Myths and Misunderstandings about Animal Welfare

1. No-Kill is unrealistic, inhumane and a danger to public safety.

To fully understand what is meant by *no-kill* it is necessary to start with some history and some commonly accepted definitions. In August of 2004, a group of animal welfare industry leaders from across the nation met in Pacific Grove, California, for the purpose of building bridges across varying philosophies, developing relationships and creating goals focused on significantly reducing the euthanasia of homeless companion animals in the United States. The Asilomar Accords[i] were developed at the session, a set of definitions which address various conditions of a companion pet[ii]. Those conditions are: *Healthy, Treatable – Rehabilitable, Treatable – Manageable, Unhealthy and Untreatable*.

The No-Kill movement is about saving the lives of all *Healthy* and *Treatable* homeless companion dogs and cats. It is a realistic goal as it has been accomplished in various cities throughout the United States. The movement has a proven formula, (set of programs) that are followed to achieve the no-kill goal called the No-Kill Equation. The movement is not inhumane or a danger to the public safety. Euthanasia (which is defined as the act of permitting death for the reasons of mercy) should be reserved for those animals that are hopelessly ill or are vicious and can never be placed into a new home.

2. Animal Control officers are experts in animal behavior and can assess an animal's temperament in the shelter.

Animal Control officers are not trained to be experts in assessing an animal's temperament. If an animal control officer is nationally certified they receive some course work in Level 1 training in animal behavior. Michigan requires at least 100 hours of training before a person can be hired by any city, village, township or county in the State of Michigan pursuant to MCL 287.289c. The training must be approved by the Michigan Department of Agriculture and requires no formal animal behavior or temperament training.

There is a great deal of misunderstand surrounding issues of temperament and behavior. Temperament is more akin to personality – behavior is how they act in a particular situation. An animal may have a very gentle and affectionate temperament but may also have an uncharacteristic protective behavior of growling when someone attempts to take their food away.

It is very difficult to accurately assess an animal's temperament in shelter conditions and can never really be conducted in a single session. Recent university research is finding that the wide spread use of a popular temperament test currently used in many shelters is seriously flawed. Many of the techniques are based on provoking an animal until they display an "unwanted" behavior. These tests were developed as a means of determining what dogs to kill based upon a philosophy that some have to be killed because there is not enough room. Animals that are frightened, extremely

stressed, and if stray may have gone a time without food and water, will often not reveal their usual temperament and may display uncharacteristic aggressive or protective behavior. Adding exercises meant to provoke an unwanted response results in the many healthy and adoptable animals failing in the shelter environment.

The bottom line is temperament testing or behavior assessment needs to be conducted by well-trained individuals with techniques that are not based on provocation. Just because a dog may have an unwanted behavior - something as common as food aggression – does not mean it would not make a great family pet. It means that particular behavior needs to be corrected.

3. There are too many dogs and cats and not enough homes.

There are 23 million people who are going to get a new pet in 2011. Some are already committed to adopting from a shelter. Some are already committed to getting one from a breeder or other commercial source. But 17 million have not decided where the animal will come from and research shows they can be influenced to adopt from a shelter. That's 17 million people that are vying for roughly 3 - 4 million homeless animals that are euthanized annually. So even if 80% of those people got their animals from somewhere other than a shelter, we could completely stop the killing of healthy and treatable homeless animals.

It is next to impossible for the homeless animals being held in a depressing "jail-like" shelter, in a location often away from the beaten path to compete against the heavily visited malls, where a pet store has puppy-mill puppies. Shelters and rescue organizations must be proactive in getting their homeless pets in front of perspective adopters. Shelters need to be less jail-like and present a happy and hopeful atmosphere. Shelters and rescue organizations need to be very vocal and inform the public that they can *save a life*.

4. Irresponsible pet owners are the problem – they don't neuter their pets and that is why we have overpopulation.

One national statistic indicates that 80% of the unwanted pet births were attributed to 3% of the population which are low-income. If this statistic is correct it may not be a case of irresponsibility but the inability to afford spay/neuter procedures and/or the availability of low-cost spay/neuter programs. If up to 30% of the dogs in shelters are purebred animals, these animals are rarely from unplanned births. They are more than likely from mass breeding at puppy mills.

Although no in-depth comprehensive study has been conducted to establish what would be considered a "population balance" nor the primary cause(s) of what is currently referred to as "overpopulation"; it is safe to attribute the lack of affordable neutering for the low income pet owner and the mass breeding at puppy mills and the marketing of these animals in pet stores and malls as primary contributing factors and probably more impactful to the problem than irresponsible pet

owners.

