



**Humane
World for
Animals™**

Formerly called the
Humane Society of the United States



Adopters Welcome

Finding, engaging and supporting adopters



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Appendices Find resource lists, sample forms and more at humanepro.org/adopters-welcome.



Humane World
for Animals

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Foreword

Finding a loving and happy home for every adoptable animal waiting to start a new life—that's one of the goals of everyone involved in sheltering and rescue work.

Organizations are continually finding new and effective ways to promote pet adoption and engage communities. As we learn from one another, we sometimes find that certain policies or approaches aren't inclusive of all individuals and families who want to share their lives with a pet. In fact, in this manual, we challenge adoption policies that many of us at Humane World for Animals promoted decades ago. An Adopters Welcome approach embraces a mindset of learning, in which we use new research and insights to inform our approach.

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 that adoptions—or lack of adoptions—can have on all the animals in a community.

Programs that attract and support adopters open doors that were previously closed. This can mean engaging a new community member in your work, or helping more animals find loving homes. In addition, more adopters are connected with great companions and learning about safety nets they might 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. In other words, adoption success has a positive ripple effect on animal welfare.

We hope you will use the practical tools provided in this manual to build a more inclusive adoption experience in your community.

About Humane World for Animals

The Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International are now known as Humane World for Animals. As the leading voice in the animal protection space, we work to end the cruelest practices, care for animals in crisis and build a stronger animal protection movement. With millions of supporters and work happening in over 50 countries, we aim to achieve the vision behind our name: a kinder world for animals.

View the digital version of this manual at humanepro.org/adopters-welcome to access referenced sources and additional content online.



Why do we need this manual?

At Humane World for Animals, 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 or biased treatment, calls and emails that aren't returned, and denied adoptions drive away pet lovers who are trying to do the right thing and can send them to less humane options. When potential adopters have a negative experience, it can have a trickle-down effect on how other community members perceive your organization.

We've also identified areas where organizations can better engage their communities, including places where interactions with traditional animal services may have been punitive in nature. Pet lovers may be unfamiliar with animal welfare organizations in their community or experience barriers to transportation, language or available time to visit an animal shelter.

Surveys conducted by our Pets for Life team have identified neighborhoods where less than 5% of pets come from shelters or rescues.¹ When we compare this to a national average of 33% of dogs and 37% of cats,² it's clear that we have opportunities to

connect with more potential adopters.

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 yet been reached with an inclusive 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.

The good news? With training and support, these barriers can be taken down and replaced with an approach celebrated by organizations that have adopted a fresh perspective.

Research on adoptions

Throughout this manual, you'll see references to research. A list of these studies is included on Pages 36-37. Stay current on new research findings that will inform and enhance your policies.

Adopt a fresh perspective

We know it's difficult when animals are returned after adoption, and we know staff and volunteers sometimes see an overwhelming amount of animal suffering, which can turn into judgmental attitudes toward people. But we need to engage people for all of our efforts on behalf of animals. (And don't forget: An adoption return is simply a foster animal returning to the shelter or rescue but without the extra paperwork.)

Your work regularly exposes you to animals in need: unclaimed lost pets, families who need to relinquish their pets, injured or ill pets, and victims of abuse. With ongoing exposure to stress and trauma, your view of adoptions and adopters may change over time. While a perspective shift is normal and predictable, if these changes go unrecognized and unchallenged, they can damage your adoption efforts.

Only a small percentage of dogs and cats, around 5.76 million, enter the U.S. shelter and rescue system.³ Meanwhile, according to 2024 estimates, there were more than 163.5 million pet dogs and cats living in American homes.⁴ That means fewer than 5% of pets end up in shelters each year. Those who do often enter shelters or rescues because of the same systemic barriers that exist for adopters—lack of access to veterinary and pet behavioral care, pet-inclusive housing and more.

Denying families an adopted pet because of fear or bias can have ripple effects:

Remember that the pets and families you engage with are only a fraction of the total.

163.5 million



Estimated owned dogs and cats in U.S. homes⁴

5.76 million

Estimated dogs and cats entering the U.S. shelter system each year³

Adopt a fresh perspective

- Long stays in a shelter may compromise quality of life for a pet awaiting adoption.
- Resources (time, funds and space) are diverted from other pets within your organization and your community.
- Demand may grow for inhumane sources of pets, such as breeding mills.
- Pets and owners who may need help down the road are cut off from the safety net services you provide.

These are not imagined risks. Most pet owners cherish their pets. 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 donors, volunteers and cheerleaders for your organization.

The adopter's perspective

You've got the animals; what you need are the adopters. It's in your organization's best interest to learn as much as possible about pet owners and what has motivated them to adopt.

Learn from your competition

A national survey of pet owners reveals that most pets came from sources other than shelters or rescues. And while most people would prefer to adopt from a shelter or rescue when looking for a new pet, they don't end up adopting from these sources.²

- 58% of potential cat owners prefer shelters, and 45% prefer rescues, yet only 24% adopted from a shelter and even fewer (13%) adopted from a rescue.
- 51% of potential dog owners prefer shelters, and 42% prefer rescues, yet only 19% adopted from a shelter and even fewer (14%) adopted from a rescue.

There's a clear disconnect between the motivations of pet owners and how they ultimately acquire a new pet.

In addition, according to a 2024 report from the Human Animal Support Services coalition,⁵ only 31% of potential adopters who entered a shelter ended up adopting that day. While the top reason was that an individual or family needed more time to ensure they were ready for a pet, the other barriers give a glimpse at the ways organizations can improve:

- Pet isn't ready to leave (active stray holds, medical requirements not yet met, etc.)
- Other (includes multiple internal barriers such as too long of wait times, process to adopt was deterrent, family wasn't at the right location for specific pet, the client left without ever being helped by shelter staff)
- Type of pet unavailable (specific species, breed, size, age)
- Compatibility (unknown history; behavior or medical requirements such as "good with children")
- Poor customer service experience

You can increase adoptions by learning from the competition. For example:

- Lost 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. Lost 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're getting from a breeder, even if that isn't always the case. Quality breeders also offer health screenings and socialization.

Top four sources of pets in surveyed homes

(American Pet Products Association, Dog and Cat 2024 Report)²

Dogs

Breeder - 23%
Friend/relative - 20%
Shelter - 19%
Rescue group - 14%

Cats

Shelter - 24%
Found pet - 24%
Friend/relative - 23%
Rescue group - 13%

Research on adopters

Research into the public's perspective on pet ownership and adoption backs up the lessons learned from competitors.⁶

- 26% of potential adopters reported concerns that they wouldn't have enough medical or behavioral information on a shelter or rescue pet to make a sound decision.
- 30% of potential adopters think the adoption process is too difficult, particularly adopters with a lower income level and those from historically marginalized communities. (Examples may include that the process is too long; they'll have to answer prying questions; they can't get to the shelter during open hours; they may not know whether a shelter is accessible for all abilities, etc.)
- Clients were much more confident with their decision to adopt when shelter staff took the time to understand their wants and needs and helped match them with a pet.
- More than a third of potential adopters said they would be more likely to adopt certain types of pets if they knew they would have access to post-adoption support such as someone to answer behavior questions or programs that helped with veterinary care.

