

Oregon Shelter Makes A Big Change For Small Mammals

By converting one of its supply closets into a small-mammal adoption room, the Oregon Humane Society created a less stressful environment for smaller pets and attracted new potential adopters.

By Debra Firmani

Rabbits and rodents have it pretty nice at the Oregon Humane Society (OHS). But they haven't always been so lucky. Not too long ago, these animals were housed in makeshift caging in a drafty area amidst the chaos of barking dogs. Not only was this housing arrangement stressful for the small animals, but the animals "looked like an afterthought," recalls Carol Shively, director of education for OHS. "That troubled us. We are here to shelter *all* domestic animals." So OHS decided to change the way it housed small mammals such as rabbits, hamsters, mice, rats, guinea pigs, and gerbils.

Because OHS has long-range plans to build a new facility, adding onto the current facility wasn't feasible. So Shively formed a committee to find another solution. The group came up with an ingenious answer: OHS could convert its supply closet into a small-mammal housing and adoption room.

Shively and her committee discussed their plan with board members and staff, overcoming some initial skepticism by explaining how the conversion would work. After getting the executive director's full support and securing a \$2,000 donation from a local pet-supply "superstore," the committee began turning its dream into reality.

From Coats to Cages

The self-contained, 10-foot by 12-foot closet had potential but was in

Debra Firmani is a freelance writer living in Germantown, Maryland.



Small mammals now get the housing accommodations they deserve at the Oregon Humane Society (OHS).

terrible shape. The room needed ventilation, lighting, new caging, and some remodeling. And the supplies and coats originally kept in the closet had to be moved elsewhere.

After OHS bought a shed to replace the lost storage, and created a place for staff to hang their coats, staff and volunteers set to work on

transforming the supply closet. They installed a new door with a window, painted the room, put in donated cage-shelving, set up new cages, and arranged the tiny room to allow for easy access and cleaning. A ventilation system was also installed to solve the small room's air-circulation problem. As finishing touches, staff



OHS staff and volunteers swept, scraped, and painted their way to a new small-mammal adoption room.

With a new room, new caging, and new educational materials, OHS is making sure the small mammals they house get the care and exposure they deserve.



AFTER

put up an accent of wallpaper and added a throw rug, plants, and even a bench for people to sit on with their prospective pets. They also created new signs for the former closet: One reads, "Welcome Everybunny" and another identifies the space as "The Rabbit and Rodent Room."

Getting the Word Out

In September 1995, to inaugurate its new rabbit and rodent room, OHS invited the public and press to a special open house. Staff made sure its theme event got the attention it deserved: A person masquerading in a bunny suit entertained guests as they enjoyed carrot cake, apple cider, and papaya pellets (a cure for bunny hair-blocks as well as human stomach ailments). Shively's own talented, white albino rat even garnered a little publicity of his own by stealing a reporter's heart.

Because the public generally sees animal shelters as a source for dogs and cats only, OHS knew it had to work extra hard to promote its small mammals. To get more people to visit the new small-mammal adoption ward, OHS used print ads as well as radio and TV spots featuring small mammals as "Pets of the Week."

Although the publicity has helped more small mammals get adopted, it has also turned out to be a double-edged sword, says Laurie Radmacher, an OHS employee who helped plan the new room. As more people learn that the shelter handles small mammals, OHS's *intake* of small mammals has increased. Still, Radmacher and other staff know that surrenders are preferable to the fates these unwanted animals might otherwise suffer.

Adopting Off Site

In addition to bringing more people *into* the shelter, OHS has also initiated adoption outreach programs with pet-supply "superstores," in which shelter animals are put up for adoption at these off-site locations. OHS staff acknowledge that this program is labor-intensive, but consider the exposure it provides for the animals and the shelter well worth the effort. "Every time we take out rabbits and rodents, they get adopted," says OHS volunteer Mary Huey.

OHS trains store personnel and OHS volunteers to conduct all adoptions according to the shelter's adoption policies, waiting periods, and fees. Staff and volunteers are also trained in basic animal care and handling.

Through these cooperative efforts, not only does the shelter get to adopt out many animals it could not otherwise place, but the animals, by virtue of their venue, go home with a great set-up. Because adopters purchase cages and supplies for their new companion animals, the pet-supply stores have an added, financial incentive to cooperate in these off-site adoption programs. "We've seen receipts for over \$100 for supplies," says Huey, "so we're all winning."

Meeting Their Needs

As with any responsible adoption program, OHS takes steps to educate and counsel potential adopters about small mammals. For example, staff left space in the small-mammal room for a display rack filled with educational materials to help people make an informed choice. Brochures about rabbits, mice, rats, guinea pigs, gerbils, and hamsters discuss the an-

imals' specific needs, suitability as pets for children, set-up needs and costs, on-going costs, time required for care and socialization, and average life spans.

OHS educates the public about small mammals outside the shelter, too. For example, OHS presented an education program on small mammals in conjunction with the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry. It also sponsors an annual summer camp program, "Shelter Friends," which includes programs for kids of varying age groups that include talks by animal-care experts and lessons in grooming, bathing, and exercising the animals.

These programs have helped OHS transform itself from an organization that focused almost exclusively on dogs and cats to one that also meets the needs of other homeless companion animals. By creating a special room for small mammals and educating the public, OHS is helping these often-overlooked companion animals live better both inside the shelter and out. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

■ To receive a packet of small-mammal care brochures and adoption guidelines, and to learn more about OHS's small-mammal adoption ward, contact the Oregon Humane Society, Education Department, P.O. Box 11364, 1067 NE Columbia Blvd., Portland, OR 97211; phone: 503-285-7722, ext. 206.

■ To receive a copy of the *Shelter Sense* article "Rabbits in the Shelter: Meeting Their Special Needs" (October 1994), contact *Animal Sheltering* magazine.