



THE HUMANE SOCIETY  
OF THE UNITED STATES

# “Adopters Welcome”

Finding, Engaging and Supporting More Adopters



“If we start from a perspective that people are coming to us with the best intentions, we will have a much better success rate of finding life-long matches.”

–Carmine DiCenso, Executive Director,  
Providence Animal Rescue League

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# FOREWORD

Finding a loving and happy home for every animal waiting to start a new life—that’s the goal of everyone who works in, for or on behalf of shelters and rescues. Our field is closer to achieving this goal than ever. While organizations are finding new and effective ways of promoting pet adoption, our colleagues in the animal welfare field are conducting research to evaluate old ways of thinking and investigate the success of new strategies. What we once considered progressive policies have changed over time as we accumulate new experiences and evidence. In fact, in this manual we challenge adoption policies that The HSUS promoted decades ago. We, like you, know that serving animals requires a commitment to ongoing honest reflection and constant evolution.

“Adopters Welcome” highlights an approach that embraces community members, encourages them to adopt and helps them and their pets succeed. The approach also acknowledges the connection among local adoption agencies and the impact adoptions, or lack of adoptions, can have on all of the animals in a community.

Programs that attract and support available adopters open up doors that were previously closed. This can mean a new friend for your organization, or an open spot for an animal in a nearby shelter. Increasing positive outcomes motivates staff and volunteers and inspires communities to increase their support. Just as important, more adopters are rewarded with great companions while connecting to safety nets they may need down the road. At the same time, an increase in adoptions from shelters and rescues means that fewer people will obtain their pet from inhumane sources such as puppy mills and irresponsible breeders, thereby slowing the flow of intact and unvaccinated animals into the community. In other words, adoption success has a positive ripple effect on animal welfare.

We hope you will use the practical tools provided in **“Adopters Welcome”** to realize this success in your community.

# WHY DO WE NEED THIS MANUAL?

At The HSUS, we often hear from shelters and rescues that increasing and improving adoptions are priorities for them. Ironically, we also hear from people who are frustrated when they try to adopt. Many have been refused for reasons that don't make sense to them. Others have changed their minds about adoption because of a bad experience. Rude treatment, calls and e-mails that aren't returned and denied adoptions drive away pet lovers who are trying to do the right thing and send them to less humane options. Not all experiences are negative, but each one can have a devastating impact. It's much better to have a happy adopter spreading the word about their experience and their wonderful pet.

The HSUS has also identified adoption blind spots—areas of communities historically untouched by traditional animal services. Pet lovers in these areas are unfamiliar with animal welfare organizations as a resource and as a place to find their next pet. Surveys conducted by

The HSUS Pets for Life team have identified neighborhoods where only three percent of pets come from shelters or rescues.<sup>1</sup> When we compare this to a national average of about forty percent, it's clear that more homes are available.<sup>2</sup>

You want more adoptions. There are people in your community who are trying to adopt but can't. And there are neighborhoods full of available homes that haven't even been reached with the adoption message. People (adopters) are the solution to your pet adoption goals, but you aren't connecting with all of them.

Why? Unnecessary barriers are getting in the way. They may exist in your policies, your paperwork, your interactions with adopters and even in your marketing. These barriers can be taken down easily and safely and replaced with an approach celebrated by organizations who have adopted a fresh perspective!

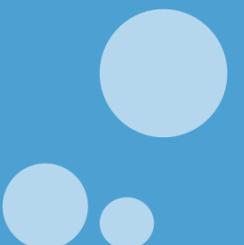
The Shelter Pet Project is a multiyear collaboration between the Ad Council, Maddie's Fund and The HSUS designed to send potential adopters to shelters and rescues as the first place to obtain a pet. As part of this campaign, we often hear from people who were inspired to choose adoption. Sadly, their feedback is not always positive. We hear stories from potential adopters whose applications go ignored, are turned down without a reason or for something that seems ridiculous to them, like working full-time. Once they have a bad experience, it takes much more work on our part to get them to try again. It becomes easier and less hassle to buy a pet.”

—Kristie Stevanus Troha,  
HSUS Companion Animals



## The Shelter Pet Project

For more information about the Shelter Pet Project, a collaborative effort of The HSUS, Maddie's Fund and The Ad Council, visit [animalsheltering.org/shelterpetproject](http://animalsheltering.org/shelterpetproject).



### \*Research on adoptions

Throughout this manual you will see references to research. A list of these studies is included on page 76. Utilize organizations like The HSUS to stay current on new research findings that will inform and enhance your policies.

# ADOPT A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

“For the longest time I thought I really just hated people. Somewhere along the way I realized I don’t actually hate people, I love them. It’s only the [jerks] I hate. Now I focus on the good... Expect the bad, it’s gonna happen no matter what, but there’s always more good than bad.”

–Josh Sellers, Providence Animal Rescue League

What is your reaction to a team member saying, “Sometimes I hate people!” or “I prefer animals to people!”? Would you agree? Would you not notice because it’s so common? Or would it be a warning sign? We need to engage people for all of our efforts on behalf of animals. Hating them, judging them or avoiding them will hold us back from achieving our mission.

Your work regularly exposes you to animals in need: unclaimed strays, surrendered pets, injured or ill pets and victims of abuse. If you let it, this can shape your perspective and damage how you approach adoptions and adopters.

In reality, only a small percentage of dogs and cats, around 6 to 8 million, enter the shelter and rescue system.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, according to 2012 estimates from the AVMA, there were more than 144 million pet dogs and cats living in American homes.<sup>3</sup> That means fewer than six percent of pets end up in shelters.

You can’t afford to let your experience with a fraction of pets and their owners influence your perceptions of adopters. The consequences of denying an animal a home because of an unfounded fear or a prejudice are too severe:

Intake should influence pet retention programs, not your approach to adoptions. It’s smart to track and investigate reasons animals come to you in need. This information can and should shape proactive pet retention services, such as spay and neuter outreach, ID clinics, behavior helplines and pet food banks for pets at risk. At the same time, approaches to adoptions should be inspired by the majority of pet relationships that are successful!

- Long stays in a facility may compromise quality of life.

- Resources such as time, funds and space are diverted from other pets within your organization and your community.

- Limited space forces euthanasia decisions.

- Demand for inhumane sources of pets, such as puppy mills and questionable breeders, increases.

- Pets and owners who may need help down the road are cut off from the safety net you provide.

These are not imagined risks. They are real.

The majority of pet owners are crazy about their pets. If statistics aren’t convincing, Google “pet shaming” to see images of cats and dogs (being naughty) shared by proud owners. Embracing this perspective can help you stop viewing adopters as potential threats and instead see them as allies. In addition to offering a home to a pet, adopters can become more active as donors, volunteers and cheerleaders for your organization.



144

Million

6-8

Million

144 million estimated owned dogs and cats in U.S. homes  
(AVMA, 2012)

6-8 million estimated dogs and cats entering U.S. shelter system each year  
(The HSUS, 2014)

Don't let your experience with a fraction of pets and their owners influence your perceptions of adopters.

## Learn from your competition

A national survey of pet owners reveals that the majority of pets came from sources other than shelters or rescues.<sup>7</sup>

**You can increase adoptions by learning from the competition.**

For example:

- Stray cats know how to market themselves! They go to where the people are, have convenient “visiting hours,” show off their personalities, don’t expect a fee and don’t ask intrusive questions. Stray cats also appeal to a person’s compassion.
- Friends and family can give detailed information about pets in a home setting, all without a lengthy application.
- People feel like they know what they are getting from a breeder, even if that isn’t always the case. Quality breeders also offer health screening and socialization.

**Adopted animals compared to top five alternative source of pets in surveyed homes**  
(2013/2014 American Pet Products Association National Pet Owners Survey)



## THE ADOPTER'S PERSPECTIVE

You've got the animals; what you need is the adopters. It is in your best interest to learn as much as possible about pet owners and what makes them tick.

## Research On Adopters

Research into the public's perspective on pet ownership and adoption backs up the lessons learned from competitors.<sup>4,5</sup>

- Many people admit to concerns that shelter and rescue pets are unhealthy and have behavior issues. They worry that there's no way to know what they'll get with a rescued pet.
- People think the adoption process is too difficult (lengthy and prying questions, etc.).
- People see breeders as "experts" and tend to trust them above others.
- People who have adopted take a certain pride in the fact that they saved the life of their pet.

