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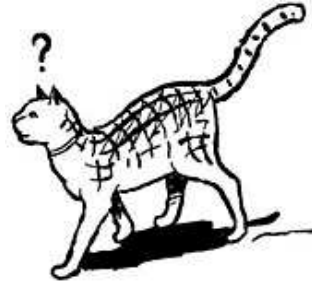
**WHAT'S IN A WORD? (AND DOES IT MATTER?)**

By Carrie Allan

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Do you say "housebroken" or "housetrained"? "Kennel worker" or "caregiver"? Are these debates mere semantic squabbles, or do our arguments over language help us progress toward a more humane world?



How would you react, hearing the following sentence uttered by a well-meaning member of the public?

"I rescued my cat from the shelter's death row."

Or how about:

"The dogcatcher took Spot to the pound, where he was destroyed."

Your reaction to those sentences, depending on your background and where you work, is likely to be one of anger, pain, dismay, or frustration. Why?

Consider a hammer: Without a hand to swing it, it is both useless and neutral. It has no intent. Put it into the hand of a carpenter, and she might build you a house. Put it into the hand of a psychopath, and the results could be horrifying.

Language is the same way: a neutral tool that can be used for good or evil. We use this basic tool every day without thinking about it; we build our communities and our work with this hammer. Throughout history, great societal leaps forward have been accompanied by new language—witness the changes of the civil rights movement and feminism, both of which were assisted by language that asked people to reconsider what they believed and to act accordingly. A culture that uses "women" and "African-Americans" to describe groups spoken of only decades ago as "ladies" and "coloreds" is not the same culture; it is more just, more tolerant, and more inclined to see people as individuals who, in their struggle for self-definition and self-expression, may call themselves what they will and define their lives as they want. It is more inclined to see people, and treat them, as individuals with equal rights and common humanity.



The debate over the terminology we use in the animal protection field is also intensifying, and people are using their tools to restructure our concept of mission. Some communities are using their

hammers of change to rebuild the language at the very core of the human-animal bond. In a move that has caught the eye of the national media, Boulder, Colorado's City Council—backed by the Humane Society of Boulder Valley and the national animal rights group In Defense of Animals (IDA)—recently changed the language of local laws relating to pets; human companions will now be referred to as "guardians" rather than "owners." (See the article **In Boulder, Pet Ownership is a Thing of the Past** for more on this story.)

Eliot Katz, president of IDA, says change is crucial to elevating the public's perception of animals. "I know the importance of language, and how action follows language," says Katz. "The change in this terminology [indicates] a change in the paradigm—to think of animals differently and think of one's relationship to them differently. It's terribly important because it's a major step in ending a great deal of animal pain and suffering." The shift away from seeing an animal as an owned thing, says Katz, is similar to the shift that gradually gave women and African-Americans status as citizens, and not property to be used according to the arbitrary will of a husband or "master."

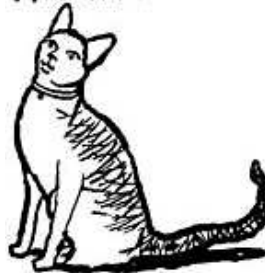
The evaluation of language is movement in itself, a hammer striking a nail into a new foundation of action and work. The humane movement has its own hammer to swing, in an arc moving ever closer to a more perfect world for ourselves and the creatures with whom we share the planet. As activists, we must be mindful of the power of language and use that power to build change.

### If You Were a Carpenter

The humane community has worked hard to learn to use its hammer effectively, co-opting the language of other compassionate work in order to reach the minds and hearts of the public. Words like "humane" and "adopt," now some of the central terms of the animal protection vocabulary, weren't always part of our vernacular. "Humane" began as a descriptive term for a broad range of philanthropic causes in the nineteenth century, and gradually began to be used to apply specifically to groups helping animals, children, and the elderly. Likewise, it is believed that the word "adopt" was borrowed from the child protection movement. These terms, now central to the work of animal protection, once had different meanings: language evolves as culture grows and changes.

