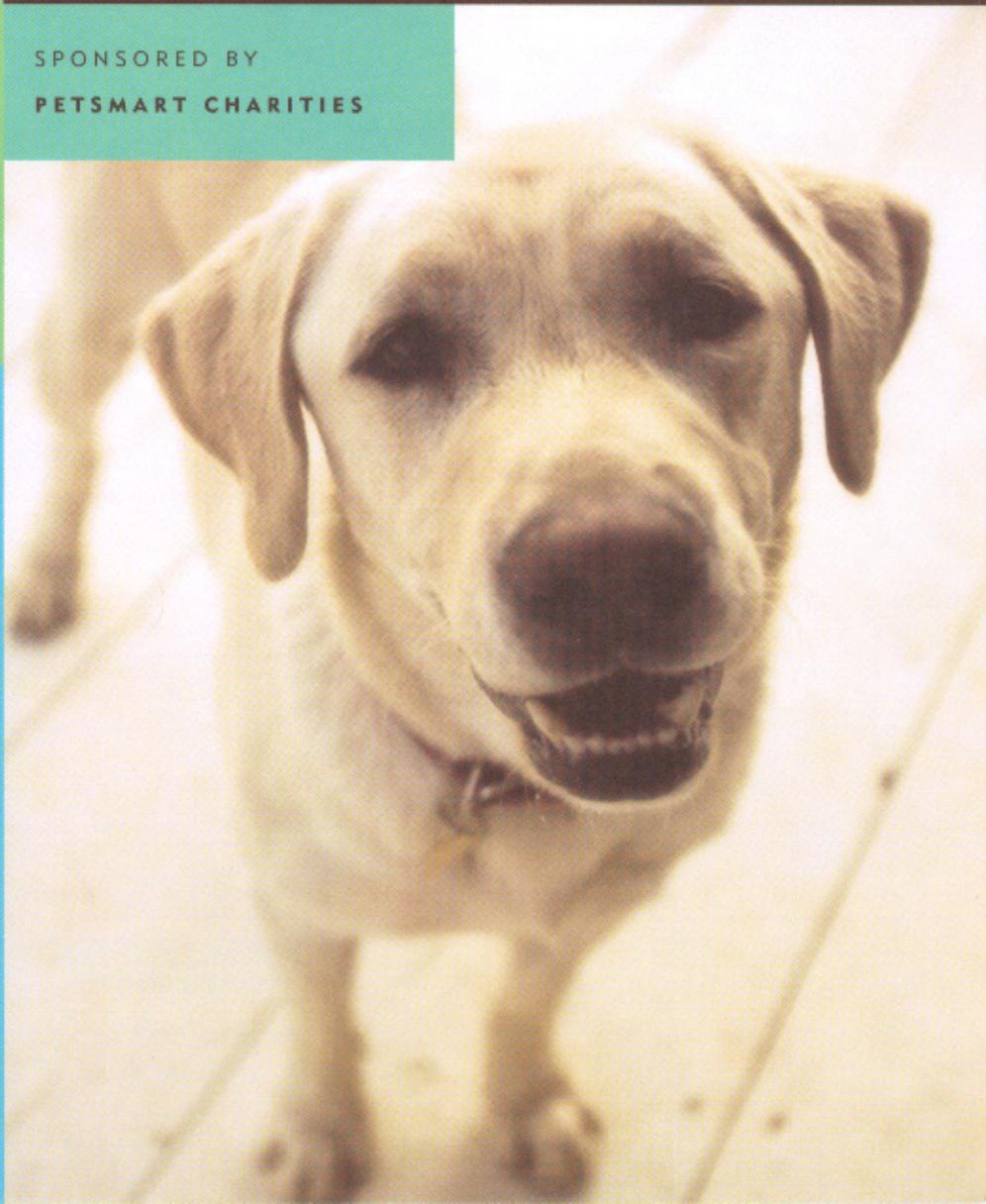


**REPORT ON ADOPTION FORUM II**

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PETSMART CHARITIES



PETSMART CHARITIES EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
SUSANA DELLA MADDALENA

PROJECT DIRECTOR AND REPORT AUTHOR  
CAROL MOULTON

FORUM FACILITATOR  
KATHY SAVESKY



19601 NORTH 27TH AVENUE  
PHOENIX, ARIZONA 85027

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A LIFELONG, LOVING HOME FOR EVERY PET

**PETSMART CHARITIES MISSION:**

TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL COMPANION ANIMALS, PETSMART CHARITIES CREATES AND SUPPORTS PROGRAMS THAT SAVE THE LIVES OF HOMELESS PETS AND PROMOTE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PEOPLE AND PETS.

## ADOPTION FORUM II

When an animal comes in to our care, we feel responsible for making sure he or she has a better life in the future than in the past. We hope that future will be in a new home. More than that, we want it to be a good home; a committed and loving home. How to achieve that, and how to know when we have achieved that, was the topic of Adoption Forum II, held in Phoenix, Arizona in January of 2003.

