Chapter 1

Foster Care and Adoptions

Recommendations

You may be asking *why do we need to worry about adoption or foster?* The answer is cost. It costs money to house and care for animals. Between supplies like food, toys, vaccines, and other medications and the biggest cost, staff time. Animals are expensive for shelters to care for. The quicker an animal is adopted or put into foster, the less is spent on their in-shelter care. There are also numerous benefits to the animal's physical and behavioral well being too. The longer animals spend in the care of the shelter, the more stressed they get and the more likely they are to get sick, which usually means they are at lower risk of adoption and higher risk of euthanasia. With more animals in the shelter, there is less room for incoming animals and shelters end up with more animals to house than space and resources allow, which is when euthanasia becomes the go-to option to clear space. Euthanasia comes with its own expenses between the drugs needed and the cost of storing and disposing of the animals once they've been euthanized. When healthy animals are euthanized for space reasons, it takes a heavy toll on the staff, even if they're not the ones performing the euthanasia.

During COVID-19, many shelters and rescues called on their communities for help and those communities stepped up in a major way. This was particularly evident with community members volunteering to foster animals with many communities seeing an unprecedented increase in foster homes. National data shows that during the height of the COVID-19 crisis shelters saw a 47% increase in dogs in foster care and a 7% increase in cats in foster care.[1] Fosters have been and will be even more critical to sustaining lifesaving operations in a post-COVID world. Our laws, regulations, and policies should encourage more community-based fostering.

There are proven practices for effective adoption and foster programs that engage the community and gets them excited to help your municipal shelter. You can find many of these programs in the Humane Animal Control Manual resources listed at the end of this chapter.

In addition to the financial cost and effect on staff morale, euthanizing large numbers in your community also creates a bad public image and negative press. Shelters that euthanize a high number of animals are under the scrutiny of the public more because healthy animal's lives are being taken when simply implementing proven solution-based community-focused practices like fewer restrictions on adoptions and inclusive foster programs could solve nearly all of these problems.

From a liability perspective, it can be worrisome to think about officially changing your shelter's policies to allow for more adoptions. Any animal with a history of unprovoked aggression should not be put up for adoption. Every animal is an individual and their behavior before or during their time in a shelter is not always a good indicator of how they will behave post-adoption. Remember that the shelter is not capable of accurately predicting behavior in this way. Everything the shelter knows about the animal should be disclosed in its entirety, but additional tools like behavior assessments have not been shown to be a complete predictor of a dog's behavior after it leaves a shelter and no guarantees about a dog's behavior should ever be made to the adopter.[2]

Consider if the fears associated with liability from these programs outweigh the liabilities of euthanizing a healthy, treatable, adoptable animal. A shelter has reached no-kill status when 90% or more of the dogs and cats who enter its care leave alive. In a general population survey done in January of 2020, 81% of people felt it is very important to essential to have a no-kill shelter in their area. More importantly, the respondents were willing to take action to make it happen.

Adoption programs that are welcoming of all types of people, conversational in nature and consultative, help adopters find a well-matched pet while providing a great experience. They specifically remove what are seen as ineffective barriers to adoption like veterinarian checks (calling veterinary offices to check on vaccination and care history), background checks and landlord checks and include adoption promotions and times of lower fees. The most cost-effective programs in sheltering concentrate on getting animals out of the shelter and into homes quickly and effectively or keeping pets in homes with financial, veterinary, or pet food aid A well-managed shelter with a good public image will include high-volume adoption and foster programs.

Barriers to High Volume Adoption and Foster Programs

- Ordinances that put needless barriers in place, such as requiring home or background checks;
- Ordinances mandating intake or adoption fees at the shelter allowing for no staff discretion in waiving fees when appropriate;
- Concerns about liability and negative public opinion if a dog bites a new owner or others in the community;
- Potential for negative press if an animal adopted from the shelter is abused or neglected;
- Foster care providers require a lot of resources: supplies and advice as well as staff or volunteer time to monitor and track their animals;
- Concern that a person with a background of abusing animals could adopt or foster;
- Inexperienced/novice fosters or adopters inability to care for their animals;
- Discriminatory screening practices based on age, race, family, or economic status; and
- County budgets may require high adoption fees to achieve revenue goals and pay for operating expenses. This would prohibit fee waived adoptions to promote harder to adopt animals or events with special adoption fees.

