**Sample Language to Model Engaging Conversations**

To help future counselors feel comfortable having meaningful conversations, incorporate examples and practice in to your training. The following is a cheat sheet with sample language to help with role-play exercises. The sections below follow the same order as a sample adopter questionnaire that can be downloaded at [*animalsheltering.org/questionnaire*](http://www.animalsheltering.org/questionnaire).

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.

The details of the adoption process, from introductions to congratulations, will be different for each agency. Use these examples to enhance your method. Your organization will need to develop specific training around your procedures.

**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. The HSUS 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:** The HSUS 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 pets 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 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!”