In 1999, PETsMART Charities sponsored the first Adoption Forum, held by the American Humane Association, to address and reassess typical adoption criteria used by adopting agencies. The widely-distributed report on that meeting has led many agencies to reconsider their adoption processes to make them more open, and give more animals and families a chance. Rather than looking for the perfect home, we are looking for at least an average home.

At Adoption Forum II we looked beyond adoption criteria to consider these questions:

- What is a successful adoption?
- What is the best adoption process?
- What are the characteristics of an adoption follow-up program that offers support and improves the chance of a successful bond developing?
- How can we best measure the outcomes of adoption programs?
- What is the effect of a good adoption program on the agency and the community?

Participants were chosen to represent non-profit shelters, adoption groups with foster networks, animal control agencies, and national animal welfare organizations. We looked for wide geographic representation. Many of the participants have worked at multiple animal interest organizations, and have been in the field for many years. They are all well-networked with other animal care groups in their communities, states and regions. A list of the participants is provided at the end of this report.

An agency's adoption program is often its most visible interaction with the community. In fact, to the public, adoptions are who we are – the shelter is a place where you can go get animals. No matter what other programs an agency has, rehoming animals successfully is most likely to win the public's approval – not to mention being crucial for the animals in our care.

But there are many different opinions on the best approach to making successful matches between potential adopters and the animals. Different agencies, each trying to do the very best for the animals in their care, arrive at different conclusions on how to do this. In this meeting, we sought consensus, and didn't always get it. When opinions differed, the range of opinions are explained in the text.

## WHAT IS A SUCCESSFUL ADOPTION?

Before discussing how to achieve successful adoptions, or have a successful adoption program, it was important to determine what we would call a “success” in this context.

The question was: How would we describe the outcomes of a successful adoption, considering the following areas:

- Quality of care and surroundings
- Minimum length of stay in the home/relationship
- General post-adoption behavior of the adopter
- Returns and alternative dispositions

In considering the quality of care and surrounding that would characterize a successful adoption, the group referred to the “Five Freedoms”, first developed by those advocating for humane care for farm animals:

The concept of the 5 Freedoms was revised somewhat to fit the basic needs of companion animals: These we’ll call the Five Essentials of a Successful Adoption:

1. The match would be suited to the individual animal and family
2. The pet would be afforded appropriate veterinary care
3. The pet’s social, behavioral, and companionship needs would be met
4. The pet would have a livable environment (including appropriate food, water, shelter, etc)
5. The pet would be respected and valued

While everyone had a vision of what the “best” life would be for a pet, we don’t have any data on what the average pet’s life is really like. There was agreement that in adoptions, we should set achievable goals. There may be only a small percentage of “best” homes, but there will be many, many “acceptable” homes. If the 5 basic criteria above are met, the home could be considered acceptable.

*It’s conventional wisdom by now that we can’t stop anyone from getting a pet—if we turn them down, they can always go elsewhere. But at least our animals will be sterilized before they go into a home. And the fact that a person has chosen to come to the shelter to adopt probably means they are trying to do the right thing.*

### 5 FREEDOMS FOR FARM ANIMALS

1. Freedom from fear and distress
2. Freedom from hunger and thirst
3. Freedom from discomfort
4. Freedom from pain, injury and disease
5. Freedom to express normal behavior

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF ADOPTIONS AND RISK TAKING**

In open-admission shelters that euthanize, an adoption that is turned down may mean the pet ends up dying. But even at agencies that don't euthanize, a declined adoption application means the pet spends more time in a cage - and reduces the number of new pets that can be rescued by the agency while he or she waits for the "perfect" home. Against these serious, perhaps disastrous outcomes, it makes sense to take some risks - especially if we can institute programs after the adoption to reduce that risk.

The group agreed that the length of stay in an adoptive home is not, in itself, a measure of success. The optimal situation is a lifelong home, but less than that is not a failure. More important is the adopter's intent and effort to build a permanent bond with the animal.

There are many reasons why an adopted animal might be returned to an adopting agency. Since most adopting agencies require by contract that animals be brought back to them if the adoptions don't work out, the adopters are only following instructions by returning an animal. Doing what we ask is a positive, not a negative.

On the plus side of a return is the opportunity to learn more about how the pet behaved in a home environment, information that may help a great deal in making a future placement.

## **POST-ADOPTION BEHAVIOR OF THE ADOPTER**

When the group discussed the hoped-for post-adoption behavior of the adopter, our expectations were quite high. We recognized that this puts a great deal of responsibility on the adopting agency to provide support and partner with the adopter to achieve these behaviors. If we have done our job well:

- The adopter utilizes appropriate resources for problem solving
- The adopter feels satisfaction with the animal chosen
- The adopter continues to learn more about their pet and the care she needs
- The adopter maximizes use of resources to build a satisfactory relationship with and fulfill the needs of the pet
- The adopter feels they "aren't in it alone", and can comfortably call the adopting agency for help without fear of being judged stupid or cruel.
- The adopter understands that acceptable reasons why an adoption doesn't work do occur, and feels comfortable returning the pet to the shelter without fear of recrimination

## ACCEPTING RETURNS

There was a clear feeling on the part of the group that the human/animal bond shouldn't be forced. Many problems can be resolved with resources such as training classes, pet sitters, veterinary attention, etc. We hope all of these will be tried, and that severing the relationship will be a last resort. (In fact, a study by Natalie DeGiacomo found that most adopters do think long and hard, and try several solutions, before finally giving up on a pet.)

