How Animal Welfare Organizations Develop
Matt Kayhoe

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A Fresh Opportunity

Over the past two decades, a dramatic shift has taken place in the field of community animal welfare, protection, and sheltering. At its core, it reflects a professionalization of the field, and a movement from reactive to strategic, and from internally focused to community focused.

Focused initially in a handful of organizations in the northeast and west coast US, this progress is very slowly spreading across the country. For those communities that are home to these advanced organizations, this progress has led to a great improvement in the health and well-being of dogs and cats, and in the relationship between humans and companion animals.

New standards and definitions for tracking and measuring progress have been established that can be adapted and adopted in nearly any community. A national awareness has been created in the field.

The best estimates are that 100 – 150 shelters are "advanced." There are roughly 12,000 "basic shelters" in the US – those that are in a defensive position and have not yet significantly shifted the community norms and conditions that put them in that position.

High level, "at a glance" indicators of progress include:

> *Advanced shelter organizations are **rehoming** 85% or more of the dogs and cats they take in, while nationally that number is at roughly 50%.*

> *The advanced shelters **euthanize** nearly no adoptable animals, yet nationally that number is roughly 36% - millions of animals a year. They do this with thoughtful, sophisticated methods for controlling the population of community animals and thus decreasing the inflow, and for increasing the outflow into new homes.*

> *On average, the **"length of stay"** for animals in advanced shelters is a few days before being rehomed or reunited with families. Nationally, that average stretches into weeks. Animal behavior and health generally erodes during shelter stays, so this affects adoptability, customer experience, revenue, and physical health.*

> *The advanced shelters are the primary and dominant **source of adoptable animals (and pet owner support)** in their communities. In those communities without advanced shelters, animals are largely sourced through other avenues.*

The Path Forward

How does a basic shelter achieve "advanced" capability and status? What's the journey? How can we know how we are doing, and if/when we've arrived?

It is tempting to think of the pathway to progress as being a magical mixture of charismatic leadership, random luck with a wealthy donor, finally getting the right Board members, or something similar. While leadership and money are important, they are as much a result of a commitment to progress as a cause of the progress. It is very much a chicken-and–egg formula.

Understanding the path forward is best thought of as a developmental journey, much like a human going through stages of growth. Each stage needs to be experienced and transcended.

Core differences between the basic shelter and advanced shelter focus:

Focus Area	Basic Shelter Focus	Advanced Shelter Focus
Animals for Adoption	• Too Many • Lack of Diversity • Breed Bans	• Where to Import Them From • Treatment of Difficult Behaviors
Animal Health	• Disease Control • Minimal Standards	• Community Wellness • Safety Net Services
Community Relations	• The "Kill/No Kill" Model • Militant Rescue Groups	• Collaborations with Other Causes
Critical HR Issues	• High Turnover • Very Low Pay • Dependability	• Rotational Assignments • Succession Planning • Developing Leadership
Funding	• Multiple Small Events • Chronic Poverty	• Diverse Revenue Streams • Measuring Impact for $$ Spent

The defensive posture is evident in the challenges faced by the Basic Shelter. The issues tend to accelerate and magnify each other. For example, low pay equals high turnover, which in turn leads to lower shelter hygiene, which in turn leads to disease outbreaks, which in turn leads to bad PR and lowered funding, which keeps the pay low, which leads to high turnover…etc. It is a tough set of circumstances to break out of, and takes as much courage and willpower as it does wisdom.

This document is an attempt at providing some of the wisdom, and perhaps some hope that will support the courage and willpower.

The Journey

Community animal welfare organizations can be generally sorted into four stages of development:

	1	2	3	4
	Rescue Group	**Basic Shelter**	**Stage Two Advanced**	**Stage Three Advanced**
Goals	Rescue and place displaced animals	Rescue Group, plus provide: A community center for adoptions Basic medical care for animals	Plus real progress with: Community animal populations Improve community pet ownership standards	Plus a leadership role in: Community animal standards Tying animal welfare to human welfare
Mental Model and Community Relationship	Reactive	Defensive	Proactive	Strategic/Long Term

Most organizations have some characteristics of each of the three shelter types, but most will self-identify with one category more than the others. Some are happy where they are, while most are striving to move to the right of this chart. (And the farther to the right you are, the more you want to move to the right!).