Creating inclusive adoption messaging, helping potential adopters know what to expect, making interactions convenient and pleasant, and rewarding people's desire to do the right thing are all within reach for adoption agencies. You also have even more to offer: a mission that establishes your organization as a lasting resource for pets and their new families.

Steps toward building an Adopters Welcome adoption program

Building an Adopters Welcome adoption program starts with a philosophical commitment to affirming people's motivation to adopt and creating an atmosphere of listening so that you can best match them with a pet and invest in their success with guidance and practical support. Putting this philosophy into practice requires several steps that this manual covers in detail in the following pages:

1. Implement policies that remove barriers and increase options for adoptable pets in your community.
2. Offer adoption counseling that relies on open and engaging conversations to set pets and their owners up for success.
3. Develop marketing strategies that remove barriers.
4. Train and support team members to consistently deliver the program.
5. Learn how to translate the Adopters Welcome philosophy into other programs.



Testimonial from an adopter

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 Providence Animal Rescue League. 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, "Sugar Pie." 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 it's 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!



Step 1: Implement policies that remove barriers

In the past, fears of what could happen to pets influenced adoption policies far more than what actually happened. The reasons families may need to relinquish a pet should influence pet retention programs, not your approach to adoptions. It's smart to track and investigate the reasons animals come to you in need. This information should shape proactive pet retention programs, such as spay/neuter and other essential veterinary care services, pet ID and microchip clinics, behavior helplines and pet food banks for families in need. At the same time, approaches to adoptions should be inspired by the majority of pet relationships that are successful.

The policies outlined below take a new approach. They're grounded in the latest research on adoptions, and they avoid barriers that will get in the way of supporting great matches.

Adopters Welcome policies

Adopters Welcome policies don't include automatic "noes" or "must-haves." These are unnecessary barriers that limit options for animals and exclude potential adopters. Instead, meet potential adopters where they are. By knowing more about them and their individual situation, you can focus on partnering with them to identify and remove barriers that might prevent them from successfully adopting in the future.

Adopters Welcome policies are pro-adopter, based on an understanding that most adopters are committed to doing what's needed to provide a safe and loving home for a pet. You may have experienced or heard about adoptions where the pet wasn't safe or looked after. These situations and experiences can cause us to be more risk averse in the future and implement policies with automatic "noes" or "must-haves."

Building a relationship with potential adopters requires trusting them to identify their own barriers and partner with you to overcome them and successfully adopt. These conversations and a positive adoption experience may also encourage the adopter's family and friends to adopt!

Adopters Welcome policies support renters

Why? Landlord checks are a drain on precious time, and they send a message to adopters that you don't trust them. It also creates a role for shelters and rescues to uphold discriminatory and unfair housing policies when they could be spending that time advocating for pet-inclusive policies. 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-check policy.⁷

How? Alert adopters to the fact that pet policies and requirements may exist and trust them to take it from there. Offer them a list of truly pet-inclusive rental options in your community or connect them with housing advocacy organizations that can help. With the extra time you're saving by not contacting and waiting to hear back from landlords, create an advocacy campaign to increase pet-inclusive housing in your state.

Adopters Welcome policies use persuasion, not policies, to help cats live indoors

Why? Approximately 75% of owned cats are kept indoors at least at night,² and this trend has been on the rise, up from approximately 20% in the 1970s.⁸

Restrictive policies prevent cats from finding homes, leading to longer stays, possible euthanasia or organizations spending more resources to help fewer cats. Don't lose a home and a chance to promote indoor cats the right way.

How? Many owners believe that it's better for cats to go outside as a form of enrichment and exercise. They may not know how many easy options there are for indoor cat fun. Others may want a working cat to help with rodent control. 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. Provide prospective adopters with information about cat harnesses and catios that allow cats to be safely outside. Be proactive by sending cats home with a collar, tag and microchip. This approach leads to adoption, plus a more informed pet owner.

Adopters Welcome supports access to veterinary care, without requiring proof

Why? Veterinary care is critical for pets and should be part of adoption conversations. But checking a person’s veterinary record can exempt families who live in communities without veterinarians or first-time adopters who have no history of established veterinary care.

Rather than shame people for the systemic lack of affordable and accessible veterinary care, determine what your organization can provide and highlight it in your marketing materials. Remember that every pet who has been spayed or neutered, vaccinated and treated for parasites prior to adoption is elevating animal care in the community at large.

How? Talk to adopters about vaccines and medical procedures provided to animals in your care. If pets at home aren’t vaccinated or spayed or neutered, offer or refer people to free or low-cost services to bring wellness to all pets in the family. Provide a list of low-cost options in case families need support in the long term.

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’s also no evidence that certain breeds of dogs will be adopted for nefarious reasons, such as animal fighting. In addition, one study found that for 90% of dogs, breed guesses by adoption agencies didn’t match the predominant breed identified through DNA analysis. Another revealed that experts seldom agree on their breed guesses, so one person’s bulldog mix is another’s boxer mix and another’s Lab-hound cross.⁹

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

How? Create adoption policies that treat dogs as individuals and use a matchmaking process based on behavior history and observations in the shelter or foster home.

All dogs can be supported by spaying and neutering them before adoption and through conversations about socialization, positive-reinforcement training, and local low-cost or free behavioral resources available to adopters.

Adopters Welcome policies welcome the giving of pets as gifts

Why? Some studies have found that pets received as gifts are actually more likely to remain in their homes than pets acquired other ways.¹⁰⁻¹³

How? Sometimes, people want to gift a wonderful pet for their children, loved ones or friends during the holidays and for birthdays, too. Instead of sending adopters to pet stores or 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 their new guardian be a gift that keeps on giving. You can also offer gift certificates to cover the costs of an adoption or, better yet, waive the fee and offer free, post-adoption support.

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

Why? Dog-to-dog introductions take time, can cause stress, and don’t always predict success or failure in a home. How a dog (or cat) behaves in a shelter environment isn’t predictive of how they may be in a new home. The stress and noise of a shelter can increase reactivity, whereas a slow introduction at an adopter’s home—or a nice, leisurely walk off-site—can do more to build the

foundation of a healthy relationship between animals.

A 2014 study showed that removing the “must meet pets” requirement didn’t change reports of how new dogs and resident dogs got along after adoption.⁷

How? Unless an adopter wants help 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 appointments when everyone in the home could be present. Like healthcare, shelters can have limited open hours, requiring families to plan well in advance or take time off work or school to meet this requirement. By the time they can finally make it to the shelter or rescue, the pet they were interested in may have already been adopted.