But if the relationship is not working, the important issue is how to provide the pet with a positive future, apparently not available in her current home.

For the adopter, even an experience that doesn't work out may help a great deal in understanding what an animal needs, normal or unusual pet behaviors, and what is required to bring a pet into the family. This adopter's next pet choice may be more fitting for his/her situation, or perhaps the adopter will decide to wait until home conditions have changed before making a future adoption. And because the adopter has been treated well by the adopting agency, he/she will probably return there when the time is right.

Optimally, the adopter will want to be actively involved in placing the animal in a new home, and the adopting agency will support that. One way for the first adopter to help is by supplying detailed information about the pet's likes and dislikes, reactions to others - human or animal, preferences for food and toys, and behavior plusses and minuses. This information could vastly improve your chance of identifying the right home for the pet on the second try - especially when she was an animal about whom you had little knowledge when she first came in. The animal was likely sterilized before she went to the first home, and if the adopter has taken the pet to a veterinarian, she may have gotten all the basic care and vaccinations she needs. Again, this may make the pet more appealing to a future adopter.

## NOT AN EASY DECISION

While we tend to view relinquishment as a thoughtless expression of a throw-away society, one study showed that the process begins long before the animal is taken to a shelter, and is anything but thoughtless. Relinquishers interviewed struggled with the decision to give up their pets for a prolonged time. The struggle often manifested as procrastination, as attachment issues, and negative perceptions of shelters balanced against circumstances threatening the pets' position with the family. Attempts at solutions were unsuccessful - although it is likely that resources and support that would truly help were either not available, not known of by the pet guardian, or considered to be beyond the financial means or general capability of the guardian.

From "Surrendering Pets to Shelters: The Relinquisher's Perspective", *Anthrozoos*, Natalie DiGiacomo et al, Vol. 11 No. 1, 1998

## THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL

This was a theme that ran throughout the meeting. Because we care so deeply about the animals we shelter, we want to be able to assure them a loving future. Adoption is seen as a flood-gate we tightly control to guarantee the animal's "next life" is a good one.

The truth is we simply cannot control the outcome of any adoption — except to make sure the pet is sterilized and microchipped before being placed.

We think by having strict requirements and many barriers to overcome in order to qualify for adoption, that we have instituted good controls. Too often the effect is to turn adopters into liars, and us into the adoption police.

Our potential adopters, who at best might become our partners in the community to help protect animals, instead become angry and feel ill-treated and distrusted.

The agency gets a negative image in the community, which will discourage people from coming to us for animals. The end result is that more of our animals will end up euthanized, while people who want animals will get them from commercial sources or the next-door neighbor.

When we give up the illusion of control and focus instead on providing education, support and resources before and after a new pet enters the home, we put ourselves in a positive light as a community service that welcomes citizens.

## ALTERNATIVE DISPOSITIONS: PASS THROUGH ADOPTIONS AND PRIVATE PLACEMENT

Whether we like it or not, there will be many cases where the adopters themselves will place the animal in another home. The group felt we must accept the reality of this, and consider that it could work out very well for the pet.

By mandating to the adopter that their only alternatives are to keep the animal themselves or bring him back to the shelter, we take ourselves out of the loop should the person choose to do otherwise.

Some people may come to us intending from the first to adopt an animal for another person, but choose not to reveal that fact during the adoption counseling session for fear they will be turned down. Adult children may see it as part of their caretaker role to find a small dog or cat for an elderly parent — and whether this works out well or not, the shelter may never know.

On the other hand, people who adopt pets for themselves, then find she isn't working out, may indeed have a friend or relative who wants the pet and can provide a wonderful home. But they aren't likely to let the shelter know if they think the shelter will demand the animal be snatched out of her new, happy home and returned to a cage.

Is an adopter really doing wrong by trying to assure the pet's happy future themselves, rather than putting the problem back into the adopting agency's hands? Isn't that the type of behavior we would like to see in pet guardians?

Certainly the outcome may be disastrous, but if we force responsible guardians to hide secondary placements from us, we won't know the outcome — good or bad!

The more you try to control the outcome in this case, the more you are apt to lose control.

One suggestion for dealing with the realities of alternative disposition and pass-through adoptions is to let the adopter know that, while it is preferred that the animal be returned to the shelter, if they choose to do the rehoming themselves the agency requests that the adopter supply the name and address of the new guardian so the shelter can send them information on pet care and the services they offer. In this way, there is the possibility of making positive contact with the person who winds up with the animal to help make that relationship successful for pet and guardian.

