

Serving Animals: When the Bond Breaks

Millions of cats are surrendered to animal shelters every year. Some shelters are implementing new options for cat owners who feel they have no choice but to surrender their pet.

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The little black cat looked shiny, well-fed and loved. The young couple he belonged to alternately cuddled and held him as they explained their dilemma to the shelter worker across the counter: They had recently moved and their new landlord did not allow pets. With tears in their eyes, they filled out a form, surrendered their cat and walked out of the shelter. They could not look back.

I watched this scene during a visit to a shelter. It has haunted me for a long time. Unfortunately, similar ones play out at shelters across the country daily. Shelters euthanize millions of cats and dogs annually. Roughly half of them are surrendered pets.

A few shelters have "stepped out of the box to help empower pet owners," says Kathy Savesky, a consultant in Natick, Mass., who has more than 20 years experience in animal protection. Here are three creative shelters' options for cat owners who feel they have no choice but to surrender their pet.

- Marin Humane Society (Novato, Calif.): Hired a transition counselor to offer alternatives to shelter surrender, such as working with renters and landlords to help people keep their pets and develop resource materials for staff members to offer pet owners. The job involves being a second set of eyes and ears to find ways to help people keep their pets, says John Reese, spokesman for the Marin Humane Society. The counselor also consolidates the knowledge of individual staff members so pet owners who need help can find it fast.
- Fort Wayne Animal Care & Control (Ft. Wayne, Ind.): Instituted Pet Points, a regularly televised education segment included in the weekly "First at Five" news program (CBS station WANE-TV NewsChannel 15). Pet Points includes advice to help prevent pet relinquishments, such as cleaning litterboxes to help avoid litterbox problems. One recent segment opened with: "Cat ownership is at an all-time high, and that is why it is critical that owners make every effort to understand normal cat behaviors."