



CHAPTER 4

Community Outreach and Engagement

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Understanding the value of people is essential to implementing an effective community engagement strategy. It used to be commonplace for animal welfare professionals to describe their reasoning behind their involvement in this field with one sentence: “I love animals and hate people.”

Scapegoating the public has proven to be an ineffective strategy, however, and is ultimately counterproductive when it comes to helping the pets in our communities. More and more, animal welfare groups and shelters are making the shift to becoming more people-oriented, not only to move their mission forward but to leverage community support, which enables sustainability for their programs.

When we meet people where they are, and filter our views of them through the lens of compassion as opposed to cynicism, we are better equipped to engage in effective dialogue that cultivates joint problem-solving. Recognizing that people are the solution rather than the problem allows organizations to implement innovative programs ranging from community safety-net programs to an animal control program that operates with a community-policing philosophy focused on education and collaborative problem-solving as opposed to punitive citation and confiscation models.

Community engagement isn’t simply about handing out spay/neuter flyers at local community events. It’s about understanding problems from the community’s perspective, which creates solutions with shared buy-in and can help increase capacity within the community to care for pets. The goal is to develop meaningful relationships with people in order to motivate them to get involved in filling a need or solving a community problem.

Identifying service gaps

A key component of effective community engagement is identifying specific areas of need and gaps in service. In one community, there may be a lack of low-cost veterinary care; in another, breed restrictions may be contributing to a dearth of affordable pet-friendly housing.

It is important to understand that service gaps often vary within a single community. Keep in mind that a “community” will have varying definitions based on the type of program that’s being facilitated. For example, the community could be an entire city or selected neighborhoods within that city. Outreach and engagement strategies could be focused on particular neighborhoods because a targeted approach to spay/neuter programming, for instance, is going to have more impact.

The first step in identifying service gaps is analyzing your data. You’ll need to ensure that your data collection points are sufficient and give you the information needed to measure trends and track progress. For example, when trying to develop a community engagement plan with a goal of decreasing owner surrenders, it’s essential to know where the animals are coming from and why. Verify that the menu of options that you provide for reasons why an animal is being surrendered is comprehensive and gets to the core issue. “Moving” and “can’t afford to keep the pet” are often generalizations of more complex circumstances and should be explored more thoroughly. Having options such as “unable to pay pet deposit,” “breed restrictions in new home,” “unable to afford medical \$100+” and “unable to afford medical \$200+” are examples of data collection points that will better inform what programs are needed to make a greater impact.

Leveraging the community as partner

Once service gaps have been discovered and verified through data, the next step is identifying community partners, organizations, individuals or groups who are willing to leverage their resources to fill these gaps. A common cycle of partnership is a foundation that provides a grant to an organization to subsidize free or low-cost veterinary care, and then that organization allocates a designated number of medical vouchers to an animal control officer to distribute throughout the community.

For maximum results, ensure that all partnering organizations are using the same data set to inform community engagement strategies. For example, if the data identifies specific zip codes where pets are medically underserved, a coordinated and deliberate strategy of distributing vouchers in those zip codes would garner a larger impact. Partnering with other organizations not only enhances the service delivery but also maximizes limited shelter resources.

Animal services departments may never have all the resources to address all community animal needs. That's why the community must develop some capacity of its own to help keep pets in homes and out of the shelter. For example, in areas that have dramatically higher shelter intake, there are generally no veterinary offices or pet stores where people who find lost pets can get them scanned for microchips. If organizations find ways to get scanners into these neighborhoods, more lost pets could be reunited with their owners directly instead of being brought to the shelter. The finders already want to help the pets — that's why they bring them to the shelter — so by providing the finders with resources and empowering them to be self-sufficient, less time and fewer physical and financial resources are expended by the shelter. This type of collective partnership strengthens engagement initiatives by activating ownership and cultivating community-wide buy-in.

Trusting your community

After leveraging community partners, the next step is developing programs and strategies to deploy. When developing programs, two assumptions should be made: (1) most people are good and (2) most people want to do the right thing. Having the opposite assumptions results in programs filled with unnecessary barriers that are difficult to engage and manage.