## THE ADOPTION PROCESS

The group agreed that a good adoption process:

- Takes place in a pleasant and welcoming atmosphere
- Is respectful of the adopter's experience and knowledge and assume both of you come from a place of commonality wanting to help animals
- Takes a conversational approach with open-ended questions such as "what are you looking for," "what's your lifestyle," etc.
- Is a discussion, rather than a series of barriers the applicant must overcome in order to get an animal
- Focuses on success, and creating a relationship with the client
- Looks for a way to make an adoption, not turn one down
- Treats each applicant and animal as individuals
- Uses guidelines to delineate issues for discussion and education, not as inflexible mandates
- Emphasizes the resources the shelter can provide to help solve any problems that arise
- Is ready to re-direct the adopter to other options as needed
- Emphasizes that post-adoption contact from the adopter will be welcomed

### FOCUS ON SUCCESS

Too often we approach our adoption checklist as a test. Give the right answer and you will get the animal. Get even one answer wrong, and you fail the test. We are focused on identifying problems until we find one that eliminates the adopter, then we move onto the next applicant. Meanwhile we lament that so few animals in our community are adopted from shelters!

The group suggests being success-focused instead. Focus first on the joy of adding a pet to the home and then get into discussion of possible "challenges" the animal presents. Too much focus on the down side may lead to discouragement on the part of the adopter to work with the animal to ameliorate problems. Encouragement and information may turn a doubtful situation into a successful one.

*I think it is an unrealistic expectation to think that the shelter failed when the adoption didn't work out. Don't beat yourself up; animals and people behave differently at home than in our shelter.*

#### **RISK IS JUST RISK**

Recent studies have indicated some of the risk factors that increase the chance that a guardian will relinquish an animal – age, lack of obedience training, tendency to house soil, being noisy, and others. But “increased chance” doesn’t mean any adoption involving such animal problems will fail – it just means there are identifiable issues to be dealt with. Look at risk factors as being incomplete data and don’t use these assumptions as hard fact in determining which animals are made available for adoption or who gets an animal.

By dealing with the issues with the adopter and the pet, you can decrease the risk factor. It’s Risk Management in the animal’s favor.

#### **ADOPTION CRITERIA AND GUIDELINES**

The group felt that the primary and guiding values in evaluating a potential placement should be the 5 Essentials:

- The match would be suited to the individual animal and family.
- The pet would be afforded appropriate veterinary care.
- The pet’s social, behavioral and companionship needs would be met.
- The pet would have a livable environment (including appropriate food, water, shelter, exercise, etc).
- The pet would be respected and valued.

However, there were some basic hard criteria that all agreed must be met before an adoption could be approved.

1. The animal must be spayed or neutered. Optimally this will be done before the animal is given to the adopter, but at least the adopter must sign a contract agreeing to have the surgery performed
2. No animal will be adopted to an applicant with a known history of animal or child abuse
3. No animal will be adopted to an individual who is suspected of being drunk or high at the time of application
4. No animal will be adopted to be used as a food source

A final criteria was judged by the group to be almost at the level of the first four:

5. The adopter must agree to keep identification on the animal at all times. Many in the group felt they would not actually turn down an adoption to someone who did not agree, but felt the importance of identification should be highly emphasized because so many animals who end up in shelters are there because they are lost animals whose guardians cannot be identified. Providing a collar and tags and microchip at the time of adoption can support this effort.

## **ISSUES OF CONCERN**

The group identified several issues of concern – issues that can negatively affect the ability of the adopter to provide the 5 Essentials. All of these issues should be discussed with the potential adopter to determine whether he/she will be able to provide for the needs of the animals.

### **CHAINING**

The group was opposed to the idea of chaining dogs outside all the time, but felt this could be most effectively dealt with by explaining the problems that arise in this situation, and discussing alternatives. For instance, the group noted that a cable run is different from being kept on a short chain, and may allow the pet to exercise more freely than she otherwise could. If housetraining is the issue, then learning how to use a crate might be the answer. Help the adopter come up with a plan that meets his needs and the needs of the pet.

### **GUARD DOG/MOUSER**

Companionship should be the primary reason for choosing to adopt a pet, but not necessarily the only reason. Again, the underlying question is, “how will the 5 Essentials be met?” You also should determine whether you and the potential adopter are speaking the same language. For instance, by “guard dog” you may be thinking of an underfed, neglected dog guarding a salvage yard. The adopter may mean a dog who barks when anyone comes to the door. And “mousing” could be more a hoped-for behavior from the family cat than the primary reason for seeking a new pet.

### **ADOPTION COUNSELOR’S INTUITIVE JUDGMENT**

While a counselor’s intuitive judgment of a potential adopter should be given weight, it must not be allowed to sink into the realm of prejudice. Automatically rejecting a certain type or group of people from consideration as adopters just artificially reduces the number of homes available to animals without taking the time to even evaluate the individual’s worth. We must be conscious of our personal bias and filters.

