

2014

Best Friends National Conference

Playbook



No-Kill Community:

What Worked, What Didn't,
What's Next

Rockwall County, Texas



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This playbook is one in a series meant to be used as guides as you explore how you can save more lives in your community. Getting to no-kill isn't a one-size-fits-all proposition. Each community is unique, with its own challenges and resources, so the playbooks highlight a variety of communities and detail the various ways that leaders in those communities progressed to no-kill or have their communities firmly on that path. Of course, there are some common denominators: Collaboration, commitment, hard work and data-driven approaches to problem-solving are some of the factors that have taken these communities to lifesaving levels once believed to be unreachable. We hope that you will find the information in the playbooks helpful and inspirational as your community works to **Save Them All®**.

Key participant in helping the community to become no-kill: Rockwall Pets

Some keys to Rockwall Pets' success:

- Conducting a comprehensive marketing campaign to let the public know that animals are available for adoption
- Developing a retail approach to adoption, to make adopting as appealing as possible
- "Minding the gap" in order to keep the lifesaving going
- Maintaining a professional and focused approach



Introduction

The road to making Rockwall County, Texas, a no-kill community began back in 2010 when Michael and Pam Kitkoski started volunteering at the city shelter in Rockwall. They soon realized the shelter was killing many more animals than it saved. In 2010, the shelter took in 1,745 animals and had only 250 adoptions by June of that year. To Michael and Pam, those grim numbers were simply unacceptable so they decided to make it their own mission to get more shelter animals adopted. They offered to begin weekly off-site adoptions at the local Petco store and the shelter agreed.

At the same time, Michael and Pam began a marketing effort for the shelter that included launching a website dedicated to adoption (rockwallpets.com) and posting profiles of adoptable animals on social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter. It wasn't long before the marketing effort took off. Michael began taking all the photographs of the shelter's pets and handling all online posts on Petfinder and Adopt-a-Pet. They used every marketing angle they could. They had Pets of the Week featured in three area newspapers and posted photos and information about the shelter's pets in three local restaurants.

The off-site adoption program began growing, too, and they began taking pets to fairs, festivals and farmers' markets in the area. It wasn't long before these efforts generated invitations from other groups. Soon, they were holding a half-dozen off-site adoption events every weekend. Michael and Pam started Rockwall Pets, a nonprofit no-kill advocacy group, and began recruiting other volunteers. They came up with some creative adoption promotions to showcase the shelter's pets, including Tail Gate Party adoptions, Find a Friend adoptions, Shelter Pets with Santa and others.

The shelter's management didn't share Rockwall Pets' no-kill mission, holding on to the belief that it was impossible for an open-admission municipal shelter in Texas to become no-kill. Once Austin did it, though, that excuse was no longer valid. But the Rockwall shelter clung to that view even after Rockwall Pets had increased the shelter's save rate from 52 percent to 72 percent in just eight months. When the shelter continued to kill healthy and treatable pets even after the save rate kept increasing, Michael and Pam decided to take personal responsibility for the pets in the shelter. Michael asked the shelter's management to stop the killing for one month and told them that he alone would be responsible for making sure pets in the shelter were adopted. That month — April 2011 — the shelter's save rate skyrocketed to 86 percent, up from 64 percent the previous month.

In August 2011, impressed by the lifesaving work that Rockwall Pets had been doing, the Rockwall City Council voted to set a minimum goal of a 90 percent save rate at the shelter. Rockwall Pets helped the shelter surpass that. By 2012, the shelter had a 97 percent save rate and in 2013, a 96 percent save rate. The Rockwall city shelter had officially become a no-kill shelter. Rockwall Pets had accomplished its goals for the shelter and the city eventu-

ally privatized the shelter. The Rockwall shelter is now managed by the Collin County Humane Society, which carries on Rockwall Pets' no-kill mission.

With that accomplished, Rockwall Pets transitioned into a rescue group so it could focus on saving pets in the city-run Royse City shelter, another shelter located in Rockwall County. The Royse City shelter, which had a budget so minuscule it only had one employee and no computers, wasn't keeping statistics, but it's estimated that about 90 percent of the animals who came through its doors were killed. With Rockwall Pets' help, by 2014, the shelter's save rate climbed to 98 percent, making it a no-kill shelter.

