

Mile-High Aspirations

Denver alliance of shelters, rescues, and veterinarians has live-release rate peaking

BY JIM BAKER

It was March 25—Cesar Chavez Day in Colorado—and Jessica Naberhaus and Jiancarlo Ulloa were knocking on doors in the city's 80205 ZIP code.

Ulloa, spay/neuter outreach coordinator for the Dumb Friends League (DFL), was educating residents about the importance of spay/neuter for cats, and making appointments to bring them humane traps, so they could participate in DFL's trap-neuter-return (TNR) efforts.

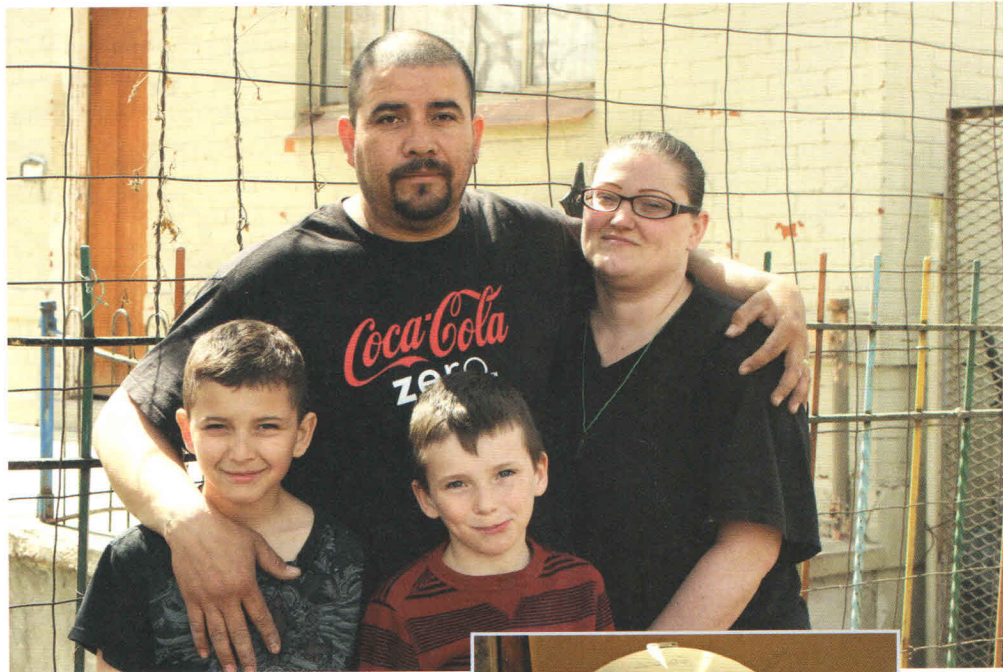
Naberhaus was tagging along so that she could get the word out about her own nonprofit, Animal Haus, a mobile pet-food pantry that she and her husband Troy founded last year, and how it could help pet owners struggling to pay for food.

"There was one house we stopped at, and the dog was chained up outside, pretty tight to the house, and we noticed that the doghouse, it looked like it had caved in on itself," Naberhaus recalls. They knocked and got no answer. But when they'd moved on to further houses, the residents came out, and Ulloa and Naberhaus went back to talk to them.

The family told them the doghouse's roof had collapsed due to a recent heavy snow. Ulloa asked if it would be all right if he brought an Igloo house for their dog. He then took it several steps further, bringing not only the house, but food, a harness, and bowls on his return trip.

"The kids were really happy that the dog has a new space," he says. They planned to spay the dog at the DFL's clinic, using a coupon Ulloa gave them to get the procedure for free.

Ulloa also passed along an application to receive ongoing support from Animal Haus, much to the delight of Naberhaus. "It was such an amazing success story, and really so easy for him to make that connec-

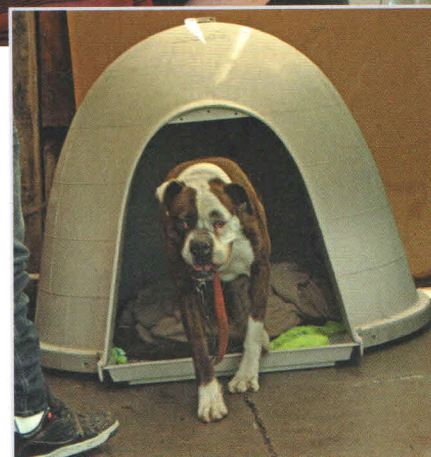


Feliberto and Kim Guzman, with their sons Enrique and Sebastian, are among the Denver residents who have benefitted from the cooperation among MDSA members, receiving a variety of free veterinary services and food for their dog, Chata (inset, in her new doghouse).

tion. And for us to see that need, it was really great," she says.