Children may benefit from meeting a pet in the familiarity of their own home where there is less stimulation, and people with physical limitations may not be able to get around a shelter easily. Multigenerational families may be common in your community, and strict meet-and-greet policies can prevent pets from living in a home full of love.

How? This policy takes agency away from potential adopters and signals a lack of trust that people have a plan to introduce the pet to others in their home. Instead of requiring everyone to come to the shelter, provide tips on how to make those meet and greets successful. Consider sending adopters home with some delicious dog or cat treats for the rest of the family to give the new pet during the introductions.

Adopters Welcome policies use persuasion to address cat declawing

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.

How? Find out why declawing is being considered and introduce adopters to effective alternatives such as nail caps, scratching posts and scratching deterrents like 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. You can also encourage them to adopt cats who are already declawed.

Adopters Welcome policies support homes for the long run instead of investigating them once

Why? Performing home visits is one of the most time-intensive and intrusive barriers to adoption, and it takes resources away from programs that could help more pets in your care or in your community. These visits also risk putting adopters on the defensive, which damages your relationship. Adopters are less likely to see you as a resource and more as an enforcement entity. You will also miss potential adopters who choose to forego the visit altogether and look for pets elsewhere.

Consider that Americans move an average of 11 times in their lives.¹⁴ 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?

How? Trade the time that would otherwise be spent on home visits for helping more animals find homes and supporting pets and families post-adoption. Provide tips and equipment (i.e., crates, baby gates) to help an adopter set up their home for a new pet. Have a conversation about how to slowly give the pet access to the entire house or apartment. According to the 2024 *State of Shelter Pet Adoption Report* from Hill’s Pet Nutrition,⁶ one-third of potential adopters would consider pets with known behavior or medical challenges if they knew they would have access to post-adoption support.



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

Why? Requirements like fenced-in yards significantly decrease the pool of adopters and is discriminatory against the millions of Americans who rent homes without yards or live in apartments. Dogs can be exercised just as well (if not more!) when walked regularly and given indoor enrichment.

Step 1: Implement policies that remove barriers

How? What makes fences so appealing? Safety? 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. Send adopters home with collars that prevent a dog from slipping out, harnesses and tips on how to train loose leash walking so it's enjoyable for everyone.

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 older adults” don’t 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.

How? Remember that older adults likely have a rich history of caring for animals and offer a wealth of knowledge and experience to a new pet. Parents are the best ones to determine if their child(ren) will be a match for a dog or cat. Just like people of any age, children are diverse individuals who may do best with the shyest cat or most rambunctious dog.



Adopters Welcome policies support spay and neuter for pets already in the home, without requiring it

Why? Your first priority is to make sure the pets you place aren't reproducing. If you're following best practices, adopted pets will be spayed or neutered and won't reproduce. If you need to restrict adoptions because your animals aren't spayed or neutered, fix that first by prioritizing animals who have secured adoptive families. If you have a backlog of shelter pets waiting for spay or neuter and have adopters without other pets at home or with pets who are altered, you can place the pet as a trial adoption or foster-to-adopt arrangement and finalize the adoption once the pet is sterilized.

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

How? If pets at home aren't spayed or neutered, offer this service or refer them to free or low-cost spay/neuter programs in your area. 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. 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.¹⁵

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, the option of same-day placement directly affects the number of animals you help in the community.

How? 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. Develop a robust volunteer program that equips adoption volunteers and foster parents to complete adoptions on their own.

Some shelters are making it possible for adopters to place an adoption hold on a lost pet who has been brought to the shelter.



While all efforts should be made to reunite lost pets with their original families, allowing adopters to express interest early on can reduce the animal's length of stay if they're not reclaimed. Get a head start on anticipated delays such as post-hold spay or neuter by proactively scheduling them ahead of time or having adopters return with a pet for their surgery. Communicating your efforts to adopters can help them manage the wait.

Saying “no”

This adoption program is based on the knowledge that most human-pet relationships can be successful. However, there will be times when adoption of a particular pet isn't the best match for a person, at least not right now. If you follow the philosophy and approach outlined in this manual, you and the client 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're ready.

Be a resource to pet owners

Removing barriers such as phone calls or emails to landlords and veterinarians, “must meet resident dog” requirements and home visits saves time and energy and prevents potential adopters from feeling judged from the outset. 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.

Return policy

Humane World for Animals supports a no-fault return policy or, better yet, a trial adoption period in which adopters are given the opportunity to acclimate to a new pet and determine if their home is the right match. Consider how often staff and volunteers are allowed to take a pet home to “see how things go,” and think about how you could extend this same privilege to potential adopters. If we as experts know that it can take weeks or months for a pet to acclimate to a new home, why would we rush the process?

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,” by offering trial adoptions or issuing full refunds for any fees paid, you reserve a home for a different animal, either now or in the future.

If you're concerned that the back and forth for a shelter dog can be stressful, research has shown that stress levels decrease for dogs who get time away from the shelter, particularly those who spend one or two nights in a new home.¹⁶ You learn more about the dog and the adopter, and the dog gets a few nights of rest. It's a win-win.

Rehoming policy

Remember that many people successfully find their pets through friends and family members, particularly those in lower-income

Step 1: Implement policies that remove barriers

households.¹⁷ Your rehoming policy should build on this natural community safety net. 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. 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 agreement

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

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

At the same time, make sure your agreement isn't undermining your adopter-friendly approach. For example, replace "no refunds" language with a satisfaction guarantee, and remove requirements that an adopter 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, including rehoming support if necessary.

Preparing for implementation

Adoptions don't happen in a vacuum. Their success is connected to all aspects of your organization and influenced by organizational culture. If a team member doesn't feel psychologically safe enough to risk speaking up if they disagree with an adoption decision or to disclose a mistake, they may not feel safe enough to risk making adoption decisions in a new way.

Part of integrating an Adopters Welcome perspective and successfully implementing the approach is reflecting on how it aligns with your organization's current culture, values and practices. Consider what other steps might be needed to support this perspective shift across your organization.

Questions to consider

- Do you know how team members (employees and volunteers) feel about the culture of your organization?
- Do you know the unique skills and talents of your individual team members?



- How can you leverage the resources you have to move organizational culture one step toward integration of an Adopters Welcome approach?

Clarifying expectations

An important first step in implementing any new practice is to get clear on expectations for everyone involved. Taking time to do this before implementation can help you identify any problems quickly, support effective communication for all involved and allocate resources where they're needed most.

Plan ahead for what might go wrong and anticipate push back from staff, volunteers or community members. Be realistic about how long it can take to shift perspectives, values and practices.

Learning from what goes wrong is an important and necessary part of implementation. Invite feedback and new ideas from all levels of your organization and actively solicit missing perspectives.

Questions to consider

- What are our goals for implementation?
- How will you know the Adopters Welcome approach is a success?
- How will you learn about the experience of adopters, animals and team members?
- What might go wrong, and what contingencies can you plan?
- How will you learn from your mistakes and successes as you develop the program?

