

Q+A with Dr. Kate Hurley, DVM, MPVM

In late 2014, Dr. Kate Hurley, program director of the UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program—which is housed within the CCAH—challenged shelters across North America to join the Million Cat Challenge, a five-year campaign to reduce the number of cats euthanized in shelters by 1 million. Overseen jointly by the Koret Shelter Medicine Program and the University of Florida Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Program—two of the most widely recognized shelter medicine programs in the world—the Million Cat Challenge is already on track to meet its bold and game-changing goal. In this interview, Dr. Hurley explains the genesis of the challenge, the innovative shelter practices that are making its success possible, and why cats entering shelters are so vulnerable.

Q: Where did the idea for the Million Cat Challenge come from?

A: In December 2012, I read a book called *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, by Chip Heath and Dan Heath. The book is filled with stories about how individuals and organizations have created dramatic change when it comes to seemingly intractable problems. One of those stories really stuck with me. It was about a man named Donald Berwick, CEO of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement. Berwick had an idea for how to reduce the number of hospital-associated errors that result in patient fatalities. Speaking at a conference, he challenged a group of hospital administrators to change four or five major practices in order to prevent 100,000 of those hospital deaths. The campaign was an amazing success. Participating hospitals achieved an estimated 122,300 fewer deaths over the next year.

A few days after reading that, I was in Chico, CA, making a presentation to 25 people from 10 or so shelters about new ways that we’re thinking about managing cats in shelters. I saw the people in the room talking to one another and problem-solving and the different kinds of shelters they represented, and suddenly the parallel struck me. So, spontaneously, I issued the “Thousand Cat Challenge.” I passed around a yellow legal pad and had people sign up and say how many fewer cats in their shelters would be euthanized in the first six months of 2013 compared to the first six months of 2012 because of what we were talking about in that room. It was just 10 shelters, and they signed up to save more than 1,300 cats. And they totally blew that goal out of the water.

A few months later, my collaborator, Julie Levy, from the University of Florida’s shelter medicine program, and I were invited to speak at the Humane Society’s annual Animal Care Expo, which is the largest animal welfare conference in the United States. We had almost 2,000 people in the audience representing well over 100 shelters. I read them the story of Donald Berwick and his healthcare campaign. And then Julie and I issued another challenge. We had little cards on everybody’s chairs, each with a picture of a cat on it. We had them write on the back of a card how many fewer cats would be euthanized in their shelter that year compared to the year before. We didn’t have any formal tracking system, but when we collected the cards and tallied up the number, it came to 126,126 cats. It was electrifying.

Instantly, Julie and I were bombarded by emails, questions, requests to speak, and requests for resources. We really wanted to capture the momentum and provide the resources that people were asking for—and we wanted to do it in the context of a big, bold campaign. There are an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 shelters in the United States, and another few hundred in Canada. If we could get a commitment to save more than 100,000 cats with 2,000 people in the room

representing 100 to 200 shelters, we thought, then if we made this a North America initiative, we actually could get to a million over five years. And that's how the Million Cat Challenge was born.

Q: How many shelters are currently part of the challenge?

A: It's up to about 240. We started recruiting them in November 2014, and we're already at 126,988 cats saved or pledged to save—which really speaks to how doable this is. Some of the shelters that have signed up have already dropped their euthanasia rate by 90 percent or more compared to what it was in 2012.

Q: There are so many shelter issues you could have chosen as the focus of a big, bold challenge. Why this one?

A: Really, cats have been *the* issue in shelters for the last decade. We've struggled so much more to get a handle on euthanasia, overcrowding, and poor housing for cats than we have for dogs. It's been common for years now for 75 percent or more of dogs to leave a shelter alive—and common for years for 75 percent or more of cats in shelters to be euthanized. It is not unusual to see euthanasia rates of over 90 percent for cats in shelters. So it's a much more serious problem.