DFL and Animal Haus are both members of the Metro Denver Shelter Alliance (MDSA), and this partnered outreach captures the essence of the organization: animal welfare organizations large and small, with differing philosophies and missions, coming together to the benefit of everyone—especially the animals.

Founded in June 2000 by Denver-area animal welfare leaders, the now-25-member MDSA is made up of private shelters, municipal animal care and control agencies, rescue groups, veterinary organizations, several foundations, a service dog group, a pet food pantry—even a parrot sanctuary—in an eight-county region. Its



common goal is to reduce euthanasia by increasing the number of animals adopted at shelters throughout the region.

The key statistic MDSA uses to track its progress is the collective live-release rate of all its sheltering members. The live-release rate reflects the percentage of animals who leave shelters alive through adoption, return-to-owner, or transfer to a placement partner that can guarantee homes for pets

[life preservers]

it receives. Since MDSA started keeping live-release statistics in 2005, that number has risen from 72 percent to 85 percent in 2012.

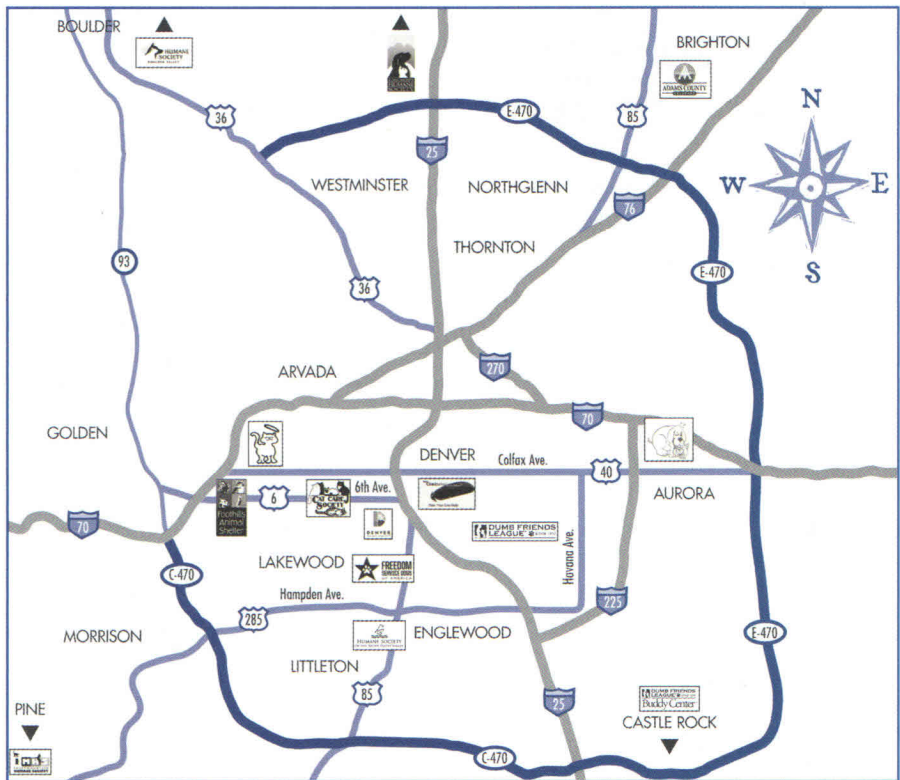
You're Welcome

It's a model that works by leveraging all sorts of community resources for animals. While shelters and rescues make up the majority of MDSA members, the group also has supporting members that don't fall into those categories but are an important part of the animal welfare community.

One example is the Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society (DAVMS), which has a common goal of "healthy pets in forever homes," according to executive director Ralph Johnson.

DAVMS strives to reinforce the message that pets require consistent veterinary care beyond the point of adoption—"that a lot of great things have happened medically at the shelter for that animal, but that's just the start of a road for a lifetime of care." Other veterinary community members in MDSA support alliance initiatives in various ways, such as when local clinics offered their services through a free microchipping program.

Earlier this year, the Naberhauses had just received 501(c)(3) status for Animal



The Metro Denver Shelter Alliance has 25 members in an eight-county region, including the 14 shelters and rescues on this map.

Haus when Jessica came across MDSA in a Google search.

Intrigued, she reached out to Jayme Nielson, a longtime DFL volunteer and facilitator of MDSA meetings, to learn more. The couple applied to join the alliance, and their program was accepted as a supporting (nonsheltering) member in January.

After her first MDSA meeting in February, even before her work on the streets with Ulloa, Jessica was impressed. "They're just amazing organizations, every single partner—such passion and enthusiasm and willingness to work together. I didn't feel any competition around that table. I felt like we were all there to serve the common goal and purpose, and you know, that's just such a great feeling," she recalls.

Being a member has already paid off. She's talked to DFL about partnering, so she can serve more people. She connected with Ulloa and joined him as he made his rounds. And MDSA member and parrot

sanctuary the Gabriel Foundation has offered to assist when pet owners need help feeding their birds.