To sum up, Rockwall Pets, an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization that relies on donations to pay for its lifesaving programs, managed to make two municipal shelters in Rockwall County, Texas, no-kill in a short amount of time.



Michael Kitkoski

About the Rockwall Pets founders

Michael and Pam Kitkoski live in Rockwall with their dogs, Lily and Petunia, and their cat, Mr. K., all rescued from shelters. Michael, a video producer, and Pam, a retired advertising executive who now works part-time for the Rockwall County Elections Department, have always been active in the communities they've lived in. Through their work with Rockwall Pets, they proved that any shelter can become no-kill if enough people are willing to work hard and put lifesaving programs in place.

Rockwall Pets continues to operate, primarily as a no-kill rescue group. In August 2014, Rockwall Pets seated a completely new board of directors and voted in a new executive director, all of whom are carrying on the no-kill mission. This freed up Michael and Pam to start No Kill Solutions, a consulting and advocacy group that responds to requests from other shelters asking for advice about going no-kill.

They soon began three additional no-kill campaigns in separate Dallas-area communities. In the spring of 2012, Michael and Pam joined forces with Dr. Ellen Jefferson of Austin Pets Alive, Ryan Clinton of FixAustin and others to found Dallas Pets Alive, a volunteer organization with the mission to provide the resources, education and programs needed to eliminate the killing of companion animals in Dallas. In 2011, Michael received the Henry Bergh Leadership Award from the No Kill Advocacy Center.

Michael says there are hundreds of rescue groups in their area, and he believes there's a great thirst for information about no-kill. Michael says, "No Kill Solutions is our 'solution' for quenching that thirst and for taking us another step forward toward the day when we Save Them All."



Extensive marketing effort

The reason Michael and Pam started rockwallpets.com back in June 2010 was to put the spotlight on the Rockwall shelter's adoptable pets. The shelter's own Web page was like a lot of municipal sites, listing the city's animal ordinances and pet registration requirements and little else. The adoptable pets were almost an afterthought at the bottom of the page.

Realizing that this wasn't the best way to get pets adopted, Michael and Pam acquired the shelter's permission to begin an extensive marketing effort to get the shelter animals' photos and bios out to the community and to potential adopters. Through this marketing campaign, Rockwall Pets blanketed the area with the message that when people were ready to get a pet, they could come to the shelter or an off-site adoption event instead of going to a pet store or the backyard breeder down the street.

Rockwall Pets' marketing efforts clearly worked because people were driving from places up to three hours away to adopt Rockwall pets. The shelter's director asked Michael why people would drive three hours to Rockwall to adopt a pet when they could adopt from their own local shelter. Michael replied, "That's what marketing is all about. They were looking for a dog and saw one online and fell in love." He says people respond to effective marketing.

WHAT WORKED

- **Launching a new website dedicated to showcasing the shelter's pets:** Michael and Pam launched rockwallpets.com, a website focused solely on adoptable pets in the Rockwall shelter. The website includes an eye-catching logo that says, "Rockwall Pets Rock."
- **Posting profiles of shelter pets on popular adoption websites:** The shelter agreed to give Rockwall Pets the responsibility for including pet profiles on Petfinder.com and Adopt-a-Pet.com. Michael and Pam considered every listing to be a small advertisement, so they made sure the profiles were the best they could be.
- **Using every available marketing opportunity:** Rockwall Pets put a "Pet of the Week" profile in three area newspapers and a "Pet of the Month" profile on two local websites, and posted photos and information about the shelter's adoptable pets in three local restaurants.
- **Using social media:** Rockwall Pets began posting photos and information about the shelter's pets on Facebook and Twitter.
- **Taking pets out into the community:** Rockwall Pets started holding off-site adoption events at the local Petco store and took adoptable shelter pets to fairs, festivals and farmers' markets in the area. Soon, Rockwall Pets was holding a half-dozen off-site adoption events in different locations every weekend. It was impossible for people to avoid seeing their pets, Michael says. Even if people weren't in the market to adopt at the time, they knew where to find just the pet for them when they did decide to adopt.