Getting people's attention, helping them know what to expect, making interactions convenient and pleasant and rewarding their desire to do the right the thing are all within reach for adoption agencies. You also have even more to offer—a mission that sets your organization up as a lasting resource for pets and their new families.





“At Providence Animal Rescue League a core belief is that we will only help animals by working proactively and compassionately with people. Reflected in all of our programs and services is our belief that people and animals are inherently good. We strive to create a judgment-free and caring environment for all community members seeking our services, whether they are surrendering a pet, adopting or utilizing our low-cost services. This philosophy is shared with all employees and volunteers.

We have recently streamlined the adoption process and have moved toward a more positive way of connecting people and animals. There are no more lengthy applications and screening processes. Instead, we want to engage in conversation with prospective adopters. If we start from a perspective that people are coming to us with the best intentions, we will have a much better success rate of finding life-long matches.”

–Carmine DiCenso, Executive Director, Providence Animal Rescue League

## STEPS TOWARD BUILDING AN “ADOPTERS WELCOME” ADOPTION PROGRAM

Building an “Adopters Welcome” adoption program starts with a philosophical commitment to celebrating people’s willingness to adopt, meeting them where they are in terms of their attitudes and understanding of pet care and investing in their success with guidance and practical support. Putting this philosophy into practice requires several steps:

- 1.** Implement policies that remove barriers and increase options for homeless pets in your community.
- 2.** Offer adoption counseling that relies on open and easy conversations to set pets and their owners up for success.
- 3.** Develop marketing strategies that overcome barriers.
- 4.** Train team members to deliver the program.

December 18, 2014

Hello to everyone at PARL!

In April, my husband and I adopted a cat but, unfortunately, she was a little too rambunctious for us and you just took her back without making a big deal out of it. Thank you for doing this and I truly hope that she was adopted and is now happy with a new family.

When I brought the cat back, someone directed me to a cat named "Cynthia" who had only been with you for about a week. She is white with a little gray on the top of her head. The following weekend, my husband and I returned to PARL. "Cynthia" was so shy in her cage but warmed up to us a bit in the little room you have so we brought her home which ended up being the best decision we could have made. "Cynthia" is now named "Sugar" or, as I like to call her, "SugarPie." She is a wonderful cat. She has filled out and her fur is thick and bright white. She likes to play, cuddle, and, as cats do, sleep in her nice, comfortable bed. She is very affectionate and so smart. She knows when I'm coming home by the beep of my car and greets me every night at the door. She knows she cannot come up on my lap when I'm eating but, as soon as I push my plate away, she jumps up knowing its cuddling time. She brings so much joy to our lives and we love her dearly.

I just wanted to let you know how wonderful the adoption process was and how fantastic everyone at PARL was to help us pick out the right cat for us. You have a wonderful facility - so very clean and filled with helpful staff. I recommend it to anyone who is looking to adopt an animal. I hope the enclosed small donation helps another animal at PARL-I wish it could be so much more!

Happy Holidays to everyone at PARL!

-- Mary Jane & Sugar Pie



# STEP 1: IMPLEMENT POLICIES THAT REMOVE BARRIERS AND INCREASE OPTIONS



In the past, fear of what could happen to pets influenced adoption policies far more than what actually happened. The policies outlined below take a new approach. They are influenced by the success of most pet relationships as well as the latest research on adoptions, and avoid barriers that will get in the way of supporting great matches.

## “Adopters Welcome” Policies

Adoption policies should not include automatic “no’s” or “must-haves.” These are giant barriers that limit options for animals and drive a wedge between you and potential adopters. Use the following examples to identify and remove barriers in your current policies and develop a better approach. A list of these policies is available at [animalsheltering.org/policies](http://animalsheltering.org/policies).



Pepper, Cher, PeeWee and Crane (along with Spiderman, Tuesday and Toast) live in a rental home that has a pet policy limiting the number of animals permitted. Mom was trusted to make it work, and she did. Landlord, mom and seven spoiled shelter alums are living happily ever after!

“Adopters Welcome” policies ... support renters instead of policing them.

## Why?

Landlord checks are a drain on precious time and they send a message to adopters that you don’t trust them. Consider the countless people who do find pet-friendly housing or manage to work through landlord issues on their own.

A 2014 study found no difference in pet retention after an Ohio shelter ended a strict landlord policy.<sup>6</sup>

## Your approach

Alert adopters to the fact that pet policies and requirements may exist and trust them to take it from there.



Mabeline was distraught when her outdoor cat went missing. Counselors at Wisconsin Humane Society shared information with her about the benefits of keeping cats indoors and she made the decision to keep her adopted cat, Kate, indoors or only allow her outdoors when on her harness.

**“Adopters Welcome” policies ...**  
use persuasion, not policies, to help cats live indoors.

### Why?

Approximately sixty-four percent to seventy-six percent of owned cats are kept indoors at least at night, and this trend has been on the rise, up from approximately twenty percent in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

Restrictive policies prevent cats from finding homes, leading to longer stays, euthanasia or spending more resources to help fewer cats. They can also cause some adopters to lie about their intentions. Don't lose a home and a chance to promote indoor cats the right way.

### Your Approach

Many cat owners believe that it's better for cats to go outside. Others don't know how many easy options there are for indoor cat fun. An adoption relationship can help you share perspectives and give cat lovers the insights they need to make good decisions. Instead of saying no, spend time explaining how cats can live longer, healthier lives indoors, with reduced risks to themselves and wildlife. Be proactive by sending cats home with a collar, tag and microchip. This approach leads to adoption, plus a more informed pet owner.



Jose wasn't ready to adopt after his 18-year-old cat passed away, until he met Sebastian. He didn't have veterinary history because he hadn't been able to afford it. Then he was too embarrassed to start. He knew veterinary care was important and planned on Sebastian being a regular patient,

but he was worried he wouldn't qualify. He did. And Sebastian is grateful!

### "Adopters Welcome" policies ...

promote veterinary care, without requiring proof.

#### Why?

Veterinarians are life savers for pets and should be part of adoption conversations. But past history doesn't always predict future behavior. Remember the time before you knew what all the letters in FVRCP and DHPP stood for? Adopters come with a range of veterinary experience and also have the ability to learn more, just like you.

Your job is to protect the health of animals in your care and set them up for success. They should be vaccinated against common diseases such as parvo, bordetella and feline upper respiratory viruses.

Automatically refusing adoptions to homes with spotty veterinary histories limits available homes and prevents you from promoting veterinary care for more pets.

#### Your Approach

Talk to adopters about vaccines and medical procedures provided to animals in your care. Use this time to find out about the adopter's veterinary history. If pets at home are not vaccinated, find out why. Reasons could include worries about over-vaccination, bad vaccine reactions or even a mistaken due date.

Use this opportunity to explain how veterinary care can help new pets (and pets at home) live happy, healthy lives.



**Good adopters can be on a tight budget, which highlights the need to offer low-cost options. Share information on any veterinary perks you offer, such as free wellness visits for adopted pets. Some organizations have on-site clinics, but many rely on partnerships with local veterinarians who appreciate the chance to gain new clients.**



“Removing policies that were different based on type or breed of dog was a game-changer. The “magic solution” is ... we actually believe what we are saying about this kind of dog. Our staff—over 120 individuals—don’t feel these kinds of dogs need “special” adopters, or that they need “extra” evaluation. And because our staff knows this to be true—we adopt out hundreds of pit bull types each year—it’s easy to share them with our community.”

–Stephanie Shain, Chief Operating Officer,  
Washington Humane Society

**“Adopters Welcome” policies ...**  
treat all dog breeds and types equally.

### Why?

Policies that prevent or regulate adoptions for specific breeds or types of dogs don’t protect dogs or people. No evidence exists demonstrating that one breed is more dangerous than another. There is also no evidence that certain breeds of dogs will be adopted for the wrong reasons, like animal fighting.

Enforcing breed-specific adoption policies causes pets and people to lose out. Fortunately, it doesn’t have to be this way.

### Your Approach

Adoption policies that treat dogs as individuals and use a selection process based on history, observation and, if applicable, results of formal behavior assessments, support only the facts.

