



The Pet Rescue Foundation

The San Francisco SPCA Path To No Kill

An interview with Richard Avanzino

PART TWO: Going No Kill

Q. OK, Rich, the contract is history. What happened next?

A. The next thing we had to do, and we actually started working on this about a year before we ended the contract, was to let the community know about the change in animal service providers. It was critical to explain the new role of both The SF/SPCA and the Department of Animal Care and Control in order to avoid annoyance and confusion. We were fortunate to have the pro bono assistance of a Marketing/Communications firm who helped guide us through the process. For example, they suggested we mail a brochure to every San Francisco resident to explain the services of each organization. They also gave us advice on publicity, suggesting, for example, that we meet with the editorial board of the leading regional newspaper to ask for editorial support (which the newspaper in fact provided.)

Q. How did you shape your message and explain your new purpose?

A. Way back when we first started talking about separating from animal control we were frequently asked, what will The SF/SPCA do now? In our 1988 magazine article, *The Animal Control Dilemma*, we talked about how we would expand our life-saving services like

adoption outreach and foster care. And we said even then that “with a more clearly focused agenda, we could achieve our objectives more quickly. First, we could reach our 100% adoption goal, and achieve zero pet overpopulation in San Francisco....” By the time we mailed our city-wide brochure, we were able to elaborate on our life-saving goals in a more sophisticated and clearly defined way. We also emphasized the very real and positive effects of separating from animal control, stressing for example, that now two agencies were working on behalf of the animals, providing them with more than twice as much staff, more than twice as much space and more than twice as much money. And we talked about how we would insure the success of the new Department of Animal Care and Control by rescuing animals from the City shelter and saving their lives, too.

Q. So did you start talking about no-kill at this time?

A. Actually, we did not. The day our contract ended, we stopped killing adoptable and treatable animals. But in those first years, we talked to the community about saving the life of every adoptable animal that came into our care. We purposely didn't use the term no-kill in deference to all of the animal welfare groups in the bay area to whom no-kill was offensive.

Q. And in those transition months, did things go smoothly, both with Animal Control and with the community at large?

A. Things went amazingly well. The community adjusted to the change without any problems. And with our prompting, the City opened its new Shelter literally right down the street from us in a converted City-owned building. (That made it easy for us to walk there and pick up animals.) At our urging, they hired our animal control staff. And they chose as their director a former SF/SPCA staff person who had worked for me in Shelter operations for five years. As a result, we really didn't have to worry about the quality of care or service the animals were receiving at animal control.

Q. What was life like at that point at The SF/SPCA?

A. It was an adjustment but in a good way. Initially, we had far fewer animals so we increasingly rescued animals from the City shelter, and accepted animals from out of county. We seriously enlarged our existing programs like Adoption Outreach, Foster Care and our

Volunteer Program. Three areas got huge: Animal Behavior, Medical Rehabilitation and Spay/Neuter. As animals stayed with us longer, we wanted to make sure existing behavior problems didn't worsen or new ones develop. In addition, we started to focus more on saving older and more troubled animals. Hence, a one-person animal behavior department grew to three staff and hundreds of volunteers. For medical rehab, we created a whole new 30- person department to treat the medical conditions of sick, injured and underage treatable animals. We even remodeled a wing of our building to accommodate this new medical emphasis, and added a state of the art, high-volume spay/neuter theatre. We pioneered early age spay/neuter, altered every animal prior to adoption, and created new spay/neuter incentives to get more animals fixed. At the same time, we expanded our publicity and community awareness programs to tell everyone about our new life-saving successes and ask them to help fund it. The results were unbelievable. In 1988 we had 27,000 members, 601 volunteers and an annual budget of approximately \$3 million (not including the animal control contract). Today, there are more than 90,000 members, 2,000 volunteers and an annual budget of \$12.8 million.

Q. And so all was bliss in 1989?

A. Not entirely. We were saving all of the adoptables and treatables at The SF/SPCA but we wanted to do more. We wanted to establish an Adoption Guarantee to save the life of every adoptable cat and dog in the city and county of San Francisco. And so we started to think about formalizing an agreement with the Department of Animal Care and Control that would enable that to happen. Those negotiations and their aftermath were one of the most interesting and challenging chapters of my 22-year tenure at The SF/SPCA.