The first challenge is about changing the way the organization is managed and led, as it develops. The second challenge is about redefining what we care about – how we measure our progress.

Management Model	Individual or small group	Board involved in day-to-day Executive Director as supervisor/director	Board: planning, policy ED as Manager & Delegator	Board: vision and values, community connections ED as Chief Executive and Strategist
Measures of Success	# of animals rescued & placed Personal satisfaction of participants	Adoption returns Budget deficit (how small?) Avoidance of bad PR	Population Reduction Live Release Rate Length of Stay Endowment Growth PR victories Animals Helped: medical, behavioral	Strategic goals met Community alliances developed Legal victories Humans helped through programs

The Journey, continued

The next set of challenges have to do with external relationships. Turning from an inward focus to an outward one is a critical cultural shift throughout the developmental journey.

|	Rescue Group	Basic Shelter	Stage Two Advanced	Stage Three Advanced
Community Relationship	Heroic; work at the edges of community	"Essential services" nonprofit agency	Professional nonprofit agency	Community standard bearer & thought leader
Service Model	Spontaneous, reactive	Rules oriented adoption Protect animals, limit returns	Partnership oriented adoption Retail industry best practices and standards	What does the community need from us?
Typical Programs		Many Basic Shelters will attempt one or two programs, and some succeed over an extended period of time. The topic is often chosen based on an expertise of a staff member, or the interest of a donor or Board member. The Stage Two organization makes its program choices strategically, rather than opportunistically.	Community spay/neuter Introductory training classes Animal-related festivals Cruelty investigations (if gov't contract)	Extensive Training Curriculum Child Therapy (abuse recovery, learning disability, etc.) Wounded Warriors, Seniors... Family Disruption Support Children Engagement: events, parties, summer camp Legal Strategies (local and regional)

The final concerns in the developmental journey are those of resources: people and money being the two primary ones.

	Rescue Group	Basic Shelter	Stage Two Advanced	Stage Three Advanced
Human Resources Strategy, Approach	Whoever shows up	Whoever is good with animals and will work for what we can pay	Personnel policies and standards	Developmental
Finances	Month-to-month Drawn primarily from small group	Quarter-to-quarter Newsletters, small events Bequests are spent on operations	Year-to-year Annual appeal, large events Bequests go to endowment; act as operational safety net	Three/five/ten year planning Endowment covers % of costs Perpetual endowment growth

Implications

This developmental model can provide a diagnostic tool for individuals and groups wishing to understand or change an organization and/or community. Inevitably, views will vary about the history and current status of any community-based organization. Those differences can remain unexplored, be sources of misunderstanding and tension, and thus serve to either keep the organization from moving forward. Or, if explored, those differences can provide a rich knowledge base from which to build and strive.

The process of exploring those differing views can create and strengthen relationships, as well as initiate a new tradition of exploratory and generative dialogue. This will serve many purposes as efforts are made to improve the present and future state of the organization.
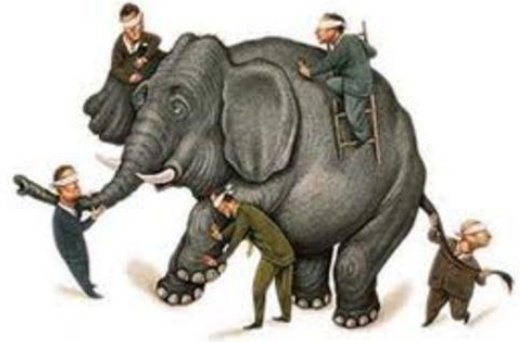
Most change requires a series of small steps, sometimes leading to great leaps forward, but not necessarily. There is usually one step backward for every few steps forward. The journey through these stages for any individual organization will follow a winding path in and around the neat boxes and that make up the model.

The most important aspect of this pathway is the enriched, deepened, and evolving partnership with the community which is served by the organization. While this is unique to the idiosyncrasies of any given community, the development of a partnership that is strongly felt by all involved has proven to be essential.

And, as mentioned earlier, there are many human elements that are not captured in this model and that are part of every developmental journey: commitment, discipline, vision, enthusiasm, inspiration, and so much more.

If you'd like to talk about this further, have feedback, or want more information, please get in touch through the website www.kayhoe.com.