



**Know the Thrill of No Kill – Retreat, Hell!**  
or  
**How the No-Kill Movement from a Conference Grew**

By Lynda Foro

Now that I have your attention, let me explain.

The history of no-kill goes back more than half a century when independent caregivers began rescuing and sheltering homeless animals with the intention of keeping them alive. This was in reaction to the standard operating procedure of most humane societies and tax-supported animal control services that killed stray and abandoned animals.

These grassroots efforts by single or small, loosely formed groups of caregivers continued their missions against many odds over the years, but typically they were not communicative with each other. Their humane objectives to save animals' lives and find homes for the homeless were time-consuming. They were also considered to be rebels against society's traditional procedures of killing homeless animals. No-kill people were never popular with the animal welfare establishment.

Simultaneous to the beginning of in-home efforts to rescue animals, carried out by individuals at their own risk and expense, other activists were beginning to focus on ways to reduce cat and dog overpopulation. In the 1930's, the first focus on preventing unwanted animal births was initiated. These spay/neuter efforts coincided with the life-saving efforts of rescuers, and so the no-kill phenomenon began. The dual development of humane activism, one preventive and the other grassroots remedial, began to address the crisis of unwanted animals being killed in shelters or pounds for lack of adoptive homes.

Fast-forward 60 years to the early 1990's. Millions of animals continue to be killed annually because of uncontrolled breeding, while numbers increase proportionately of caregivers who believe that destroying these animals is not the solution to dog and cat overpopulation. Curiously, it is the independent caregivers and a very few humane societies who lead the rebellion against killing, and not the major, national animal protection agencies. Then, as now, the killing is described as "euthanasia," even though the destruction is often performed on healthy animals, and a common recommendation is to improve euthanasia techniques, with less emphasis on applying animal birth control.

The anti-establishment believers in saving animals' lives and finding loving homes for healthy, adoptable animals were growing in numbers and in their activism. Some no-kill caregivers had formed humane organizations over the years and developed specialty programs or focused on particular services, such as high-volume adoption or lifetime care sanctuaries. Yet they continued not to have a common voice or a means to communicate with each other. In the early 1990s, there was a radical example set by Richard Avanzino, then president of The San Francisco SPCA, to reverse a 100-year policy of traditional methods in handling unwanted strays, by establishing a working model between the SPCA and animal control to save animals' lives.

About this time, I became aware of no-kill, alternative methods of dealing with homeless animals. A companion to several domestic cats, I was not in the animal welfare business and simply made a visit to a large no-kill sanctuary out of curiosity. It was a significant event, how much so would become evident in the next few years. My immediate change was to become an ethical vegetarian, reasoning that to promote no-kill means, also, that one does not kill farmed animals for food or any other creature that tried to get away.

I discovered during that initial visit to the sanctuary in 1992 and in subsequent visits in 1993, that there was no communication device among practitioners of no-kill. Individual caregivers and rescue groups generally did not network with each other for lack of a national directory of no-kills. Yet there was a crying need for information and resources to be shared to help the animals in their care.

I created the first national No-Kill Directory in 1994, and the response was so positive by no-kill practitioners that I decided to organize a national gathering to explore the issues involved in saving animals' lives. In order to host a national meeting and encourage funding, it was necessary to establish a nonprofit corporation. Thus, Doing Things for Animals was founded in 1994 for the purposes of promoting education, performing research, and establishing communication among animal caregivers.

This is also a good time to mention that one of the reasons that a national meeting was so desired is that none of the national organizations which hosted animal welfare events had acknowledged or invited no-kill people to attend. The issues of no kill were not represented on the agendas, and those no-kill people who did attend were often poorly treated by others registered. No-kill was not widely understood, and there was no voice to speak on its behalf. The established humane community had little knowledge of its principles. And often equated the notorious failures of animal hoarders with no-kill.

Out of this void, the first national no-kill gathering was conceived. Doing Things for Animals planned for the first event to be called a retreat. It was planned for a single day in September 1995, in Phoenix, Arizona. An invitation was extended to every humane organization and animal caregiver in the United States to attend. DTFA's desire was to make everyone welcome at this retreat, no matter what their organizational policies were, because the intent was to explore ways of saving animals lives -- believing then as now that this is every caregiver's goal. There are simply various ways of getting to that goal.

The 1995 retreat was called "No-Kills in the '90's" and approximately 75 people attended from 18 states. Not all the attendees were no-kill, to my delight. It was the first time that a positive meeting had been held on neutral ground that invited dialogue between no-kills and others in the humane community. Then, as now, the goal was to communicate and open doors for collaboration. Importantly, no-kill people began networking among themselves and forming working relationships. The no-kill movement had begun.

