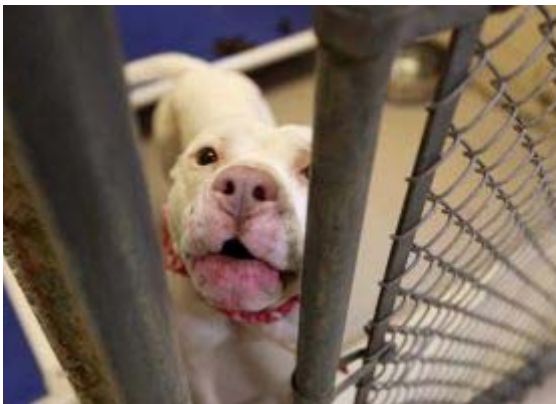


# Editorial: Kinder, gentler animal shelters

July 1, 2011



What should society do with stray pets? For a long time, the answer to this was easy. They were rounded up in shelters and, if not adopted after a short time, they were put to death.

But ideas about this are changing. In the 1990s, San Francisco adopted a no-kill policy for its shelter, a notion that has since spread to many places, including some on [Long Island](#). In such facilities, animals are only killed if they're too sick or ferocious to find a home.

As awareness of animal rights has grown, the no-kill idea has gathered steam. Volunteers and rescue groups here, as elsewhere, have challenged municipal shelters to stop killing adoptable dogs and cats, and to upgrade care. Even in places without no-kill policies, many shelters (such as those in New York City) are working harder to minimize euthanasia.

Yet in many Long Island communities, shelters remain dumping grounds not just for unwanted animals but for political appointees. At the same time, questions have been raised about the treatment of animals in these places.

The controversy has been brought into focus at the Town of [Hempstead](#)'s animal shelter, which is under investigation by [Nassau](#) County District Attorney Kathleen Rice. The shelter's \$7 million annual budget includes salaries of more than \$100,000 each for nine workers, many of whom have done political work on behalf of local [Republicans](#).

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Three rescue workers who were ousted by the town last year have brought a federal lawsuit claiming the shelter is abusing animals, and that when they complained, the town retaliated. Hempstead Supervisor [Kate Murray](#) has already shaken up the shelter's leadership after a 17-year-old video appeared on [YouTube](#) showing shelter workers tormenting a cat. One is heard chanting: "Kill the kitty." The town removed Pat Horan, the shelter's acting director at

the time, after she was identified as one of workers. Hempstead says it continues to search for a new shelter director.

On the other hand, some shelters on Long Island have made major reforms.

Two years ago, budget woes almost caused [Southampton](#) to close its shelter. Instead, the town paid a foundation \$200,000 to run it. Southampton's Animal Shelter and Adoption Center also works with rescue groups and volunteers, using "playgroups" to socialize dogs for adoption.

In [Brookhaven](#), Shelter Director Dori Scofield -- an ex-rescue worker -- has established the Bully Alliance to help find homes for the shelter's many Pit Bulls. The program uses private donations to pay rescue groups \$250 to place animals for adoption. The town is also designing a new animal shelter.

Southampton and Brookhaven have shown that there are better models for operating shelters, but the state must do more. Worthy legislation sponsored by Assemb. [Micah Kellner](#) (D-Manhattan) and Sen. [Joseph Robach](#) (R-Rochester) would establish shelter access rights for legitimate rescue groups, giving them notice about animals they can save from destruction. The bill would also set humane standards for shelters, including feeding, exercise and veterinary care.

Kellner says his bill will give rescue groups and volunteers protection, so they can complain about animal mistreatment without fearing ouster. The bill also raises the bar for rescue groups, letting shelters turn away those refusing inspections or led by people with a history of animal cruelty. The bill follows similar laws in [California](#) and [Delaware](#).

As the Hempstead dispute reminds us, the state needs to set standards for animal shelters and the rescue groups that work with them. But reform in Hempstead need not wait. There are lessons for Hempstead to be learned from Brookhaven and Southampton, where shelters work with rescue groups and volunteers to train animals for adoption while saving money too. hN

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