

WHY MUST WE EUTHANIZE?

by Phyllis Wright

Anyone who works in or cares about animal welfare must eventually face the fact that millions of dogs and cats must be euthanized each year because there are no homes for them. No one, least of all The HSUS, is happy about this. Nevertheless, we realize it is a necessary kindness to put to sleep unwanted animals.

But some people have great difficulty accepting this. They see the kindness in euthanizing an animal that is in great pain, or terminally ill. But why must young, healthy dogs and cats be put to sleep simply because no one will take them home? Why can't they be kept at the shelter indefinitely, to live out their lives in warmth and comfort with plenty of food and good veterinary care?

Economically, this is rarely, if ever, possible. The cost of feeding and caring for millions of unwanted dogs and cats would be tremendous. Yet, that isn't the most important reason. Animals, like humans, need more than food and shelter. They need affection and companionship. Without it, they suffer.

Phyllis Wright, HSUS Director of Animal Control and Sheltering, discusses below her own feelings on euthanasia, developed over many years of dealing with the problems of unwanted animals.

We all know people who never want an animal euthanized, who insist it's best to keep the animal alive and breathing regardless of how badly the animal lives, how inadequate its care, or how impressive its loneliness. That is the worst thing we can do.

Our objective is to prevent and release animals from suffering. We know that death, humanely administered, is not an evil, but a blessing to animals that are of no comfort to themselves or to the world because they are unwanted and suffering in



Food, water and loneliness are the daily diet for too many animals.

isolation. And we are positive that it is no comfort to dogs or cats to be kept alive indefinitely in shelter cages, even if they are well fed. Companionship is one of the basic needs of dogs, cats, horses, or any animal we have domesticated.

I ran a boarding kennel in Washington, D.C., from 1954 to 1960, and I, like most people, learned things the hard way. I had two-and-a-half acres of fenced-in yard. I had decided those dogs needed exercise and, by darn, they were going to get exercise. On Sundays the front gate was padlocked and that was their day for exercise. "OK, come on Snoopy, let's go; OK, come on Tag, let's go out." Three minutes later here's everybody sitting at the fence, because Phyllis was working inside. That's where they wanted to be; they wanted to be

where Phyllis was. They didn't care about the apple orchard, the grape yard, anything. That didn't seem to mean a thing to them. They didn't run around and skitter about; they sat at the gate. Now, if I walked out there and threw sticks or balls or played with them, oh, that was fun! But companionship was what they wanted more than freedom. I'm totally convinced that companionship is the most important thing. Without companionship, what does a dog or cat have?

I remember one shelter in Dallas, Texas. A nice lady left a million-and-a-half dollars in 1927 to establish a perpetuated home for stray and lost dogs. The bank in Dallas sat on the money from 1927 to 1947. But the money was left for stray and homeless animals, not for stray and homeless bankers. So in 1947 some pressure was brought and they decided they had to do something or be in hot water. So what they did was build three-foot cages, three feet high, and put twenty-five dogs in them. And they hired a caretaker that came in every day, put the dogs outside for an hour, cleaned up inside, put the dogs back inside, gave them food and water, and went home. I had the unfortunate experience to visit this shelter a couple of years ago, with TV cameras, newspaper reporters, and a few radio station reporters.

The dogs were so insane that when you walked into the room, they started going in circles, hitting all four sides of the cage. You couldn't get your hands on those dogs. They hadn't had any companionship, not even an occasional pat on the head. Obviously, these aren't the same dogs