Doing Things for Animals was urged to continue hosting the national meeting, and I decided to move it regionally each year to reach caregivers in various parts of the United States. In 1996, the meeting's identity was changed from being a retreat to being a conference, due to expectations of growth in attendance and duration. In addition, The American Humane Association, under the leadership of Ed Sayres, then director of its Animal Protection Division, offered to co-host the 1996 event as a means for the humane community to explore the no-kill philosophy. The 1996 No-Kill Conference in Denver, Colorado, was another success, with 125 people in attendance and breakout workshops extending into two days.

By now, the 1995 and 1996 editions of DTFA's No-Kill Directory were published, and more and more no-kill organizations were standing up to be counted. While hundreds were identified across the country, it was clearly evident that many times those recognized were doing business, saving animals' lives. What also was apparent was the need for improved nonprofit management skills among these organizations, probably the weakest link in their collective being. The grassroots nature of their origins precluded a focus on administrative matters in many cases, and this shortfall prevented maximum effectiveness of their operations. This phenomenon continues today, although progress is being made by means of the annual, educational No-Kill Conferences and other resources.

In 1997, DTFA moved the No-Kill Conference to Massachusetts for two full days. Attendance more than doubled to 300 people. In 1998, the Conference was held in California. Chicago was the host city in 1999 and attendance doubled again, to 600.

After last year's successful meeting in Tucson, this year's, Conference will be held in Hartford, Connecticut, August 16-19, 2001, with an expected attendance of 1,000 people. The No-Kill Conference brochure, listing 45 seminars and workshops and more than 70 expert presenters, is now available; it can be downloaded from [www.dtfa.org](http://www.dtfa.org).

It is no coincidence that Doing Things for Animals, the No-Kill Conference, and the "no-kill movement," have evolved at the same time. They are intertwined, and DTFA serves as a voice for no-kill. The opportunity was there in the early 1990's for someone to represent the now-thousands of no-kill organizations providing service to animals. The curious part will always be, why didn't any established national "animal protection agency or federation" take on this cause? We won't ever know that answer, but maybe it was because a grassroots person needed to initiate a basically grassroots movement.

While no-kill practitioners are growing in numbers and sophistication, their organizations are forming or transitioning from traditional operations, and the definition and

characteristics of no-kill are becoming better known, it is still an unknown quantity in some communities.

The best way to describe the no-kill movement is to recognize its simplicity: these are caregivers and organizations who generally specialize in services they perform best – high volume adoption, lifetime care, rescue, feral cat management, spay/neuter, etc. Their common goal is to save animals' lives when there is a quality alternative to killing. They will perform clinically indicated and dictionary-defined euthanasia. They will put down dangerously aggressive animals that cannot be rehabilitated. They will work within their resources to save animals' lives. They will limit the numbers of animals in care in respect to their mission and to work within their resources. They will give aid and comfort to homeless animals in a humane, healthy and caring environment. They will encourage the public to take responsibility for their animals.

As in every service industry and in every human endeavor, there are those who do their work well and those who need to close shop. The no-kill movement is made up of people who know the risks, the uphill battle with saving animals' lives and who try to educate the public into being "stakeholders" in an animal's future, and they carry on. The movement is inspired by those who attend the No-Kill Conference, who read No-Kill News and other trade journals, take their management responsibilities seriously, and follow their organization's mission.

They are also rewarded by incentives to extend themselves further into community action, to develop collaborative efforts to reduce dog and cat overpopulation, and to share common resources. Well functioning cooperative programs may become eligible for Maddie's Fund. An effective marketing plan for humane organizations will earn appreciation for their services and draw support for their missions.

In our advancement towards becoming a no-kill nation, caregivers can look forward to a time when homeless animals are reduced to a steady, predictable number. It will always be the case that animal control has work to do, but in time, they will return to their original task of providing for public health and safety, law enforcement and animal regulation. They will focus on humane education, spay/neuter and finding homes for adoptable animals. No-kill terminology will fall into disuse, since the concept will be commonplace. The no-kill movement will have had its day.

**About the Author:** Lynda Foro is the founder and president of Doing Things for Animals, the nation's only advocacy program dedicated to promoting the no-kill philosophy. DTFA hosts the annual No-Kill Conference, publishes the national No-Kill Directory, and edits the quarterly No-Kill News. Foro holds a certificate in nonprofit management from Arizona State University and a BA in Spanish and education from the University of Maryland. Foro enjoys meeting with caregivers and decision-makers to discuss their management issues and ways to make the most of their organizations' resources.

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