

APPENDIX H

Intake Diversion via Pet Retention

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The aim of shelters focused on lifesaving involves two basic paths: reducing the number of animals entering the shelter and increasing the number leaving with a positive outcome. From Jacksonville Humane Society statistics and informal polling of other agencies, we have found that intake diversion and pet retention, done effectively, can result in reducing intake by 33 to 50 percent. The goal is to keep pets in the homes they already have, and when that's not possible, to encourage owners to rehome the pets themselves in order to avoid having them come to the shelter.

In addition to the obvious benefit of reducing intake, a well-run pet retention program builds goodwill in the community and engages citizens in finding solutions, rather than blaming them. It leads to a higher degree of professionalism in your staff and fewer customer complaints. The long-term gains include garnering the respect of the community and having citizens view your organization as a valuable resource.

Getting started

The single most important ingredient to a successful program is the staff. Your staff should have the belief that people love their pets and want to do what's best for them. Remember, if pet owners came to your shelter, that's a good thing. They did so because they understood that's what they're supposed to do.

Now it's your staff's role to help them understand that shelters are often full, they are stressful for pets, and other alternatives besides relinquishment exist. A compassionate and nonjudgmental approach on the part of staff is essential for gaining the trust and cooperation of pet owners. Your staff will soon see that functioning as empathetic counselors produces positive results for pets, reduces the pressure on the shelter and earns them the admiration of grateful pet owners.

Determining reasons for surrender

To establish a successful pet retention program, you'll want to examine the variety of reasons that people in your community seek to surrender their pets, and then secure the resources that address those reasons. Often the reason for surrendering is due to a short-term issue that can be resolved fairly simply. Other times, it may be a permanent, more complicated situation that is not resolvable and rehoming may be the most appropriate outcome.

According to a study on rehoming done by the ASPCA¹ in 2015: "The most common primary reasons for rehoming a pet were related to the pets themselves (46 percent), followed by family situations (27 percent) and housing issues (18 percent). For those living in rental housing, housing issues were the top reason for re-homing.... Many of these challenges can be mitigated or resolved through affordable and accessible veterinary care, increased access to pet-friendly housing, and better access to other supplies and necessities."

Below, I address some of the most common reasons for surrender and suggest resources that can help keep pets with their families.

Moving issues

Many people surrender their pets because they are moving and can't find housing where pets are allowed. To help people in this situation, compile a list of pet-friendly housing in your area and make it available to pet owners. This list is something a volunteer can put together and keep up to date. Be sure to include details such as any pet deposits required and any additional fees per pet, as well as breed or size restrictions. If pet owners cannot pay the pet deposit, consider paying it for them. The cost for your shelter to intake, process and house the pet is likely to be much more than the cost of the pet deposit.

Behavior problems

According to the ASPCA study, among pet owners making less than \$50,000, a third of them said that free or low-cost training or behavior advice would have helped them keep their pets. So, another way to encourage pet retention is to offer training information and supplies. For example, if the issue is house-training, offer them information on how to do it successfully. (And you don't have to create your own resources. There's lots of information available on the websites of most national animal organizations.) You can get supplies, such as crates, donated through your shelter wish list. This same path can be used for a variety of common behavior issues that lead to surrender, such as litter box problems in cats and destructive chewing in dogs.

If you have trainers on staff, offer to have them talk with pet owners regarding serious issues such as separation anxiety or aggression toward other animals or people. If you don't

have trainer on staff, consider forming a partnership with local trainers. They may be willing to donate their time and expertise to assist with your lifesaving efforts. Finally, consider including other services that can allow people to keep their pets. For example, to help pet owners whose dogs are escape artists, recruit volunteers who can mend broken gates or build secure fencing.

Medical conditions

If the reason for surrender is the cost of treating pets' medical conditions, provide the care for them. The ASPCA study found this: "Of the 46 percent (of pet owners) who responded they'd given up a dog or cat due to a pet-related issue, 26 percent said they could not afford medical care for their pets' health problems." You can offer medical care through either low-cost clinics or veterinary practices willing to provide a discount in support of your program. Many national organizations, such as Banfield, the ASPCA, PetSmart Charities, the Petco Foundation and Best Friends Animal Society, provide grant funding for this type of assistance.

Remember, if you intake the animal, you are likely going to end up incurring the cost anyway. Better to spend it on care and allow the pet to remain with his/her family. Sometimes, the problem is minor and easy to solve. For example, one of the more common complaints is flea infestation. Providing an owner with flea prevention products is much less expensive than accepting the pet into the shelter. Drug manufacturers or suppliers may be willing to donate their products for this purpose.

Can't afford to keep the pet

In addition to the assistance mentioned above, consider operating a pet food and supplies bank. It can be set up using entirely donated pet food and supplies such as crates, leashes, collars, bedding and housing. If you ask, your local grocers will donate broken bags of pet food and off-season supplies, and members of the community will be generous, too.

Life changes

Pet owners sometimes experience unexpected changes in their lives that prevent them from providing care for their pets for a period of time. Examples include hospitalization and recuperation, a death in family, divorce, escape from domestic violence and short-term homelessness. In these cases, providing a foster home or boarding at a private facility may be the answer to preventing surrender of the pet. Doing so provides comfort to the individual in crisis and assures reunification with his/her pet once the crisis has passed. You can recruit volunteer foster families specifically for this purpose and talk to the owners of boarding

facilities in your area to see what they'd be willing to do to support your work. Grant funds may also be available.

Help with rehoming

If people have decided that they must relinquish their pets, explain why entering the shelter may not be the best outcome for their pet and ask them if they've attempted to find a new home themselves. You'd be surprised how many times they have not. (Remember, they thought bringing their pet to the shelter was what they were supposed to do.)

To help people rehome their pets, suggest that they contact everyone they know — neighbors, family, friends, co-workers, members of their church and social circles — to see if anyone is interested in taking in the pet. Tell them to go to adoptapet.com and visit the “Rehome a Pet” section, which provides an easy process for direct placement from their home to a new adopter's home. You can take it a step further and offer to take the pet's photo, assist with writing the pet's description and upload the information for them to the website. You could even offer your shelter as a safe place for them to have meetings with potential adopters who respond to their posting.

Conclusion

Progressive programs focused on lifesaving accomplish much more than simply diverting intake. They lift your staff from functioning merely as gatekeepers to being counselors and helpers; engage your community's individuals, organizations and businesses in new and meaningful ways; create a positive relationship between the shelter and the public; and ultimately save many lives.

NOTE

1. Matt Bershadker, “New Study Spotlights Need to Help People Keep Their Pets,” ASPCA blog, December 11, 2015. Available at aspca.org/blog/new-study-spotlights-need-help-people-keep-their-pets.