An Adopters Welcome approach relies on high standards of care, effective communication, an investment in the workforce (staff and volunteers), and a willingness to consider ways to improve on current adoption practices.

Step 2: Rely on conversations instead of applications

Long applications that ask pet owners intrusive questions are another barrier in and of themselves. Applications may not be accessible to all potential adopters, and they may limit the information gathered about the adopter to the questions in the application. Relying on a lengthy application also makes it easy to miss insights that help make a match succeed.

According to the 2024 *State of Shelter Pet Adoption Report* from Hill's Pet Nutrition,⁶ adoption applications are viewed as more difficult among minorities and low-income groups. An Adopters Welcome perspective starts with meeting adopters where they're at and finding a way to get to a "YES!"

Applications can have the unintended consequence of discouraging a potential adopter from identifying and disclosing a potential barrier that could be overcome. Building a relationship and being a resource and support to adopters from your first interaction can increase their comfort in asking for help or sharing any challenges they may be having post-adoption.

Many of us will have had the experience of reading about an animal and their history and assuming they would be difficult to adopt, only to meet them and see them go on to be successfully adopted. People and pets aren't always what they seem on paper!

You invest valuable time preparing animals for adoption. By investing time in potential adopters, you have the potential to create loving homes for current and future animals.

First step: Call it a questionnaire. An application is a pass/fail approach, and Adopters Welcome is all about conversation. See the sample adoption questionnaire on Pages 16-17, which 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 provide information to assist the adopter in finding the best pet for them.

This questionnaire also asks adopters to select which topics are important to them, which can help counselors prioritize what information to share. Finally, there's space to promote pet owner support programs that can help adopters (or someone they know) access pet care resources. You can customize the template to fit your organization. Our only request is that you keep it barrier-free. (Download the questionnaire at humanepro.org/adopters-welcome.)

Paperwork optional

Be willing to let go of unnecessary paperwork and go straight to the adoption conversation once team members have built and practiced their conversational skills.

Start by identifying what information is necessary to complete an adoption, rather than which questions to ask. This creates consistency among the team and gives space for diverse interpersonal styles.

One of the strengths of a conversational approach is the flexibility to respond in the moment, to ask supplementary questions if more information is needed or to explore topics that might not have been included on an application.

Relational approaches

Every interaction is an opportunity to practice a relational approach and build your "conversational muscles." Practice as a team and offer each other support and feedback. Be willing to try something new and be curious about what you learn when it goes well and, just as importantly, when it feels hard or doesn't go according to plan.

Developing your relational skills can make it easier to talk to an adopter about difficult topics or ask hard questions about information they've shared in a thoughtful and compassionate way. Practice empathy and curiosity, and remember we never know everything there is to know about a situation, and what we learn often depends on how we ask.

Step 2: Rely on conversations instead of applications

Adopters Welcome aims to remove obstacles to adoption, but for some team members taking a conversational approach to adoptions may feel like a barrier itself as it relies on different skills and abilities. Give teams opportunities to share any worries or concerns they might have and address them in training and planning for implementation.

An Adopters Welcome approach supports building a collaborative relationship with adopters rather than negotiating a one-off transaction. All adopters have the potential to be partners in our shared mission to help pets. A relational approach can strengthen organizational culture, which in turn can support safe, stable adoptions and responsive ongoing support.

Sample questionnaire

Your logo

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

Name of animal(s) you're interested in: _____ Animal ID #: _____

Your name(s): _____

Address: _____ Town, state, zip: _____

Email: _____ Preferred phone: _____

Best way to be reached: ☐ text ☐ call ☐ email

☐ 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 may 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:

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?

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

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

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Borrow/rent a crate with this adoption | <input type="checkbox"/> Make ID tags for current pets | <input type="checkbox"/> Information about volunteering or fostering with us |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Information on our next free or low-cost vaccination day for any current pets | <input type="checkbox"/> Information about our pet food pantry | <input type="checkbox"/> Information about supporting us with financial or in-kind donations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Information on our next free or low-cost microchip implantation day for any current pets | <input type="checkbox"/> Information about our training classes | |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Information about free or low-cost spay/neuter services and other veterinary services | |



Step 3: Develop marketing that overcomes barriers

Use marketing to get past barriers

Marketing is an important tool to help you break 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.

Making your messaging accessible for all is a critical step in reaching potential adopters in your community:

- Translate your marketing into the most common languages in your community.
- Use diverse media outlets to spread the word.
- Avoid shelter jargon and write clearly, aiming for an eighth-grade reading level.¹⁸

To make sure you don't miss a step, develop a marketing action plan. See the sample guidelines on Page 22.

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 hindering your adoption goals.

Holding on to outdated beliefs

Are you still afraid of fee-waived adoptions? When you waive fees but include all the benefits of your adoption program, including conversation-based counseling, you can compete with the marketing genius of lost cats. Research shows that attachment to cats adopted through fee-waived programs was no different than those who required a fee.¹⁹

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 reducing pets' time in the shelter, 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.²⁰ 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 them 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



Step 3: Develop marketing that overcomes barriers

and other fomites are more likely to spread disease.²¹ 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’re 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.

Whenever you make a positive change, such as 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.

Waiting for people to come to you

Look to the success of foster-based rescue groups that 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 each 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 well-resourced teams for successful adoption programs. If adopters can’t find anyone to help them meet animals and answer questions, they will walk away frustrated. Unanswered emails and phone calls send potential adopters elsewhere, despite their good intentions. 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 often limited staff resources effectively and still provide great customer service.

Know the unique skills and abilities of your teams and volunteers so you can leverage them when and where they’re needed most. Volunteers shouldn’t 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

counseling adopters and introducing them to animals. Be sure to offer foster parents and volunteers the same training as you do your adoption staff.

Reach new audiences

Never take for granted that all of the potential adopters in your community know you’re the best source for pets. Chances are you’re missing out on entire zip codes full of great homes.

On average, about 33% of the dogs and 37% of the cats in homes today come from shelters or rescues,² but in some parts of your community, that number can be much lower. Humane World for Animals’ Pets for Life program works in underserved neighborhoods where less than 5% of pets come from shelters and rescues.¹

It’s not surprising that in these same areas, only 12% of pet owners report having any interactions at all with their local shelters or animal care and control agencies. 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.

You can uncover opportunities to engage the community 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.

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 who can help expand your outreach efforts in their neighborhoods.

Welcome, adopters!

You understand the importance of being professional and welcoming to community members, but do you know how your agency appears to them?

Find detailed instructions on how to perform a comprehensive community assessment and build a strong presence in previously underserved neighborhoods by reviewing our *Pets for Life Community Outreach Toolkit* at humanepro.org/pfltoolkit.



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, a member of our Pets for Life team shared her experience seeing puppies just like Bronco in the local shelter. She didn't realize the impact of this conversation until Cardale came back to get Bronco fixed and said that he was telling his brother to adopt! Now Cardale is spreading the word about spay/neuter and adoption.