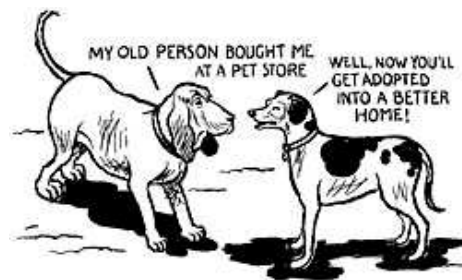
Gradually, we've managed to almost erase terms like "dogcatcher" from common usage; even 20 years ago, this word flowed easily not only from the mouths of the public and the media, but also from our own lips. Now the "dogcatchers" of yore have become "animal control officers." And many agencies aren't stopping with that change: They've added the word "care" to the names of their organizations and the titles of their staff. While the word "control" by itself was once appropriate to the times, reflecting the primary mission of protecting the public from rabies and dog bites, the animal control officers of today have progressed far beyond their original job descriptions. Beyond just "catching dogs," they educate the public, ensure public safety, and rescue lost, neglected, and abused animals. It is only natural that the compassionate "care" they provide should become a part of their titles.

HMMM..



Not only is "animal care and control" a more accurate representation of the work involved, but it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy: If "care" is actually part of your job description, you're bound to think of that aspect as much as you think of "control." And many animal control agencies are calling themselves "animal services," a term that places a renewed emphasis on being responsive to the public. Fifty years ago, the main purpose of a "pound" was to impound strays, just as the main point of having a dogcatcher was to ensure that no rabid or vicious dogs were roaming free. Now, as municipal and private shelters have vastly expanded the scope of their goals and programs, our language is expanding to keep up with us.

### Roll With the New



While the term "dog pound" lingers in the public consciousness, it's one that animal protection advocates have worked hard to eliminate. Not only are over half the animals in shelters non-canine, but, more importantly, shelters do much more than impound animals. The shift toward the gentler and more comprehensive word "shelter," with its implication of protection for the animals, reflects the changing idea of what humane work entails. Although "pound" remains the legal term in many states, many organizations are lobbying their legislatures to have that changed in order to better reflect their work.

It's easy to blame the usage of outdated or harmful terms on the public, but the humane community has an obligation to remain careful in how it defines itself, says Christie Smith, executive director of the Potter League for Animals in Rhode Island. "The term 'pound' lingers because some animal control facilities still call themselves 'the pound ... And I will not address them that way," says Smith. "They may say 'We're the pound,' and I will say, 'You're the animal control facility.' If you're not prepared to change yourself and professionalize yourself and send a better image, you can't expect it from the public." If you put forth your best image, then that's how others will see you.

All of the adjustments in our language reflect the sweeping changes in the animal sheltering field, says Smith. "I think that 'dogcatcher,' 'pound'—all of those are just years behind the times. They were appropriate at the time, but they're no longer appropriate," says Smith, who feels that these archaic terms affect the consciousness of those in and out of the field in a negative way. "I think we sell ourselves short sometimes in our word choices because some terms don't reflect how far this industry has come, or how bright and dedicated so many of the people are."

The focus of the terminology changes from region to region, city to city, shelter to shelter. While some shelters such as the Humane Society of Boulder Valley are tackling terms as pervasive as "pet owner," other agencies are just starting to examine the words they use to describe their everyday work. Is it better to say "catchpole" or "control pole"? Do animals in your shelter receive "shots" or "vaccinations"? Is your dog "housebroken" or "housetrained"? Are animals "killed" or "euthanized"?



#### TERMS:

#### **Are your dogs housebroken or housetrained?**

Your dogs are *housetrained*, not *housebroken*. House-training focuses on the learning side of this accomplishment—a cooperative effort on the part of the human teacher and the learning animal. *Housebroken*, on the other hand, implies first that the process is rough and cruel, and second that the animal has been broken in order to fit into the household—neither of which is true.

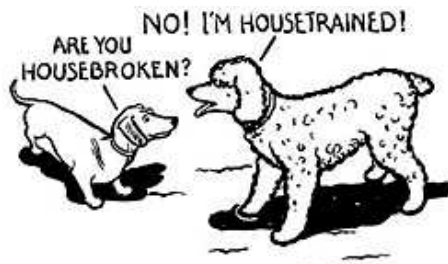


This sort of minute tinkering with language may seem obsessive. But all of these things have an important place in the work of animal shelters, and thus in the language we use. While many of us are quick to dismiss linguistic lobbying we dislike as mere "political correctness," we're also quick to correct people who use terms we know to be hurtful or inaccurate in describing our field.

**"Politically Correct" Is Not an Insult**

*Politically correct.* If the term itself sends an involuntary shudder down your spine, you're not alone. America has become a culture obsessed with words; during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, President Clinton even tried to argue over what the word "is" meant. "Do we have to call a manhole cover a personhole cover now?" jokes Smith.