All dogs and adopters should be set up for success through:

- Access to spay and neuter services.
- Counsel and access to veterinary care.
- Counsel on socialization, training and the dangers that can result from chaining or separation from family members.

Developing proactive services like these will help all people and pets far more than special hoops for certain breeds ever will.



“After reading the positive research about pets as gifts, we came up with the idea for a special delivery adoption promotion, using staff and volunteer ‘elves’ to deliver adopted pets on Christmas Eve and Christmas. The week before, adopters signed up, chose a day and time for the delivery, met with a staff person to arrange the surprise and went home to wait for the big moment. Groups of elves were assigned to deliver an adopted pet and were encouraged to wear elf suits or other holiday attire. The response was tremendous. In the days leading up to Christmas, we nearly emptied the shelter and filled all of our available delivery spots. The look on the kids’ faces when that door opened was just priceless and adopters told us we created a lifelong memory for their families. An added benefit? Our trained volunteers and staff members were there to help with introductions and to provide counseling and resources. We will definitely be doing special deliveries again next year!”

–Tawny Hammond, Director, Fairfax County Animal Shelter

### “Adopters Welcome” policies ...

welcome the giving of pets as gifts.

### Why?

Research shows that pets received as gifts are actually more likely to remain in their homes than pets acquired other ways.<sup>8,9,10,11</sup>

### Your Approach

We know that puppies and kittens (and older pets!) can be wonderful presents for children, loved ones and friends during the holidays and for birthdays, too. Instead of sending adopters to pet stores, questionable breeders and classified ads because of unfounded fears, support these gift adoptions by helping the gift giver find the best match for their lucky recipient. Let your continued support for the pet and new guardian be a gift that keeps on giving.





### “Adopters Welcome” policies ...

provide tips on how to introduce a new pet, but don’t require a “meet and greet” unless the adopter requests one.

#### Why?

Dog-dog introductions take time, can cause stress and don’t predict success or failure in a home.

A 2014 study showed that removing the “must meet pets” requirement did not change reports of how new dogs and resident dogs got along post adoption.<sup>6</sup>

#### Your Approach

Unless an adopter wants help physically introducing dogs, skip this requirement. Instead, offer guidance on how to successfully and gradually introduce new pets to resident pets at home.

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### “Adopters Welcome” policies ...

allow adopters to determine if they would like all members of the home to meet a new pet before adoption.

#### Why?

Imagine families could only schedule doctor’s appointments when everyone in the home could be present. Advance planning and time off from work or school might be necessary. Patients would be angry at doctors for not trusting them. Emergency rooms would become more appealing because of their flexibility! If this sounds crazy, then imagine how adopters feel when they are forced to put their household decisions in your hands.

#### Your Approach

It makes sense to want everyone in a household to be on the same page. It doesn’t make sense to hold up an adoption in order to prove it. Instead of forcing the issue, which wastes time and goodwill, make it a part of your adoption conversation. Some pet owners will want to take the extra time to include all members of the home in their decision, but leave that up to them.



### “Adopters Welcome” policies ...

use persuasion to address declawing, not punishment.

#### Why?

Automatic denials based on declawing reduce options for cats and shut out opportunities to change minds. Some adopters may admit to an interest in declawing, but others may not. An open conversation can be more effective in eliminating this practice. Many cat lovers don’t understand that declawing is an amputation and are horrified when they learn the facts.

#### Your Approach

Find out why declawing is being considered and introduce adopters to effective alternatives like nail caps, scratching posts, and scratching deterrents such as Sticky Paws. Have these resources available on-site to make it easier for adopters to do the right thing and remind them that you’ll be available to help if problems come up at home. Let pet owners know why declawing should be a last resort. You can also encourage them to adopt cats who are already declawed. This approach leads to adoption, plus a more informed pet owner.

### “Adopters Welcome” policies ...

support homes long-term instead of investigating them once.

#### Why?

Performing home visits takes time and ties up space and other resources that could save more pets in your care or in your community. These visits also risk putting adopters on the defensive, which damages your relationship. They are less likely to see you as a resource. You will also miss potential adopters who choose to avoid the visit altogether and look for pets elsewhere.

If your only gain is a snapshot of a home that may not accurately reflect the pet’s future, can you justify what’s lost?

#### Your Approach

Trade the time that would otherwise be spent on home visits for helping more animals find good homes and supporting pets and families post-adoption. You are far more likely to guarantee a good home when you have a close connection to adopters!

### “Adopters Welcome” policies ...

help adopters keep their dogs happy and healthy, whether or not they have a fence!

#### Why?

Requirements like fenced-in yards only decrease the pool of adopters for homeless pets. What does the presence of a fence really tell you about an adopter? Challenge yourself to find five dog owners you know who have a fence and five you know who do not. Are the five with fences better pet owners? Are their dogs happier and healthier? Which dogs spend more time with their family members on walks?

#### Your Approach

What makes fences so appealing? Safety? Freedom from chains? Off-leash exercise with their family? All of these needs can be met without a fence. Instead of relying on a physical object that may not actually serve your goals, focus on the needs themselves and help adopters meet them, no matter their living environment.

### “Adopters Welcome” policies ...

help pets live happily with people of all ages.

#### Why?

Restrictions such as “no children under 5” or “no puppies or kittens for seniors,” do not protect animals. They **do** offend potential adopters and greatly reduce opportunities for pets. Age restrictions and snap judgments based on age are barriers that interfere with your adoption conversation. They can cause you to miss out on a great home.

#### Your Approach

Share insight with adopters. If you know that the 70-pound dog is an active jumper who has a history of knocking down small children, tell adopters your concerns and ask them about their own. Together, you may be able to make these matches work, or find one that is even better.





### “Adopters Welcome” policies ...

support spay and neuter for pets at home, without requiring it.

#### Why?

Your first priority is to make sure the pets you place are not reproducing. If you are following best practices, adopted pets will be spayed or neutered and will not reproduce. If you need to restrict adoptions because your animals aren't spayed or neutered, fix that first.

Refusing to place an altered pet in a home with intact animals is counter-productive. Chances are good the denied adopter will still get a pet. Chances are also good that animal will be intact, creating a breeding environment adoption could have prevented.

#### Your Approach

If pets at home are not spayed or neutered, take advantage of a great opportunity to do some outreach. Ask why. Have a conversation about the benefits of spay/neuter and take time to answer questions and concerns. Letting adopters know what options are available locally or through your organization may add spay/neuter success to your adoption success.

### “Adopters Welcome” policies ...

don't delay in sending pets home.

#### Why?

Policies that delay people from starting life with an animal they've fallen for don't make sense. Today, good customer service includes instant results. Chances are that most folks who come to you with the intention of giving a new pet a home are excited and want to get started right away.

A 2012 survey of adopters found that pets adopted on the spur of the moment were just as likely to still be in the home after six months as those adopted by owners who had done lots of research.<sup>12</sup>

Moving pets out of cages or kennels sooner cuts down on stress and related illness and frees up resources for animals still in need of a home. For groups that rely on home-based foster care, such as rescues, the option of same-day placement directly affects the number of animals you help in the community.

#### Your Approach

Sending animals home at adoption requires smooth operations that start at intake. Look at your process to make sure animals have what they need to go home at adoption, including spay or neuter surgery. Anticipate bottlenecks such as weekends and holidays or increased volume for upcoming events. Make sure staff and volunteers at offsite events and satellite locations have what they need to send animals home.

Many shelters are making it possible for adopters to consider stray animals before their hold is up. If these animals are not reclaimed, they can find their new homes faster. Get a head start on unavoidable delays such as post-hold spay or neuter by proactively scheduling them ahead of time. Communicating your efforts to adopters can help them manage the wait.



## SAYING NO

This adoption program is based on the knowledge that most pet relationships can be successful. However, there will be times when adoption isn't the best option for a pet or a person, at least not right now. If you follow the philosophy and approach outlined in this document, you and the adopter will be more likely to come to this conclusion together. Instead of leaving you and finding a pet somewhere else, they may listen to your suggestions and come back when they are ready.