"When someone new shows up, we're very welcoming," says Nielson, a DFL volunteer since 1991. "We try to make everybody feel comfortable, just to talk about whatever's on their mind, whatever they're struggling with, whatever the other organizations can do to help them."

The fact that the alliance's live-release rate since 2005 hasn't seesawed up and down, but instead has been a consistent movement in the right direction, is noteworthy to Johnson.

"What I think that steady, incremental growth in that rate symbolizes to me is that the shelters and rescues have been able to institutionalize these best practices. You do one good thing, and you add another layer. You cement that, you add another layer, so that you can sustain that rate in the community," he says.



Jiancarlo Ulloa gives the "thumbs up" sign after helping Christina and David Valdez of Denver trap 12 community cats in their neighborhood. Ulloa housed the cats overnight in his home, before taking them to be altered and vaccinated the next morning at one of the DFL's mobile spay/neuter clinics.

MDSA is able to track its collective live-release rate thanks to two central principles that its members have agreed on: a common, nonjudgmental language that's clearly defined and consistently used, and statistical transparency. One of the alliance's first challenges was to come up with terminology that everyone would use. A definitions task force developed language that was clear, straightforward, and accessible.

MDSA members don't use the term "no kill," believing it potentially divisive and lacking a universally accepted definition. Instead, members identify themselves as "open admission" (accepting all animals), or "limited admission" (limiting/selecting the animals accepted). Other agreed-upon terms that members use to track animal statistics are: Healthy, Treatable/

Rehabilitatable, Trainable/Manageable, and Unhealthy/Untreatable. Agreeing to use the same terms, and to separate animals into the same kinds of categories, creates a standardized approach to tracking outcomes for pets and allows MDSA to gather reliable statistics from its sheltering members.

While there are a few local animal welfare organizations that haven't joined the alliance, overall, the degree of cooperation in Denver is remarkable. "I'll restate what our friend [executive director] Bob Rohde at the Dumb Friends League says. He quite elegantly states it that 'working together works,' and I think that the alliance has really demonstrated that collaboration is not just an abstract concept," Johnson says. "It is not just pie in the sky—it really can have tangible, real results for the benefit of animals in our community."



Eulalia Casillas and her grandson Isaias Acosta connected with Jiancarlo Ulloa, the DFL's spay/neuter outreach coordinator, when he was spreading the word about the MDSA's free spay/neuter initiative for cats. Casillas now regularly feeds the cats on her block, as part of the effort.

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Haven't We Met?

When Alice Nightengale, environmental public health manager for the City and County of Denver, was asked to step in as interim director of the Denver Animal Shelter in October 2012, everything she knew about pets came from owning one. A geologist by training, she soon reached out to MDSA members for advice and support.

"If I had just gone in there and hadn't gone to a meeting [of MSDA leaders] ... I would have missed out on a huge opportunity to understand better what's going on ..." she says. "The alliance itself I think is a critical component of networking and understanding what other shelters are doing in the area."

Representatives from all member groups meet every other month to give their reports and discuss items of a general nature. Just the shelter executive directors and CEOs meet on the opposite months, with a more free-form agenda that allows participants to discuss whatever issues they're facing—everything from the rate of cat relinquishments to policies for adoption holds. They've branched out to include meetings of operations directors, volunteer managers, and transfer and volunteer coordinators, too.

All the shelter directors have each other's cell phone numbers, so they can get in touch if an emergency arises, like a seizure of animals from a hoarder, or a natural disaster. "Just through the alliance, everybody knows everybody, and they don't hesitate to pick up a phone whenever there's a situation," Nielson says.

The alliance gets its members out of their individual silos in other ways, too. "Last year,

we formed a little committee, and we started the 'shelter safaris,'" says Suellen Scott, development director of the Cat Care Society in Lakewood. "We would take turns sending our employees, our volunteers, our staff members to these all-day events where they would visit three shelters in different parts of town." These outings have been good opportunities for her staff, particularly those who work in adoptions, to see how other facilities are set up, and what their processes look like.

It's not just communication that flows from member to member; there's also a regular transfer of animals among shelters. Each shelter has its own set of expertise and resources. If one shelter's seeing a high incidence of a particular kind of animal or behavioral or medical issue, and another shelter has the capacity to meet that need, the goal is to partner up, explains Lisa Pedersen, CEO of the Humane Society of Boulder Valley, and president of the Colorado Federation of Animal Welfare Agencies.

"We often get the call to assist with what we characterize as food-guarding animals," says Pedersen. "We have a really strong, effective protocol, and so, on a regular basis, we're taking food-guarding animals from our alliance partners, getting them here, rehabilitating them, and getting them into our adoption center," she says. "And then that frees up the space in that shelter to take on some other issues that maybe they have a better capacity or set of resources to address."

