The Dodge County Humane Society is a small shelter that has achieved a lot with relatively little, thanks to its emphasis on reaching out to all facets of the community.

In her opening letter in the Dodge County Humane Society’s 2007 Annual Report, Shelter Director Kimberly Waugus pulled no punches when describing the organization’s 980-square-foot structure, which had been built more than 30 years before. “Anyone who visits our current facility can see that it is small, severely overcrowded, and lacks the proper isolation and quarantine areas. Our air conditioning quit working in August 2007 and our furnace is on its last leg.”

Continued Waugus, “We need a new building. We need to be able to provide decent, humane living quarters for our animals and adequate quarantine and isolation wards to keep staff and other animals safe.”

Fortunately, the new building so desperately desired had already been purchased in 2005 and was ready to undergo much-needed renovation. Waugus informed shelter members that it would cost $400,000 to get the new facility up and running with only the bare necessities. “For now,” wrote Waugus, “we will be very content with a structurally sound building, heat and hot water.”

On July 24, 2008, the Dodge County Humane Society moved into its new home, which — at almost 10 times the size of the original facility — can house twice the number of animals more safely and comfortably. This small shelter solicited the funds to do so by following the foremost rule of successful fundraising: Build relationships first.
“This shelter is truly a community-based organization,” says Waugus. “We do not have one substantial source of income; instead, we rely on donations by local corporations and individuals to stay in business. When we started our capital campaign drive to renovate the new building, we knew we would have to obtain some large donations — but we also realized that even the smallest donation mattered.”

Waugus also understood the importance of building relationships to get those donations. “That was the number one priority when I took this job,” states Waugus. “I needed to put Dodge County Humane Society on the map, as well as repair some broken relationships and adjust how we were viewed. In prior years, the shelter had come near to closing due to poor management and lack of fundraising. We needed to get our name out there in a positive light.”

Before starting the public relations blitz, Waugus made sure that she and the board of directors were on the same page in terms of their mission statement, services, costs and other essentials. “Then I proposed that we make our shelter more visible by holding a lot of little events,” says Waugus. “I told the board that they would be public awareness events, not fundraisers. You have to start by getting people to know who you are and to come into the shelter to look at the animals.”

Waugus and her staff and volunteers — along with an all-volunteer fundraising committee — set about to raise the profile of the shelter. Waugus herself spent a lot of time visiting local municipal officials and doing presentations to area civic groups, schools and churches. She submitted a series of articles about animal-related topics to area newspapers and made appearances on local radio and TV shows, including a regular pet segment for the NBC affiliate in Madison, Wis.

In December 2007, the Dodge County Humane Society was asked to take in about 20 dogs from a man whose wife had suddenly passed away. Recalls Waugus, “This was an urgent situation for the animals and for us; we only had 10 dog kennels at the old building and were already full. Nevertheless, it could not have come at a better time. I put out a plea to area shelters and rescues for immediate help and contacted the media. The story was picked up by several TV stations, and eventually we got statewide coverage. What a wonderful Christmas story — and what a wonderful way to say ‘we desperately need a new shelter.’”

Special Programs Key to Visibility

These formal public relations efforts were augmented by the visibility received from the many community programs offered by the Dodge County Humane Society. One of the most successful is the shelter’s sponsorship program, in which individuals or schools pay for a particular animal’s adoption fee so it can be adopted out at no charge. Waugus says they receive about 10 sponsorships each month. “One woman sponsors every adult cat that has been in the shelter for longer than 30 days,” says Waugus. “She comes in every other month and usually ends up giving us $1,000...
to $1,500 each time.” In fact, the sponsorship program and resulting increase in cat adoptions has been so successful that Waugus has occasionally been able to pull in cats from other shelters.

The shelter also offers a variety of other programs and services that keep it in the public eye. These include Kids Kamps interactive mini-seminars for children, a foster program, a doggie day care program, dog training classes, a pet therapy group and educational seminars. The shelter partners with a local domestic violence facility for Pets Escaping to Safety (P.E.T.S.), in which the shelter fosters animals owned by victims of domestic violence for up to 30 days. The shelter’s thrift store is also a good draw for bringing potential adopters and income (about $3,000 a month) into the shelter.

Fundraisers and Donations: It All Adds Up

The shelter also builds relationships, awareness and its bank account with proceeds from a number of popular events: twice-yearly fundraising dinners and raffles, the annual membership drive and seasonal activities such as Pictures with Santa and the Golf Outing. But formal events hosted by the shelter are just one piece of the fundraising puzzle, declares Waugus. “What totally floors me is how many people and organizations in the community hold fundraisers for us,” she says. “We tell a school or the Kiwanis Club that we need cat litter or canned food, and they get together and hold a mini fund drive — then pretty soon, we get a van full of supplies or a check.”

For the capital campaign drive, the shelter’s fundraising committee did private solicitations of individuals and approached corporations and foundations for contributions. The resulting $550,000 surpassed the shelter’s original goal and allowed it to complete the entire dog kennel and thrift store wings and repave the driveway.

The Bottom Line? Caring for Animals

At the end of the day, all of Dodge County Humane Society’s relationship-building and fundraising efforts are for the sole purpose of fulfilling the shelter’s mission: To promote animal welfare by providing care and shelter to animals in need, by facilitating adoptions and by educating the public. States Waugus, “My philosophy is, these animals are all God’s creatures, too — thinking, feeling beings who deserve to be treated appropriately.”

“Leveraging Data to Meet Your Strategic Goals” will be the first topic in PetPoint’s Summit 2009 speaker series, which is designed to help management staff tackle key aspects of running an animal welfare organization. Some of the nation’s top animal welfare experts will be appearing, and registration is just $25 per person. PetPoint offers a fully integrated system coordinating data management, pet insurance and pet microchip identification for shelters.

To learn more or register, visit www.petpoint.com/summits.