Kris Badillo is the former Chicago Community Organizer for The HSUS Pets for Life program. He helped pet owners in the neighborhood of Lawndale access services including spay and neuter surgery, veterinary care and dog training. He also helped connect them with the local shelter for adoption. One of his clients, Margie, was a cat lover who already had three adult cats at home. She asked for Kris's help adopting a kitten. Through his outreach to Margie, Kris knew she had a lot going on in her life. She had recently suffered a serious trauma and was in the middle of an unexpected move. He wondered if now was the right time for her to get a new kitten and shared his thoughts with her in a nonjudgmental and compassionate manner. He didn't need to say "no." Through that conversation, Margie decided to put off adopting until the time was right.



## Be a Resource to Pet Owners

Removing barriers like phone calls to landlords and veterinarians, “must meet resident dog” requirements and home visits saves time and energy. Reinvest these resources to support adopters during and after the adoption process. Use experience to anticipate common challenges, and then assemble resources from your organization and your community that prepare counselors to help. A template for the example provided is available at [animalsheltering.org/support](https://animalsheltering.org/support).

### **Adopter’s challenge:** Keeping a new cat indoors

#### **Tips on indoor enrichment**

Where: [indoorpet.osu.edu/cats/](https://indoorpet.osu.edu/cats/)

Approximate Cost: Free

Notes: Look under the “For Pet Owners” tab

#### **Toys cats like to hunt**

Where: Local shelter’s retail store

All local pet supply stores and online

Approximate Cost: \$7+

Notes: Some favorites are treat-dispensing toys, fishing rod toys and interactive toys

#### **Cat harness**

Where: Local shelter’s retail store

All local pet supply stores and online

Approximate Cost: \$10+

#### **Making cat-friendly changes to your home**

Where: *Catification* by Jackson Galaxy

Approximate Cost: \$13+

Notes: Includes ideas that range from cheap DIY to professional remodeling





## Return Policy

The HSUS supports a no-fault return policy in which adopters are given the opportunity to find a better match, or receive a full or partial refund. This approach turns mismatches into opportunities.

The former adopter can serve the same role as a foster home. By learning more about the returned animal, you can make a stronger match next time. And by embracing the “returning adopter,” you reserve a home for a different animal, either now or in the future.

This approach, first dubbed “satisfaction guaranteed” by the Humane Society of Boulder Valley, helps the public overcome any fears they may have about adopting a shelter or rescue pet. The ASPCA looked at statistics in a few shelters that switched to this policy.<sup>13</sup> They found that more visitors decided to adopt with a satisfaction guarantee in place than without. In some shelters, returns did not increase. However, when returns did increase (possibly because adopters felt more comfortable returning), they were still outpaced by an increase in adoptions. In other words, satisfaction guarantees led to more happy endings overall.



## Rehoming Policy

Remember that a major source of pets is friends and family members. Your rehoming policy should build on this success. Sometimes, in spite of efforts and desire, adoptions don't work out. Empower adopters to follow your lead in finding a better home for the pet, without fear of breaking contracts or harming their relationship with your organization. This includes allowing them to adopt another pet from your organization. Ask the former adopter for help with encouraging the new owner to reach out to you. In addition to updating records, including contact information for microchips and ID, you can also share any follow-up assistance with them. When you are proactive about rehoming you can reserve space, time and funds for animals in greater need of assistance.

# The Adoption Contract

At the end of the adoption process, many shelters and rescue groups use an adoption contract to formalize the agreement between the adopting organization and the adopter. In addition to demonstrating transfer of ownership from the adopting agency to the adopter, adoption contracts also serve to protect your adoption agency from future liability.

Consult with an attorney who is licensed in your state and familiar with issues pertaining to animal law when drafting or adopting legal documents such as contracts. Not only do you want to ensure that such documents

are tailored to meet the requirements of all federal, state and local laws, you also want to ensure that your organization is protected in the event that there are future issues with the pet.

After implementing the new approaches outlined in this manual, examine your contract to make sure you aren't undermining your adopter-friendly approach. For example, replace "no refunds" language and demands to return the animal to your agency if they can't be kept. Instead, focus on influencing pet care through engaging adoption conversations and follow-up support.

## Self-Assessment Tools

Adoptions don't happen in a vacuum. Their success is tied to all other aspects of your organization. The adoption program outlined in this document relies on strong standards of care, effective operations and an investment in your human resources, including staff and volunteers. In this manual we operate from the assumption that these aspects are currently in place and working well. The following tools can help you make sure they are! Find links to all of these resources at [animalsheltering.org/assess](http://animalsheltering.org/assess).

### UC Davis Virtual Consultant

This is a free online self-assessment tool created by the shelter medicine experts at UC Davis. Shelters, rescues and other animal welfare organizations complete straightforward surveys and receive immediate feedback regarding animal care practices. The tool points you to the best available resources to help with making any needed protocol adjustments.

### People Practices Self-Check

You spend tremendous amounts of time and energy improving the health and welfare of your shelter's animals, but what about the staff you rely on to do the work? The People Practices Self-Check is a new tool designed by a team of organizational science experts at the University of North Carolina Charlotte. It will help you identify opportunities to promote the growth and success of your animal shelter's human resources.

## Rescue Program Assessment

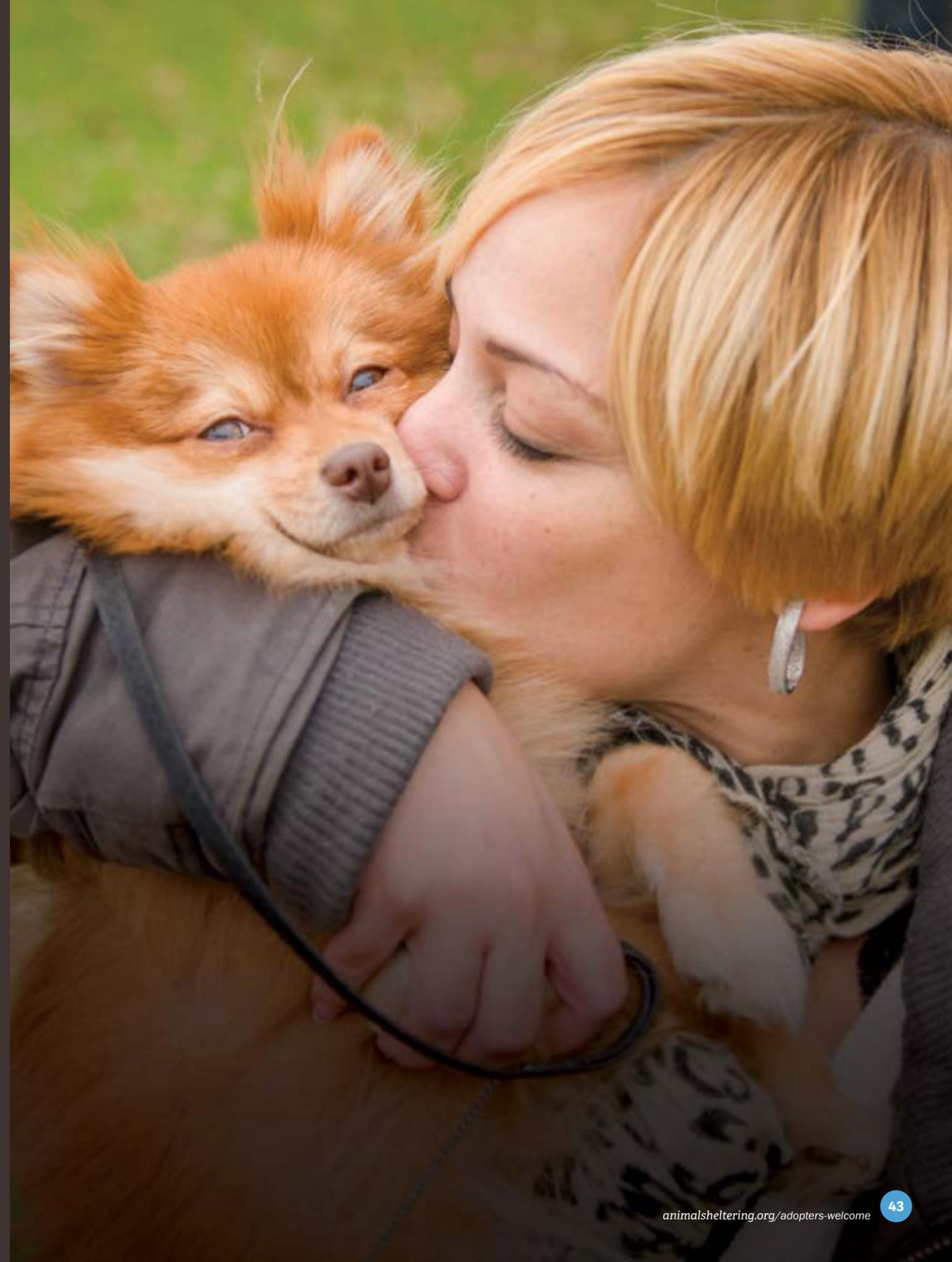
Volunteers are the lifeblood of rescue groups, who often don't have paid staff. But without a highly effective volunteer program, rescues can't operate at their full life-saving potential. The Rescue Program Assessment (RPA) is a new tool that assesses a rescue's volunteer program and provides concrete steps to improve the organization's effectiveness.

