

Let's See Some ID

Accurate identification in shelters remains a crucial, overlooked task

BY JAMES HETTINGER



You might think you could never forget these faces, but formal methods of identifying and tracking animals can help shelters avoid mistakes.

When it comes to identifying incoming animals and tracking them within shelters, there are plenty of examples of what *not* to do.

Take a Midwestern shelter evaluated a few years ago by a team from The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS).

Using a method of identification that stunned the evaluators, the shelter took numbered paper tags and glued them to dogs' backs—using toxic glue normally reserved for cattle at auction. Dogs—especially puppies—routinely chewed off each other's tags, creating a real possibility of poisoning. Carolyn Machowski, manager for The HSUS's Shelter Services department, recalls that when an owner reclaimed a dog, shelter staff would rip off the tag like a Band-Aid, leaving the

dog with a big patch of itchy, glued-together fur to drive him crazy.

"We were astounded by that method of identification. That is pretty unusual," Machowski concedes. The shelter's defense was that the tags didn't come off easily—which was true, Machowski adds, but staff members apparently failed to see the method's dangers.

One Cat, Two Cat, Black Cat, Black Cat

For shelter staff, keeping track of animals is a bedrock responsibility: If you mistake one animal for another, you might adopt out the wrong cat, administer an improper medication, fail to keep a dog for the required holding period, or, worst of all, euthanize a misidentified pet.

And yet, proper identification is a task that many shelters neglect, according to

Machowski, who has evaluated shelters around the country for The HSUS.

At smaller facilities, where the animal populations are relatively small and stable, staff members often develop a false sense of security, thinking that they know all their animals by sight and couldn't possibly make a mistake in identifying them, Machowski says. But that notion can be shattered if three black cats with no identification on them get moved from their cages during cleaning, for example, or spend part of the day together in an exercise or meet-and-greet room. At some point a new black cat might join the others in a group setting, and the staffers who thought they knew which black cat was which suddenly discover they don't, Machowski says.

Some larger shelters, she asserts, have simply gotten lazy about identifying



JAMES HETTINGER/THE HSUS

If shelter staff members stop seeing the animals in their care as individuals, it's time for them to find a new profession, says Linda Shea, a humane educator for Frederick County Animal Control in Maryland.



JAMES HETTINGER/THE HSUS

At Frederick County Animal Control, adult cats who can be handled get a tag around their necks upon intake, while kittens aren't collared until they reach an adoptable age and appropriate weight.

and tracking animals. Many shelters, for example, don't have a written intake procedure, or they fail to realize that ID numbers should be assigned at intake—not three or five days later.

Another problem, Machowski says, is that some shelters rely solely on cage cards or cage numbers for identification, arguing that ID bands can be removed.

Cage cards are designed to follow an animal who gets moved to a different cage, but that doesn't always happen, she notes. And cage numbers become obsolete as identifiers when an animal moves, for example, from the stray holding area to the adoption area.

The HSUS recommends that all dogs and cats be fitted upon intake with an ID collar—which Machowski says could be as simple as an inexpensive paper collar with sticky tape. The best IDs she's seen are the more expensive, clip-on bands made by Hollister Inc., which go around an animal's neck, are waterproof, and usually include the date of arrival plus the ID number. The bands should be attached before the animal is placed in a cage.

Identification issues aren't difficult to address, Machowski says: Shelters essentially need a procedure that assigns each incoming animal an ID number, records it in a database, and physically attaches that number to the animal, making it possible to track the pet's medical care, movements throughout the shelter, and final disposition. "Correctly identifying and tracking animals within a shelter is not terribly complicated or difficult," Machowski says, "but it is a procedure that is very often overlooked."

Getting It First, Getting It Right

Correctly identifying animals in a shelter is partly a matter of common sense, but it also requires staff to pay attention to the details—starting at the moment an animal comes through the door, says Linda Shea, humane educator for Frederick County Animal Control in Maryland.

Dogs and adult cats who can be handled get a tag around their necks, fastened with a piece of tape and marked with a permanent marker. Small kittens aren't collared until they reach an adoptable age and appropriate weight. Collars can pose a danger to cats who weigh less than 2 pounds, Shea says, noting that if the collar isn't sized correctly, it can get caught in their mouth or trap their paws. For dogs who already have a collar, the staff attaches the temporary tag to the collar.

When someone surrenders an animal, it's crucial to get as much information as possible. "What we try to instill in our staff is that this may be the only interaction—when that person comes through the door, at this moment, when we're interviewing and getting information," Shea says. "We may never see [them] again. We may never be able to contact [them]."