But the term "politically correct" itself was coined in an attempt to deride people's efforts to define their lifestyles and cultures more accurately and justly. And although many of the sheltering professionals interviewed for this article believe our debates over labels have become extreme, some of



those same people are examining their language to find the messages buried within seemingly simple terms. While political correctness may have become the brunt of much mockery and derision, language, whether we like it or not, defines who we are and what we do. No other tool we possess has as much power to push our consciousness forward. And language is continuously evolving to keep up with our culture—witness the recent additions to the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the word "Internet," the prefix "cyber," and the computer-related, non-animal meaning of the word "mouse."

The changing terminology of the sheltering field represents a similar shift: an attempt to use the language that represents our work, and the living creatures at its center, in the best, most progressive, and most compassionate way possible. And with all the advances in the animal protection field, it's no wonder that the language of humane work has changed to reflect new trends and new directions.

Sometimes these changes happen amazingly fast, says Geoff Handy, who started in animal protection as an editorial assistant for *Shelter Sense*, the predecessor of *Animal Sheltering* magazine. Now the Director of Communications and Campaigns for the Companion Animals section of The HSUS, Handy says that even in the decade he's been in the field, he's seen changes in the language local animal care and control agencies and national animal protection organizations are using. "One of the most obvious changes is the evolution at The HSUS of animals as 'it' to animals as 'he' or 'she,'" Handy



**TERMS:**

**Do you care for unwanted or homeless animals?**

You care for *homeless* animals. *Unwanted* implies that the animals will never be wanted, and that no one wants the millions of animals who don't have homes, when in fact many adopters would love to make these animals part of their families. Except in very

says. The change was meant to reflect a shift similar to the one now going on in Boulder: An "it" is an owned thing with no interests except those of its owner, whereas a "he" or "she" has feelings, rights, and needs.

The changing dynamics of pet relinquishment have resulted in a gradual shift away from describing animals in shelters as "unwanted." Jan Elster, an organizational development consultant, says



the difference between "unwanted" and "homeless" is a subtle one, but one worth considering. "I prefer the term 'homeless,'" Elster says. "So many of the animals are unwanted, but some are brought in by caring people who love them, but for some reason cannot take care of them. We can only assume they are 'unwanted'; we know for sure they are 'homeless.'" Just as importantly, the misnomer "unwanted" belies the fact that even though one person did not want the animal, hundreds more may find the same creature to be an ideal companion.

#### Changing Dynamics, Changing Terms

Even the long accepted idea that there is a pet "overpopulation" problem—a concept that has helped shape animal protection programs and initiatives for the last two decades—appears to be changing. Like the term "dogcatcher," the word "overpopulation" was a function of its time; it was coined in an age when litters of cats and dogs were being relinquished to shelters in record numbers. But now that studies have shown that behavior issues and lifestyle shifts are also primary drivers of pet relinquishment, many people in the animal protection field have come to see the term "overpopulation" as incomplete.

The National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy—whose members include leaders in the field from organizations such as the American Veterinary Medical Association, the American Humane Association, the National Animal Control Association, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and The HSUS—is reconsidering the way it uses the term "overpopulation."

"It's not necessarily that there's an overpopulation of animals all around," says Darlene Larson, the council's public information consultant. "There might be too many within certain parameters, different ages and things like that. ... We're starting to look at 'pet population dynamics,' rather than pet 'overpopulation.'"

Kathy Savesky, who's worked for several shelters in different areas of the country and now works for the developers of PetWhere software, agrees. "I think that we, for so long, focused on the 'overpopulation' term to a point where it really

specific situations (such as to say, "That spaniel was *unwanted* by that person"), homeless is a more truthful description.



#### TERMS:

**Do you practice early-age, juvenile, or pediatric spay/neuter?**

You may not be practicing any of them, but if your organization seeks to sterilize its animals at a young age, it may be better to refer to this as *pediatric* or *juvenile* spay/neuter. While the difference is subtle, *early-age* spay/neuter contains a slight implication that the shelter is performing surgeries early; that is, before it is healthy or otherwise appropriate. The veterinary community largely supports sterilization at a young age, and when you sterilize animals over eight weeks of age, it is not too "early" to do so.

prevented us from looking at the full scope of issues that were bringing animals into shelters," says Savesky, "'Overpopulation' was linked to what was seen as the sole solution: sterilization."