For example, consider an alternative to a shelter surrender program that focuses on empowering finders to house the lost pet while searching for the owner. If the program was developed with the two positive assumptions mentioned above in mind, the organization will educate finders on what steps they can take to help reunite the pet with the owner (e.g., have the pet scanned for a microchip, create and distribute flyers, email a photo of the pet that can be attached to the “found animal” report). On the other hand, if the program was developed with negative assumptions, the organization may require finders to bring the pet to the shelter to be scanned, request to see a copy of the flyer and know all the cross streets where the flyers were distributed, and use intimidating language that may discourage finders from participating in the program.

Those of us in animal welfare and public service have all seen and experienced horrific things, but more often than not, we also experience acts of heroism, goodwill and support, and those are the generalities regarding the public that should influence program development and implementation.

Earning trust through transparency

Not only is it important for organizations to trust the communities they serve, it is equally important for the community to trust them. An effective way to build trust is through transparency. In animal welfare, being transparent about data is one strategy an organization can use to build credibility.

Of course, a shelter that currently has a live release rate of (for example) 50 percent may be reluctant to share that statistic, but the key is in the messaging. Highlight any gradual or significant increases in the live release rate that have occurred over time, and identify programs and community contributions that were important to the increases. Use this as an opportunity to express a desire to do better and emphasize that community assistance and support is needed to reach new goals. Keep messaging upbeat and inspirational and, if possible, use the power of storytelling to convey this message.

At Pima Animal Care Center in Tucson, Arizona, staff used the following messaging structure to engage the community: “In (month/year), we reached a historically high save rate of (xx)%. Just five years ago, it was only (xx)%. Despite these gains, we know our community can do better, and we want to save more lives — but we can’t do it without you. We are an open-door shelter, and we never turn away a pet in need. That means we take in the old, sick, injured and scared. YOUR support can help us save even more of them.”

Communities will meet organizations where they are and will support them, but only if the challenge is clearly articulated and they know about it.

social media accounts, press releases, newsletters, and volunteer and donor mailing lists. In addition, building good relationships with the local news affiliates and proactively reaching out to them helps the shelter shape the narrative and increases the chances that the shelter’s stories will be picked up by the news stations. The more transparent and positive the messaging is, the more the public perception of the shelter shifts, and the equity that holds creates a platform for more meaningful engagement.

Launching programs

Once a foundation has been established that is built on using data to inform strategies, adopting a productive outlook and collaborating with various community partners, the next step is to move forward with piloting community engagement programs. Here are some areas of animal welfare that are only successful when there’s effective and broad community engagement:

- Animal protection programs
- Volunteer and foster programs
- Owner retention and alternatives to shelter surrender

- Trap-neuter-return and working cat programs
- Lost and found programs
- Fundraising efforts
- Adoption programs
- Shelter beautification projects

Conclusion

As animal welfare evolves, so does the menu of strategies an organization uses to support the pets in the community. It is imperative that organizations ask critical questions about the perceived problem of pet homelessness. For decades, we classified the problem as pet overpopulation, so organizations created outreach programs that emphasized spay/neuter services. While spaying and neutering will always be an important aspect of the work and services needed, we now understand that the problem is more layered and complex. Redefining the problem becomes critical for progress because doing so promotes new innovative solutions. As organizations explore redefining the problem, they must also be cognizant of and sensitive to the cultural and socioeconomic nuances that influence communities.

Community engagement programs are at the forefront of tackling the problem, but this time with the community as an ally, not the entity being blamed or fought against. Effective community engagement strategies focus on cultivating meaningful community relationships founded on mutual trust, developing and implementing strategies based on sound data, and building a community's capacity to proactively participate in the solution.

We have all heard the phrase “I want to work myself out of a job someday,” but a more realistic and effective way to think about the future of animal welfare is wanting to work ourselves into a new type of job. In that future, those who work in animal welfare function as liaisons for the community; the shelter is a community resource center where animal control officers are viewed as a support system, not dog catchers; and residents are empowered to take personal responsibility for the well-being of the pets in their community.

For more information, see [Appendix A](#), “Community Engagement Strategies.”