## Shelter Diagnostic System

Developed through a partnership between The HSUS and the University of North Carolina Charlotte, the Shelter Diagnostic System is a consultation service designed to help private and public animal shelters run better by surveying employees and making specific recommendations based on the results.

## Volunteer Program Assessment

Through scholarship funding from The HSUS, the organizational experts at the University of North Carolina Charlotte can help you assess and enhance the effectiveness of your volunteer program, at no charge to you.



# STEP 2: RELY ON CONVERSATIONS INSTEAD OF APPLICATIONS



Long applications that ask pet owners to prove their worth are in and of themselves another barrier. This approach also makes it easy to miss insights that help make a match succeed. Remember your new perspective—your job isn't to ferret out bad adopters, it is to help support great pet owners. Your goal is to find a way to get to “yes!”

The following adoption questionnaire (we don't call it an application!) is designed for conversation-based adoptions in organizations that have barrier-free adoption policies. You won't see a space for landlord contacts or veterinary history, or any questions that might lead to automatically rejecting adopters. You will see questions that will help counselors learn about the adopter, or a gift recipient, and any pets at home. These can guide conversations about a particular animal, or give hints to assist the adopter in finding the best pet for them. It can even be used with formal matching programs you might have in place.

This questionnaire also asks adopters to point out what topics are important to them to help counselors prioritize what information to share. Finally, there is space to promote your special services that might be of interest to adopters, or someone they know. You can customize the template to fit your organization. Our only request is that you keep it barrier-free. Download the questionnaire at [animalsheltering.org/questionnaire](http://animalsheltering.org/questionnaire).



**We'll explain this new pet's medical history and behavioral history. Check additional topics you'd like to discuss:**

- Feeding this pet
- House training/litter box training
- Grooming/nail trimming
- Exercise, toys and fun activities
- Puppy/kitten-proofing your home
- Finding a trainer
- Introducing this pet to other pets
- Microchips and other ID options
- Finding a veterinarian
- Declawing
- Crate Training
- Moving with pets
- Pulling on-leash
- Flea/tick prevention
- Heartworm prevention

Other questions: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*[Shelters and Rescues: Use the following space for additional services your agency may be able to offer pets at home. Examples listed below.]*

**Extra services and opportunities; check any you are interested in:**

- Borrow/rent a crate with this adoption
- Information on our next low-cost vaccination day for any current pets
- Information on our next low-cost microchip implantation day for any current pets
- Make ID tags for current pets
- License current pets
- Information about our training classes
- Information about low-cost spay and neuter services and other veterinary services
- Information about volunteering or fostering with us
- Information about supporting us with financial or in-kind donations

## Your Logo

**Thank you for choosing adoption! Please complete the following questions to help guide our conversation today.**

Animal's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Animal ID #: \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name(s): Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Town, State, ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Cell phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Home phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Work phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Best way to be reached by phone?  cell  home  work

Best time of day to be reached?  morning  afternoon  evening

This pet is meant to be a gift. I am answering the following questions from the perspective of the lucky recipient.

*We welcome adopters who rent, or live in an apartment or condo. We want to alert you that some landlords and management companies have size and breed restrictions, limits on number of pets, and/or require pet deposits or additional fees.*

**Tell us about members of the new pet's household (e.g., # of adults/seniors/young children):**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Tell us about pets at home (check all that apply):**

- We have one or more dog(s)
- We have one or more small animal(s)
- We have one or more cat(s)
- I'd like help with introducing a new pet to pet(s) at home

**Other info you want to share?**

## Paperwork Optional

Don't tie yourself to unnecessary paperwork. If adoption counselors can demonstrate that they have mastered the new approach, allow them to skip the questionnaire altogether and go straight to the conversation. This approach is already working for the Animal Humane Society, which serves communities out of five campuses in Minnesota. According to Janelle Dixon, President and CEO, the group has eliminated checklists and applications for adopters to fill out. Customer service representatives refer to a list that guides a friendly and constructive conversation. Dixon states, “We refer to our adoption process as relational and not transactional.”



# STEP 3: DEVELOP MARKETING THAT OVERCOMES BARRIERS

“To the best of our knowledge, waiving the fee for the adoption of an adult cat was developed at the Wisconsin Humane Society (WHS), often considered one of the top humane societies in the United States. The idea of a fee-waived adoption program was motivated by the knowledge that many in the community were acquiring free-roaming cats or cats from “free to good home” newspaper ads, neighbors and the like. In most cases, these cats were not spayed or neutered; new guardians did not have the tools to effectively resolve common behaviors that education during adoption could provide, increasing secondary abandonment and thus contributing to cat overpopulation. In addition, waiving the fee created an opportunity to discuss the plight of cats and encouraged adopters to select an adult cat over a kitten. The implementation of this program resulted in increased adoptions of adult cats at WHS.”

– “A Comparison of Attachment Levels of Adopters of Cats: Fee-Based Adoptions Versus Free Adoptions.”<sup>14</sup>

## Use Marketing to Get Past Barriers

Marketing is another tool to help you bust through barriers and reach a larger audience. Adorable pictures, meaningful descriptions, creative advertising and special promotions get people’s attention and help them get past worries about shelter and rescue pets.

If you need to jump start your adoption marketing, start by checking out what other adoption agencies are doing by visiting their websites and Facebook pages. Assemble a list of ideas—even big ideas that aren’t realistic for all animals should be included.

To make sure you don’t miss a step, develop a marketing action plan. The sample provided (template available at [animalsheltering.org/actionplan](http://animalsheltering.org/actionplan)) is part timeline and part checklist for your individual strategies (outreach events and agency wide specials won’t be included). Some basics should be in place early for all adoption-track animals. New strategies should kick in as time passes. This is just one example. The strategies and timeline will vary by agency, but the goal is to help every animal find a good match as soon as possible.

	<b>Code Green = Ready for adoption</b>
	Take an upbeat picture that shows off good looks and personality
	Write a profile description that is positive, creative and highlights best features
	Post pictures and profiles to national adoption websites and to your local online pages
	Set reasonable adoption rates that are competitive
	<b>Code Blue = Available for adoption more than two weeks</b>
	Identify behaviors that may be driving adopters away - Move to a foster home for behavior modification
	Relocate housing to a different location within the shelter, main lobby or off-site location
	Highlight as “Pet of the Week” through local newspaper, television and radio stations
	Take a new picture that captures personality - Upgrade with silly props and colorful backdrops
	Write a new profile description illustrating unique and special qualities - Stay positive and use humor
	Add a short video featuring play and other fun activities to online profiles
	Create a personalized cage sign by using just a few words to say something extra special
	<b>Code Orange = Available for adoption more than four weeks</b>
	Evaluate for mental health- If showing signs of deterioration, move immediately to foster
	Identify new behaviors that are driving adopters away- Move to a foster home for behavior modification
	Take a set of fresh new pictures using better backgrounds, outfits, accessories and popular themes
	Add or subtract from the profile and alter the pet’s name- Use puns, rhymes, and play off current events
	Promote socially by adding photos on Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc. as a pet of the week
	Spotlight the pet on your website and ask your local businesses to do the same
	Find volunteers to take dogs to training classes or clicker train cats and promote as a special feature
	Bring to special events, popular parks, and other high traffic locations to maximize exposure
	<b>Code Red = Top five animals with highest number of days available for adoption</b>
	Drop the adoption price by waiving or cutting the adoption fee
	Encourage staff and volunteers to add the pet’s picture and tagline to email signatures
	Decorate housing by using popular themes and match colors or patterns throughout bedding and toys
	Create and share flyers on social media asking followers to print and post at work/coffee shops/etc.
	Run senior bloodwork, perform dentals and have the pet groomed to add value and peace of mind
	Find sponsors for adoption fees and any additional medical needs
	Send out on regular field trips into the community to meet adopters where they are



### Start your brainstorming

Be sure to check out one of our favorite sources for cool marketing ideas: the new and improved “Little Black Book of Adoption Promotion Ideas,” available at [aspcapro.org](http://aspcapro.org).

