

Tuesday, September 19, 2006

Renovated shelters are the cat's meow

By Charisse Jones
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — The surroundings are plush. There are duplexes with glass walls, funky modular furniture, brightly colored cushions and hallways lined with elegant portraits.

This is no luxurious Manhattan co-op, at least not one inhabited by people. The residents enjoying these high-gloss digs are more than 350 homeless cats and dogs living in the newly renovated shelter unveiled Monday by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA).

With the \$5 million upgrade, the ASPCA replaced cages with glass cubicles, cinderblock walls with waterproof Corian. They installed high-energy air filters and stucco ceilings to cut down on odors and noise. Piped-in sounds soothe the animals. Cats, for example, get the sounds of birdsongs and babbling brooks.

Such high-end amenities represent the changing face of animal shelters from here to Milwaukee and San Francisco, where cage-lined corridors are being replaced by cozy living quarters, and some humane societies are becoming as desirable a place for a child's birthday party as the local Chuck E. Cheese's.

The goals of animal havens without cages are to woo potential pet owners and cut the number of dogs and cats that are euthanized below current national estimates of between 3 million and 4 million a year.

The San Diego Humane Society and ASPCA, which moved into a 44,000-square-foot building three years ago, even incorporated *feng shui*, the Chinese practice of placing buildings and furniture according to how they will affect the flow of positive and negative energy, in its design.

"We had been trying to attract people to come to a place where they didn't want to be," explains Mark Goldstein, the San Diego society's president. Now, "people walk in expecting to be hit with barking, meowing, odors, and instead they're met with peacefulness and a waterfall."

San Francisco led way

The San Francisco SPCA helped launch the modernization trend with a new facility in 1998. While New York's ASPCA shelter is the latest to follow

Some homeless animals wait for new families in seriously suite digs



Settled in: Cats play in a "colony house" at the ASPCA shelter.



Photos by Todd PIER, USA TODAY

Introductions: Five-year-olds Mekhi, left, and Eliza and their dad, Sawm Wynn, play with a dog Saturday at the ASPCA shelter on Manhattan's Upper East Side while mom Marlene watches.

At shelters, half are euthanized

An estimated 6 million to 8 million dogs and cats are cared for by shelters in the USA each year, and about half are euthanized, according to the Humane Society of the United States. Animal shelter statistics for 2005 for selected cities:

City	Sheltered	Adopted	Euthanized
New York	43,618	19,017 ¹	22,967
Los Angeles ²	47,508	13,693	20,562
Richmond, Va.	6,039	4,320	1,393
Boulder, Colo.	8,309	4,602	1,544

¹Includes pets reunited with owners

²Dogs and cats only

Sources: Lynn Spivak, Maddie's Fund and USA TODAY research

suit, at least a dozen others have made similar changes.

Besides attracting potential pet owners who otherwise might avoid coming to a shelter, a more homelike environment prepares animals for going to a new family, advocates say.

"It's not just an innovation of physical space," says Robin Starr, CEO of the Richmond, Va., SPCA, which has equipped its 4-year-old, 64,000-square-foot facility with cubby-filled cat areas and "living rooms" for dogs.

"It's part of a larger, more progressive way of thinking about involving the entire community in the animal shelter and having a different approach to adoptions."

The changes are paying off. "Our getting more (animals) adopted translates into us getting more animals out of the local pound, which translates into fewer pets getting euthanized," Starr says. The organization has found homes for 11,319 pets since implementing a no-kill

seeking ways to save animal lives. They are pushing adoption over euthanasia, encouraging spaying and neutering and working with veterinary schools to cut the cost of rehabilitating sick animals, says Taimie Bryant, who teaches animal protection law at UCLA Law School.

Less costly options

"It's hard to serve as a role model if what you're doing is killing animals," Bryant says. "There are very innovative solutions available without large amounts of dollars coming in. We'll begin to see even more shelter managers moving in the direction of these new and innovative programs."

New York's remodeled shelter can house 40% more animals than before. Terrazzo floors and plastic wainscoting are easy on the eye and even easier to keep clean.

It makes for an environment that matches the message, says Ed Sayres, president and CEO of the ASPCA. It would be difficult to encourage people to adopt who then asked, "Why are they housed in those noisy cages? Why can't they be more comfortable?" he says.

"The considerations for us are trying to get a new audience coming to the shelter. You hear from the public that they can't go to an animal shelter because caging makes them feel badly, or they pity the animals," Sayres says. "The modern way for adoption is to have a people-friendly and animal-friendly environment. ... Any shelters doing any kind of capital renovation are employing some level of these concepts."

Milwaukee's shelter incorporates suites for dogs and cats and sound barriers. Adoptions rose to 7,500 in 2005 from roughly 4,200 in 1999, DeGrave says.

"We wanted a fun atmosphere where people would say, 'This is cool, and we feel good about going there,'" DeGrave says. "We have a lot of people who come in on the weekends who may not be in the market to adopt an animal today but may be in the future. They like to come and bring the kids."

policy in 2002, when it completed its new shelter in a one-time tobacco warehouse.

The new shelters also emphasize better medical care for animals. San Diego went from a 504-square-foot treatment room to a 2,300-square-foot medical center that does everything from spaying and neutering to hip surgeries and care for diabetic animals.

Shelter managers say that improving medical care is a key to finding homes for animals that otherwise might be deemed unadoptable.

"In the past, an animal with a serious leg injury we might have had to euthanize," says Jill DeGrave, education director of the Wisconsin Humane Society in Milwaukee. "In this new shelter, because the veterinary clinic is much more modern, we're able to handle a lot of medical and behavioral conditions that we couldn't. ... Euthanasia has gone down, and adoptions have really taken off."

While not all organizations can raise millions of dollars to create gleaming new facilities, more animal care providers are