



By Anne Dunn

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I want to share my thoughts on our industry and the incredible opportunity we have now to begin again, cooking social justice into our foundation.



The animal welfare industry lives at the intersection of white privilege and systemic racism. What is important to understand, and accept, is that we are all biased, and racist to some degree, but that doesn't make mean we're monsters. If you work in animal welfare, you are probably a good and compassionate person, but, if you are white, you may also be unaware of the extent to which you are a product of this culture, or the ways in which that both benefits you and harms others.

What's important now is to differentiate between individual acts and structural racism. We need, of course, to take responsibility for how we individually benefit from and perpetuate this broken system, but changing structures is about collective power and resources. Making systemic change requires looking at the ways in which we operate now to reinforce systemic racism. As was noted yesterday, for example, we take animals from "bad" people and give them to "good" people, ignoring a lack of resources and instead seeing neglect. We charge fees for people to redeem lost animals, creating a barrier to their return. We charge high adoption fees and say that if someone can't afford that they shouldn't have an animal. Having the transformative love of animal companionship in your life shouldn't be a privilege.

One hope I have for this industry is that we measure the success of an organization by how they use their resources. An example of this is the Community Reinvestment Act, a federal law which requires banks with major assets to invest in low-income communities. I would love to see each major organization measured by the extent to which their assets are used to benefit the people in their community who most need help.

As the director of Oakland Animal Services, the primary reason I jumped at the chance for our organization to participate in the Human Animal Support Services pilot is to address the deep inequities in the animal welfare industry. It thrills me to see that so many other people are thinking along the same lines and see this extraordinarily painful moment as an opportunity to burn our house down and rebuild it with a foundation of social justice.

-- Shared with permission from the Animal Shelter Leadership Coronavirus Information Facebook group, June 6, 2020