While sterilization programs continue to be a top priority, more and more shelters are seeing fewer baby animals. It is becoming clear that the problem is more complex than a mere surplus of cats and dogs—and that our terminology needs to change to reflect our expanded response to the reasons for animal homelessness.

#### Different Strokes for Different Folks

Our ancestors developed different tools as their needs evolved; language evolves in the same way. The vocabulary of the sheltering field and the debate over certain terms varies regionally, as different issues arise within different communities. That's natural—language, like anything organic, changes when there is a need for change.

The needs of the animals and people in your community are the best barometers for measuring how effective your word choices will be, says Savesky. "We have a tendency to be so internally focused that even those of us who come into the field from another area immediately adapt all of the terminology and all of the concepts that we're hearing from other people in the field, because we want to belong," Savesky says. "And so we don't really focus on getting to know our community, and what the issues are for them—why they do what they do, why they believe what they do, and even what certain words mean to them ... so we end up trying to send a message using terms that either put people off or don't have any meaning for them at all." It's not only important what we say, but that we say it in a way that will be heard and understood.

Employees at the Virginia Beach SPCA are attentive to the words they use, but they also understand that certain words may not always go over well with the public, says Dale Bartlett, the shelter's community outreach director. For instance, while the term "companion animal" is more reflective of the way he wants people to think about their cats and dogs, it doesn't always lend itself to easy, simple messages that the public can understand. "We've got billboards up now that say, 'Animal lovers fix their pets,'" Bartlett says. "If someone asked us, we don't use the word 'fix' and we don't use the word 'pet,' but we put up a billboard using both of them. Because, you know, when you need to keep it simple, you need to keep it simple."

If you spend time getting to know your community, you'll learn to speak their language, and you'll understand more clearly why certain words are important to them. "Sometimes it's hard to remember to use certain terms, because we tend to have a biased perspective," says Jim Tedford, executive director of the Humane Society of Rochester and Monroe County in New York. "It's hard to step outside yourself and think in terms of some uneducated individual who doesn't live and breathe this stuff every day—to think how they respond to the words we use." To keep a fresh perspective on your language, it may help to try and remember how you felt when

#### Do you offer **low-cost** or **subsidized** sterilization?

*Low-cost* implies that a spay or neuter surgery is cheaper because of less expensive labor or materials. *Subsidized* is a more accurate term, describing a spay/neuter surgery that's partially paid for through donations and discounts from veterinarians. And calling the reduced-cost sterilization *subsidized* is a great way to give credit to the veterinarians who enable you to offer the cheaper sterilizations to the public.



#### TERMS:

#### Do you house your animals in **cages** or **kennels**?

This one is tricky; depending on what your housing facility actually looks like, it may be more accurate to call the units **cages**. But if you work hard to ensure the greatest comfort level possible for your animals, and you want to refocus your potential adopters' attention on the high-quality care you provide, it's worthwhile to consider changing to the kinder, gentler **kennels**. Some shelters use other friendly terms like *condos*

you were first getting into the field; imagine what the person you are now would want to say to the person you were then. And then imagine your community as you were: confused, but compassionate and eager to help. What were you ready to learn then? What do you think your community is ready for?

While the debate over the legal and societal ramifications of "owner" versus "guardian" may be making headlines nationally, your community may be at a different stage. Just as the Virginia Beach SPCA opted for the words "pets" and "fix" in its ad campaign, Smith says that her community still uses the traditional "pets" and "owners" when referring to the human-companion animal relationship. "The animal 'guardian' thing [people in this area] don't quite get yet," says Smith. "It's not mainstream enough yet. ... And in the big picture, that wouldn't be the word I'd choose to worry about. There are other hills I choose to die on, set up a battle camp on, but that wouldn't be the one." Smith does, however, encourage her staff to use the term "vaccinations" instead of "shots," feeling that the undercurrent of violence in the word "shots" is not one the shelter wants to encourage.

or rooms.

**Do you have pets or companion animals?**

This is another tricky term: The HSUS has a Companion Animals section that deals with the issues surrounding *pets*. The idea behind the term is to encourage people to see their animals as friends and companions, and not as objects that are owned. The term has not been completely successful; while some folks have started using it, many mistakenly believe that the term *companion animals* applies to therapy or guide dogs.



