

## SAVING HARD TO PLACE PETS

By Rich Avanzino, Maddie's Fund President

Animal shelters have always considered themselves a morally superior alternative to commercial pet sources. After all, to adopt from a shelter is to save a life, and not support puppy mills or backyard breeders

But rather than focus their marketing on lifesaving, many shelters have tried to go head to head with retailers. Their message has been "we have a huge assortment of adorable puppies, kittens and purebreds and they're all healthy, 'high quality' pets-you'll find exactly what you're looking for here" These shelters seem to fear that to say anything else would be to lose what market share they already have.

In the past, shelters could use their 'perfect pet' messaging because they had those animals 'in stock.' That's not true anymore. In many communities, puppies and small dogs are practically an endangered species. But rather than change their message or their approach to adoptions, many shelters are simply importing the cutes and cuddlies the public wants, to the detriment (often resulting in death) of treatable, overlooked and hard-to-place pets.

I think these shelters are missing the boat by abandoning their humane message and not marketing to their strength-the importance of saving lives. To me, the point should be, "every life is precious, every life is important. This dog may be large and nondescript, this cat may be sixteen years old, but we are a 'humane organization' and our job - our mission-is to save the animals in our care. Won't you help us? Let's build a humane community together"

Some organizations - many of them small, all volunteer grassroots rescue groups - are focusing on a lifesaving message. They're promoting dogs with disabilities, geriatric pets, shy cats, big, brown, nondescript canines or cats and dogs with medical and behavioral issues - and having great success! One hundred and ninety five of them entered Maddie's Marketing Competition for hard to place pets. Some of their stories are in this issue of our newsletter.

These groups are demonstrating to the bigger, better funded agencies that a significant market does exist for treatable and hard to place pets - you just have to tap into it. In fact, many pet lovers are particularly touched by the plight of disadvantaged dogs and cats and are eager to shower them with love and a new forever home.

In my opinion, all of the animal welfare organizations providing care for and finding homes for our nation's 'left behind' pets are real heroes. These are the groups that will guide us to the promised land of a no-kill nation within ten years.