Use the following questions to gauge how welcoming your agency is from a visitor's perspective. Seek feedback from the communities you serve and be willing to make changes based on what you learn.

For organizations with a central facility:

- Is your facility identified with clear, multilingual, easy to find signage that marks the open hours and entrances?
- Is your facility easy to locate?
- Is there public transportation to your facility?
- How does your facility appear from the outside? Are there visual barriers such as weeds or 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 for adopters to meet with and learn about animals?
- Are visiting spaces comfortable for all types of visitors? (Consider your adopters' abilities and what's needed to facilitate 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 for adopters to view and learn about animals online?
- Is the list of available animals updated automatically (or consistently)?
- Once someone finds a pet they're interested in, is it clear what to do next?
- When animals are in public locations (such as pet supply stores), is it easy for potential adopters to interact with them? Are instructions available that tell potential adopters how to take the next step?
- Are emails 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 to facilitate a meaningful conversation.)

“

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, Ph.D., Professor, University of North Carolina | Organizational Science | Editor, *Journal of Business and Psychology*

Step 3: Develop marketing that overcomes barriers

Use this tool—part timeline, part checklist—to develop your pet marketing action plan. (Download a copy at humanepro.org/adopters-welcome.) New strategies should kick in as time passes.

Note that 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.

| Code Green = Ready for adoption (the basics) | | | |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | Take an upbeat picture that shows off good looks and personality. | | Write a profile description that's positive, creative and highlights the animal's best features. |
| | Be clear about what medical and behavioral support adoptable pets have received (vaccinations, training, spay/neuter) to increase adopter confidence. | | Set reasonable adoption rates that are competitive or, if you anticipate the pet may be more difficult to place, waive the fee altogether. |
| | Post pictures and profiles to national adoption websites and to your local online pages. | | |

| Code Blue = Available for adoption after more than two weeks | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | Highlight positive changes or training successes that show a pet's progress and potential. | | Take a new picture that captures personality, ideally with a human. Upgrade with silly props and colorful backdrops. |
| | Identify behaviors that may be driving adopters away. Move to a foster home or have a volunteer take a dog off-site to learn more about (and document) their personality. | | Highlight as "Pet of the Week" through local newspaper, television and radio stations. |
| | Add a short video featuring play and other fun activities to online profiles. | | Write a new profile description illustrating unique and special qualities. Stay positive and use humor. |
| | Relocate the animal to a different location within the shelter, main lobby or off-site location. | | Create a personalized cage sign by using just a few words to say something extra special. |

| Code Orange = Available for adoption after more than four weeks | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | Evaluate for emotional or behavioral signs of stress or deterioration. If any signs appear, transition to foster care for further support. | | Ensure the profile highlights the pet's best qualities. Use puns and rhymes, and play on current events. |
| | Identify any new behaviors that are driving adopters away. Move to a foster home for behavior modification or enlist the help of a positive-reinforcement trainer. | | Take a set of new pictures using better backgrounds, accessories and popular themes. Prioritize photos and videos of the pet with other animals or humans or in a home environment. |
| | Promote socially by adding photos on social media and your organization's newsletter or blog, etc., as a "Pet of the Week." | | If the pet is comfortable, bring to special events, popular parks and other high-traffic locations to maximize exposure. |
| | Spotlight the pet on your website and ask local businesses to do the same. | | Find volunteers to take dogs to training classes or clicker-train cats and promote as a special feature. |

| Code Red = Top five animals with highest number of days until available for adoption | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | Waive the adoption fee. | | Find sponsors for adoption fees and any additional medical needs. |
| | Encourage staff and volunteers to add the pet's picture and tagline to email signatures. | | Create and share flyers on social media asking followers to print and post at work, coffee shops, etc. |
| | Decorate housing by using popular themes and match colors or patterns throughout bedding and toys. | | Send out on regular field trips in the community to meet adopters where they are. |
| | Connect with local community centers to display the pet's profile and host an adoption event in a new community. | | Run senior bloodwork, perform dentals or have the pet groomed to add value and peace of mind for potential adopters. |



We are proud to announce we have partnered with the Humane Society of the United States and Partners for Animals and will be adopting dogs from animal shelters in North Carolina.



Step 4: Train and support your team

Pause to reflect

How would adoption counselors in your agency respond to these questions?

- What vaccines do adopted animals receive and what do they protect against?
- What is heartworm disease and how is it prevented?
- What are some tips for introducing cats to each other?
- How do you house-train an adult dog?
- How do you prevent a cat from scratching the furniture?
- What are the essential qualities you look for in an adopter?
- What are the deal-breakers that would prevent you from approving an adopter?
- How safe do you feel to speak up if you disagree with a colleague's decision to refuse a potential adopter?
- How would your agency respond if you made a mistake or approved an adopter who went on to mistreat an animal in their care?

- What skills do you use to regulate your own emotions while engaging with an adopter who is angry?
- How does your team challenge each other to rethink practices and invite new perspectives?

Develop an inclusive training plan

Lack of professional development or training that doesn't invite critical thinking and new perspectives is another barrier to adoption success.

Counselors' responses to questions like those above can offer helpful insight into how and where to invest valuable training resources.

Take time to consider what knowledge you expect adoption counselors to have and what knowledge and skills you may need to help them build through training and coaching. Your teams are as diverse as the adopters they're supporting, and an inclusive training plan will consider not only what the team and agency need to learn, but also what may need to be unlearned. For example, adoption counselors who have denied adopters due

to a lack of access to spay/neuter services may need to practice referring adopters to low-cost services.

Organizational culture

Organizational culture is being communicated all the time, in everything we say and do. An Adopters Welcome approach represents a paradigm shift in how to approach not only adoptions, but all aspects of shelter work, and will require learning and accountability at all levels of the organization. Adoption counselors being asked to take a conversational approach to their work will learn from how conversations are approached in the workplace and the values being expressed.

Changing how we do things can feel hard, and modeling a relational approach to implementing these changes gives team members an experience of an Adopters Welcome culture in practice. When we have an experience of something, it reinforces what we learned, and the benefits of an Adopters Welcome approach extend beyond adoption conversations.

Trying new approaches can feel risky at first. A supportive culture where teams are encouraged to speak up if they make a mistake and learn from what goes wrong is key to success. Reviewing a paper application gives more time to process information about a potential adopter before needing to respond, but in a conversational approach, counselors are listening and responding in real time to what they're learning and what they still need to learn.

A conversational approach to adoption decisions may present new and different challenges. Part of planning for success is supporting counselors to strengthen their relational and regulation skills. These kinds of skills can only be strengthened when counselors have opportunities to learn and practice in a variety of ways.

Organizations will want to plan their training based on their specific structure and resources and the diverse learning styles of their team members.