### **OUTSIDE DOG**

The question is not simply whether or not the dog will live solely or primarily outside, but rather how the dog’s social and companionship needs will be met. Mitigating factors may be the presence of other animals (dog, horse, goat, etc) the dog can play with, and how much time the dog will spend with his guardian (i.e., how much time does the guardian spend outdoors). Also, we might consider that many a dog meant to sleep outside has wagged and wiggled his way indoors – often right into the guardian’s bed.

#### **OUTSIDE CAT OR INSIDE/OUTSIDE CAT**

This was considered to be a good example of a requirement that leads applicants to lie to the agency. Ultimately, the adopting agency cannot control this situation. A reasonable expectation may be that the adopter understands all the dangers of letting a cat outside, the importance of always having ID on the pet, and the shelter's strong preference that cats be kept indoors. Give information on ways to enrich the indoor environment to improve quality of life without "outdoor time." But the bottom line may be that if the adopter wants a cat for a pet, and plans to let her outside, at least a shelter cat will be spayed or neutered so unwanted reproduction will not occur. The same may not be true of a cat from another source.

#### **LANDLORD PERMISSION**

Adopters need to understand if they have a pet in a no-pet rental, they may be forced to find new housing in order to keep the pet. Rather than acting as a detective in this case, you can choose to trust the adopter to make a good decision.

#### **PET GUARDIAN HISTORY**

While past failed human/pet relationships raise red flags, the group felt strongly that the simple fact of problems with previous pets should not deter future adoptions. The real value of finding out the guardian's history is in seeing areas where resources will be needed to help make sure past problems do not recur. If an applicant has no history of pet ownership, a discussion on expectations may help start the relationship off well. In addition, more follow-up and support may be needed after the adoption.

#### **ARE OTHER ANIMALS IN THE HOME SPAYED OR NEUTERED?**

At some agencies, this requirement is meant to incentivize the adopter to get his/her other pets sterilized. However, viewed strictly in terms of the welfare of the animal being adopted, the only important thing is to make sure the pet you are adopting out is sterilized before going into a new home. Chances are, when the adopter finds out how pleasant it is to live with a neutered pet, the incentive to neuter their other pets will be there in spades.

#### **DECLAWING**

This was the most controversial issue discussed. While no one in the group liked the idea of declawing, there were different opinions on whether the intent to declaw would always mean turning down an adoption.

For some, interfering with the integrity of the pet's body for our own convenience was simply ethically wrong and never acceptable in an adoption.

On the other hand, we do accept altering an animal's body when we see it as being for the pet's benefit (ear tipping) and/or the benefit of the species (spay/neuter). Right or wrong, we also cite the "convenience benefits" of spay/neuter (less yowling, roaming, spraying, etc.) as an inducement to get guardians to sterilize their pets. Yet, declawing is a very different surgery from spay/neuter, with more complications likely, and some felt the two could not be compared.

An important issue is the amount of pain experienced in declawing surgery and its aftermath. It appears beyond question that post-operative pain is most often present. New emphasis among veterinarians on pain management and the use of post-operative analgesia could relieve pain for the cats. Improved surgical techniques, including laser surgery, may make the procedure easier on the cats and reduce any long-term deficits. But even if the pain were eliminated, the ethical question still remains.

Negative behavioral effects such as increased biting, increased house soiling, and lack of a primary means of defense are also frequently cited as strong reasons to eliminate declawing. A review of research on behavioral effects of declawing done by Dr. Gary Patronek of Tufts University reveals no conclusive evidence one way or the other about behavioral effects. Most studies involved only small numbers of cats or were unable to account for other variables that might be in play. Dr. Patronek concludes his article with a call for better studies with more definitive data on which to base our conclusions on declawing.

This is not a small issue. Despite the years of animal welfare advocacy against declawing, a survey by the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy found that more than 24% of owned cats have been declawed. We must think long and hard about eliminating up to a quarter of potential cat homes as prospects for adoption.

If refusing an adoption because an applicant wants to declaw means the cat is likely to be euthanized, the stakes become very high. More animal professionals are willing to accept declawing as a last resort to being relinquished or euthanized, and would accept it as an option if death were the only likely alternative.

Whatever stand your agency takes on this issue, it is clearly one where education is key – especially because it is easy for adopters to give the “right” answer – no – to the declawing question while intending to go ahead with it once they have the cat home. The potential adopter needs to know the possible drawbacks to declawing, and be provided with tools and techniques to train for appropriate clawing before a problem occurs.

## **SELLING AN ETHIC**

Every conversation with a potential adopter is an opportunity to advocate for the interests and well being of the animals. That is really the greater objective of a humane organization. It is why we don't just sell an animal to anyone who walks through the door. Instead we counsel adopters, making education part of the package along with the dog or cat. Our job is to impact humans and animals in a positive way. We are not just adopting out animals, we are selling an ethic of humane action and respect for life.