Probably the biggest reason for this is that we don't have a big unowned dog population—but we have a huge unowned cat population. All of our work to educate pet owners and promote spay and neuter and give people the tools they need to be responsible pet owners and maintain the human-animal bond—it all works for *pets*. In fact, a higher percentage of owned cats are spayed than owned dogs. But none of our efforts were touching that unowned cat population. We can offer low-cost spay and neuter all day long, but there has to be an owner to bring the cat in. So, our efforts weren't touching the problem.

And you can imagine that if you're working in a shelter where you're euthanizing nine out of 10 cats that come through the door, that has impact across the organization. It has impact on how dogs are treated. It has impact on how employees feel and on how many people are willing to volunteer or support the shelter. So solving that problem solves a lot of other things at the same time. Also, we saw the real practical opportunity for rapid change. We knew that there were doable, affordable, scalable things that could be put in place and replicated, shelter by shelter.

Q: The Million Cat Challenge highlights five initiatives that shelters can implement to help reduce their cat euthanasia rates. What's the first one?

A: It starts with **alternatives to intake**, which basically means considering alternatives to admitting a cat to a shelter in the first place. I've been working in shelters for 25 years, and like many others in this field, long thought that taking in every cat presented to a shelter represented the highest standard of care and responsiveness. We totally believed that was the right thing to do for cats and for the community. But it's not always the right choice. For example, cats are 10 times more likely to get reunited with their owners if they stay where they are versus brought into a shelter. So instead of automatically taking them in, shelters might offer a flyer that people can download from their website and post around their neighborhood. This is a better way to get cats back to their owners than allowing people to bring them into the shelter if they don't have a collar and an ID. Or if somebody calls and wants to bring in a litter of five-week-old kittens and the shelter doesn't have foster care, that shelter could provide some food and a litter box and some guidance and have the person hang onto them for two or three

weeks until they're old enough to get spayed and adopted out. Or if it's your own cat and it's having a behavior problem, can we help you work through that instead of bringing it in.

Providing an alternative to admission means really broadening the way we think about service. It's asking the community to step up and help us and partner with shelters. Surprisingly, we find that most people don't see this as an imposition. Rather, it gives them the opportunity to be more responsible and engaged in solving the problem. In the past, we've helped pave the path straight to a shelter's front door, for every cat, regardless if there was room or the ability to provide care or the ability to assure that that cat would leave the shelter alive. So now we're creating more paths—and creating a little resistance to the path of just coming into the shelter.

Q: What's the second initiative?

A: The next one is **managed admissions**. This means scheduling the intake of cats to match the shelter's ability to accommodate them. Most shelters open their doors to however many animals come, even if it overwhelms them. So this one is about scheduling intake to match resources. It doesn't mean you turn any more cats away or have any different policy. If a cat needs to come into the shelter but it's not an emergency, maybe we can make an appointment for the cat to come in. It can be as simple as putting people on the waiting list and calling them when there's room. Or if you do all your adoptions on Fridays and Saturdays, maybe you schedule your intake during the other days of the week.

Q: The third initiative is **capacity for care**. What does that entail?

A: This one is my favorite—and also the foundation for everything else. Capacity for care means that every cat that comes into a shelter—whatever her background and whatever her outcome—will receive basic humane care and the five freedoms of animal welfare: freedom from hunger and thirst, freedom from discomfort, freedom from fear and distress, freedom from disease and injury, and the freedom to express normal behaviors. To be able to assure these five freedoms is so profound. And for shelter staff and volunteers, working in an environment where you can give these things has tremendous impact.

Q: What's an example of something a shelter might do to increase its capacity for care?

A: Well, the housing that we have typically had for cats in shelters and veterinary clinics across America for as long as we've been sheltering cats has been profoundly inadequate for providing those five freedoms. When cat housing is so small that they are kicking litter into their food and water, we are not providing the five freedoms. But when we turn that around, and we provide them with the housing and comforts they need and we keep them healthy, an amazing thing happens. They move through the shelter in less than half the time. And that means they cost half as much and take up half as much space. And people get engaged. They come in and see that the cats are happy, relaxed, and healthy. The staff actually need to spend less time tending to them. It starts unwinding the whole mess, and it makes cats happier right away.