Questions to consider

- How does our current training reflect the values of Adopters Welcome?
- Does our current training invite and encourage team members to challenge their own biases and perspectives?
- Are we making staff responsible for a system problem?
- What information is essential for adoption counselors to have to successfully place an animal with their new family?
- What relational and regulation skills do team members already have, and what skills do they need to build?
- What can be taught versus what can be learned through experience?

- How can we support ongoing learning and development and a range of learning styles?
- What do we need to adopt, adapt or abandon?

Compile key background information

Counselors need to understand your adoption process from start to finish. They will be expected to answer questions about individual animals and fill in any gaps adopters have in their own pet care knowledge. 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. Remember that seniority in a role doesn't always translate to the best or most innovative practices. Stay open to learning from the newest members of the team as well.

See Page 26 for 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. Also check out our resources at humanepro.org/adopters-welcome for a brief reading list to help counselors get up to speed on common pet care issues. (To make sure you've covered all the bases, ask counselors what else they need to know.)

Model engaging conversations

To help counselors feel confident and comfortable having meaningful conversations, incorporate examples and practice into your training. Effective training helps counselors build confidence and improve their ability to connect with adopters. Consider offering:

- Role-play exercises: Practice engaging conversations, troubleshooting challenges and addressing common adopter concerns.
- Virtual training options: Provide access to webinars or video demonstrations to accommodate remote or hybrid staff.



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 connect individuals with pets through a conversational, matchmaking approach)

All related policies: _____

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

Spay/neuter, vaccinations, parasite treatment and prevention: _____

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: _____

Medical notes: _____

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

Where to go with detailed medical or behavior questions: _____



- Advanced empathy exercises: Teach counselors to listen actively and respond thoughtfully to diverse adopters.
- Mentorship opportunities: Pair new counselors with experienced team members for hands-on learning and support.

The following examples include sample language to support role-play exercises and address modern challenges in the adoption process.

The details of the adoption process, from introductions to congratulations, will be different for each agency. Use these examples to enhance your method and ensure your approach remains adaptable and inclusive. Your organization will need to develop specific training around your procedures. Download sample language at humanepro.org/adopters-welcome.

Start with a warm “hello”

A genuinely warm greeting can set the tone for a positive interaction. Whether you’re helping people get to know the animals in your adoption program or reviewing their questionnaire, a friendly introduction can ease potential intimidation or confusion about the process. Be approachable, welcoming and open to questions.

- In-person introduction: “Hi, I’m Rosie. Thanks so much for visiting us today! Pepper is such a sweetie and very handsome. Can I help you get to know him better?”
- After receiving a questionnaire: “Hi, I’m Rosie. I see you’ve already started with our questionnaire—thank you! Let’s go over it together. Feel free to ask questions as we go along!”

Support gift adoptions

Gift adoptions can be especially meaningful, but they require extra care to ensure the recipient is ready and excited to welcome a pet into their home. Use the questionnaire to gather details and offer additional follow-up support.

- “I see you’re adopting for your parent—how thoughtful! What can you tell me about the lucky recipient? I can help you find a great match and share tips for introducing the pet to their household. Is this a surprise, or are they involved in the decision?”
- “I see you’re adopting for a friend—how thoughtful! What can you tell me about the lucky recipient? I can help you find a great match and share tips for introducing the pet to their new family. Is this a surprise, or are they involved in the decision?”

Engage adopters who rent

Our sample questionnaire doesn’t 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, provide helpful advice and trust them to work through any bumps.

- “If you rent, let me know if you have any questions about possible pet restrictions such as size limits or pet deposits. We may have programs to help you.”

Learn about household members

You have access to information about each animal, including historical information from owners or finders. Be transparent with this information and cover all pertinent interactions the pet has had with adults, children, strangers and other pets, if known. 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 you have a family member who may have difficulty walking a large dog. Do you want to look for a dog who is more low-key, or would you like to discuss ways we can help Sophie learn to walk on a loose leash?”

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’re 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. Would you be interested in some tips on keeping Squeaky inside with you? We can also provide a free crate until he’s acclimated to your home.”
- “I’m so sorry your last cat ran away! Would you like information on how to exercise your new cat without letting them outside?”

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 organization’s care. Answer questions (or connect the adopter with someone who can) and aim to help them find accessible veterinary care if they don’t already have it.

- “I’m 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 aren’t 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’re used to, or would you like a list of local options?”

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 or cat behavior professionals, or offer these services directly, this is a good time to discuss what’s available.

- “Rocco has shown some playful but mischievous behavior with household items in the past. If you’re considering adopting him, we can provide you with some resources on how to manage these habits.”

Covering additional topics

Some adopters may have questions or concerns that aren’t typically covered in a standard adoption conversation. It’s important to address these with empathy and provide honest, helpful information.

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 such as long-term pain and behavioral concerns. We recommend alternatives that I’d be happy to go over with you!”

Heartworm prevention:

- “Heartworm disease is a big concern for dogs in our area, so we always like to ask pet owners if they’re aware of this disease and how to prevent it. Do you have any questions about heartworm disease I can answer?”

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’re always worth it!”

Saying “no”: As hard as you try to help make matches successful, there will be times when adoption isn’t 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. Can we talk about some steps you can take before adopting?”

Explaining the return policy: While we strive for successful adoptions, not every match will work out as planned. Be transparent with adopters about your organization’s return policy and offer solutions to any concerns they may have.

- “We want this adoption to be a success, but if things don’t work out, we want you to feel comfortable reaching out. Our return policy is designed to make sure every pet has the best chance of finding the right home. Let’s go over the process together so you’re aware of your options.”

Follow-up and support: Offer adopters the reassurance that your shelter is there for them post-adoption. Provide information about any follow-up programs, including support on pet behavior, medical needs or community resources. The relationship built through your outstanding customer service and engaging conversations will encourage them to call before a problem is out of hand.

Promoting additional shelter services: Adopters are a captive audience. If your organization offers extra services such as ID tags, microchipping, pet food pantries, 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.

Incorporate digital tools while ensuring accessibility:

As more organizations embrace online tools, it’s essential to consider the varying levels of comfort adopters may have with technology. Provide options for those less familiar with digital platforms and offer guidance to make the process user-friendly.

- Tech-savvy adopters: “I noticed you completed our online questionnaire—thank you! That’s a great start. Let’s go over it together to make sure we find the best match for you.”
- Adopters less familiar with technology: “If you’re not comfortable with the online forms, no problem at all! We can go through the questions together right here. I’m happy to help however works best for you.”
- Hybrid approach: “We offer virtual meet-and-greets if that’s more convenient, but you’re always welcome to visit in person, too. Let me know what works best for your schedule and comfort level.”

Emphasize DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging):

Create a welcoming environment for adopters from all backgrounds. Tailor your approach to individual needs and avoid making assumptions about their knowledge or experience with pets.