## **BUSINESS PRACTICES**

The group considered issues such as adoption fee levels and differentials, requiring positive identification from adopters, type of database used to maintain and evaluate data, contracts, follow-up for fundraising and the like to be business practices, and not covered in this symposium.

## ADOPTION FOLLOW-UP PROGRAM

Since a good adoption follow-up program is key to the long-term success of adoptions, it is important that the organization is committed to it from top to bottom. In a good follow-up program:

- The organization has a clear structure and explicit objectives for the follow-up program
- The board and administration allocates the staff or volunteers and resources necessary to carry out the program. This may mean prioritizing use of resources to follow-up over other attractive but more peripheral programs
- There is cultural acknowledgement by adoption personnel that follow-up is essential, not just a "good idea"
- Outcomes are tracked and used to evaluate and improve the program.

### THE ROLE OF RISK ASSESSMENT

The group preferred that a follow-up program be applied to every adoption, but realized you may not have the resources to do that. If that is the case, the next best thing might be to develop a process of risk assessment to identify adoptions that experience and available data suggest might be at highest risk for failure, and those that present relatively low risk. For instance, puppies who will grow into big dogs, and large dogs 6 to 18 months old might be considered high risk. A 2 year old, healthy socialized cat with no history of litter box problems might be considered low risk. Spend your staff or volunteer time for follow-up on high-risk adoptions first, then on others as you are able. Be sure to track returns to test if your risk-level assessment is on target.

Risk assessment should avoid "profiling" people, but may take into consideration expressed behavior such as expectations or experience in pet parenting. Focus mainly on the individual animal's characteristics. Typically animals in the following categories might be considered at a higher risk than others:

- Those behaviorally-challenged
- Those with medical problems (disclosed at the time of adoption)
- Younger dogs
- Animals entering a multi-pet household

## THE FOLLOW-UP PROCESS

The group suggested these procedures for follow-up calls:

- Be sure to obtain verified contact information at the time of adoption – address, phone number(s), e-mail address
- Let the adopter know that someone from your agency will/may be calling to see if they have questions or problems with the pet's adjustment to the new home (but make sure they know they don't have to wait for you to call – they can call you at any time). You may want to ask for a good time of day/week to call and make a note of that
- Check the adopter and pet's file before calling to make sure you are familiar with the background of the case
- Track calls and keep notes on the date of the call, length of the call, problems brought up and your responses or referrals. Keep this in the animal's file for future reference
- Use a checklist of questions/issues to be covered – create a script for the caller to use if necessary
- Start off with questions that look for positives in the relationship
- Use questions crafted to get at specifics, rather than simply asking if there are any problems (ie; any litterbox problems? inappropriate barking? etc.)
- Be prepared with answers or referral information at the time of the call – not later
- Be non-biased, with a goal to facilitate a better bond, not judge the adopter
- For people who are difficult to reach, e-mail may be an option. However, one-to-one personal contact is preferred

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADOPTERS – THE ULTIMATE FOLLOW-UP

A recurring theme in the two-day meeting was emphasis on the need to build a relationship with every prospective adopter. The adoption event should not be viewed as a one-time-only contact ending in either acceptance or rejection of an application. The importance of a continuing relationship is the opportunity to help the person over time to make good choices, discover and use resources to resolve problems he/she might have with a pet, look to the adopting agency as a friendly resource, recommend it to friends, and perhaps become a supporter of the work of the agency. A strong adoption follow-up program will enable you to do this, and more – because you can also learn a great deal from your constituents. Asking for continuous feedback about your own operations, image, processes, and the programs and resources you offer will help you improve them all.

*Returns are not a sign of failure. In fact, having no returns may be a sign of failure, because you are not taking enough risks, giving the animals and adopters the benefit of the doubt in pursuit of a positive outcome.*

#### **RESOURCES/REFERRALS FOR ADOPTION FOLLOW-UP PROGRAMS**

These are some ideas of the types of services new pet guardians may need that you can help them find. Have this type of information at hand at the time of the follow-up call. This information may also be made available on your website.

- Handouts or pamphlets on typical problems new pet owners face
- Referrals to pet-friendly housing opportunities in the community
- Either access to or referrals to animal behaviorists
- Schedule for pet parenting classes
- List of available basic dog training classes
- References to veterinary services
- References to pet sitting, dog walking, kenneling, doggie daycare services
- Carpet cleaning services or recommended products for self-cleaning
- Reference to pet product suppliers
- Breed clubs for breed specific questions
- List of dog parks in the community
- List of local animal laws
- References to pet health insurance companies
- References to pet-friendly homeowner's insurance companies
- List of grooming services
- Bereavement support, in case the worst occurs

### **WHO SHOULD CALL?**

There were two schools of thought on who should make the follow-up contacts. One approach is for the original adoption counselor to continue as primary contact person with the adopter. This “personal banker” approach assures the primary contact is familiar with all stages of the adoption and adoption follow-up process.

