff with bone disease. When the mastiff's owner surrendered the dog to the shelter, he told employees he had visited surgeons at the University of Missouri and discovered that his dog's genetic problems would cost many thousands of dollars to correct—with still no guarantee of recovery. Shelter employees wanted a second opinion.

"He was such a sweet dog," says Davis-Yates. "So at that point, we thought, 'Well, let's see if we can get an opinion from a rescue group that deals with this, because they're breed-specific.' " After hearing the details and coming in to evaluate the dog, local mastiff groups agreed that euthanasia would be the most humane alternative. "We felt like we had at least explored all of our options," says Davis-Yates. "Unfortunately, the dog did have to be euthanized, but we at least tried to consult with the group, and they agreed."

Helping as many animals as possible requires recognizing that not all of them can be helped—for instance, a 9-year-old poodle with heartworm and no housetraining, says Nastasi. Or the poodle whose separation anxiety is so severe that he relieves himself all over the kitchen table whenever his owners leave—and makes himself bloody if anyone tries to crate him. "You've got to be realistic," says Nastasi. "I don't agree with [the policy of] non-euthanizing at all." Like most shelters, Nastasi recommends euthanasia of homeless dogs with severe health problems or overwhelming behavior issues.



Nastasi was disheartened recently when she learned that a group in her area had placed a 12-year-old dog with a rotting mouth and missing teeth with an older woman who'd been led to believe her new pet was only seven. Less than six months after adopting the dog, the woman was heartbroken to find him dead in her bedroom, possibly of a brain tumor. "The lady was devastated. The reason she had gotten a dog is that her husband had passed away," Nastasi says. The woman ended up adopting another poodle—this time one who was truly seven years old, and this time from Nastasi. But it took a bit of convincing on Nastasi's part to explain that the age and health status of the dog had not been fabricated.

On the other hand, Nastasi and breed-placement partners of her ilk feel it's part of their responsibility to help shelters with the dogs whose problems may be solvable. In fact, Nastasi got her start by helping the Michigan Humane Society with a four-month-old standard poodle who had a severe break in his rear leg that needed repairing. "I got my veterinarian to do the pin work—he charged me [a] minimal [fee]," Nastasi says. "And from there, it just kind of snowballed."

That was 17 years ago, and Nastasi still works with the Michigan Humane Society, as well as with other shelters—both private and public—in Detroit and other parts of Michigan. One of the dogs she's caring for now came from the Michigan Humane Society's Central Branch; Nastasi describes her as a brown

standard poodle with just "a little bit of baggage." "She's a little crate-reactive, and she's a little food-reactive," says Nastasi. "She's got an edge about her. She wouldn't do well in a shelter situation-she's having issues here with some of the dogs I'm babysitting. ...But she's going to make somebody a lovely pet. She's a great dog."

These are the kinds of dogs Wayside Waifs employees also place with area groups they trust—the dogs who aren't a threat to anyone but who may be too stressed in the shelter. Wayside prefers to have groups direct potential adopters toward the shelter, but will make exceptions when it's in the best interests of the animal. "Right now, we've got a Chinese crested powder puff," says Davis-Yates, referring to the furry relative of the hairless "Chinese crested" breed. "This dog is very shy and not adjusting really well to this type of environment. ...He passed the temperament test, but he's not doing well here, and it's just not fair to the dog if we've got another place—a home environment—we can send him to."

Ranging from mastiff aficionados to fans of high-strung dogs no bigger than hedgehogs, Wayside Waifs' network of breed-placement groups is extensive. These partnerships didn't develop out of thin air, however. They are the culmination of a lot of hard work on the part of Davis-Yates and Renee Harris, director of shelter operations, to ensure that they were doing right by their animals.

Making Structural Improvements

When Harris arrived at Wayside Waifs several years ago, the shelter had no formal agreements with any breed-placement groups. Anybody could just enter the building, declare himself a "rescuer," and walk out with animals—many of them unsterilized.