Suggested Solutions

- Every adopter and foster should sign a contract waiving liability for animal's behaviors post-adoption or in a foster home. Shelters cannot guarantee the health or behavior of any animal but there are common-sense, practical solutions to mitigate these concerns. Sample contracts are provided at the end of this section.
- In certain cases where an animal has an extreme medical need or an unusual behavior history, additional waivers can be drafted explicitly outlining the history and needs of that pet.
- In more common cases, adopters can sign behavior notes and documents associated with the animal, to further document that the adopters/fosters were informed prior to taking the animal home.
- Providing adequate training guides or training opportunities for staff, volunteers, fosters and adopters. Publish organizational philosophies, codes of conduct and other resources reiterating consistent information about how to handle behavior situations. Address any issues right away and consistently.
- Give fee management and decisions, including the ability to waive fees for good cause, to the management staff at the shelter.

Successful Adoption Programs

Adoption philosophy and big picture view

Most people who come through the door to adopt want a pet for the right reasons. With that philosophy in mind, all program decisions should come from a place of trust. Focus on the overwhelming majority of the public who want to adopt or foster for reasons the community agrees with and will take great care of their adopted pets. Even with good intentions,

some adopters will be confused about how to take care of a pet so be prepared with knowledge and resources to help some know what that is. In every interaction, the goal is to help each person be the best pet owner possible and establish a judgement-free, long-term relationship so that the shelter can remain a resource for the adopter.

Fees

Relying on revenue sources that are not dependent on the number of animals flowing through the shelter allows shelter leadership to focus on proven strategies to keep animals out of the shelter while helping pet owners in need. Many shelter budgets rely on adoption, in-take, and other types of fees as revenue requirements to offset expenses. Instead of a fee-based revenue model, models that include donations, grants and other fundraising elements should be encouraged as a better means to meet the long-term financial needs of the shelter.

Shelter Directors should be empowered and have the flexibility to increase or decrease adoption fees as they see appropriate in consideration of the age, health and length of stay of the animal along with the population of the shelter. Puppies and young small dogs can generate more income and older or larger pet fees can be reduced to encourage adoption. Adoption promotions can happen at the times of the year when shelter census is high, like during the summer months, which is "kitten season", to help the staff move animals out into the community much quicker and to increase the lives they save. If an animal is a special needs animal with health issues, the fee might be waived completely or greatly reduced.

A common misconception is that adopters who don't pay adoption fees are less likely to be able to financially support the animal or will feel less attached to the animal adopted. Everyone loves a good deal! It's illogical to assume that higher adoption fees change attachment levels between people and pets over time. Fee waived adoptions increase adoptions and, according to a [study] published in the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, people who adopted cats with waived fees had the same degree of attachment as those who paid fees.[3] Additionally, the study found that eliminating fees did not devalue the cats in the eyes of the adopters.

Screening vs. putting up barriers

Evaluate your current criteria for adopters: what answers on the application result in an automatic denial of the adoption? Examine whether the things you are screening for are putting up arbitrary and unnecessary barriers to adoption that may actually be discriminatory and preventing positive outcomes. Any restriction placed on an adoption should be done simply to increase the animal's overall chance for survival or to allow for a successful adoption. For example, for a dog who's proven to be an "escape artist," there might be a valid requirement that his adopter's yard have an eight-foot fence or that the adopter agree to keep him on leash at all times. In other words, any restrictions should focus on the behavior of the individual dog.