On the other hand, busy adoption counselors may not have time to make follow-up calls, or may not have “clicked” with the adopter. In that case a different person would handle follow-up calls. To provide some continuity however, it makes sense for the staff or volunteer who makes the first follow-up call to stay with the case until all follow-up is completed.

The general recommendation for the timing of follow-up contacts with new adopters is:

- First contact within 3 days of the pet arriving in the home;
- Second contact 3 weeks after adoption
- Final contact 3 months after the adoption, unless additional contact seems necessary.

If the adopted pet is a puppy, the group felt it would be best to add two additional follow-up contacts at 6 months and 9 months after adoption to proactively address problems that often arise in dog adolescence.

### **DO WE REALLY KNOW OUR ANIMALS?**

We do our best to discover the nature of the animal we are putting up for adoption, and with this information try to make a good match with a guardian. But how successful are we at predicting post-adoption behavior? The group was quite skeptical that behavior in a shelter situation represented the animal’s normal behavior. The stresses of being housed in unfamiliar quarters surrounded by other stressed animal’s may well skew an animal’s behavior. We rely on temperament assessment procedures to classify dogs because it is the best tool we have. And yet, studies in progress suggest real differences in post-adoption behavior versus shelter behavior. Foster homes give a more natural environment for behavior assessment, but everyone agreed that a cat doesn’t just “get along with other dogs and cats,” but may get along with some dogs and some cats and react very negatively to others. The truth is it may not be possible to know how well an animal fits into a new home without actually giving the new home a try.

## PROGRAM EVALUATION-ANIMAL OUTCOMES

The group suggested three possible ways to evaluate the outcome of the adoption program:

### MEASURING RETURNS

Currently, many agencies only track the number of adopted animals returned, considering a low return rate to indicate a successful adoption program. Realistically we know that in some cases the animal doesn't remain in the home, but is also not returned to the adopting agency. The group felt that a low return rate is not, by itself, a reliable indication of success.

Certainly statistics should be kept on returns, and the reasons tracked carefully. As discussed above, it is especially important to collect all information possible on the returned animal's behavior, likes, dislikes, interaction with children or other animals in the household, in order to improve chances of finding a permanent home with the next adopter.

### MEASURING RETENTION

Retention is studied by post-adoption surveys at certain intervals to discover how many adopted animals are still in their home. Unlike adoption follow-up programs designed to trouble-shoot and provide informational and referral support to a new adopter, post-adoption surveys are statistical in nature and look at overall versus individual successes. Three or six months after the adoption would be reasonable timing for post-adoption surveys. Experience indicates that after six months, a great percentage of adopters will be unavailable for contact due to moving or other situations, making it difficult to acquire reliable data for calculating retention percentages.

### KEEP IT SIMPLE

Don't collect data you aren't going to use for a specific purpose – it is too expensive and time consuming. Focus on one part of your program to evaluate in follow-up surveys one year, use the results to improve your program, then change survey questions to focus on another part of your program the next year.

Though more accurate than “returns”, “retention” surveys are also flawed vehicles for evaluating success. Again as discussed above, a certain number of adopters will rehome the animal themselves, with friends, relatives or people reached through classified ads or word of mouth. This doesn’t necessarily mean a negative outcome for the animal, but it can create a major obstacle to determining what the outcome is.

#### **MEASURING ACTUAL OUTCOMES – GUARDIAN SATISFACTION**

A most difficult, but revealing survey would follow an animal’s “trail” to the final outcome (within a time period – perhaps six months), even if that means tracking through more than one post-adoption home. Finding those secondary or tertiary homes would be easier if adopters were encouraged to report self rehoming, rather than told the only acceptable way to end the adoption is by returning the animal to the adopting agency.

- The key in this case would be to ask questions that measure the guardian’s level of satisfaction with the pet, and the facts of the animal’s current lifestyle to determine if his or her basic needs are being met.
- How well has the animal settled into the household?
- Where does the pet stay during the day; at night?
- What is the pet’s role in the family/household?
- What is the family’s level of satisfaction with the pet?
- Has the animal seen a veterinarian – for preventative care or other reasons?

## PROGRAM EVALUATION-CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Another type of follow-up is done to evaluate customer satisfaction with your adoption process. For this kind of follow-up you want to try to contact everyone who came to the shelter to consider adoption, whether the visit ended in adoption or not.