"You'd think that they owned this organization and this facility, and I just said, 'This is wrong,'" recalls Harris. "And that's when I came in and made a stand and said, 'We're not doing this anymore until we can establish a program.'"

The decision was not taken kindly by the people who had once had free rein over the fate of purebreds in the shelter. "I cannot tell you the amount of abuse I took from these people," Harris says. "They would physically come out and push my staff around. I'd get hate calls. They would leave messages about wanting to hurt me or hurt my animals. I was hated in this area by the breed rescue groups."

Harris wasn't inherently against partnering with external adoption groups; the relationships she has developed over the last couple of years are a testament to that. But she wanted to do it right, to make sure that the groups the shelter was working with shared the same mission and understood the shelter's policies. Building such a solid foundation eventually led to rational, friendly relationships with area breed-placement organizations.

"I think when the groups go through our process ... the ones who are trying to save every [animal] generally don't make it," Harris says. "They won't let us come and do a home visit [at their foster homes]; they may be over their limits and have too many animals."

Wayside Waifs releases animals only to those groups that have a state license (a requirement in Missouri) and that have passed muster with Davis-Yates' screening process. Interview questions are designed to ensure the groups' policies are in line with those of Wayside: Does the group comply with its city's limits on the number of animals it can house, or does it have a kennel license allowing the group to surpass that limit? Does it conduct home visits and then follow up with adopters once a placement is completed? Is the group willing to follow Wayside's guidelines? Are animals placed in a timely manner, or does the group hang on to too many animals for too long? How does the group publicize



its services?

Appropriate answers to these and other questions are a good sign, says Davis-Yates. But the most important part of the process—the visits to the homes of potential breed-placement partners—was added after Harris and Davis-Yates learned the hard way that a state license does not guarantee that a group is acting responsibly.

When Wayside Waifs initially launched its formalized program with breed-placement groups, Harris and Davis-Yates assumed it was safe to release dogs to groups as long as they were licensed by the state; state licensure means that Missouri inspectors will visit the property at least once a year. But two weeks after the shelter allowed the operator of a state-licensed dalmatian adoption group—a seemingly kind and levelheaded man—to leave with a dog, a state inspector visited the man's property and ended up seizing all his dogs, several of whom were already dead.

When Harris and her employees found out, they were devastated. "It was a horrible feeling because we thought we were doing the right thing," Harris says. "We had sent one of our animals there, and we were not able to locate our animal. So when that occurred, we sat back again and said, 'Let's relook at our program and how we can ensure our animals are going where we want them to go.' And that's when we implemented the home visits."

Now, whenever anyone questions Wayside's strict screening, follow-up, and inspection procedures, Harris and Davis-Yates recount the story of the lost dalmatian. They have few problems with their breed-placement partnerships, though they still encounter groups that will do anything and say anything to "buy more time" for an animal. A breed group representative might say, for instance, that she'll send someone to pick up an animal—and then no one will show up. Or she'll bring in a potential adopter who's totally inappropriate for the dog in question; one group tried to persuade Wayside to adopt an Australian cattle dog to an 80-year-old woman who was physically unable to care for him and who planned to keep him in a run all day.

"We're at the point now," says Davis-Yates, "where if somebody gives me a problem, I just say to them, 'We're not going to work with you anymore.' It's just not worth it to us."

It's the save-them-all-at-any-expense attitude that makes things more difficult for reputable adoption partners like Nastasi, who says that the best way to establish trustworthiness is to do what you say you're going to do and to "show up when you say you're going to show up."

Lack of timeliness has been one of the biggest obstacles for Summe and her staff, who generally have good relationships with many of the breed-placement groups in their area of Kentucky. Whenever possible, shelter employees hold onto animals if a group says it can come quickly to pick them up. "There are [groups] who have been super about running down here and getting the animals," she says. "The ones who don't call us back are the ones that irritate us. ...A lot of times they're all bent out of shape when they show up a week later or call back a week later and the dog's not here. And they say, 'Well, I told you I was going to save it,' and it's like, 'Well, you didn't show up.' ...That's our biggest problem we have because we're a small shelter. When we're calling you, we need you."