Another example of a seemingly simple term is "cages," a word that Bob Rohde, president of the Denver Dumb Friends League, has worked hard to phase out. The League has a beautiful adoption area for its cats, with Plexiglas walls and soft items for the cats to snuggle with; the area is well lit and warm. Calling the area "cages" would be, in the case of the League, downright inaccurate. Rohde and his staff work to refer to "cat kennels" instead, not only for the sake of accurate description, but also because they prefer the softer sound of "kennel" to the suggestion of a jail inherent in the word "cage." "Kennels' doesn't sound as hard," says Rohde.

**Hey, Hey, What Do You Say?**

A frequently used term that bothers many shelters because of the image it presents is "rescue groups." Many shelters that work with these organizations do so only after thoroughly examining the groups' missions and processes, ensuring that those to whom they entrust the animals in their care are responsible and genuine in their desire to find loving homes. But shelters often find some of the language these groups use problematic; some "rescue" organizations present themselves to the public in much the same way that some irresponsible "no kill" shelters do: as saviors who come in and "rescue" these animals from the shelter's "death row." If the organizations are telling the public that they "rescue" animals from your shelter, then they've cast a big shadow over your facility from the get-go.

The Humane Society of Rochester and Monroe County, which works with a variety of organizations that aid in placing animals, refers to these groups as "pet placement partners." This change was deliberate, says Tedford, and led to a great deal of discussion among the staff about the use of this new terminology. "They were still referring to 'breed rescue groups,' "he says. "And it was kind of hard for them to make that leap. It was a semantics issue for them, because they never thought of those animals as being 'rescued' from the shelter. But ...I said to them, 'Do you understand that the implication here is that animals in our care need to be rescued, as if they haven't already been by virtue of being here?'"



The Marin Humane Society in Novato, California, has addressed other aspects of the language of animal protection, seeking to represent the animals in its care more accurately. The shelter is always examining its vocabulary, says Associate Executive Director Rick Johnson, who jokes that this kind of scrutiny may be "a California thing."

Along with the switch from "owner" to "guardian" and "pet" to "companion animal," Marin employees have made simple changes in the way they communicate. "Our animals don't have 'problems' anymore. They do have some 'issues,' though. You may have to address an 'issue,' but it's not a problem," Johnson laughs, noting that this change affects the way people see the animals. "You can actually see the difference when someone says [to a potential adopter], 'This animal has a problem.' Immediately they're going, 'Huh? What is that?' But when the animal has some 'issues' that you need to work on, it's not quite so negative."

Johnson also says that Marin has made a change in recent months from "processing" animals to "evaluating" animals: "You 'process' things like cheese; you 'process' things that aren't necessarily living. This isn't a manufacturing plant; it's not a cheese factory. We 'evaluate' all of our animals."

Again, this understanding, that animals are not "things" or "objects," is the impetus behind so many linguistic shifts in animal protection—from the move to "adopt" animals rather than "buy" them to the more recent move to refer to them with gender pronouns instead of with the "it" term reserved for inanimate objects. By looking more closely at your casual conversations and the slang you use, you can better understand the messages you're conveying. You may not always like what you've found; that's all the more reason to start tearing down the old and building up the new. The new messages you construct in place of the old may be more thoughtful, just, and



#### TERMS:

#### **Have you prosecuted collectors or hoarders?**

More and more people are using the term *hoarder*. This is partly because *collector* sounds fairly benign—many perfectly nice and stable people collect stamps, coins, and Beanie Babies. But as an increasing number of people in the animal protection and psychiatric fields come to recognize animal hoarding as a specific kind of acquisition disorder, people are increasingly using the term *hoarder*—it's the correct, clinical term for people who obtain more animals than they can safely and legally care for.

#### **Do you process, handle, house, or shelter your animals?**

You should try to speak of *sheltering* or *housing* your animals. *Handling* and *processing* apply to non-living things, and using that terminology to describe the care you provide to animals



compassionate—more like the very qualities you and your colleagues seek, every day, to embody.

**The Great Divide**

Of all the terms under examination in the sheltering field today, by far the most controversial is "no-kill." Debate over this phrase has polarized our field the way the abortion debate has polarized the larger political scene. The resentment that many pro-choice individuals feel about the term "pro-life"—because it implies that the opposition is somehow "anti-life"—resonates in the sheltering field. As Christie Smith points out, however, there is a difference: "At least with the abortion debate, you've got two positives: 'pro-choice' or 'pro-life.' One group isn't getting slammed by language." For many people, the questions about the justice of these terms go deeper still: While there are distinct similarities between the debate over abortion rights and the debate over euthanasia, the euthanasia that takes place in shelters is not an issue of individual choice. It is the compassionate, organized, but deeply painful result of a single undeniable fact: that the public continues to generate millions of homeless animals every year.

