



# The Shelter Ally Project

Creating successful shelter partnerships to save  
more animals' lives



THE HUMANE SOCIETY  
OF THE UNITED STATES

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“You are extraordinary. You have turned a nation that was euthanizing 20 million pets annually into a relative haven where a home for every adoptable pet is on the horizon. The key to making our goal a reality is to bring all our colleagues, from the furthest corner of Texas to the very tip of Maine, with us. You are part of a remarkable and strong network of shelters that can do just that. It is an honor and privilege for the Humane Society of the United States to be partnering with you on this journey.”

–KIM ALBOUM, DIRECTOR, SHELTER OUTREACH & POLICY  
ENGAGEMENT, THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES





# Partnering for Success

## Creating Successful Shelter Ally Partnerships

This is a remarkable time for our field—shelter euthanasia is down to its lowest point in history, there are thousands of different organizations working together to save animals, adoption by the public is at an all-time high and our shared goal of seeing the end of the euthanasia of healthy, adoptable animals is tantalizingly close. However, even as we celebrate this success, there are pockets of the country that have not come as far in terms of reducing pet overpopulation, and for whom the dream of minimal euthanasia still seems unreachable. Those shelters need the help and support of their peers who have been more fortunate. Thankfully, the hearts of many groups around the country are big enough to embrace them and share the secrets of their success to help ensure everyone crosses the finish line together.

### Why become a Shelter Ally?

Creating a relationship with a group struggling to provide care for their animals is one of the best ways to increase lifesaving beyond your own facility. The collaboration between mentor and mentee groups allows for opportunities to share knowledge and information, ensure funds for necessary spay/neuter efforts and provide other types of support. It is unique in that it is a hands-on cooperative venture between animal welfare organizations designed not only to help individual animals but also to weave a stronger safety net for the community at large.

But taking on a mentee shelter is a decision that should not be made lightly. It means an ongoing, long-term commitment to another organization, often many miles

away, that has fewer resources, less lifesaving infrastructure and novel obstacles. It also means juggling responsibilities at home, ensuring that board members, supporters, taxpayers, the community at large and even staff recognize and support the broader goals achieved by diverting staff time and resources to elevating another group. In the end, however, it is a unique opportunity for groups that are leading the way in humane care and lifesaving to share their expertise outside their backyard, and truly help create a more humane nation.

### What is the goal of a Shelter Ally partnership?

Shelter Ally partnerships should not be the equivalent of transport partnerships with a little extra advice thrown in here and there. While transport can be an important part of helping to reduce animal populations for mentee groups in the short term (and it can certainly be a benefit to the mentor groups as well), the true goal of any Shelter Ally partnership must be long-term transformation of the mentee group in all aspects of their operation, from intake to population management, adoption policies to community outreach.

Ideally, with the support and guidance of their mentor group, mentees should, at a minimum, achieve:

- Stability in their shelter population, maintaining their humane capacity for care through intake management and diversion practices and enhanced live release options;
- Trap/Neuter/Return and Return to Field programs for community cats;
- Conversation-based, [Adopters Welcome](#) adoption policies;
- Accurate data collection and routine, transparent data reporting through [Shelter Animals Count](#);
- Commitment to ensuring all [Five Freedoms](#) for every animal every day;
- Comfort in appropriately navigating and [implementing positive policy changes](#) to help more animals at the organizational and local ordinance levels;

- Participation in cutting-edge initiatives like the [Million Cat Challenge](#).

Mentor groups should strive to support and elevate their mentees to the point at which they are able to manage their own populations effectively and achieve best practices in animal sheltering. As a shining example of humane animal caretaking and model shelter operation, the former mentee group will then be able to pay it forward, helping to elevate other groups—in short, the mentee group should become a model shelter/mentor for their area. What's more, their excellence should serve to shine a spotlight on local groups not employing best practices and influence them to change. In sum, the goal of the Shelter Ally Project is to support and build leaders who were once struggling and turn them into local influencers for positive change.



