

Why It's Time to Retire the Term "No-Kill"

The no-kill term and movement started in the late 1980's and gained momentum into the 1990's and early 2000's. Its goal was noble; to no longer accept the routine euthanasia of pets in America's animal shelters due to space and the volume of pets entering shelters. The movement wanted animal welfare organizations & leaders, communities, pet owners, and government entities to think differently about how we treat our companion animals. By pushing progressive ideas and targeting the issue at the source (spay/neuter) the movement gained significant traction.

With that traction came a by-product. The identification of animal welfare organizations as "kill" vs "no-kill" which often has led to friction and tensions between organizations. Often organizations labeled as "kill" shelters were vilified and staff members of these organizations were told they did not care about the pets they cared for. This led to organizations who needed more adopters, more donors, and more volunteers to help them improve live outcomes struggling to improve because of the public perception of their organization as a "kill" shelter.

Many of the shelters labeled as "kill" were the ones who were taking in the highest volume of companion animals because they did not turn them away once they were full and regardless of an animal's health or temperament. These organizations took the ones others would not and in return they were vilified for the outcome those animals required to keep the community safe and prevent animals from medically suffering.

Today, the term "no-kill" is a contentious term amongst animal welfare organizations because of the past 30+ years. It is time to retire the term; it has served its purpose in many communities that have evolved and changed to better serve their companion animals.

As time has passed, one thing has remained constant. The lack of a clear definition of the term "no-kill" that animal welfare organizations and members of the public both understand.

We are often asked, "Are you a no-kill shelter?" and our response is the same "What is your definition of "no-kill?"

- Some people, especially members of the public, believe "no-kill" means no animal is ever euthanized period.
- Some national organizations have labeled "no-kill" as an organization who reaches a 90% save rate (other terms used are live release rate or placement rate). The issue with this number is it is an arbitrary number picked without

any evidence to substantiate why it is the benchmark to be met to achieve “no-kill status.”

- Some organizations call themselves “no-kill” if 90% or 100% of all “healthy and treatable animals” are placed. But what is a treatable animal? That definition could be significantly different depending on each organization’s resources.

You can see where this can lead to a misunderstanding between organizations and the public. Without clear definitions and understanding, conflict arises which is not in the best interests of the companion animals in each community.

The 90% benchmark refers to the Live Release Rate/Save Rate/Placement Rate for an organization. This number can be calculated two different ways.

- Live Outcomes (Adopted, Returned to Owner, Transferred to Another Organization for Placement, Return to Field)/Live Intake
- Live Outcomes/Total Outcomes (Same as above but adding euthanasia, lost in care, and unassisted death to total outcomes)

Again, this number is arbitrary without statistically evidence to support why it has been the chosen benchmark. It isn’t based on animal health, safety, or community wellbeing. It became a marketing benchmark — not a care standard. Yet shelters are judged, financially supported, and publicly praised or shamed based almost entirely on that single number, 90%.

A single metric can distort decision making. When everything rides on hitting 90%, decisions stop being about the individual animal and start being about the statistic. This pressure can lead to keeping animals alive when they are suffering. Delaying humane euthanasia to avoid a “negative” outcome. Placing unsafe animals back into the community, sedating animals on the adoption floor to make them appear more adoptable and letting animals mentally deteriorate in kennels rather than making hard but humane decision. None of that is compassion — it’s hitting a benchmark.

As stated earlier, “no-kill” does not mean the same thing everywhere. There is no universally accepted definition of no-kill (although some would argue it is 90%). Some shelters don’t count neonatal kittens as intakes, some don’t count feral cats, some reclassify shelter euthanasia as “owner-requested euthanasia” for surrenders they deem unadoptable, some turn away sick, aggressive, or senior animals to avoid euthanasia. Some refuse adopted pets as returns so they don’t impact their numbers.

Animal welfare must come first. Animal welfare is not just about keeping animals alive, it's about: quality of life, medical care & suffering, behavioral health, and community impact & safety. Keeping an animal alive at all costs — especially when an animal is suffering is 100% inhumane. And there is a term for this, it is called “warehousing” which is a nicer way to say “hoarding.” When you warehouse animals, you are not meeting each of their individual medical and behavior needs, you are keeping them alive to simply keep them alive.

We need to value honesty over numbers. Responsible organizations who report raw, transparent data, follow clear SOPs (standard operating procedures), make decisions based on individual animals, and accept that some years may be 88% and others 91%. They need to focus on doing what is right for each animal — not what looks best for the numbers. A shelter who tells the truth and prioritizes humane care is far more trustworthy than one that protects a label at all costs. “No-kill” is not a guarantee of compassion, sometimes it's a marketing term, sometimes it's a fundraising tool, and sometimes it pressures shelters into choices that are not in the best interest of the animals or the community. What matters more than a label/number is integrity, transparency, humane decision-making, and accountability. Those are the things that truly protect and saves lives.

In the end an animal welfare organization should not be solely judged off one single metric. Is it an important metric? Yes, absolutely. Does it tell the whole story? No, not at all. Everything else an organization does to support pet owners and pets in a community should also be considered when evaluating their impact in addition to the care they provide to the pets entrusted to them.

At Capital Humane Society, we do not use the term “no-kill” and we never will. We do not feel it is an appropriate term to use due to all the aforementioned items but most importantly, we will never ask our staff to make decisions about individual animals based on meeting an arbitrary benchmark of 90%. By forcing staff members to make a behavior or medical decision about a pet with that number in the back of their minds, you run the risk of the wrong decision being made. The wrong decision could mean an unsafe pet is placed in the community where it could inflict serious harm or injury to another pet or a person or it could mean an animal unnecessarily suffers medically or behaviorally to avoid a euthanasia outcome.

At Capital Humane Society, we identify ourselves as a socially conscious animal shelter. The fundamental goal of a socially conscious shelter is to create the best outcomes for all animals. The responsibilities of a Socially Conscious Shelter include:

- Ensuring every unwanted or homeless pet has a safe place to go for shelter and care.
- Placing every healthy and safe animal.
- Assessing the medical and behavioral needs of homeless animals and ensuring these needs are thoughtfully addressed.
- Alleviating suffering and making appropriate euthanasia decisions.
- Aligning policy with the needs of the community.
- Enhancing the human-animal bond through thoughtful placements and post adoption support.
- Considering the health and wellness of each animal and each community when transferring animals between communities.
- Implementing inclusive policies and practices.
- Fostering a culture of transparency, ethical decision making, mutual respect, continual learning, and collaboration.

In the end, the “no-kill” movement has served its purpose, especially in our community. Significant changes have been made to improve the outcomes for pets in our shelter and our community. But the time has come to retire the term “no-kill” and look to the future of animal welfare in our community.