



Virginia Alliance for Animal Shelters

Case statement

The animal welfare movement, as with many public policy activities, is the product of an ever evolving and shifting terrain. Animal shelters were created more than 100 years ago to provide an accessible and available alternative to animal owners who were, for one reason or another, getting rid of their companion animals. Owners were persuaded that rather than shooting them, drowning them or simply abandoning them, shelters would accept these animals with the hope for a more humane solution. Tens of millions of animals have been spared such terrible deaths through the dedicated and ongoing work of the humane shelters operating throughout the United States.

For the majority of our history, that purpose remained the same, every animal brought to an animal shelter was accepted. Most shelters tried very hard to find these animals new homes but when no adopters were found, they were humanely euthanized. Certainly not every shelter was or is as adoption focused as we would like and many have very limited resources. However, the field of animal welfare has become far more progressive over the past 20 years with a wider and more diverse inflow of dynamic and committed professionals. That progress must be supported and enhanced.

In Virginia and across the country, animal welfare shelters, both public and private, joined together during the 1990s to present a unified message that there were too many dogs and cats being born and not enough homes for them so that spaying and neutering was an agreed upon primary solution to that problem. The number of animals euthanized in shelters across the United States has dropped by more 50% from an estimated 15 to 16 million per year to between 4 and 6 million as a result of this unity and this shared focus.

In Virginia, this unity and focus also resulted in very productive legislative outcomes related to mandatory spay/neuter in shelters, adoption of felony cruelty statutes, expansion of animal care requirements and many other achievements.

In the early 2000s, animal welfare began to attract more attention from outside of the animal sheltering community. The euthanasia of animals became the cornerstone of opposition to the existing animal welfare paradigm. The time-honored notion of accepting every animal into a shelter was challenged as making it too easy for pet owners to relinquish animals and was an

“inappropriate” use of private shelters. Euthanasia rates became the sole measure for evaluating programs and assessing those who work in the animal welfare field.

For the first time, a significant private funding stream (Maddies Fund) was available for animal welfare organizations but only if the shelters accepted this new way of doing business. Because it became acceptable for some shelters to “pick and choose” the animals they would accept, the distribution of animals in a community was altered with the public shelters taking in more animals and the private shelters taking in fewer. Most municipal shelters, as well as some private shelters, saw limiting the intake of animals as an abandonment of a responsibility and have chosen to continue to try to give every animal a chance because they believe every animal is precious. This difference has generated a significant rift in the animal welfare community with words being used that logically drive individuals away from one another and has undermined the consensus that once existed in the Virginia animal welfare community, as well as nationally.

For the past seven or eight years, Virginia organizations, private, public and volunteer have operated more or less independently of one another at the legislative level. The Virginia Federation of Humane Societies, in the past the traditional organization for advancing legislation, has become less influential at the state level and has been dominated by private rescue organizations and a few limited access shelters. The interests that VFHS promotes are at times counterintuitive to open access shelters, both public and private.

There is a distinct difference between those organizations which operate in full public view, subject to regulatory oversight and having accountability to a wide ranging constituency from those who do not function within those constraints of inspections, record keeping and public scrutiny. There is a deep operational difference between those who accept all animals presented to them (usually numbering in the thousands) and those who pick and choose animals they serve based upon adoptability, health status and other criteria often numbering a few hundred or less. Those organizations with long histories of service to their communities are not usually based upon individuals or personalities but rather more permanent and long lasting structures and are influenced by broader constituencies and a need to balance a variety of points of view.

The time has come in Virginia for those of us who operate open access shelters, either because we believe it is our duty or because it is our mandated responsibility, to join together to speak with one voice and to advance our ideas of what works and what will benefit the animals in our care. For too long we have let others define us and distract us from building on our experience, our knowledge and our commitment to our work.

Therefore, we are delighted to announce the creation of the **Virginia Alliance for Animal Shelters (VAAS)**. The member organizations serve tens of thousands

of animals in Virginia, are transparent organizations which are regulated by the Commonwealth of Virginia and have a long term history and future in serving Virginia's communities, both people and animals. Our goal is to utilize the collective experience, professional commitment and resources of our organizations on behalf of companion animals, our constituents, donors, taxpayers and our wider community. We are dedicated to improving and supporting the member shelters on behalf of the animals we serve and the larger issues related to animal welfare in Virginia. We are committed to educating our member communities and Virginians state-wide on the status of animal welfare and encouraging and inviting the full participation of Virginians in the continued advancement of those solutions and policies which we believe will improve the interests of companion animals in Virginia.