### Is mentorship right for my organization?

The keys to a successful partnership are thorough planning, allocation of resources, clear agreements and long-term commitment to the project. For mentor groups, particularly those that rely on transport to meet adoption demand, taking on a partner can seem like an easy decision. But remember, the goal of a Shelter Ally partnership is transformational change on the part of the mentee group, not just a steady source of adoptable transport animals (in fact, if mentorship is done correctly, that source of excess animals from the

mentee group should all but dry up). Before signing up to serve as a mentor, groups should ask themselves:

- Do we have full commitment from leadership? Mentorship can't be just the work of one or two individuals; it must be a program with full support and dedication from leadership and should be factored into strategic planning, budgeting, staffing, etc. Support from the mentor group must continue even if individual staffers close to the program leave the organization.
- Do we have staff buy-in? After all, shelter work is difficult enough; asking staff to take on mentorship of another organization, experiencing their challenges and heartbreaks, can be overwhelming. Be sure that staff understand and share the long-term commitment to helping save lives in another community.
- Do we have the financial resources required? Mentors certainly cannot be expected to fund their mentee shelter (although income realized from adoption of transferred animals should be reinvested in the source shelter), but the mentorship process unquestionably involves devoting staff time and expertise, travel and other resources to another group, rather than applying them locally.
- Do we have support from our donors and community? It can be difficult for those not in our field to see the critical importance of spreading lifesaving efforts even beyond their backyard; communicating the message that their local support is being magnified globally is essential.
- Do we have the expertise, or are we willing to get it? Mentor groups should be realistic about their strengths and abilities and look for a mentee that generally aligns well with their areas of expertise (for example, a cats-only group probably shouldn't take on a municipal dog shelter as a mentee unless they are willing to bring on supplemental assistance).
- Do we have our own house in order? Every group has unique operating needs and philosophies, but there are well-accepted industry best practices that mentor groups must have in place themselves before they try to help others. Before taking on a mentee, it is vital to perform a comprehensive self-assessment. There are several useful tools for this purpose, including those listed at [animalsheltering.org/assess](https://animalsheltering.org/assess). At a minimum, every mentor group needs to be enrolled in [Shelter Animals Count](#) and the [Million Cat Challenge](#) and practice open, conversation-based adoptions (ideally implementing [Adopters Welcome](#)). And every prospective mentor group should utilize the ASPCA's [Shelter Care Checklists: Putting ASV Guidelines into Action](#) to ensure they themselves are meeting the highest standards of animal care in their day-to-day operations.





Of course, mentor groups can never be expected to provide for their mentees at the expense of animals in their own facilities and/or communities. However, they will be expected to devote considerable time and resources to supporting and elevating their Shelter Ally over a long period of time. What that investment looks like will vary greatly, depending on the needs of the mentee shelter. Some groups may need primarily advice, guidance and a shoulder to lean on, while others may need more tangible resources like vaccines, handling equipment and animal care items. Some will already be well-versed in humane sheltering and best practices, while others will need help with basics like sanitation and intake practices. Mentor groups will need to be flexible, work to understand the needs and abilities of their mentee shelter and establish and execute a plan for moving forward.

### Which groups are good candidates for mentorship?

While most groups are happy to accept offers of resources, transport support, etc., not every

organization is a good candidate for mentorship. To truly embrace the opportunity participation in the Shelter Ally Project provides, groups must be willing to accept the recommendations for change and implement mentor group suggestions. Honest and forthright initial conversations must be had in order to determine the prospective mentee's openness to change.

This is not to say that every group must be 100% ready to change every existing policy before becoming a mentee. After all, even the most progressive groups had a journey by which they embraced change, and even current best practices were likely initially resisted. The key in selecting a mentee group is their openness to potential change, and their willingness to have dialogue and conversation around ideas that currently seem foreign to them. For example, a group that insists its transfer partners use strict adoption screening and provide them the opportunity to reject placements may evidence a group that is unlikely to recognize the value of open adoptions any time soon. By contrast, a group that currently uses strict adopter screening but is willing



to dialog about why their transfer partner uses conversation-based adoptions is potentially open to change once they see the benefits of that approach.