The shelter honestly has very little control over what happens to the animal when they leave the shelter and the desire to find the perfect home by exploring and cutting off any possibility for failure is not only futile, but actually counterproductive. Making perfect the enemy of good results in more pets languishing in the shelter and more pets needlessly being euthanized for space. Once a pet leaves the shelter, we simply cannot know what will happen. Our best bet for protecting the animal is forging a lasting relationship with the adopter so that if they do run into issues where they may not be able to keep the animal, they will return to us for help with resources or to bring the animal back if necessary. The unfortunate reality is that if people want to acquire a pet and you deny them an adoption, they can get a pet from a friend, neighbor, stranger on the internet or another shelter (they now know the answers to the questions on the adoption application). It is in our best interest, in most cases, to provide adopters with a sterilized and vaccinated animal versus driving them to acquire an intact and unvaccinated animal from a non-shelter source.

The following are some of the things typically used to screen adopters that should be reconsidered:

- Home checks and visits – These take up an enormous amount of staff time and since they are typically scheduled, the home can be altered to change or hide any obvious red flags. I certainly wouldn't want strangers coming into my home and it's important to understand how this requirement could make some adopters and staff uncomfortable. These checks also inject implicit bias into the screening, which is obviously something we should be working to remove from our processes.
- Landlord checks – It's important to explain to adopters that many landlords or HOAs have restrictions on pet ownership including breed, weight, size, or number of animals, along with additional pet deposits, pet rents and other requirements. However, no adopter wants to have to return their pet after their landlord rejects it and the onus to confirm that the adopted pet meets the requirements should be on the adopter, not on the shelter. If the adopter reports that the animal fits their landlord's requirements, they should be trusted. Of course, some landlords and tenants will miscommunicate, and some animals will be returned for this reason, but that should not be seen as a shelter's failure. Returns actually present shelters with the opportunity to know more about the pet's behavior in a home, and might help facilitate its next adoption. Instead of checking with the landlord, you can have the tenant bring in a copy of their lease or get a letter of consent from their landlord.
- Fence requirements – Dogs have complex sensory and exercise needs and access to a fenced back yard does not automatically meet these needs. It's important to explain the exercise needs of a particular dog to any potential adopter and ensure that they can be met, with or without access to a fenced yard.

- Background checks – Shelter staff are constantly exposed to some of the worst sides of humanity, and over time it can start to feel like there are more people with bad intentions towards animals than good. It's important to remember that most people who come to the shelter to adopt have honest intentions to care for the animal. Running background checks on each adopter takes time and resources which are in short supply. The chances of finding an adopter with an animal cruelty or neglect conviction on their record are so low it is not worth the amount of resources utilized. Plus, these types of checks further the distrust between the public and the shelter.
- Vet references – Many responsible pet owners, likely including some of the shelter staff, do not have pristine vaccine history on all of their pets. Taking the time to call veterinarians to verify details like vaccine history on current or previous pets is not worth staff time and definitely not an accurate way to determine whether a person is a responsible adopter
- Income verification – This is probably the toughest question for adopters and just as in the previous examples, not a way to screen for responsible adopters. Shelter staff will know that wealthy people with seemingly unlimited financial resources can be horrible to their pets while people on public assistance will put their pets needs before their own. Simply put, a person's income has no correlation to their fitness to adopt. It may also deter some people from even completing the application.

An alternative to some adoption procedures could be to offer training or educational opportunities for the adopter to bring the animal and interact with assistance from a qualified trainer. Behavioral issues that occur after adoption may be addressed in this manner and a pet remain in the home.

If your agency uses any of these as part of your screening, application, or overall adoption process, take some time to think about why you have them in place and how they impact the animals; are they serving the intended purpose or creating more missed opportunities? If you're trying to create more open-adoption programming, consider the restrictions placed on the animals at your agency. For instance, if your shelter has restrictions on the adopter's age for certain breeds, on the number or types of animals in the home for certain breeds or ages of animals, then we recommend that you examine the reasons *why* those restrictions exist and if the costs outweigh the benefits. One way to do this is to track how many adoptions were not able to go through in a certain timeframe due to these specific restrictions as well as complaints handled by animal control and the bases of those complaints. Similar to the barriers we place on prospective adopters, these restrictions are almost always based on myths, misperceptions, and implicit and explicit biases.

Keep in mind that every animal is an individual with individual needs and desires. When someone is interested in adopting a pet, you should evaluate whether that particular pet is a match for that particular adopter. Restrictive policies do not give people the broadest range of choice in selecting an animal or allow them to tell you how they would handle any issues that might arise.