It's the kind of story Nastasi knows well—and one she hopes will serve as a lesson to those groups that want to help shelters and shelter animals but haven't quite realized yet what a difference a good attitude makes. "I'll be honest, in the years I've done this, there are more rescues out there that aren't so great than there are that are," she says. "Their intentions are always good; I don't think there are true 'bad guys' out there. But I think that in trying to save the world, they treat any home as good enough. So they've dug a ditch for the people who are good."

Less Added in Seattle

Finding the groups you do want to work with may seem as difficult as herding a cavalcade of cats; a search on the Web reveals far too many "rescue" groups

portraying themselves as the ultimate "saviors" of animals "awaiting the death sentence" at the "pound"—an image that makes shelters look more like concentration camps than the refuges they are.

If you search long enough, though, you'll find some refreshing model partnerships that interested breed-placement organizations in your community may be able to take a lesson from. A visit to the Web sites of shelters in the Seattle area is inspiring: Many of the agencies provide links to the site of an organization called Seattle Purebred Dog Rescue, or SPDR for short. On its Web site, in turn, SPDR describes itself as a "non-profit referral organization dedicated to placing unwanted purebred dogs into suitable homes, and preventing unwanted purebreds from overloading the shelter system."

The good vibes between SPDR and area shelters are no accident; they've been 13 years in the making, says SPDR President Lynn Erckmann. "We had to earn our relationship with the shelters," she says. "They had to watch us work. ... I think when we started, rescue was fairly novel, and I think shelters just had to see us in action and see how we could help."

Seattle Purebred Dog Rescue is made up of more than 100 "breed representatives," each of whom must be interviewed and approved by a board of directors. The "breed reps," as they are commonly called, then receive training and a handbook of policies that helps them understand how to follow SPDR procedures and explains how to work within shelter policies. Not anyone can become a breed rep; just having owned and loved a dog is not enough to qualify a person for the job. "We need to know that they know their breed very well," says Erckmann. "What constitutes an adoptable dog in their breed? What is a good home for a dog of their breed? They can also be familiar with more common health problems that their breed might have, to be able to know if what they're seeing in a dog is something that's a minor problem or something that's major."



Just as important is the criterion that breed reps have "a realistic attitude toward rescue," Erckmann says. "They need to know what they can do, what is realistic for them, not overextend themselves, not try to save every dog. We don't require breed reps to accept every dog that they're notified about if it's overextending them or if they don't have enough homes. ... We also need them to have a realistic attitude about euthanasia—that some dogs probably can't be saved, or the expense in saving them would be so high that we honestly can't afford it."

SPDR has also endeared itself to local shelters by respecting shelter protocols and decision-making processes. The organization's breed reps take dogs into foster homes only if shelters ask them to; usually a shelter will request the temporary placement if a dog appears too stressed or has developed a minor illness that can be easily treated in a home environment. Whenever SPDR acquires an unsterilized dog, breed reps must ensure that spay/neuter surgery is performed within one month. (SPDR will reimburse the breed rep, and adopters, in turn, are asked for donations to help cover the costs.)

More often than not, however, the purebred organization acts as a referral service for the shelter, sending pre-screened potential adopters to 18 area agencies. The system is organized and efficient: Volunteer "shelter-checkers" visit the agencies regularly, reporting back to breed reps with descriptions of purebreds being housed in the facilities. Breed reps then call the shelters to learn the status of the animals, inquiring as to whether they were stray or owner-surrendered and finding out if they will be put up for adoption. "Sometimes [the shelters] decide the dog won't be adoptable, and we can't question that," Erckmann says.