For a long time, animal shelters did not speak out about euthanasia, maintaining a silence that led to an intense, bottled-up sense of rage at the injustice of what was happening. That silence led eventually to a total reversal, a cathartic speaking out: In the 1970s, shelter workers and others in the animal care field began deliberately using the word "kill" to describe the euthanasia in shelters. It was a way of throwing it back to the public, of getting people to recognize that there was a problem of surplus animals—and that animal sterilization was essential. "I think that the intent was good," says Penny E. Cistaro, sheltering consultant. "I don't think that the word



**TERMS:**

**Who looks after your animals—animal caretakers or kennel workers?**

The people frequently called *kennel workers* don't work for the kennels themselves, but for the animals in those kennels. They comfort, feed, clean up after, and train shelter animals, and their job titles should reflect their dedication. The term *animal caretaker* focuses both the employees and the public on the most important aspect of a shelter's work.

**Do you work with breed rescue or breed placement groups?**

You already rescue animals, but you may have partners who help you place them in homes. To call a *breed placement*

focuses your public on the bureaucratic, paperwork-laden side of sheltering, rather than on the care that's at the core. You should try to speak of sheltering or housing your animals. Handling and processing apply to non-living things, and using that terminology to describe the care you provide to animals focuses your public on the bureaucratic, paperwork-laden side of sheltering, rather than on the care that's at the core. You should try to speak of sheltering or housing your animals. Handling and processing apply to non-living things, and using that terminology to describe the care you provide to animals focuses your public on the bureaucratic, paperwork-laden side of sheltering, rather than on the care that's at the core.

"kill" was good, because "kill" has such a violent connotation. When in actuality, when it's done well, it's a very peaceful thing for the animal."

In spite of the good educational intentions behind the use of words like "kill," such terms had a terrible side effect: a growing fear and mistrust of animal shelters in the mind of the public. The "no-kill" movement was born out of this growing public mistrust; with the advent of "no-kill" terminology, the attempt to throw the destruction of millions of animals back to the public that created the problem has backfired. Some less responsible limited-admission shelters use their "no-kill" label as a way of setting themselves above open-admission shelters in their locales. Many also declare "no-kill" status to obtain more funding from the public, who like the term "no-kill" because of its emotional cache, without fully understanding what it really means: that "unadoptable" or aggressive animals are still euthanized, that many animals are turned away and sent elsewhere for euthanasia, and that animals who go unadopted can remain in cages for months and even years.

The arguments over what it means to be "no-kill" are not new—they've been festering for years. Vicki Cameron, of Henderson Animal Control in Nevada, started out in the field in 1973 as a secretary to the "pound master," and while she's pleased that the term "pound" has become less common, she regrets that "no-kill" is just the same old issue with a new face. Twenty-seven years ago, she says, the battle camps over words were already entrenched, with only slightly different opponents. "Back then, the war was between the humane community and animal control; the idea was that municipal animal shelters and animal control killed everything, and private humane societies didn't," says Cameron. "And that [battle] should never have been—we're all in it for the same end. ... So now we've just come full circle. And where I thought we were making great inroads into merging the two communities, because we both have the same ultimate goal, instead we're right back where we were 30 years ago."

While our field has moved forward in so many ways, this battle over how language should be used seems never-ending. Perhaps more than any other term, "no-kill" demonstrates how people who share a desire for change, a deep compassion for animals, and a passion to end the need for euthanasia must seek a common language in order to be a more effective force for progress. Thirty years is too long to argue. And while we can chant the "sticks and stones" adage to ourselves every minute of the day, denial is ineffective: words still hurt us.