# Getting Past Barriers To Your Marketing

Make sure barriers aren't getting in the way of your marketing and outreach. Here are a few ways you may be holding back your adoptions:

## Holding on to outdated beliefs

*Are you still afraid of fee-waived adoptions for cats?*

When you waive fees, but include all the benefits of your adoption program, you can compete with the marketing genius of stray cats. Research<sup>14</sup>, long-running programs like the one at Wisconsin Humane Society and repeated success all over the country trump old concerns that adopters will be less committed to free cats. You can find excellent resources on fee-waived adoptions at ASPCApro. Collect tips from agencies that tried this approach and love the impact it has on adoptions and reducing the time cats spend in shelters. These accounts will also challenge any budgetary concerns you may have by pointing to savings that result from reduced stays in care, as well as revenue generated by donations and product sales that increase as adoptions increase.

*Do you make it easy for adopters to interact with potential pets?* Never underestimate the power of touch! A 2010 survey of adopters from five different shelters looked at what influenced adoption choices.<sup>15</sup> Adopters pointed to appearance and behavior as well as learning more about animals from staff and volunteers. Adopters also reported that directly interacting with an animal was more important than seeing him or her behind a cage door. We know what you're thinking! But what about disease? Fear of spreading germs often leads to (not so friendly) warnings that visitors should keep their hands and fingers to themselves. The reality is that animal care staff, equipment, shared surfaces and other fomites are more likely to spread disease.<sup>16</sup> Keep your disease control protocols tight, but loosen up with visitors—tear down those “no touching” signs.

## Opening during inconvenient hours

If people aren't available when you are open, they can't adopt. Retail hours, also known as shopping hours, make it convenient for adopters—not to mention volunteers and other supporters—to visit on evenings and weekends. Putting this piece of common sense into practice can get bogged down by legitimate concerns about staffing changes and schedule shifts. But the benefits of making this change far outweigh the challenges. And remember that the hours will be more convenient for volunteers as well, making it easier for them to help out.

Talk to other agencies similar in size and structure and ask how they made the switch. For example, Friends of Lawrence County Rescue (FOLC) in Ohio helped their partners at the Lawrence County Animal Shelter ease into the change with a few weekend events. The increased traffic helped the warden see that expanding hours could increase adoptions and help people buy their dog tags for the year. Now the shelter is regularly open from noon to 4:00 p.m. on Saturdays. FOLC pointed out that being open for adoption also meant being open for intakes. This was a drawback, but it didn't stop progress. The shelter added a few hours to the schedule and an office worker joined the regular weekend crew. Everyone is happy with the decision, especially the adopted pets.

Whenever you make a positive change like extending your hours, be sure to brag about it! Let the public know that you've made it easier for them to adopt and pitch it to local media for extra (free) advertising.





### Find puppy friendly pet store partners

Shelters and rescues are already filling PetSmart and PETCO stores with animals for adoption, but you don't have to stop there! More and more locally owned stores want to support adoption groups instead of selling pets from puppy mills and are looking for partners. To find potential stores in your area, look for the state-by-state search at [hsus.org/puppystores](https://hsus.org/puppystores).

### Waiting for people to come to you

Look to the success of foster-based rescue groups who operate without a facility. Satellite locations, adoption events and volunteers can help expand your reach.

Adopters can't get to you if they don't know where you are! Always publicize all of your locations and hours and let visitors at one adoption site know what other options exist.

A cheap way to expand your reach is to empower staff, volunteers and foster parents to take animals out on the town for walks in parks, on city streets or into pet-friendly businesses. "Adopt-me" vests can make your mission clear and keep adoption at the top of the public's mind. Find the opportunities that work in your community; the key is taking animals where the people are.

### Spreading your staff too thin

Organizations need to budget staff resources for successful adoption programs. If adopters can't find anyone to help them meet animals and answer questions, they will walk away frustrated. Unanswered e-mails and phone calls diffuse good intentions and send potential adopters elsewhere. Keep in mind that adoption events are staff- and volunteer-intensive. Be strategic about the events you choose to attend so you can manage your staff resources and provide great customer service.

Volunteers should not be relied on to fill chronic staff shortages, but they can help you do more. Many volunteers will jump at the chance to participate in the adoption process by introducing animals and counseling adopters. Be sure to offer foster parents and volunteers the same training as you do your adoption staff.

# Check Your Blind Spots

Never take for granted that all of the potential adopters in your community know you are the best source for pets. Chances are you're missing out on entire zip codes full of great homes. On average, about forty percent of the dogs and cats in homes today come from shelters or rescues, but in some parts of your community, that number can be much lower.<sup>2</sup> The HSUS Pets for Life program works in underserved neighborhoods where less than three percent of pets come from shelters and rescues. It's not surprising that in these same areas, only twelve percent of pet owners report having any interactions at all with their local shelters or animal control agencies.<sup>1</sup> This isn't because there are fewer people with pets in the zip code. The pet lovers are there; we just need to let them know adoption is an option for them.



"Cardale didn't want to spay his puppy Bronco because he knew he'd want another puppy someday. He had no idea that he could adopt one. While talking with Cardale about spay and neuter, I also shared my experience seeing puppies just like Bronco in our local shelter. I didn't realize the impact of this conversation until Cardale

came back to get Bronco fixed and told me that he was telling his brother to adopt! Now he's spreading the word about spay/neuter and adoption."

—Annette Bellezzo, Coordinator, Pets for Life Chicago

You can uncover your "blind spots" by mapping out past adopters by zip code or street address. It makes sense to include data from at least a few years. Depending on the number of adoptions you perform, you can try this by hand or take advantage of mapping software. Try free options like Google My Maps or invest in a product like MapPoint. This will give you a bird's eye view of the parts of your community you aren't currently reaching.

Connecting with untapped parts of your community doesn't happen overnight. A single outreach event won't turn your organization into a household name. In many cases, these adoption areas will be underserved in other ways, isolated from services many of us take for granted. It will take time to build familiarity and trust by having a visible and consistent presence. Needless to say, the goal is worth the effort. In addition to finding adopters, you will meet clients who can benefit from other services such as spay/neuter, and you will gain advocates like Cardale, who can help expand your outreach efforts.

Find detailed instructions on how to perform a comprehensive community assessment and build a strong presence in previously underserved neighborhoods by reviewing The HSUS Pets for Life Community Outreach Toolkit at [animalsheltering.org/pfltoolkit](https://animalsheltering.org/pfltoolkit).

Jill Kline, Vice President of Community Impact Programs at the Wisconsin Humane Society (WHS), shares her insights from completing a community assessment as part of the Pets for Life mentorship process:

“WHS is fortunate to have a beautiful, inviting shelter in Milwaukee, with open and friendly staff. We know, however, that there are still populations we’re not reaching with our services. We completed a community assessment that helped us to identify the zip code in our city with the most significant economic challenges and fewest animal care resources. We found that just 76 of our nearly 9,500 adoptions in 2011 came from that particular zip code. We identified this as an opportunity to further engage the community in our mission and available resources, including our adoption program. We were excited about the potential impact of building a relationship where these clients would look to us for animals—and we would connect them with altered, vaccinated animals.

We have learned that many people in our focus community do not realize that they can adopt from our shelter. The majority of community members have never been to our building and didn’t realize that we were ready to be a resource for them, whether they already have an animal in the home or are hoping to bring one into their lives. In addition, many people believe that the adoption process may be intimidating or that they would be turned down. As we share information about our organization and adoption process, we find that many community members are interested in saving a homeless animal, and we’ve been able to connect some of our clients with a new companion—a win-win for everyone.”