For those dogs going up for adoption at the shelters, breed reps keep waiting

lists of people interested in particular breeds. "We let people on the waiting list know there will be a dog of the breed they're interested in coming up for adoption ... [and say], 'Go down and take a look!'" says Erckmann. "When I refer an adopter to the shelter, that adopter still has to go through the shelter's adoption policies and procedures and comply with those. But at least I'm sending them somebody that I've prescreened already and that I think is a good home. And [the shelters] appreciate that."

"I'm happy that a dog is adopted. It doesn't have to be somebody I've sent—the main thing is that the dog got a good home," says Erckmann. "...It's not like SPDR steps in and pulls out all the purebreds—only if we're asked to. The shelters would usually just prefer if we refer adopters to them, and that works well for everybody."

Helping When Asked

At a time when the people and pet populations in the Seattle area are growing by leaps and bounds, Seattle Animal Control certainly appreciates the help, says Manager Don Jordan. When the agency began working more actively with pet-placement partners five years ago, shelter employees met with group representatives to compare notes on adoption guidelines and procedures. "In many cases it was a matter of trying to re-educate some of the rescue groups about exactly what it is we do, that we're not just an agency that euthanizes animals," says Jordan. "So it's a matter of getting everybody on the same page. ... We realized that we can't save all the animals on our own. We need help from the community. So we're looking for the resources available, and the rescue groups are just a great asset."

Like many shelters, however, Jordan and his staff prefer to try to place dogs first. "There's a vested interest on some of the staff's part in that they take the animals very personally," says Jordan. "They've cared for them while they're down here, they've cleaned them, they've fed them, so they like to have the first shot at trying to place them into an appropriate home because there's some gratification, some accomplishment that comes with that."



It's only after a greyhound or a whippet or an Australian shepherd has been up for adoption in the shelter for a certain number of days—and has garnered no potential adoption prospects—that the shelter explores the possibility of placing that dog with SPDR. "If there's no interest in a particular animal, then we've got to look at our next avenue," Jordan says. "Does this animal need training? Is he just stressed out from being in a cage? ... [The dog] could have been very friendly when he came in, and the shelter environment was just not

conducive to an adoption."

Sometimes the shelter seeks help from SPDR not for a special-needs animal, but just to free up some space for other animals—and that's one of the key benefits to working with breed-placement groups, says Erckmann. She does what she does not only to help her favorite breed, but also to help public and private shelters provide refuge for all the homeless dogs who come through their doors. When SPDR first formed, skeptics called it an "elitist purebred group," but the organization's rational and helpful approach has helped to disabuse many community members and shelter advocates of that notion, Erckmann says.

"I certainly can't be an expert on 150 breeds of dogs. I certainly can't be an expert on the mixes of those breeds," Erckmann says. "But I am an expert on my breed, and that's where I can help. It's sort of like [finding] where your efforts are best spent. ...It's not that I feel that purebreds should be saved and the others shouldn't, but by helping with these purebreds, I'm helping with the others as well. I am making more room in the shelter for those other dogs to be there."

Kris Fancher, who takes in Keeshonds and Keeshond mixes in the Kansas City area, also takes issue with the suggestion that she's an elitist canine lover.

"Generally speaking, a rescue is pro-any dog," she says. "All we're saying is, 'This is the breed that we know.'"

Meeting the Needs of Breeds—and Adopters

That's the main point Tetrault likes to emphasize in the packets she sends out to local agencies in upstate New York. Whether she's approaching an organization for the first time or just reminding its employees of her services, she puts together a pile of materials that includes information about Siberian huskies and explains her background in working with the breed.

The approach has been successful in many cases; with the help of volunteers, Tetrault works with about a dozen public and private shelters in her area. As a longtime shelter volunteer and board member, Tetrault not only refers husky adopters to shelters but also offers discounted dog-training classes to adopters of animals from shelters and other humane organizations. Her volunteers visit shelters to take photos and create descriptions of huskies available for adoption; Tetrault then submits the dogs' bios to an international Web site that displays regional listings of homeless huskies. If an animal up for adoption in a shelter isn't spayed or neutered, Tetrault offers to pay for the surgery.