### **Moving Beyond "No-Kill"**

Rohde and many others feel that the term "no kill" is inherently offensive, a term that implies shelters that are forced to euthanize are 'pro-kill.' "We're all trying to get out of the euthanasia

*group a rescue group implies—to the shelter's employees, the placement group workers, and the public—that the shelter does not already rescue animals from abuse, hunger, neglect, and homelessness. If you've got partnerships that are already working and the subject doesn't seem a sticky one, fine. But if you don't and you could use some help—or if you work for a breed "rescue" group and you've found area shelters reluctant to partner with you—then you might want to reevaluate your terms and use *breed placement*.*

### **Are you animal control, animal care and control, or animal services?**

Animal control officers do much more than simply control animals; they care for them, transport them, shelter them, feed them. They also perform any number of essential services for their community. Especially if you've had trouble with your public image, it might be worth making the transition from *animal control* to *animal care and control* or *animal services*—both terms remind the public what you do.

### **Are you into animal rights, animal welfare, or animal protection?**

You may be for *animal rights* personally, but if you work for a shelter or animal care and control agency, then your job involves *animal protection* or *animal welfare*. As a general rule, animal rights organizations believe that animals have intrinsic rights, which include the right to life, the right not to be eaten, and the right not to be used for sport or research. Animal welfare and protection

business," says Rohde. "Using 'no kill' as a label makes it sound like there are two separate movements. There aren't."

organizations have a more conditional stance, which is that people should treat animals as kindly as possible, regardless of the place they are accorded in society.

Others have mixed feelings about the term "no kill," saying that if it's used correctly and fairly, it can be an effective means to rallying community support. It's all a matter of usage, according to Elster. "Terms that sell one shelter's program and put another shelter in a bad light are inappropriate," says Elster. "The days of blowing your own horn at the expense of another agency should be over. I see some shelters collaborating with others that have less space, staff, and resources, rather than touting 'no kill' at the other's expense. These partnership programs are, hopefully, the wave of the future."

But many point out that there will always be euthanasia in shelters: Even if every healthy, socialized animal could be re-homed, euthanasia for reasons of sickness, aggression, and severe abuse or neglect would have to continue. Even in that close-to-perfect world, "no-kill" would continue to be a deceptive term because untreatable animals would still have to be euthanized; the most we can hope for, say critics of "no-kill" organizations, is not "no-kill" but "low-kill."

Shelters in some areas of the country have tried to give the "no-kill" phrase a positive spin by declaring that an entire community is working toward the goal of ending euthanasia of healthy, adoptable animals. But these partnerships between open and limited-admission shelters cannot achieve their mission when certain groups continue to use terms that make other organizations look like the bad guys. The money and public support that come when a shelter declares itself "no-kill" are difficult to give up, even for the sake of collaboration and accuracy. Dependence on the term "no-kill" is a hard habit to break, but understanding how this term hurts other compassionate and dedicated people in the field—and seeking to be as humane to humans as we are to other animals—may be the first step to achieving greater inter-agency communication and respect.



What's more, "no-kill" may be a term that puts the focus on the pound of cure rather than the ounce of prevention. It may be great to have a "no-kill" community, but if that's what you want, it means first striving to create a community of responsible and compassionate citizens who do not harm, neglect, breed, or discard animals. Before anyone can agree on the term "no-kill," they must first form a community that is "no-harm," "no-neglect," and "no-abandon."



**TERMS:**

**Do you help feral or free-roaming cats?**

*Feral* cats are animals who have either never been socialized, or who've escaped from domestication and become wild, whereas *free-roaming* cats are domestic, stray, or wild cats who live outside for any reason. The groups can overlap, but if you're speaking specifically of

**The Sliding Scale of "Adoptability"**

Feeding the "no-kill" controversy are words like "adoptable," "treatable," and "rehabilitatable." Frequently used by limited-admission shelters to describe their euthanasia policies ("No adoptable animal is euthanized at our shelter"), the terms' definitions change from community to community, region to region—a fact usually lost on the public.

With the exception of aggressive animals, who for safety reasons should almost always be euthanized, Johnson says that all animals are

adoptable. "It's just a matter of what you can do in order to place them," he says. "An animal with a broken leg here? Not a problem. An animal with a broken leg at a large metropolitan shelter? It is a problem, and they may have to look at that animal as unadoptable, whereas here, it's adoptable. It's certainly a regional term and even a local term."

undomesticated, unsocialized animals, it's correct to call them *feral*. If you're speaking of outdoor cats as a whole, *free-roaming* is more accurate.