# Welcome, Adopters!

You know the importance of being professional and welcoming to your patrons. Now take a fresh look at how you are appearing to them as well. Use the following questions to gauge how you're doing from a visitor's perspective. If you want to take it a step further, ask a trusted friend or volunteer to answer these example questions for a fresh perspective.

## For organizations with a central facility:

- Is your facility identified with clear signage that marks the open hours and entrances?
- Is your facility itself easy to locate?
- How does your facility appear from the outside? Are there visual barriers like weeds and trash?
- Is someone available to greet visitors when they enter?
- How does your facility look from the inside? Include the good, the bad and what's missing.
- Is it clear where to go and what to do next?
- How do the animal areas look, smell and sound?
- Do the animals look comfortable, with soft bedding and toys?
- Is it easy to meet with and learn about animals?
- Are visiting spaces comfortable for all types of visitors? Consider your adopters' ages, abilities and what's needed for a meaningful conversation.
- What's it like to call your organization? Are questions answered promptly? How long is the hold time? Do you get lost in "the system?"

## For organizations without a central facility:

- Is it easy to "meet" and learn about animals online?
- Once you find a pet you are interested in, is it clear what to do next?
- When animals are in public locations (such as pet stores), is it easy for potential adopters to interact with them? Are instructions available to inform adopters how to take the next step?
- Are e-mails or phone calls returned in two days or fewer?
- Is communication customer-friendly?
- Is it possible to meet available pets in four days or fewer?
- Are representatives friendly and helpful at adoption events?
- Are visiting spaces at events and foster homes comfortable for all types of visitors? Consider your adopters' ages, abilities and what's needed for a meaningful conversation.



# STEP 4: TRAIN YOUR TEAM



“Processes and practices are destined to fail unless your people are highly trained not only for today, but also for tomorrow. Successful organizations shine on many fronts. One of the brightest stars is the commitment to employee growth and development.”

–Steven G. Rogelberg, PhD, Professor, University of North Carolina Charlotte  
Director, Organizational Science | Editor, Journal of Business and Psychology

## ● ● Pop Quiz

**How well would adoption counselors in your agency perform on this adoption pop quiz?**

1. What vaccines do adopted animals receive and what do they protect against?
2. What is heartworm disease and how is it prevented?
3. What are some tips for introducing cats to each other?
4. How do you house-train an adult dog?
5. How do you prevent a cat from scratching the furniture?



## Develop A Formal Training Plan

Lack of training, or improper training, is another barrier to adoption success. You need to be certain that counselors can answer questions like the ones in the above pop quiz correctly, consistently and in a customer-friendly way.

Ideally, counselors will be able to train gradually. Different organizations will need to find the training method that works best for their structure and resources, but one approach could look like this:

- 1.** Receive classroom instruction or homework on key background information for adoptions. Pass an open-book test to advance to the next level.
- 2.** Observe senior counselors or mentors in action.
- 3.** Practice through role-play.
- 4.** Take the lead in counseling while being observed.
- 5.** Demonstrate that they can implement what they've learned in training in order to graduate to counseling on their own.

This plan assumes that the counselors already completed a general orientation and received basic training, such as animal handling.

# Compile Key Background Information

Counselors need to understand the mechanics of your adoption process from start to finish. They will also be expected to answer questions about individual animals and fill in any gaps adopters have in their own pet care knowledge, without being preachy! Finally, they need to know when to say, “I’m not sure, but let me find out for you” and where to go for answers.

What follows is a basic checklist of information to include in adoption counselor training. You’ll need to fill in the blanks with details unique to your organization. We’ve also included a brief reading list to help counselors get up to speed on common pet care issues. This list is just a start. To make sure you’ve covered all the bases, ask counselors what else they need to know.

## Facts about your organization (some will be a review from other trainings and orientation)

Organization’s mission:

---

Basic statistics:

---

Details about services offered by your organization:

---

Details about services offered through community partnerships:

---

Details about how adopters can get more involved (volunteering, donations, wish lists):

---

Where to go with questions about different issues:

---

## Facts about your adoption program

Adoption program mission:

*Example: To make adoptions succeed by getting rid of barriers and partnering with people to help pets*

---

All related policies:

---

Details about services included in adoption fees (or waived fees) such as:

- Microchips \_\_\_\_\_
- Pet insurance \_\_\_\_\_
- Access to discounted services such as health checks or training classes \_\_\_\_\_

Administrative details of your process including paperwork and filing:

---

How to direct adopters to ask follow-up questions:

---

Where to go with adoption related questions (team leaders, supervisor, etc.):

---

Local pet-related laws:

---

How to direct adopters to share pictures and stories about their pets with your team:

---



## Facts and observations about the pets adopters are interested in

How to access medical and behavior information on pets including:

- History \_\_\_\_\_
- Staff and volunteer observations \_\_\_\_\_
- Results of information about formal behavior assessments, if applicable \_\_\_\_\_
- Medical notes \_\_\_\_\_

How to be transparent with facts and observations, while avoiding promises:

---

Where to go with detailed medical or behavior questions:

---



## Pet Care Information

What follows is a partial list of resources for counselors.  
Find links and more at [animalsheltering.org/counselorinfo](http://animalsheltering.org/counselorinfo)

**The HSUS website:** [humanesociety.org/pet\\_tips](http://humanesociety.org/pet_tips)

The HSUS offers a long list of tip sheets for pet owners that you can copy and paste into a document with your contact information.

All we ask is that you credit us as a source. Topics include:

- House-training puppies and adult dogs
- Crate-training dogs
- Exercise, toys and fun activities for dogs and cats
- The dangers of long-term chaining or tethering and social isolation
- Introducing new pets to pets at home
- Facts about declawing cats
- Facts about flea and tick prevention
- Facts about microchips
- Finding a veterinarian
- Finding a dog trainer and training tips

**HSUS Cat Answer Tool:** [humanesociety.org/catanswertool](http://humanesociety.org/catanswertool)

This tool offers solutions to a variety of common cat behavior problems. Some of the problems addressed include litter box issues, scratching and chewing things, hiding, biting and fighting with other cats. This tool can help with staff and volunteer training and be promoted to pet owners as a resource.

**Pam Johnson-Bennett:** [catbehaviorassociates.com](http://catbehaviorassociates.com)

Pam provides great resources focused on solving cat behavior problems for pet owners.

**HSUS Animal Sheltering:** [animalsheltering.org](http://animalsheltering.org)

In addition to accessing issues of *Animal Sheltering* magazine, you can stay current on all the tools The HSUS has to offer. Be sure to sign up for *The Scoop!* to have the latest news delivered directly to your e-mail inbox.

**Heartworm Society:** [heartwormsociety.org](http://heartwormsociety.org)

Get info on how to protect pets from heartworm disease and why it's important for owners.

**Indoor Pet Initiative:** [indoorpet.osu.edu](http://indoorpet.osu.edu)

This amazing tool from The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine can help counselors and adopters discover tips for helping pets live happily indoors.

**Living with Kids and Dogs:** [livingwithkidsanddogs.com](http://livingwithkidsanddogs.com)

Discover resources from Colleen Pelar for helping families with children live safely and happily with dogs.

**Professional Development Links:** [animalsheltering.org/faq](http://animalsheltering.org/faq)

Search under "Professional Development" to find links to a variety of websites that provide additional resources and training for adoption and more.

# Model Engaging Conversations

Knowing the answers is important, but counselors also have to feel comfortable sharing their knowledge with adopters. The next step in training is to help future counselors feel comfortable having meaningful counseling conversations. To help get you started, we've created a cheat sheet that follows the same order of the adopter questionnaire introduced earlier (see page 45). We've even included some sample language to help with role-play exercises. The details of the adoption process, from introductions to congratulations, will be different for each agency. Use these examples to enhance your method. Find additional sample language at [animalsheltering.org/conversationtips](http://animalsheltering.org/conversationtips).

**Start with a warm “hello:”** As silly as it may sound, a genuinely warm greeting can make a big difference to a potential adopter. Whether you are helping them get to know the animals in your adoption program or are meeting them after they've picked “the one,” introduce yourself and let them know you are happy to help them adopt. Visitors may be intimidated by the adoption process or may not know what to expect. They need encouragement to ask questions.