- **Marketing the shelter:** Taking pets out into the community gave Rockwall Pets an opportunity to tell people about all the wonderful adoptable animals at the shelter.
- **Campaigning to get the shelter a mobile adoption unit:** At first, Rockwall Pets used an animal control vehicle to transport shelter pets to off-site adoption events. To get a more suitable vehicle, Rockwall Pets decided to ask local businesses to sponsor a mobile adoption unit. Rockwall Pets showed the businesses what the unit would look like with their businesses' logos on it. The effort was successful and Rockwall Pets soon had a much nicer mobile adoption trailer to transport animals to off-site adoption events.

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- **Not making enough of a distinction between the shelter and Rockwall Pets:** Rockwall Pets' marketing efforts were so successful that the community viewed the shelter and Rockwall Pets as one entity. People would often donate to the shelter instead of to Rockwall Pets.



Retail approach to pet adoptions

When Rockwall Pets first started doing weekly off-site adoptions at the local Petco store, a retail environment, it was an eye-opening experience. To increase the number of pets who found homes, Rockwall Pets developed its own retail approach to adoptions.

WHAT WORKED

- **Creating a pleasing environment:** Rockwall Pets made sure its display areas looked pleasing and inviting.
- **Providing good customer service:** Rockwall Pets strived to provide superior customer service and continued to provide services after the adoptions, such as providing advice to adopters on how to help anxious pets settle in their new homes and helping adopters solve behavior problems.
- **Running reduced-fee adoption promotions:** After reading all the studies about fee-reduced adoptions and seeing what Petco did to help move their merchandise, Rockwall Pets encouraged the shelter to do the same with regard to the shelter's harder-to-adopt pets. However, the city didn't want to reduce adoption fees because the money didn't go directly to the shelter; it went into the city's general fund, which in turn provided funding to the shelter. So, Rockwall Pets raised the money to subsidize reduced-fee adoptions. When Rockwall Pets held a fee-reduced adoption promotion, it would make up the difference by writing the city a check at the end of the month so the shelter didn't lose a penny in adoption fees.
- **Using some creative retail tricks:** Michael says Rockwall Pets found homes for a lot of difficult-to-adopt dogs and cats by "thinking like a retailer." For example, the shelter always had a "wild" dog or two available for adoption, dogs who would be jumping up and down and acting a little crazy when confined in the kennel area. Rockwall Pets had a volunteer who couldn't move around very well, so they asked her to sit in the shelter's lobby with one of the "wild" dogs. The first thing people saw when they entered the shelter was a dog playing with the volunteer and licking her on the face. More often than not, that interaction ensured that the dog would be in a new home by the end of the day.
- **Getting people to fall in love with a pet:** Lots of potential adopters won't go to a shelter because they find the facilities too depressing. That's one reason Rockwall Pets loves off-site adoptions. "People are much more relaxed and open to falling in love," Michael says. And when people did visit the shelter, Rockwall Pets volunteers used every trick in the book to get them to fall in love with a pet. And if they didn't fall in love, the volunteers made sure people left with cards and other information to encourage them to keep looking at Rockwall Pets' online listings.

- **Having volunteers who engaged with potential adopters:** At adoption events, Rockwall Pets wanted volunteers who greet each potential adopter with a leashed dog alongside and greet each family member who wants to see a cat. Michael says pets are often masters at selling themselves, but they need to be given the opportunity to do so.
- **Marketing shelter pets who weren't at the off-site events:** Rockwall Pets always had photos, cards, videos and other giveaways that featured pets back at the shelter.
- **Evaluating off-site adoption locations:** Like any business, Rockwall Pets is always evaluating each of its off-site adoption locations. Rockwall Pets wants as many adoptions as it can get, which means trying new locations, not being afraid to jettison under-performing locations and doing what's most effective in finding homes for shelter pets.

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- **Having volunteers who aren't proactive in getting pets adopted:** Rockwall Pets didn't want volunteers who sat behind a table and visited with each other while the adoption event was going on.

WHAT'S NEXT

- **Increasing market share:** Rockwall Pets believes in encouraging and promoting the adoption of shelter pets in order to capture more market share. That alone will go a long way toward stopping the killing in shelters and putting puppy mills and backyard breeders out of business.



