



The Pet Rescue Foundation

# The San Francisco SPCA Path To No Kill

*An interview with Richard Avanzino*

PART THREE: Signing the Adoption Agreement with Animal Control

**Q. Rich, you said earlier you wanted to formalize an agreement with Animal Care and Control. Since you were already taking Animal Care and Control (ACC) animals, why was this so important?**

A. First, even though the numbers were small, adoptable animals were still dying at ACC. An agreement could insure that all of the adoptables were saved. We reckoned that once we had something in writing, we could then issue a citywide adoption guarantee. And here's why we thought a guarantee was so critical. We believed that pet owners who abandoned their animals on the streets did so because they feared their family pet would die if surrendered to an animal shelter. And this started a cycle of death: there was a perception the animal would die, which led to the fear of using the shelter, which led to abandonment and neglect, which put the animal at risk of injury, illness and uncontrolled breeding, which led to sick and injured animals being debilitated and impounded, which led to euthanasia once the animals were picked up and taken to animal control. By proclaiming loud and clear that no healthy adoptable cat or dog would die in any city shelter and backing it up with a written agreement, we believed we could break this cycle. People would have the confidence to bring their animals into the shelter and not abandon them and these healthy animals could then be placed. Not having to pick up and kill sick and injured animals

would save the taxpayers money. And although this would mean more animals coming into shelters in the short term, in the long term, we felt this would reduce shelter populations and shelter deaths.

**Q. Sounds good. How did ACC feel about your idea?**

A. There was not a lot of enthusiasm for this agreement. After a long period of inaction, we decided to try a new tack: a proposed City ordinance called the Adoption Act. The ordinance would have made it against the law for a public animal control agency or humane society to kill an adoptable dog or cat. And that's when all hell broke loose.

**Q. What happened?**

A. When we took the Act before the Animal Welfare Commission (as a precursor to going to the Board of Supervisors), ACC, who sits on the Commission, came out against it.

**Q. On what grounds?**

A. First, the agency said that an adoption guarantee would prompt pet owners to casually surrender their animals to the shelter for any reason. In other words, ACC believed that the threat of a death sentence was what kept pets in their homes. By contrast, we thought it was precisely that fear that led to abandonment. We believed that rather than blame or punish people who brought their pet to the shelter it was better to be non-judgmental and instill in people the trust that the animal shelter would give animals a second chance at life. ACC also said that if we told the public that adoptable animals were no longer dying, people would think pet overpopulation was solved and would no longer spay or neuter their animals.

**Q. How did the animal welfare community feel about the proposed ordinance?**

A. We got letters of support from the Cat Fanciers' Association, the American Dog Owners Association and from the San Francisco Dog Training Club. However, the California Animal Control Directors Association railed against it. And we were vilified by our animal welfare neighbors. Four of the largest bay area shelters asked their

Board to write letters of condemnation to our Board. Then they started negative publicity campaigns, both internally to their own membership and externally to the local media. We had obviously touched a raw nerve—and the reaction was strong and swift.

**Q. But this proposed ordinance didn't effect other counties. What was the deal?**

A. Although all of the animal welfare agency letters we received echoed many of ACC's arguments, there was the real fear, both stated and implied, that this legislation would bring public scrutiny to their own operations, encouraging challenges to the status quo with comments like, "if they can do it in San Francisco, why can't we do it here?" There was also the concern that this legislation might surface in their own counties or cities if people believed it was an effective way to stop the killing.

**Q. So how was the whole Adoption Act issue resolved?**

A. The Chairman of the Animal Welfare Commission came forward and urged The SF/SPCA and ACC to put aside their differences and work together on a non-legislative agreement. On April 1, 1994, both agencies signed the *Adoption Pact*, which provided the adoption guarantee, stating The SF/SPCA would take any adoptable animals the City couldn't place, and work towards saving all the treatable animals as well.

**Q. And was the agreement satisfactory?**

A. It was great for the animals. The year before the Agreement was signed (calendar year 1993), 5,712 cats and dogs were killed in San Francisco. Of those, 131 were adoptable, 2,603 were treatable and 2,947 non-rehabilitatable. From 1994 to the present, no adoptable cats or dogs have been killed in a San Francisco shelter.\* Impounds have dropped to only 10,181. And according to a joint report from both The SF/SPCA and ACC, in 1999 at both facilities, there were only 873 treatable cat and dog deaths and 1,961 non-rehabilitatable deaths for a total city-wide of 2,916 cat and dog deaths (again, compared to 5,712 in '93). This is a human population/animal death ratio unmatched by any other urban center in the United States.

**Q. Did implementing the Pact work out for the two organizations?**

A. It was difficult at best and at times it was actually rocky. I often likened the relationship with ACC to a marriage. Our aggressiveness in getting the Adoption Pact signed and publicizing the adoption guarantee's lifesaving results created hard feelings and difficult peer relationships for ACC. These feelings exist to this day although with a new leader at the helm of The SF/SPCA, I know things have improved. Could we have achieved the same results in other ways? I really don't know. I only know that thousands of four-legged creatures are walking on this earth today because of the Adoption Pact.

**Q. Do you have any advice for groups who want to work cooperatively with their municipal agencies but are running into brick walls or hostility?**

A. Working partnerships are always difficult. This is especially true when organizations have different agendas, needs, philosophies, employers, constituents and histories as is usually the case with municipal animal control and private shelters. Throw in conflicting personalities or other variables and it can really be tough. Sometimes, the barriers come from outside. As groups try to put collaborations together, they should be prepared for external critics, those who would try to disrupt, discourage and prevent a partnership from going forward. This can take the form of verbal attacks, or unfair representations in the media. But it's all about keeping your eye on the goal. The insults, innuendo and criticisms have got to be ignored. All that really matters is saving lives.

\*Some pit bulls terriers have been euthanized but there is a dispute as to their classification.