That cat with the broken leg might be considered unadoptable—until a kind-hearted grandmother comes to take him home. A blind old dog might be considered unadoptable—until the moment when a child and his family fall in love with her. As anyone who's worked in a shelter knows, animals like these have often made for some of the best and most loving companions, and some of the happiest endings. But because of the nature of shelter work, with the constant constraints on space, time, and funding, these animals would usually be considered "unadoptable." The kind grandmother, the compassionate child and his family—while everyone knows they're out there—can be as uncommon as those legendary lamps with genies inside. While genies are wonderful when they show up, shelter workers can't define "adoptable" using the genie factor; they have to look at the realities of individual animals' potential for placement. The word "adoptable" is inherently subjective, with local, regional, financial, seasonal, and species-specific conditions shaping the answer to that final question: How likely is it that this animal will find a responsible home?

Savesky says that a national standard for the word "adoptable" may be an impossibility. "All our animals are equally adoptable. We shouldn't be using the 'adoptability' terminology; adoptability is a dependent variable ... not a condition of the animal [but] maybe a condition that we don't have the resources to cope with. An animal is not inherently 'adoptable' or 'unadoptable'; an animal is an animal, and we either can or can't place it in the right type of home."



Most organizations still use the word "adoptable," but they use it for lack of a better alternative, and with an understanding that it's a term defined by the community in which they live and work—not a term that should be used to gloss over an organization's euthanasia statistics. "If shelter X says they're placing all their 'adoptable' animals, how many are they truly euthanizing, and what are they terming not adoptable?" asks Cistaro. "I'm trying to use the term 'adoption potential,' and looking at what

has that potential and what doesn't. In the middle of the summer, when you've got a six-year-old cat coming into the shelter with bunches and bunches of kittens, his potential isn't so great, but he's still adoptable. And in the middle of January when there aren't any kittens, that six-year-old cat is going to be adopted in a heartbeat."

#### The Word Preferred

Whether dealing with an issue as large as euthanasia or as small as how you refer to your animal housing, half of the war of words is knowing the preferred terms, and using them yourself when you deal with members of the public and the media, says Tedford. "We know what [certain words] mean when we say them, so we don't really consider the baggage," Tedford says, "so sometimes it's really easy to lose sight of the fact that not everybody is on the same level of understanding or awareness that we are."

Rohde agrees, and says that one of the biggest terminology problems he and his staff face is remembering to be careful about the jargon they use in dealing with the public. "We have people come in and be interested in a certain animal, and we say, 'Okay, we'll put a hold on him for you.' What does that mean? A

wrestling hold?" says Rohde. "Or when someone comes to claim their animal—we try not to say 'We'll RTO him to you,' because what does that mean to them?"

Wherever your organization stands in your continuous examination of language, it's important to get your staff on the same page. "We tell people when we hire them that everybody who works at an animal shelter, no matter what their job is, has a role as an educator," says Tedford. "Whether they're here or at home or out socially, they're going to be asked questions and they're going to be engaged in conversation, and they have a responsibility to respond appropriately. So I think that's where the shift can happen."

For those who still believe this is all much ado about nothing, consider how damaging words can be when they are misused by policymakers. The recent American Veterinary Medical Association's *Panel on Euthanasia* report has provided a painful example of this. While everyone in the sheltering field longs for the day when they no longer have to euthanize healthy animals, and while open- and limited-admission shelters may differ on what constitutes genuine euthanasia, the updated report has created a whole new problem. Among a host of other questionable regressions is the listing of kill traps as an "acceptable" method of euthanasia.

Legislative bodies look to the AVMA for guidelines in order to establish local laws governing euthanasia methods. Animal control and sheltering organizations look to the report as a guide for their work in the shelter and in the field. With the AVMA moving backwards instead of forwards on the issue of what constitutes an easy and painless death, there is a real danger that some organizations will begin to use the word "euthanasia" to describe almost any killing of an animal, without regard to whether it is necessary, merciful, or humane.

When seemingly simple words can be used in such a misleading way, it's the responsibility of all of us to define our work fairly, accurately, and progressively. "The very discussion of language helps a field grow," says Handy. "If you compare 'owner' to 'guardian' and examine the context of each term, then what are you saying? Why are you considering that shift? The dialogue gets people thinking."

In the end, the debate over language and terminology is about self-determination, and how to best express the goals and ideals of the humane movement. "I think we get hung up on language and labels," says Smith, "but that's where a societal movement begins to impact an individual." If we speak justly, it is easier to act justly, to build just and humane communities, and to encourage others to do the same. Our community is based on shared compassion; it requires a language of compassion to communicate its intent.

Go forth, and use your hammer wisely.



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