

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.



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.⁶

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.⁷

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.^{8,9,10,11}

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.⁶

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.

“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.¹²

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.

Adopter's challenge: Keeping a new cat indoors

Tips on indoor enrichment

Where: 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.¹³ 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.

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.