And because she knows the breed so well, shelters can turn to Tetrault if they need specific advice on an animal before placing him. "They will contact me and ask, 'What's the best type of home? Should we require fencing? How much exercise does a Siberian need? Are they good with cats?'"

Those are the same kinds of questions posed by responsible breed-placement groups that are truly looking out for the best interests of the animals they seek to rehome. Nastasi checks the veterinary references and groomer references of potential adopters, all the while evaluating the dogs in her care to decide what type of home would best match their temperament. After determining that the dog with "poodle baggage" just needed a little direction, Nastasi tracked down a childless couple who enjoy training dogs.

"Standard [poodles] are literally bouncing off the walls," says Nastasi. "They're high-energy. They're not for everybody. ... So it's nice when shelters will work with ... a good rescue group that's evaluating properly and that knows specific things about their breed."

For Nastasi, finding an adopter is only the beginning. Nastasi makes sure dogs about to be placed are sterilized, vaccinated, and checked for heartworm and other parasites. Just as many shelters do, she sends adopters home with as many goodies and helpful materials as possible. "I purchase a tag with the new owner's name, address, and telephone number on it, and I buy it and mail it to their house. I do the extra steps. [Adopters] leave with a brush. They leave with written material—books, whatever they need, whatever that particular dog needs. If that dog is a needy little dog and he needs a bed, then I'm buying him a bed."



And, while most agencies with effective breed-placement relationships require partnering groups to forward the names of adopters so they can be kept on file, Nastasi takes the extra step in that direction as well, forwarding photos and letters from adopters on to the shelters. "I think that helps them to see that I have placed the dogs in very nice homes," she says. "And I think that's helped establish me with the shelters."

"To do it properly and do things in the right way is truly time-consuming," Nastasi says. "If I could have the time and the hours back, my God, it would add up to many years of my life."

Constant Communication, Meticulous Monitoring

For shelters, the process of building partnerships with adoption groups and breed-placement partners is no less time-consuming. Policies and procedures vary widely from group to group, and it can take years to find people like

Nastasi whom you trust implicitly. For the Virginia Beach SPCA, the process is one of constant education and monitoring.

Shelter employees usually don't release a dog to a breed-placement group until the animal has been up for adoption in the shelter for a minimum of six days—and only after employees have called people on a waiting list of potential adopters looking for specific breeds, says Bartlett. But exceptions are made if it's in the best interests of the animal—and if it involves an organization like Golden Retriever Rescue Education and Training (GRREAT), a group in the Virginia Beach area that not only understands the shelter's needs and policies but also supports them. "We trust them enough that we'll turn the animal over to them immediately," Bartlett says. "This is what gets us into trouble because other groups are like, 'Well, you gave one to GRREAT.' And sometimes you just have to say, 'Well, you know what? We're comfortable with GRREAT, and until we have a 10-year working relationship with you, we're not going to have that level of comfort with you.' "

In Bartlett's experience, those groups most critical of the shelter are usually the ones that have assisted homeless animals the least. "We have people who come to our meetings complaining about our adoption policies. We say, 'Well, how are you helping?' They say, 'Well, sometimes I can take in one rottweiler.' And you have to look at them and say, 'Well, thank you very much, but this year we'll take in 430 rottweilers. That means that, unless you're going to take in 1½ a day from us, we're going to have to euthanize.' "

Recently the shelter's policies came into question after the United Kennel Club printed an article in its magazine called, "Better Dead Than Bred." The controversy started when an American Eskimo came into the shelter along with papers showing he'd come from a breeder in Florida. Following its normal procedure, the shelter sent the breeder a letter to let her know that one of her dogs had, in fact, ended up homeless. "In so many cases, breeders feel they're the 'responsible' breeders, and we just want them to know, 'As responsible as you think you are, your animal is still in our shelter,' " says Bartlett. "You get to see them at the good time when they're being born, and we get to see them at the bad time when they're ending up in an animal shelter.' "

The Florida breeder demanded that the shelter send the dog back to her, and Executive Director Sharon Quillen-Adams told the breeder the Virginia Beach SPCA would follow through with its responsibility to place the dog in a good home on its own. Soon enough, the UKC article about the case had made its way onto the Internet, and breeders from around the country were sending hate mail and death threats to Quillen-Adams and her staff. The local kennel club, a longtime supporter, ended its relationship with the shelter.