In a nutshell, **the most important ingredient for success as a mentee group is leadership that is committed to change.** There is no animal welfare group that has unlimited resources—even groups with the largest operating budgets, newest facilities and most robust fundraising teams still work hard for every dollar and must spend their resources wisely. Being selected as a mentee by another group should be viewed as an honor, as the mentoring group has chosen to voluntarily share their valuable resources—including their time and professional expertise—with the mentee. As such, it is important that mentees enter this relationship with a commitment to being open to change and accepting advice even when it seems contrary to current practices or experience. A mentee must be open to hearing their mentor group's experience, trusting their recommendations and adjusting policies accordingly. If a group's desire is to simply continue doing what they have always done but have someone temporarily relieve some of the burden, they don't need a mentor—they need a basic transport partner.

To ensure success, it is vital that, before entering into an official Shelter Ally relationship, both groups are clear as to the goals and expectations of the partnership. The mentee should know—and agree—that their mentor's goal is to support them beyond simply providing

transport, and that to achieve that goal they will be asked to provide data, participate in trainings, consider operational and policy changes and more. By the same token, mentor groups must be transparent about the types of assistance they will and won't provide; for example, mentor groups should be clear about whether they will supplement staffing, underwrite structural improvements or provide equipment or other assistance. While an informal discussion may be easiest, groups should consider entering into a formal agreement to ensure that unmet expectations do not derail the sister shelter relationship.

### Creating a plan of attack

So, you've established your Shelter Ally partnership and you're ready to jump in—where do you start? Transport is the obvious first step; after all, it's a proven way to relieve the burden of overcrowding. But a true partnership is designed to provide more than temporary relief to the mentee shelters; it is intended to give them strategies for reducing their population to the point that transport is unnecessary because they are operating

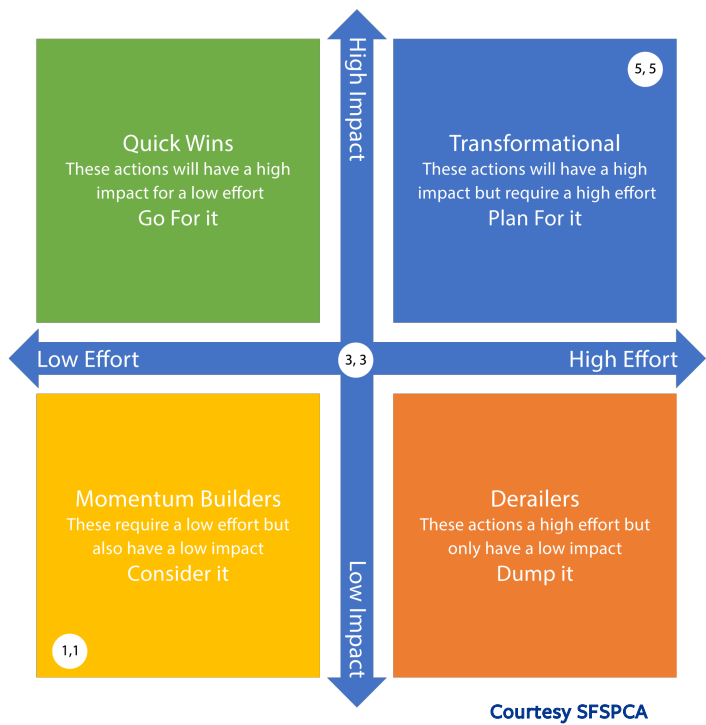
We often say, “change is hard” and use that as an excuse to drag our feet and resist. But as Chip and Dan Heath, authors of the book *Switch* point out, some change is actually easy—marriage, for example, or welcoming a new baby. When the change is something we want, we can embrace it! It's about our attitude and approach. Change in our approach to animal sheltering/rescue is no different.





within their humane capacity for care and meeting all the pressing needs of their community.

To dive deeper into the roots of their challenges, a visit to the mentee shelter is necessary, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the facility, the community and the challenges before them. A checklist of items to consider during the initial visit is attached (note: groups shouldn't necessarily fill this out during their visit, since that might change the tone of the visit from a "get to know you" meeting to a formal inspection but should consult it for guidance to help identify potential areas for assistance). It's possible that there are just a handful of tweaks that would put the mentee on the road to success, in which case your plan of attack is clear. But what if it feels like they need help with everything?