Inclusiveness Matters

Restrictive screening in adoptions usually has a disparate impact on residents in already-marginalized communities. The low-income communities we tend to label as poor pet owners and deny adoptions to tend to have less access to veterinary care and training resources. Because they believe that they will be treated poorly or denied an adoption if they come to the shelter, they tend to get animals from each other instead of from the shelter. This can sometimes be labeled as "backyard breeding" and perpetuates both the cycle of unaltered animals with limited vet care and the shelter's labeling of this community as irresponsible pet owners. If we are more inclusive and encourage more people to adopt pets, even targeting these marginalized areas for adoption outreach and veterinary care, we will be reducing our community's pet overpopulation and building bridges with people.

People with limited resources love their pets as much as those with more resources. Many organizations have established pet food banks, low-cost medical and wellness services, and other community-focused services. Providing these services may seem outside of a shelter's mission but remember that providing these services while keeping the animal out of the shelter is always going to be less expensive than impounding the animal, caring for it and finding it a new home (or euthanizing them). Providing annual vaccination clinics and/or free training and behavior resources for adopters could assist in keeping the animal in the home also and encourage those with lower incomes or financial difficulties to adopt. These services help build a more diverse and inclusive community of potential adopters, fosters and volunteers, and also help the shelter achieve its mission. The bottom line is this: If people want a pet, they will get a pet. A vetted adopted pet is setting people up for success and provides a positive relationship with the shelter should future assistance ever be needed.

Measuring success

So, you've made a few changes and have incorporated more open-adoption policies at your shelter. How do you know whether your efforts have been successful? Think about what data you could collect to measure success with your new approach to adoptions. Here are some data points to consider:

- Number of adoptions (the end goal, a major metric)
- Time from intake to adoption (key to helping more animals
- Increase or decrease in returns
- Diversity of adopters (Are there any zip codes that are being left out?)
- Diversity of animals adopted
- Perception of the shelter in the community
- Number of adoption denials
- Volunteer applications and hours
- In-kind and monetary donations
- Complaints from the public to animal control or other city agencies regarding nuisance or failure to comply with the laws
- Returns or impounds

Successful Foster Programs

Program Overview

By offering a foster program, you can reduce the number of animals in the shelter and increase successful outcomes for more animals and people in your community. Some of the benefits of foster programs include:

- Engagement with community members who love animals and are willing to open their homes temporarily to pets in need. Many fosters are not able to make a long-term adoption commitment and enjoy getting their pet fix this way. Getting adoptable animals used to living in a home setting and learning more about their behavior. This helps make successful adoption matches and adopters feel more informed knowing the animal has been in a home setting in the past.
- Alternative housing arrangements for pets not showing well in a shelter environment, such as reactive or shy dogs (These pets can be marketed for adoption while in their foster homes.)
- Safety and comfort for sick or injured pets in need of healing, animals who have been in the shelter for an unusually long time and pets with contagious diseases.
- Prevention of the development of problematic "kennel behaviors" caused by dogs living in a kennel too long
- Fewer animals in the shelter, less money and staff time being spent on daily care.
- Developing a relationship with the community through establishing relationships with responsible adopters.

Barriers to remove

Laws and regulations restricting shelter's ability to easily utilize foster homes create unnecessary barriers and staff workloads while doing little to solve for the problems underlying their justification. For example, The Georgia Department of Agriculture requires all potential foster homes to be inspected at least twice a year.[4] Georgia shelters must inspect a home before an animal is placed there for foster care, prohibiting emergency fosters and inhibiting lifesaving. Shelters also spend hundreds of hours meeting this requirement each year but since the inspections are self-regulated, Georgia still sees plenty of rescue hoarding situations at approved and inspected foster homes. Removing this type of regulation and others that stop or unduly burden people from trying to help the shelter system is important to saving the lives of animals.