Transfers of animals from shelters to rescues in the Denver region predate MDSA, but the alliance has improved relationships. There used to be "a good deal of suspicion between people who wished to do breed rescue and the shelter community at large," says Martha Smith, board member and past president of All Breed Rescue Network (ABRN), an umbrella organization for about 85 rescue groups concentrated in Denver that place about 5,500 dogs each year.

MDSA has made collaboration between shelters and rescues broader and more effective, because everyone recognizes that



Boo, a 4-month-old rat terrier mix, sits when Allison Hartlage, a training and behavior consultant for the Humane Society of Boulder Valley (HSBV), approaches with a bowl of food. Boo was transferred from another MDSA partner for enrollment in HSBV's food-guarding behavior modification program.

there's a shared goal: eliminating the unnecessary euthanasia of pets. Even if there's disagreement among alliance members, Smith says, it's done in a civil manner, and shelters are relieved to know they have places they can transfer animals who might need some help before final placement.

MDSA "saves animals by fostering relationships among a lot of disparate groups, so that it's hard to demonize people that you meet with face to face on a regular basis," Smith says.

Yo Hablo Español

MDSA is likely making the biggest impact on people and pets in the Denver region through its collaborative outreach programs.

In September 2008, DAVMS, DFL, and other participating members launched the Chip Your Cat initiative, a yearlong campaign to provide free microchipping and lifetime registration for cats owned by residents in Adams, Arapahoe, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas, and Jefferson counties.

Resources

- To learn more about the Metro Denver Shelter Alliance, go to mdsalliance.org.
- Visit Mascotas de Colorado (Pets of Colorado) on Facebook or Twitter.

The campaign, sponsored by Bayer resQ and Home Again, enabled the chipping of 25,000 cats, according to Rohde.

In December, MDSA members teamed up to start a yearlong, targeted program offering free spay/neuter for owned and community cats in Denver's 80205 ZIP code, encompassing heavily Hispanic neighborhoods that have been identified as hot spots for feline overpopulation. Residents make appointments and bring their cats to the DFL's two mobile clinics, the Meow Mobile and the Lulu Mobile. The project is underwritten by a grant of about \$18,000 from the Animal Assistance Foundation.

Ulloa and Laura Lampley, MDSA cat spay/neuter outreach coordinator, trap community cats and bring them to the mobile clinics for surgery; the cats recuperate overnight at the Denver Animal Shelter, and are returned to their original location the next day. Feral kittens who are trapped are placed in foster homes for socialization, then taken to MDSA shelters and put up for adoption. MDSA member Feline Fix, which operates a high-volume spay/neuter clinic and has a comprehensive trap-neuter-return program for the public, trains volunteers who want to help TNR cats for the 80205 project.

Ulloa spends much of his time talking to residents about the benefits to the community of spaying and neutering cats, and identifying cat colonies. By early April, 115 cats had been altered through the project. Ulloa notes that the numbers likely aren't higher because the project is a new effort, it was launched in winter (and trapping is suspended on very cold or snowy days), and it takes time to change people's attitudes and behaviors.

Ulloa, who's from Costa Rica, also helps with another MDSA initiative, the Hispanic Outreach Linkage Alliance (HOLA). The program is designed to help educate Spanish-speaking members of the community about veterinary and animal welfare services, improve relationships between Hispanic residents and veterinary

clinics and shelters, create pet-health materials in Spanish, and bridge language and cultural differences.

He also educates MDSA members about cultural differences between the Hispanic and Anglo communities in their attitudes toward pet ownership. For instance, Ulloa explained to MDSA members that in Mexico and Latin America, cats are often seen more as wildlife than as pets. And (at least in his experience on the streets of Denver) there's resistance among Hispanic men to having their male dogs neutered. "I'm dealing also with cultural situations, more with the 'macho' idea. So females, it's OK to spay, but males—forget about it," he says, laughing.

HOLA has a social media component, according to Tara Miller, manager of public relations for DAVMS, who chairs the MDSA committee that oversees the initiative. There's now a Mascotas de Colorado (Pets of

Colorado) Facebook page and Twitter feed, both of which are in Spanish and English. These are used to promote the work and services of MDSA members, as well as events, adoptable pets, and pet-care tips.

The value of MDSA, according to Pedersen, is that it keeps members from getting myopic in their approach to how they do things, and how they see the issues affecting animals. Leaders, staff, and volunteers from many organizations get to know each other, and there's peer-to-peer conversation going on at all levels.

"It's not just the leadership that understands the importance of that collaboration, but that we recognize that the animal welfare challenges that we're seeing are happening in different ways in every community," she says. "There's a lot of similarities, there's a lot of differences, and we can learn from one another. And that collective knowledge just makes all of us stronger." ■

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