*“Hi, I'm Rosie. Thanks for being here today! Pepper is a real sweetie and very handsome. Can I help you meet him?”*

*“Hi, I'm Rosie. I see you've fallen for Pepper. Thanks for getting started with our questionnaire. Let's go over it together. Feel free to ask questions as we go!”*

**Support gift adoptions:** Make gift adoptions easy and meaningful. Our sample questionnaire includes a prompt for anyone adopting a pet as a gift to answer from the perspective of the soon-to-be owner.

*“I see you are adopting for a friend. What can you tell me about the lucky recipient? I can help you find a great pet and we can follow up with them in the future to let them know about our services. Is this a surprise? We don't want to spoil it.”*

**Engage adopters who rent:** Our sample questionnaire does not include a question about renting or owning a home. Instead, it provides a brief FYI about possible restrictions for renters who may not be aware of them. Encourage renters to be familiar with any pet policies, expose them to helpful advice and trust them to work through bumps.

*“If you rent, let me know if you have any questions about possible pet restrictions such as size limits or pet deposits. We don't want you to be caught off guard!”*

**Learn about household members:** You have access to information about each animal, including historical information from owners or finders, observations from staff and volunteers and in some cases, results from a formal behavior assessment. Be transparent with this information and cover positive, neutral and negative interactions the pet has had with adults, children and strangers. Combine this information with the insights you gather from potential adopters to identify suggestions that can help the match succeed.

*“We've noticed that Sophie is a very active dog. Even the Good Samaritan who found her said she was friendly but very strong! You mentioned that your grandma stays with you and is a little nervous about your new family member. Do you want to look for a dog who is more low key, or would you like to discuss ideas to harness Sophie's energy so she isn't too much for your grandma while you're away?”*

**Learn about current household pets:** Start the conversation about any pets already in their home, building on their answers. Pay attention to what information the adopter offers because it creates a picture of what they already do and what they are expecting with this new pet. Don't be afraid to offer suggestions that can help them with a smooth transition.

*“You mentioned that your last dog stayed outside and it sounds like you have the same plans for Squeaky. We know from Squeaky's former owners that he is used to living inside and might not do well outside, away from you. Dogs are very social and can actually develop problems when separated from their family. Would you be interested in some tips on keeping Squeaky inside with you?”*



*“I'm so sorry your last cat ran away! That's actually one of the reasons we try to help families keep their cats indoors. It's safer and healthier for the cats and prevents heartbreak for owners. I can't promise that Whiskers will stick around if you allow him to go outside, but I can help you keep him happy inside. How does that sound?”*

**Share the new pet's medical history and agency**

**notes:** Review any known medical history collected from the previous owner or finder, as well as medical information from the pet's time in your agency's care. Answer questions (or connect the adopter with someone who can) and share your perspective on the benefits of veterinary care. Clarify terms of any discounted or free veterinary visits that your organization may offer directly or through partnerships.

*"I am not a veterinarian, but I will go over Bella's medical notes with you and send you home with a copy of everything. According to her records, vaccines are not due until September of next year, but it's a good idea to think ahead about who her veterinarian will be. Do you have a veterinarian you are used to, or would you like a list of local options? We know that finding the right veterinarian for your family is just as important as finding a doctor, so I can offer tips on what to ask, if you are interested!"*

**Share the new pet's behavior history and agency**

**notes:** Review any known behavior history collected from the previous owner or finder, as well as information from the pet's time in your agency's care. If you work with any certified pet dog trainers and/or cat behavior professionals, or offer these services directly, this is a good time to discuss what is available.

*"Rocco's former parents told us that he got into trouble playing with cushions and shoes when he was just out of sight. Let's come up with a few things you can do to manage things more easily. Have you used baby gates or crates with dogs before?"*





**Cover additional topics that the adopter wants to discuss, even the tricky ones:** In addition to covering topics important to the adopter, you can also check in on their understanding of certain topics they may not yet see as priorities.

**Declawing cats:**

*“You mentioned that you have questions about declawing. We’ve found that many folks aren’t aware that the surgery is actually an amputation that can have some negative effects. We recommend alternatives that I’d be happy to go over with you. You might also want to consider a cat who is already declawed. What are your thoughts?”*

**Heartworm prevention:**

*“Heartworm disease is a big concern for dogs in our area, so we always like to ask pet owners if they are aware of this disease and how to prevent it. How familiar are you with heartworm, which is different from other kinds of worms?”*

**Introducing this pet to other pets:**

*“Sounds like you are like me, with a whole crew of pets at home! Tell me more about them and I can offer suggestions for introducing the ‘new kid.’ I’ll also send you home with some tip sheets to help you stay on track over the next few days or weeks. Sometimes introductions take time, but they are always worth it!”*

**Saying “no:”** As hard as you try to help make matches successful, there will be times when adoption is not in the best interest of the person or the pet. If your conversation has been based on honesty, openness and mutual respect, you will be in a better place to say no, or not right now.

*“I know you want a pet right now, and I appreciate that you chose to help a pet from us. But I’ve been listening to you closely and I want to share my concerns. We aren’t comfortable doing this adoption now. Can we talk about some steps you can take before adopting?”*

**Explain your return policy:** Even though you aim for success, it’s a good idea to clarify return policies to adopters, including your approach to rehoming.

*“We expect everything to work out great, and are here if you have bumps along the way, but I want to make sure you know about our return policy. Are you familiar with our Satisfaction Guaranteed policy or how we can help if you need to rehome Scooter?”*

**Offer follow-up support:** Be sure to let adopters know you are available to help after they take their new pet home. Follow-up programs will vary by agency, so let them know how yours works. The relationship built through your outstanding customer service and engaging conversations will encourage them to call before a problem is out of hand.

**Offer any extra services you can:** Adopters are a captive audience. If your organization offers extra services such as license tag sales, ID tags, microchip registration or low-cost spays and neuters, adoption counselors should be well versed in promoting these services and answering common questions about them. Remember that this is a pet lover in your community who may be able to take advantage of your programs, spread the word about them or even support your efforts with time and money.

**Wrap up with a “thank you:”** This is a nice time to reinforce that your agency welcomes and appreciates adopters. Close with a sincere “thank you!”



### Hiring for adoptions

Too often, agencies either aren't picky, or tend to look more for animal handling and husbandry skills rather than human skills when adding people to the team. Knowing a little something about animals is great, but we all know that we need our customers and supporters in order to succeed in our mission. The truth is that customer service matters, so why not hire people who are already good at it? The types of people who will easily become stellar representatives for your organization are already out there. You just need to find them!

### Continuing education

Visit [animalsheltering.org/training-events](https://animalsheltering.org/training-events) to search training opportunities offered by The HSUS and other national and state agencies by category, type and location. Find numerous recorded and live webinars by visiting the sites listed under “Professional Development” at [animalsheltering.org/faq](https://animalsheltering.org/faq). Networking sites like the Society of Animal Welfare administrators ([sawanetwork.org](https://sawanetwork.org)) offer opportunities to learn about training practices from colleagues across the nation.

### HSUS volunteer resources

The HSUS Volunteer Management portal offers resources that can help you start, grow or enhance a powerful volunteer program. You will find a resource library that includes guides and samples, magazine articles and tools from The HSUS, including a free list-serv dedicated to volunteer managers, and free access to Everyone Ready, a training resource for all things volunteer. Visit [animalsheltering.org/volunteermanagement](https://animalsheltering.org/volunteermanagement) to learn more.





# SHARE YOUR SUCCESS

“Adopters Welcome” reflects the knowledge and research of our time while remaining open to future insights. It is important to constantly look at what we do and why we do it so that we can embrace new learning and research that positively influences our work. Sometimes we find that what once was beneficial has become harmful or that what was useful has become a barrier—all with good intent, but missing the optimal outcomes we could achieve.

We welcome your insights as you use the “Adopters Welcome” approach to reach our shared goal of finding a loving and happy home for every animal waiting to start a new life. Tell us how it’s going so that we can share your lessons learned and successes with others. E-mail us your stories at [AdoptersWelcome@humanesociety.org](mailto:AdoptersWelcome@humanesociety.org).

To view this document and related resources online, visit [animalsheltering.org/adopters-welcome](https://animalsheltering.org/adopters-welcome).

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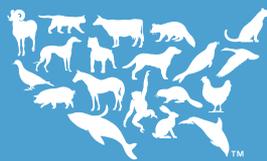
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