5. Rescue organizations and closed admissions shelters are "no-kill".

Rescue organizations and shelters that *close admission* when they are full or select only *healthy* and *treatable* animals for admission are more accurately called *Adoption Guarantee* organizations/facilities. Traditional shelters that have *open admission* – meaning they accept all animals brought to their door and/or are brought in by Animal Control personnel and achieve *saving* all *healthy* and *treatable* dogs and cats are no-kill shelters.

6. Animals in shelters are defective; they have been given up because they have problems.

Especially with the number of owner give-ups due to the current economic condition most of the dogs and cats in shelters are not defective. They are there because their guardian can no long afford to keep them or has to find new housing and the housing would not allow the animal.

Some animals do have issues/problems that are usually created by owners who were not prepared for pet guardianship. Puppies are adorable but they can be very destructive if not trained. Training takes both time and effort. If the time and effort is not provided, problems or unwanted behaviors can develop. It is important that the issue or problem is addressed while at the shelter and that future pet guardians fully understand if continued work is needed to solve the issue and what actions are required. Setting up foster homes with expertise in addressing common behavior problems such as potty training or separation anxiety can turn what some may term a defective animal into a great addition to the family.

7. No-Kill and increasing shelter "save rates" is an expensive luxury that most governments cannot afford.

A study[iii] conducted in 2009 concluded that money was NOT the determining factor in achieving a no-kill status for a shelter. Shelters spending as little as $1.50 per capita were able to achieve no-kill while other shelters spending as much as $6.30 per capita had high kill rates. The No-Kill Equation consists of many programs and activities that cost nothing – including volunteers, working with rescue organizations etc. When the focus changes from *how many do we need to kill* to *how do we save more* - activities change. As an example… traditionally an Animal Control officer will pick up a stray dog and take it to the shelter. Once at the shelter paperwork needs to be filled out about the dog. The dog needs to be kenneled – fed. Determination needs to be made if it is chipped or has identification. If there is identification, attempts to contact the owner are required. With a change of focus, the Animal Control Officer will pick up a stray. Instead of immediately driving the dog to the shelter, the officer makes a couple of stops in the neighborhood to inquire if anyone happens to know if the dog is from the neighborhood. A good percentage of animals can be returned to the owner without the animals ever being taken to the shelter – both a service for residents and reducing

the number of animals and expenses at the shelter.

8. People that work in shelters love animals.

If only this statement was true. Some shelter workers DO love animals. Some are there, like any profession, because it is a pay check. Unfortunately in many municipal shelters they become the dumping ground for problem employees or political appointments. After all, those in their care can't complain if a lazy employee decides not to clean the cage or provide a feeding.

Many shelters that have embraced the no kill philosophy – which includes not only a change of thinking but also includes hard work and diligent workers - have found that 1/3 of the employees quit, 1/3 are fired and 1/3 are thrilled and work diligently.

9. Mandating spay/neuter would solve the pet overpopulation problem.

On the surface this approach seems reasonable, however as mentioned earlier if 80% of the unplanned births come from 3% of the population that cannot afford spay/neuter, mandating the program without free or low-cost spay/neuter programs only results in unpaid penalties or more animals being taken to the shelter for non-compliance. There is a very good case study in Los Angeles which demonstrates this point. The city operated several low-cost spay/neuter clinics and while in operation the number of animals in the shelter were drastically reduced. Budget cuts resulted in the clinics closing – and the number of animals steadily rose in the shelter resulting in increased killings. In 2000 the City Council adopted the nation's strongest spay/neuter ordinance. Instead of lowering the number of animals in the shelter, it substantially increased the number of animals.

10. The shelter director has nothing to do with save rates at the shelter.

The shelter director has EVERYTHING to do with the save rates at the shelter. It is the single most important factor to success. The director must first embrace the idea of refocusing from killing to saving. They also need to have the skill sets to collaborate and cooperate. Those that have neither the desire nor the skill set need to be replaced. Elected officials and not-for-profit boards need to be held accountable for the expenditure of tax dollars and charitable contributions. There is a formula to increase shelter save rates. If they refuse to institute humane government policy, their voters need to elect officials who are more accountable to resident desires and effective use of their tax dollars and charitable contributors need to redirect their contributions to those that welcome being accountable.

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[i] www.asilomaraccords.org

[ii] Feral cats are not addressed as they are not companion animals

[iii] The study was conducted by the No Kill Advocacy Center