- “We’re here to support you, whether this is your first pet or your tenth. Can I answer any questions about caring for a new pet or what to expect during the adoption process?”
- “We want to make sure our process is accessible to everyone. If there’s anything we can do to make this easier for you, please let us know!”
- “Pets make great companions for everyone. Let’s talk about how we can help find a match that suits your lifestyle and preferences.”

Wrap up with a “thank you”: Always close the conversation with appreciation, reinforcing that adopters are valued members of your shelter’s community and you appreciate the time and effort someone has taken to adopt!

Building your team

An Adopters Welcome approach challenges us to think again about barriers that could be preventing adoption. This is an opportunity to reconsider who your organization is reaching in its hiring efforts and what skills and qualities you want to seek and prioritize.

Historically, organizations may have focused more on animal



Step 4: Train and support your team

handling and husbandry skills than people skills when hiring new team members. Knowledge and experience with animals are helpful, but consider what other knowledge and qualities might be needed to build a successful Adopters Welcome program.

Hiring team members with diverse skills and experience, who reflect the communities you're serving and trying to reach, could strengthen your adoption program in ways you hadn't before considered.

Recruiting and retaining a diverse, representative team will likely attract a more diverse pool of adopters and strengthen your community connections.

Check out our list of staff and volunteer resources at humanepro.org/adopters-welcome.

Share your success

Adopters Welcome reflects the knowledge and research of our time while remaining open to future insights. It's 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 once was useful has become a barrier. Staying nimble keeps us focused on the long-term goals.

Staff support: stress, trauma exposure and empathic distress

Implementing the Adopters Welcome approach may be met with concerns and resistance. It's important to acknowledge fears, offer support and provide ongoing training to help staff adjust to changes.

Recognizing occupational hazards

Animal welfare professionals work in high-stress, trauma-exposed environments that can contribute to chronic stress, empathic strain or empathic distress (compassion fatigue), and vicarious trauma. This can significantly affect staff members' thoughts, emotions and behavior.^{22,23}

Empathic strain is a profound emotional, mental and physical exhaustion, developing over time due to the demands of working in an intense caregiving environment in which helpers feel the pain, stress and emotions of others. Symptoms can include loss of empathy, irritability, cynicism, guilt, an overdeveloped sense of responsibility and hopelessness.^{23,24}

Vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress is the experience of being significantly negatively impacted by the suffering of animals and people who have experienced trauma. This can result in a profound shift in worldview. Over time, staff may find it difficult to see the world as a safe place or perceive others, including adopters, as good or trustworthy. Symptoms can include all of the above, as well as hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, anxiety, avoidance and anger.^{23,25,26}

Understanding how stress and trauma impact the brain and body

When humans process information, our limbic system and brain stem (the "survival brain") ask: Is this dangerous or safe? Danger can encompass direct physical threats or perceived threats to our beliefs or the safety of others, such as the animals we feel responsible for as adoption counselors.^{23,27}

Whenever a sensory cue—such as a smell, voice, memory, visual, sound or phrase—triggers reminders of a previous distressing experience, whether from childhood or an adoption in which the animal was returned or abused, the survival brain perceives danger. This activates our fight-or-flight stress response and disrupts the functioning of our prefrontal cortex (the "thinking brain"). This process occurs quickly, involuntarily and often outside of our conscious awareness.²⁷

These physiological and psychological changes can impair our ability to access empathy, recognize biases, embrace complexity, tolerate uncertainty, engage in constructive conversations and apply logic to our decision-making. Therefore, it's essential to provide staff with targeted training in stress and trauma, along with ongoing support, as you implement these changes.²²⁻²⁴

Organizational support strategies

Address working conditions: Ensure adequate staffing to reduce chronic stress and time pressures, which impair clear thinking and the ability to engage in open, constructive conversations with adopters.²²

Provide training on stress and trauma: Acknowledge that adoptions can activate stress and trauma responses, and teach staff skills to recognize and navigate these challenges. Plan to offer retraining and mentoring as needed. Ongoing exposure to stress and trauma may result in well-trained staff members experiencing periods of reduced competency and confidence in themselves and others and the Adopters Welcome approach.²²

Have compassion for staff: Reframe "difficult" behaviors as coping, self-protective behaviors. Restrictive adoptions may have given staff a (false) sense of certainty and control, helping them to feel safer and less stressed. Changing to more subjective, conversation-based adoptions may heighten fears that they will make a "wrong" decision and "fail" to protect animals for whom they feel responsible. Instead of thinking "this employee is giving me a hard time," try "this employee is having a hard time."

Offer supportive conversations: Meet with staff individually, allowing them to reflect on their experiences. Validate that it's "OK not to be OK sometimes." Normalize emotions such as helplessness, sadness, fear, guilt, grief and anger. Acknowledging



feelings first will help staff focus on solutions. Consider bringing in a veterinary social worker for regular structured debriefing or grief support sessions.

Train staff in zone-of-control thinking: Staff do not have direct control over what happens to animals after adoptions and few tools to help them cope with that reality. Help them identify what they can control, what they can influence and what is beyond their control. Then assist them in finding positive coping strategies for what's outside their control, such as the outcome of their efforts.

Model a realistically optimist outlook: Don't dismiss or minimize negative feelings; instead, counterbalance them by highlighting positive outcomes and partial wins to help combat the negativity bias.

Allow job rotation: If a staff member's distress persists despite support and training, consider temporary or permanent role changes.

Individual strategies for adoption counselors

Stay aware of your body and behavior: When speaking with a potential adopter, pay attention to your physical and emotional state. Look for signs that your stress response is activated (i.e., increased heart rate, shaking hands, trouble making eye contact, stomach knots, sarcastic responses or mentally checking out).

Pause the conversation: If you notice that you're feeling activated, slow things down. You might say, "I need to grab some

paperwork; I'll be right back." Take a moment to reset. Drink water, take five slow, deep breaths, or mentally list 30 things you can see and hear in your environment. This helps your body feel safer and brings your thinking brain back online, allowing you to assess the situation clearly.

Fact-check your thoughts: If you're still feeling discomfort, ask yourself: "When am I? Is this feeling about the past or the present?" You might also ask yourself: "What exactly am I thinking? How do I know that what I believe about this adopter is true? Is it a fact? What else might be possible?"

Ask for a second opinion: If you're still not sure, ask a trusted co-worker or supervisor for their opinion and commit to trusting their judgment.

Discharge the accumulated stress: Engage in regular self-care outside of work to release stress and process your emotions. Activities such as exercise, singing, dancing, creating art, journal writing, playing with pets or children, and talking with a caring friend or therapist can help.²⁴

Have compassion for yourself: This is hard. Painful things are guaranteed to happen, despite your best efforts. It's OK that you're struggling with this. What would you say to a good friend in your shoes? What kind of support or care do you need? How can you meet that need, even just a little?



Translating Adopters Welcome philosophy into other shelter programs

The Adopters Welcome framework can easily be implemented in all other aspects of animal sheltering. By removing barriers and increasing access to resources in all of your programs, you can support pets and their families.