“Minding the gap”

Rockwall Pets’ philosophy is to try to fill any gap it discovers. When pets in the shelter were in need of medical care, Rockwall Pets raised funds to start a revolving account with a local veterinarian and told the shelter to take any ill or injured pet to the veterinarian for treatment – no questions asked – at Rockwall Pets’ expense. When Rockwall Pets decided that special promotions (such as reduced-fee adoptions) would increase the adoption rate, it took care of the bill. When the shelter wouldn’t expand the facility’s hours to make it easier for working families to adopt, Rockwall Pets offered volunteer labor to open the shelter one night a week, and keep it open later on Saturdays and Sundays. When kennels weren’t cleaned regularly or litter boxes were overflowing, Rockwall Pets volunteers didn’t complain; they just made sure everything was cleaned. In other words, when Rockwall Pets spotted a gap, it did everything it could to make sure it was filled as efficiently and as promptly as possible.

Rockwall Pets held on to that philosophy when it transitioned into an independent rescue group. When the group rescued its first dog with parvo, it started a parvo ward. When Rockwall Pets rescued some animals with ringworm, Michael and Pam turned one of their bathrooms into a ringworm ward.

Margo Nielsen, a founding member of Rockwall Pets’ board of directors and the executive director of Helping Hands, the largest nonprofit organization in Rockwall, gave Michael and Pam some good advice. She told them, “Have faith and the money will follow.” She convinced Michael and Pam that if they believed strongly enough in what they were doing, success would always follow.

WHAT WORKED

- **Running the shelter with dedicated volunteers:** Shelter visitors remarked that they thought the shelter was cleaner and more pleasant when it was staffed by Rockwall Pets volunteers. On volunteer-only days, Rockwall Pets had a rule that every kennel be inspected and cleaned, if necessary, every 15 minutes. It was healthier for the pets and more pleasant for the visitors. Rockwall Pets had a dog-walking list to make sure every dog in the facility went out for some exercise with a volunteer.
- **Earning the community’s support:** Whenever Rockwall Pets told the community what it was doing to mind the gap, whether it was scrambling to save a life or offering reduced-fee adoptions to get more pets into homes, members of the community responded with generous donations.

WHAT DIDN’T WORK

- **Expecting support from shelter staff:** Michael says the shelter’s staff felt Rockwall Pets was undermining their control-oriented approach.

WHAT'S NEXT

- **Continuing to mind the gap:** Rockwall Pets continues to mind the gap each and every day. Rockwall Pets believes that as long as healthy and treatable pets continue to die in shelters, each day should start with a sense of urgency. Every gap filled means more lives are saved.



Professional, focused, committed approach

Michael says maintaining a professional attitude can be difficult because animal welfare is such an emotional field of endeavor. However, he truly believes that one of the keys to Rockwall Pets' success is its professionalism. Rockwall Pets instituted a "no drama" rule long ago. With all the emotional ups and downs, taking a level-headed, professional approach works best for everyone involved, including city council members and other government workers.

Rockwall Pets also found that maintaining a professional attitude helps the organization stay focused on its goals and mission. Michael says that taking a professional and focused approach ensures that Rockwall Pets moves closer to its goals every day.

WHAT WORKED

- **Treating people with respect:** Rockwall Pets always treats others involved in lifesaving as partners, including staff at retail locations where off-site adoptions take place, veterinary staff, media contacts and, most important of all, adopters, potential adopters and donors.
- **Staying focused:** Rockwall Pets has always stayed focused in its approach, and it pays off in its relationships with local government officials, retail partners, veterinary clinics and others. Even when Rockwall Pets was sometimes attacked by the rescue community or shelter staff, staying focused helped the organization weather the storm.
- **Being in it for the long haul:** After meeting many former rescuers and advocates who burned out and quit, Michael and Pam built Rockwall Pets for the long haul. Michael says that he's told everyone that long after he's dead and buried, he wants Rockwall Pets to still be doing what's best for shelter pets. In August 2014, four years after founding the organization, Michael and Pam turned over the leadership of the organization to a new board and management team who are continuing Rockwall Pets' no kill mission.

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- **Involving people who live for the drama:** These people joined Rockwall Pets and flamed out in a short period of time.

WHAT'S NEXT

- **Focusing on the end game:** Michael says he and Pam aren't going to quit until we Save Them All. That means getting more people involved, setting them up for long-term success, and working hard until they mind all the gaps.