



## The Oregonian

### Spaying, neutering, saving lives

An upcoming conference and a Portland advocate are taking steps to reduce animal euthanasia

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Sometimes, working at a shelter or volunteering with an animal-rescue group can make you feel like a hamster on one of those wheels -- running as fast as you can and getting nowhere. Every day you come to the shelter, there's a whole new group of homeless animals who need help.

Michael Mountain, president of the Best Friends Animal Society in Kanab, Utah, wants people to start thinking that the problem of homeless animals is solvable. Rather than spreading gloom and doom, Mountain preaches that this country has made huge strides in the past few years. "In 1987, 17 million animals were euthanized in animal shelters and humane societies in the United States," he says. "Now, it's down to 5 million."

The per-capita-rate of euthanasia has dropped dramatically in Portland -- it's about 40 percent lower than it was in 1997, according to Mountain. "You're basically in the top 10 in the country," he says. "You are really close to being a no-kill city."

Mountain will be a keynote speaker at the No More Homeless Pets conference that his organization is sponsoring in Portland later this month. The goal of the conference is to give nuts-and-bolts workshops to help shelter workers and advocates for homeless animals become even more efficient and effective.

Celeste Crimi of Aloha says attending the 2001 No More Homeless Pets conference changed her perspective as a volunteer. "I was fostering cats, but I felt like it was a losing battle. I decided if I put my time and energy into spay-neuter programs, I could help hundreds of animals instead of just a few," she says.

Two years ago, Crimi launched the Oregon Neutermobile program, which has spayed or neutered more than 4,600 cats, dogs, rabbits and other animals in rural, economically depressed areas of the state. She now volunteers as vice president of Pet Over-Population Prevention Advocates. As part of her responsibilities there, she coordinated the March Tom and Mom Cat Special, which spayed and neutered 806 cats belonging to low-income people for \$10 each.

Crimi also is working with the Oregon Spay/Neuter Task Force to develop long-term funding programs for low income people who want to spay or neuter their pets -- something that will save public dollars at shelters. "If the mama is spayed, it's a cost savings and a heartache savings," she says.

Animal advocates today are media-savvy and well-organized. They e-mail press releases, have Web sites for their shelters and make a day at the shelter fun for volunteers. "In the past, you found homeless animals and dealt with them. Now, we're moving into doing things at the front end to help the problem. It's a more creative way of thinking," says Robyne Balog-Ressler, volunteer coordinator and a founding member of the Pals of Paws Brigade.

The key word nowadays is cooperation rather than competition. The Pals of Paws Brigade brings together volunteers for short-term, tangible projects that help other Oregon organizations. It might be a weekend-long effort to paint a room, lay down new flooring or upgrade the fencing at a shelter. "Things like a fresh coat of paint make life easier," Balog-Ressler says.

One of the goals of Pals of Paws is to make volunteering a short-term commitment, which allows a wider range of people to participate. "It's a community issue if there are homeless animals, and it affects the whole community," Balog-Ressler says.

It all adds up to a kindness revolution, Mountain says. "There has been an absolute shift. Kindness to animals -- indeed, all living beings -- is the key spiritual value of our time," he says. That interest in the well-being of other creatures causes people to create spay-neuter programs, or help out a stray kitty in the yard, or choose to adopt an aging dog. Those kind actions all add up to making a no-kill community closer to reality.

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