

IS A MADDIE'S FUND GRANT FOR YOU?

A Conversation with Rich Avanzino

Q. Getting Maddie's Fund money is really complicated. There are so many prerequisites groups have to comply with just to fill out the application! Why can't you just review good proposals and give out money to individual projects?

A. Maddie's Fund is trying to achieve several ambitious objectives with our funding. First and foremost, we want to help provide a nationwide adoption guarantee for all healthy shelter dogs and cats by 2010. Second, in the communities we fund, we want to set the stage for animal organizations to work together and create a broad safety net to save companion animals. We want to initiate a collaborative spirit that will be nurtured over the grant period and continue well beyond the grant's termination date. Third, we want the organizations we fund to not only meet their targets and goals, but to build a strong track record of success. We believe a demonstrated history of accomplishment will merit a continued and expanded commitment of community resources. This in turn will enable each of the organizations that participate in the project to be prosperous long after the project is over. Finally, we want to help sharpen the management skills and business acumen within our funded agencies so they can grow and thrive long into the future. Fulfilling all of these objectives is a tall order, and as a consequence, our grants have challenging requirements. We ask for the collaboration of private veterinary practitioners, animal control agencies, traditional shelters and adoption guarantee organizations. We insist on accountability and results. And we ask for the statistics that will establish parameters for performance, enable us to monitor activities and meet the objectives of the business plan. Having said that, it's good to remember that our grants are multi-organizational, include several programs, are offered over seven to ten years and are generally large (we have a half million-dollar minimum—our largest grant is twenty-four million).

Q. OK, but don't you think your requirements for getting a grant are too difficult for most organizations to meet?

A. I want to make one point perfectly clear. If what we ask of groups isn't what they believe in, or isn't what they want to do anyway, they shouldn't apply. For example, if the groups don't agree with the principle of collaboration or if they think the goals aren't worth the effort and therefore they're too difficult, they shouldn't waste their time filling out an application. If organizations don't wholeheartedly embrace the idea of doing more adoptions and spay/neuter surgeries than they did the year before within the constraints of a defined budget, then a Maddie's Fund grant isn't right for them. Maddie's Fund grants are for organizations that share the Maddie's Fund principles and have a strong commitment to the goals but simply lack the resources to get the job done. We would also like our funded agencies to have a business

commitment that's as strong and important to them as their dedication to fulfilling their philosophical objectives. Make no mistake, it's a challenging process, but communities have to decide for themselves whether the rewards and financial assistance are worth the effort.

Q. Why is it that even after you award a grant you still ask for monthly reporting—that's more bureaucratic red tape than the government requires!

A. You can't run a successful business without knowing whether you're meeting the objectives of your business plan. You have to have a way to judge your successes and failures and looking at numbers every month gives an organization that gauge. We want to get organizations in the habit of using their numbers as an important tool for operational decision making. Without understanding what's happening, organizations can't know how to correct deficiencies if any shortfalls occur. We believe tracking the numbers is an important discipline that leads to better management decisions and higher goal attainment. If communities don't think the effort involved in collecting the numbers is offset by the added financial resources and the gratification of achieving the goals, then this project isn't going to work for anybody's interest.

Q. Speaking of numbers, isn't your model too oriented towards numbers? For example, it seems like you care more about the number of adoptions you do than the quality of the adoptions.

A. When we remember that each number represents a life, the numbers take on a huge significance. Yes, it's critical to make those adoption numbers high—it's the difference between life and death. And frankly, I don't know how you measure life-saving efforts without numbers. We believe the agencies we've funded have committed themselves to placing animals into loving homes for a lifetime. We would expect them to continue this practice with or without a Maddie's Fund grant. The fact is, to do otherwise would be counterproductive. If community shelters have a high rate of return and have to spend time and money placing the same animals over and over, it would be almost impossible to achieve the adoption or death reduction goals.

Q. What makes you think your model will work?

A. We don't have all the answers and ours isn't the only solution. We do believe that ours is a model worth investing in. We believe it has the potential to change the status quo and radically accelerate the ability to save lives. We have created a model that relies on the ingenuity and creativity of each community to build a collaborative structure to achieve quantifiable goals within five years. We think the movement has come a long way but we want to end the tragedy of surplus pets. We're betting with our dollars that this is one good way to help get the job done.