The San Francisco SPCA was confronted with just that challenge when they took on their first mentee. To determine where to begin, they created a model approach other mentor groups would be wise to follow. Using a modified traditional decision matrix model (see above), they examined each need and potential solution and categorized them according to their potential level of impact and effort required for success. For example,

they determined that their mentee group could better combat disease simply by implementing better vaccination and sanitation practices—that fit into the “high impact, low effort” corner of the matrix, so it became one of the first priorities for assistance. But things like implementing a Return to Field program for community cats, which would certainly have high lifesaving impact but required modification of a local ordinance (extremely high effort), fit into the “plan for it, but don’t tackle immediately” category.

Using this matrix to organize your mentee group’s needs will allow you to segment and prioritize your to-do list, allowing you to concentrate your efforts first on those items that will achieve quick wins, helping to generate enthusiasm for the partnership and cement your relationship for the more difficult challenges ahead.



When things go wrong

Initial screening of a mentee group is essential to determining whether they are truly eager to accept the





opportunity to make organization-wide transformational change, or whether they are simply looking for a partner focused on a single point of assistance, like transport. But even with the best intentions, relationships can go awry—groups can hit a wall of resistance, or management can change and undo the progress that had been made. In such cases, mentor groups must decide whether to continue pushing for improvements or accept that they have reached their current ability to help and consider moving on to another group that is more eager for support.

### Changing hearts and minds

Embarking on becoming a Shelter Ally is working toward finding homes for all adoptable pets nationwide. Every mentor/mentee relationship is unique with its own set of victories and challenges. The key is to provide support and a structured plan for creating sustainable programs for communities and pets. With the incredible advancements being made in our field, it is hard to imagine that any animal shelter could be completely left behind, but that is exactly what has happened in many locations. The Shelter Ally Project aims to address the pets and the staff caring for them in these pockets of

population disparity with a nonjudgmental but firm approach.

It is important to keep in mind that solutions will likely require a multi-prong approach. While staff training and improved protocols may seem like obvious solutions to many sheltering issues, lack of community support—and therefore, resources—can prohibit forward movement. We must work together to change hearts and minds on the value that animal shelters provide for all animals in the community.





# Resources

## Animal Care Expo

The world's largest international training conference and trade show for animal welfare professionals and volunteers takes place annually each spring. Visit [animalcareexpo.org](http://animalcareexpo.org) to learn more, submit a workshop proposal (early summer) and register (fall through spring) to attend!

## Animal Sheltering magazine

[Animal Sheltering](http://AnimalSheltering.org) is the only magazine that exclusively covers the people and organizations making a difference for pets in the U.S. This award-winning, quarterly publication is designed especially for shelters, rescues, animal care and control agencies and everyone involved in community animal welfare. Subscribe or renew at [animalsheltering.org/magazine](http://animalsheltering.org/magazine).

## Animalsheltering.org

[Animalsheltering.org](http://Animalsheltering.org) is your online resource for news, training, jobs and more! Read articles from *Animal*

*Sheltering* magazine, check out blogs from experts in the field and access a host of tools and strategies for your lifesaving work, including implementing best practices, managing cat populations, reaching underserved communities and saving more lives.

## The Scoop!

Stay up-to-date with the latest happenings in our field and receive special discounts for Animal Care Expo by signing up to receive our bimonthly e-newsletter, [The Scoop!](http://TheScoop.org)

## Additional resources

For resources listed by topic area from the Humane Society of the United States and other expert sources, please visit [animalsheltering.org/resource-list](http://animalsheltering.org/resource-list).





## PHOTO CREDITS

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# Our Promise



**We fight the big fights to end suffering for all animals.**

Together with millions of supporters, we take on puppy mills, factory farms, trophy hunts, animal testing and other cruel industries. With our affiliates, we rescue and care for thousands of animals every year through our animal rescue team's work and other hands-on animal care services.

We fight all forms of animal cruelty to achieve the vision behind our name: a humane society.  
And we can't do it without you.

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