To stave off the potential for such problems with breed-placement groups, shelter employees decided to call a meeting and present the groups with the real facts about what had happened. Fifty people representing 38 breed-placement organizations showed up. "We called the meeting ... to say, 'Some of you we're working with because you've applied to be rescue groups with us, and we've checked over your adoption standards and things like that, so we'll release animals to you,' " says Bartlett. "Some of you we don't work with because we don't know you and you haven't applied, or because, frankly, your adoption standards don't come up to snuff.' But that's not to say that we won't work with them in any way."

While some groups still blast the shelter for its policies, others have come away from the meeting more enlightened about where the SPCA stands and why. As a result of the communications, four new breed-placement groups have been added to the list of organizations to which the shelter releases animals.

By remaining in control of its breed-placement program, the Virginia Beach SPCA is able to maintain positive collaboration while also protecting against activities that could run counter to its mission. And by aggressively promoting all the ways it helps animals in the community, the organization gathers tremendous public support for its initiatives—which gives the shelter the backing it needs to stand up to criticism, says Bartlett.

In an interesting turn of events, the shelter even became the rescue group for a rescue group, when the personal circumstances of a dalmatian rescuer

prevented her from following through with an adoption process she had already initiated. "So we just ran it all through the shelter," says Bartlett. "The dog came back to the SPCA. Our shelter staff went to [the adopter's] house and did the home visit essentially for her, and we did her adoption for her. In that case, we were her rescue group."

A Rescue by Any Other Name ...

And what about that word rescue? Sometimes "rescue" groups themselves have problems with the public perception of the term. As Nastasi points out, people who approach her about her poodle rescuing at times assume that the dogs have all been rescued from abuse cases, when in fact many have simply come from people who decided there was no more room in their lives for a pet. "[People] hear the word 'rescue,'" says Nastasi, "and they assume it's been in a bad situation."

Talk of "rescuing" an animal from a shelter conjures up the same images, portraying the shelter as a bad place to be. In an attempt to change the way "rescue" groups look at themselves—and at shelters—organizations such as the Humane Society of Rochester and Monroe County in New York have made a formal change in their everyday lingo; "breed rescues" in the ROCHESTER area are now referred to as "pet placement partners." It's a move The HSUS not only supports but encourages, believing that shelters should not sell themselves short with the language they use.

Whether or not a shelter finds the "rescue" label offensive often depends on how the term is applied. In communities like Seattle, where "rescue" groups have become true partners, the word doesn't seem to be an issue. Seattle Animal Control's Jordan suggests the word "recruiting" as a possible replacement. "I think that the reality is, though, that if the animals don't get placed, what's the alternative?" Jordan asks.

Maybe, jokes Bartlett, the solution is to rename humane societies and SPCAs, calling each of them, "The Society for the Rescuing of Animals." In the meantime, however, all those who work to help animals must try to go beyond the words they use, to create an entire community for the rescuing of animals—one that's supportive of all efforts, whether those efforts are initiated by shelters or breed-placement partners or the woman who finds the lost cat at her back door. There's strength in numbers—but only when those numbers aren't dividing themselves.

"When people say, 'Yeah, but you guys kill animals, so we need to "rescue" them,' there's no way you can't take that personally, because it's such a raw emotional issue," says Bartlett. "What you have to do is, in our case, pretty much just suck it up, grin and bear it. Decide that we're not going to make decisions that will affect the rest of an animal's life based on whether someone has said something that might hurt our feelings. Rather, we're going to base our decisions on whether we think that person can really do something that's going to give this animal a good life and find him a good, responsible home."



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