The staff asks people surrendering pets for some identification, preferably a photo ID like a driver's license. The shelter may need to contact the person if the animal has a zoonotic disease like rabies, becomes aggressive, or ends up being the subject of a cruelty or neglect case, Shea explains.

Some people don't want to admit that they're abandoning their pet, so they withhold information about the animal and are reluctant to identify themselves, claiming that they have no driver's license and walked to the shelter. It can be disheartening to deal with such individuals, Shea says, but staff members need to remember that they're working for the animals, so "for the animals' sake, we need to collect as much information as we can."

Staff enter information from the intake ticket into the shelter's computer system—covering such topics as breed, gender, where the animal was found, or who brought it in—and also look for in-

juries, marks, and signs that the animal is underweight, Shea explains.

The key at this stage of the process is to get the best identification possible, taking care to get the breed and color correct and to note if the animal's got three legs or a spot on its ear, adds Mark Townend, CEO of the RSPCA in Queensland, Australia. "Don't make up the colors" or use slang names, and don't simply call a dog a "black Labrador" if there are other details worth noting, he says.

Machowski notes that animal control officers often bring animals into shelters and fill out the intake forms, but are frequently not well-trained in identifying breeds and genders. Better training, she suggests, could help reduce the number of dogs identified simply as "mixed Lab" or "mixed shepherd."

At Shea's shelter, a chart near the intake desk helps staff identify cat colors. But even if the intake staff is literate in identifying animal breeds, sexes, and colors, the shelter should encourage people who call looking for lost pets to come into the shelter to look around. The staff's description of a pet might not match the owner's. "People still don't know that tabby is a pattern, not a color," Shea says, and the differences between Siamese and Himalayan cats are not widely understood.

Shelters owe it to the animals and their owners to identify animals carefully, Shea says. The process involves "common sense, definitely, but you have to be detail-oriented. I think that's part of sheltering. I think at the point when you don't see every animal as an individual, it's time to change professions. You have to see that uniqueness, and it's important that they're all tracked independently and individually, and accurately."

Success in Bluegrass Country

At the Kentucky Humane Society in Louisville, "We have this part of the operation down pat," says shelter manager Susan McKellep.

First, each incoming animal is scanned to see if it has a microchip. "If it does, that's a great, unique identifier" that could help the shelter find a lost animal's owner, she says.



Cage cards should be posted as soon as animals enter the kennel and should follow the animals if they move to new cages.

All animals—whether they're strays, owner surrenders, or transfers from other shelters—are recorded in the shelter software, which assigns each a unique identification number. The number is written in permanent marker on the waterproof plastic neckband that staff attach to each animal, McKellep says; the bands are tight enough that animals can't remove them on their own. The ID number is also placed on the cage card and all the paperwork related to the animal. Staffers photograph each animal upon intake and add the photos to the electronic file. Photos can also be posted on the shelter's online adoption board.

McKellep says the neckbands quickly tell staff who's who if confusion should arise—for instance, if two volunteers take similar-looking dogs out for walks and forget which cages they came from, or if the shelter is housing two black Labradors named Lulu.

The only ID issue McKellep could recall at Kentucky Humane was when the shelter received 10 black Labrador puppies who managed to chew each other's neckbands off. Luckily, they had all been microchipped, so staff scanned them, looked them up in the database, and wrote their ID numbers on inexpensive canvas collars the dogs couldn't chew off. "That was challenging—10 puppies that look just alike,"

McKellep says. "Thank goodness they were microchipped."

The shelter does a temperament and health assessment within 24 hours of an animal's arrival to see if he meets the criteria for adoption. Pets deemed adoptable are spayed or neutered, generally within three days of arrival, and they're microchipped while under anesthesia for the surgery, McKellep explains. (Previously altered pets are also microchipped before adoption, but without anesthesia.)

McKellep notes with wonder that until a few years ago, Kentucky Humane's system wasn't even computerized. "I wasn't here then, but I can't imagine keeping up with thousands of animals on paper." Now, she adds, that shelter's software is web-based, enabling staff to go elsewhere and access records in the event of a power outage, fire, or flood.

Shelters whose ID methods are lacking will find that the problem "comes to the front very quickly," McKellep says. After a few mistakes—like adopting out the wrong pet because the cage cards were mixed up—a shelter will realize it needs to improve its process. At Kentucky Humane, she says, "We have so many animals—we did 6,018 adoptions last year—we have to be really organized on the front end, or it can just be a disaster all the way through." AS