Adopters Welcome in field services programs

Animal care and control and humane police officers, often referred to as field services, play a crucial role in maintaining public safety and animal welfare. However, communities with limited or no access to pet resources often face challenges such as inadequate pet care, lack of veterinary services or pet overpopulation. These challenges can lead to misunderstandings or noncompliance with local laws. By adopting a culturally competent approach and providing supportive resources, field services teams can build trust, empower pet owners, and improve outcomes for animals and their communities.

In communities facing barriers to care, the field services team is often people's first point of contact with animal services. Unfortunately, these interactions may have historically been punitive, involving citations, confiscations or enforcement actions. This can create mistrust and hinder future collaboration. Shifting to a supportive, solution-oriented approach can help repair relationships and promote positive outcomes for both animals and people.

While stories of severe, intentional animal cruelty often make headlines and stick in our minds due to their shocking and emotional nature, these cases represent a statistically smaller portion of overall cruelty incidents. Intentional abuse accounts for about 35% of animal cruelty cases, while neglect—including

issues such as poor living conditions, malnutrition and lack of medical care—comprises roughly 65% of reported incidents.²⁸ The reality is that millions of pet owners experience systemic challenges such as poverty and lack of access to affordable veterinary care.

Through empathy, inclusivity and cultural competency, field services teams can share resources that support the human-animal bond and foster meaningful change.

Incorporate a new approach to field services that will build trust, empower caretakers and focus on compassion instead of citations.

Build trust

- Approach individuals with respect, understanding and empathy.
- Use culturally competent language to avoid judgment and facilitate communication.
- Example: Instead of saying, "You're not taking care of your pet," try, "I see you care about your pet. Let's talk about ways to make their care easier for you."

Empower caregivers

- Offer resources on pet care and available community support.
- Foster collaboration with community groups to bring more resources into the community.
- Example: Create partnerships with local clinics for affordable veterinary services.



- Providing spay/neuter resources: “I understand that you’re doing your best for your pet and that you care deeply for them. Would you be interested in learning more about our low-cost spay/neuter programs?”
- Access to resources: “It’s clear that you love your pet. I can help you find local programs that offer discounted services to make sure they get the care they need.”

By embracing an Adopters Welcome culturally competent approach, field services can transform interactions with the community. Through empathy, inclusivity and education, officers can support the human-animal bond, address underlying challenges, and create lasting solutions that improve the welfare of animals and the people who care for them.

Adopters Welcome in “friendraising” and fundraising

Sustainability for programming is a partnership with our community, as we can’t succeed in our missions without the help of those around us. Ensuring your marketing, fundraising and volunteer recruitment are inclusive of the community you serve is essential. The more people you reach, the larger your donor pool and program support will be. When people have a deep connection to your mission, they will positively promote you to others, and this ultimately will extend your reach.

In line with the Adopters Welcome philosophy, being inclusive and reducing barriers will increase support and expand your ability to achieve your mission. Assess your current program and determine how easy it is to volunteer and give funds.

“Friendraising” is a term that focuses on the relationship and deeper connection with our supporters beyond just their financial contributions. This can extend to our volunteers as well, and it’s important to create these long-lasting relationships to increase our reach and the support of community members. These friends can garner and influence more support for our mission through their relationships and sharing of positive experiences with us.

Accessibility considerations for volunteers and supporters

- Do your supporters represent a diverse population or the community you serve?
- What does your volunteer onboarding process look like? Consider removing barriers such as invasive applications, unnecessary background checks or lengthy onboarding training.
- What volunteer opportunities exist in your organization? Are there many roles that pique multiple interests, or are there just a handful of ways someone can support your organization? Consider expanding opportunities so that

Reflect inclusivity

- Embrace diverse communities and respect cultural differences.
- Tailor outreach programs to engage different groups and ensure they feel supported.
- Example: Develop multilingual resources and outreach materials that cater to specific community needs. Hire employees from all of the communities in your service area.

Focus on solutions

- Provide clear, constructive steps for addressing animal welfare concerns.
- Offer guidance on humane treatment and help reduce barriers to compliance.
- Example: Instead of issuing a citation for a loose dog, provide a leash and information on fencing resources.

Examples of field services conversational approaches

- Health and wellness education: “I can see how much you care for your pet, and I understand the challenges. Let’s explore some low-cost options to ensure they stay healthy and happy.”
- Supporting pet ownership: “Your pet clearly means a lot to you. Together, we can connect you to affordable resources that help maintain their well-being and happiness.”

people with different skillsets can volunteer their time, and don't forget virtual opportunities.

- Are there opportunities for businesses and groups to support your organization, or are you only focused on individuals?
- Do you view all community interactions as an opportunity to recruit supporters, or are you just focused on certain services?
- Are volunteers permitted to do functions that staff are allowed to do? Are they seen as part of the team?

Diversifying marketing and storytelling to increase support

- What percentage of your marketing is focused on single programs such as adoption and foster programming? Do you share stories about other work that is meaningful to your community, such as pet retention programs, field services or lost pet reunifications?
- Do your images include people and animals? Do those images reflect the people in your community? Are you creating a welcoming portrayal of those around you or catering to just one group of people?
- Are you giving people a voice in your storytelling? Are you talking about people, or are you allowing people to share their own stories and experiences with you to highlight your impact in your community?

- Do you welcome a variety of ways for people to support your mission (e.g., financial donations, supplies, volunteering on a short- or long-term basis)?

Increasing fundraising efforts

- Always communicate the connection between gifts and impact. Show how the funds and items are being used so donors can see their gifts in action.
- Be mindful about divisive language being used to fundraise—you set the tone for your supporters! Ensure the language you're using is objective, shows empathy and doesn't perpetuate bias.
- Diversify fundraising streams. Consider gifts from different donor sources as well as different modes of giving—individuals and organizations, crowdsourcing and planned giving.
- Set goals and show progress to those giving to your organization. Supporters want to see the impact and feel like they're part of the journey. This is a great opportunity to share data.
- Always thank your donors and be sure to use storytelling to share the impact they have made.

Adopters Welcome in owner support programs

Rethink any barriers you may have for your pet owner support programs. Do you require all pets in a home to be spayed or neutered before someone can access your pet food pantry? Help people access veterinary care in addition to ensuring their pets have the nutrition they need.

Adopters Welcome in lost pet reunification efforts

Does an owner need to pay a large fee to reclaim their lost pet, or do you require they spay or neuter their animal before they can take the pet home? If fees offset the costs to care for the pet, consider how much longer you may have the pet in the shelter if you don't return them to their family. In addition, owners may be understandably upset, and a pet may experience more stress than necessary.

Adopters Welcome is a community-centered philosophy that can translate into all aspects of animal shelter and rescue programs. Programs that attract and support adopters open doors that were previously closed and will allow your organization to better engage and serve the pets and people in your community.



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Our mission

Together, we tackle the root causes
of animal cruelty and suffering to
create permanent change.



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