Program Composition

The following describes workforce needs, internal and/or external resources, and any other additional steps that should be taken into consideration for successful program implementation and to reduce risk and liability for the locality:

- Create a foster agreement contract that includes a comprehensive liability waiver, examples are below.
- Identify a key staff member or volunteer who will take the lead on overseeing the implementation and continuation of the foster program.

- Develop your standard operating procedures, including essential components such as:

  –What are the expectations for basic medical care (vaccinations, deworming, etc.) and what is the process for bringing animals back to the shelter to receive routine care?
  –Who should foster families contact if they have questions about their foster animals?
  –What should a foster caregiver do if an animal needs urgent medical care? Outline what constitutes an urgent situation.

- Develop a foster care manual for your foster families. The manual should include some essential information that may seem basic to you, but may not to your foster caregivers, such as:

  –How to prepare their home for the foster pet
  –What to do when they first bring the animal home
  –Routine daily care
  –Medical and emergency protocols
  –Behavior support
  –How they can help market their foster pet to help them get adopted
  –Interaction with neighbors

- Create a thorough online and in-person application for potential foster families to fill out. This will give you information on their families, home and needs in regards to the animals they are able to help through foster. Safely placing pets into foster homes will reduce problems and issues of liability.
- Provide connectivity for the foster families to your organization and to each other, this level of support ensures that staff and volunteers can intercede if there is a problem, reducing liability or concerns around the foster home:

  –Utilize volunteers to routinely check in with foster caregivers.
  –Gather photos and videos from foster caregivers to promote the animals for adoption.
  –Create a closed Facebook group for foster caregivers to connect with each other.

Examples and Resources

Training [module on Open Adoption](#) practices and protocols
Waiver examples-
- [BF Volunteer Engagement](#) (pg 12 - Volunteer release, waiver, and safety guidelines)
- [Taylor Animal Shelter Volunteer application/waiver](#) (in operational playbook > [sample contracts and waivers](#))
- [APA 2019 Volunteer Application and Agreement and Release](#)

Contract examples -
- [BF Adoption Contract](#) (liability/waiver)
- [LMAS Stray Foster Contract](#)

Program overview & resources (providing adequate training/resources):
- [Salt Lake City Dog Foster Manual](#)
- [Adopters Welcome Manual](#) (very comprehensive)- animalsheltering.org
  –[Adopters Welcome step by step implementation plan](#)
- [LMAS Stray Foster Care Guide](#) (emailed 7/7/20)
- [BF Operational Playbooks](#) (any program)

Examples of contract with "not convicted of animal cruelty or neglect" language:
- [Almost Home Humane Society](#) - Adoption Contract - #7-9
- [SLC Animal Services Adoption contract](#) – mentions experimentation or vivisection
- [Pasco County Adoption Contract](#) - #8

[Humane Animal Control Manual](#) – sections to consider including:
- Ch 1 & 2 ([The Role of Animal Control in Local Government](#) and the [Role of Local Government in Animal Control](#))
- Pg 22 [Data reporting & transparency](#)
- Pg 23 [Communication & Social Media](#)
- Pg 125 - 138 [Adoption Programs](#)
- Pg 139 [Shelter Liabilities](#)
- Pg 141 [Waiver of Liability and Indemnity agreement example](#)
- Pg 174 [Foster Programs](#)
- Pg 184 [Volunteer Programs](#)

Notes

1. Petpoint Industry Data - https://www.petpoint.com/Industry Data.
2. S.L. Bennett, A. Litster, H-Y. Weng, S.L. Walker, A.U. Luescher (2012). *Investigating behavior assessment instruments to predict aggression in dogs*. Applied Animal Behaviour Science, 141, 139–148.
3. Sandra MacArthur, BS; Julie K. Levy, DVM, PhD, DACVIM; Patricia A. Dingman, MS, Sylvia J. Tucker, BS (2012). *Outcome of Pets Adopted During a Waived-Fee Adoption Event: Maddie's Matchmaker Adoptathon*. Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science.
4. Georgia Department of Agriculture Rules and Regulations for Licensed Shelters - http://www.agr.georgia.gov/Data/Sites/1/media/ag animalindustry/animal protection/files/Animal- Protection-Act-rules-2020.pdf.