For example, one of the shelters that I talked to saved so much on reduced medical costs by changing their cat housing—because the cats stayed so much healthier—that they were able to do all kinds of stuff with adopting out special needs cats—like cats with tumors and diabetes. And they were able to start a trap and neuter return program for their community. So it actually can free up resources to do some of the other initiatives that might cost a little bit more.

Q: What's number four?

A: That's **removing barriers to adoption**. It has been common for shelters to feel like having restrictive adoption policies will help make sure that only good pet owners get cats. But we've come to understand that we can't control who gets a cat. Anyone who wants a cat can get a cat; you can look on Craigslist and find a cat of any color or age or size for free, anytime of the day or night, anywhere in North America. So removing a shelter's barriers to adoption makes it easier for people who already know how to be cat owners to get a cat from a shelter. But it also makes it easier for people who *don't* know how to be good cat owners to at least get a cat from a shelter instead of off of Craigslist or the Canadian equivalent. If people are only willing to get a cat if it's free, then let's make some free cats. It's not worth it to collect a \$50 adoption fee if that's going to mean the difference between a cat getting euthanized or not. Also, if a shelter location is hard to get to or kind of grim—like if it's behind a wastewater treatment plant, which some shelters still are—then maybe you find a way to have adoption events in front of a Petco or Walmart, so that it's as easy as falling out a window to adopt a cat that is spayed, neutered, vaccinated, and identified.

Q: And what's the final initiative?

A: The last one is **return to field**—which means sterilizing, vaccinating, and returning healthy *unowned* cats to the outdoors as an alternative to euthanasia. There are somewhere between 30 million and 80 million unowned cats in the United States—and many of those cats are not sufficiently social to be placed into a home. Trying to euthanize the ones that can't be placed into a home is not solving the problem, and it's devastating to shelters. The estimate now is that 1.5 million cats are euthanized annually in shelters. That's a trivial fraction of 30 million to 80 million unowned cats—and we now know that euthanizing that small a fraction is not going to lower the number of cats out and about, reduce their impact on wildlife, or change their effect on public health. In fact, a recent study showed that low-level culling of cats without removing the food source actually increased the population. So we may even be making the problem worse. We're certainly destabilizing those populations by removing the adult individuals and leaving the food source for other breeding individuals to come in. And we're breaking our hearts and our budgets by euthanizing those 1.5 million year after year after year.

In the last few years, shelters have started to change their perspective on this problem. Sterilizing these cats will reduce the nuisance that they're going to cause and substantially improve the welfare of the individual cat. And it will stabilize the situation. Instead of removing the breeding individual without removing the food source, take the breeding individuals, bring them into the shelter, sterilize them, and place them right back where they were found. They go back, eat the food so it's not available to other cats that might come along to make more kittens, and make no more babies themselves. In shelters that have had this program for a few years, we've actually started to see intake go down, suggesting that we are stabilizing the breeding population by putting the cats back, sterilized.

Q: It sounds like a giant undertaking!

A: This initiative is probably the most expensive, and for some shelters there are logistical obstacles to being able to do it. You have to have access to veterinary services to sterilize those cats and the wherewithal to put them back. But in the long term, it may be a really good investment for shelters and communities, in terms of being a game-changer. For all these years we've only had programs that targeted *owned* pets. And so this whole population of 30 million to 80 million unowned cats was left out of our sheltering equation, which is why we weren't making headway with cats like we were with dogs. And now, all of a sudden, we have this other

tool. This is something shelters can't change overnight, but I certainly hope that as shelters and communities try this out and see how well it works, it will spread—and more and more shelters will be empowered and resourced to do this.