Some of the types of information you could gather in a program evaluation survey are:

- The customer's level of satisfaction with the adoption process
- Suggestions for improving the process
- How people learned you have animals for adoption (word of mouth, website, saw pets at an off-site adoption location, saw the shelter building when passing by, public service announcements, etc.)
- Why people chose to adopt from your agency (good animals there; wanted to save a life, cheaper than buying, etc.)
- The number (%) of people who came in planning to adopt but did not – and why they did not (didn't have the type of pet they wanted, too expensive, animals didn't look healthy, denied, etc.)
- Which of your other services they have used (relinquished animals, report cruelty, education program at kids school, etc)
- What material/information was given at adoption that proved helpful to them in caring for their new pet?
- The number (%) of dogs that went to training classes after adoption
- How well the animal's behavior in the home matches his behavior in the shelter, or in the behavior assessment procedure
- What health problems are being seen in recently adopted animals
- Whether the customer would return to you if looking for a pet in the future
- Whether the customer would recommend your agency to others looking for a pet

*We should recognize that every interaction with the public is an opportunity to educate AND to learn. We can learn while we are teaching. If we don't educate and build relationships with our clients, we aren't achieving what we could for the animals.*

The survey can be conducted by staff, volunteers, a professional firm, or perhaps by students at a university or by contract with a non-profit group providing jobs for the disabled. In a program evaluation survey, as opposed to an adoption follow-up interview, the survey taker should not answer questions. They should be trained to stick with a script, but provided with a referral number or website address to give to people with questions about animals or the shelter's services or policies.

## THE EFFECTS OF A SUCCESSFUL ADOPTION PROGRAM ON YOUR ORGANIZATION AND COMMUNITY

As we increase the market share of animals adopted from animal shelters and fostering agencies, we simultaneously:

- Increase the percentage of animals in the community who are sterilized – and, most important, sterilized before they can reproduce even once
- Reduce the number of surplus pets within the community
- Increase the number of pet guardians in the community who have received some education about their pets, and now know that the adopting agency is a place to go for more information
- Increase the number of people who will choose to adopt homeless animals when they add pets to their family in the future
- Increase the number of people with positive experiences with your agency to share with family and friends in the community
- Increase the number of pets in the community with identification – either through microchipping and/or tagging before release to the adopter, or by educating the adopter about the importance of identification
- Increase compassion in the community. The fact that someone came to your agency should be points in their favor even if they don't adopt
- Increase the number of potential donors to the organization

As an added benefit, when policies are perceived as rational and fair to animals and people, fundraising is much easier! Experience has shown that people will generously support a positive, welcoming, community-interactive animal care group. As we create and maintain constructive, helpful relationships with more and more members of the community, our impact on the community's attitudes toward animals grows. Finally, we find ourselves in the best position to be the ambassadors of the humane ethic that our missions call us to be.

*Unless you can gain information from interaction with adopters and learn how to do your job better, everyday at the front desk becomes Groundhog Day*

**JULIE MORRIS**

*Vice President National Shelter Outreach*  
ASPCA  
New York NY

**JAN SCARLETT, DVM**

*Associate Professor*  
Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine  
Ithaca NY

**CAROL MOULTON**

*Consultant*  
PETsMART Charities  
Phoenix AZ

**JULIE SCHMALTZ**

*Manager of Adoptions Operations*  
PETsMART  
Phoenix AZ

**STEVE NOTARO**

*Executive Director*  
Champaign County Humane Society  
Urbana IL

**BERT TROUGHTON**

*Director*  
ASPCA and San Francisco SPCA Strategic Alliance  
Richmond NH

**GARY PATRONEK, DVM**

*Director*  
Center for Animals & Public Policy  
Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine  
N. Grafton MA

**VICTORIA WELLENS**

*Executive Director*  
Wisconsin Humane Society  
Milwaukee WI

**KATHY SAVESKY**

*Executive Director*  
Bosack-Kruger Foundation  
Ashland MA

## ADOPTION FORUM PARTICIPANTS

### **MARTHA ARMSTRONG**

*Senior Vice President, Companion Animals*

Humane Society of the United States

Gaithersburg MD

### **SHARON HARMON**

*Executive Director*

Oregon Humane Society

Portland OR

### **JAMES BIAS**

*Executive Director*

Humane Society/SPCA of Bexar County

San Antonio TX

### **RICK JOHNSON**

*Associate Executive Director*

The Marin Humane Society

Novato CA

### **ED BOKS**

*Executive Director*

Maricopa County Animal Care and Control Services

Phoenix AZ

### **TAMMY KIRKPATRICK**

*Director of Animal Care Services*

SPCA of Texas

Dallas TX

### **JOYCE BRIGGS**

*Former  
Associate Executive Director*

PETsMART Charities

Phoenix AZ

### **DARLENE LARSON**

*Board Member*

National Animal Control Association

New London MN

### **JODI BUCKMAN**

*Manager of Shelter Services*

American Humane

Englewood CO

### **STACEY LEBARON**

*Board of Directors*

Merrimac River Feline Rescue

Newbury Port MA

### **VICKI FREUND**

*Director*

Vicky's Pet Connection

Adda MI

### **JAN MCHUGH-SMITH**

*Executive Director*

Humane Society of the Boulder Valley

Boulder CO



**PETSMART**  
*Charities.*

19601 NORTH 27<sup>TH</sup> AVENUE  
PHOENIX, ARIZONA 85027

[www.petsmartcharities.org](http://www.petsmartcharities.org)  
1-800-423-PETS