

Follow Up Procedures in Animal Shelters: A Survey of Current Practices

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ABSTRACT

The Shelter Committee of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC) began work to develop a systems analysis of current animal shelter procedures and practices. The IHAF model (intake, holding, adoption and follow-up) was used to evaluate current practices. A 10 question survey pertaining to follow-up procedures was conducted and fifty-six shelters responded. Results showed that nearly half of the shelters did not have the time or resources to conduct follow-up checks on animals that had been adopted. When follow-up did occur, there was a significant amount of variability with regard to how often and when checks were conducted.

Introduction

Animal shelter practices have changed dramatically in the last 20 years. An increasing number of shelters strive to implement state-of-the-art, high-quality programs that result in as many adoptions as possible. In an effort to ensure the successful lifelong placement of shelter pets in their new adoptive homes, many shelters now provide comprehensive services such as assistance with medical problems, behavior counseling, and dog training classes on-site or as a partnership with local trainers. In addition, a number of shelters provide adoption counseling when a person is selecting a pet and follow-up after animals have been adopted (HSUS, 2006). Follow-up contacts with people who have adopted a pet from the shelter can be in the form of phone calls,

emails, letters, or home visits. Follow-up contacts give the animal's adopter the opportunity to talk to shelter staff or volunteers about any problems such as behavioral or health issues. The ultimate goal of follow-up checks is to reduce the chance that the adopter will return the animal to the shelter. Follow-up checks for adopted shelter animals are generally regarded as a part of "best practice."

Van Winkle (2005) proposed a model of looking at shelter operations that is referred to as the IHAF Model: Intake, Holding, Adoptions, and Follow-up. The IHAF model provides a framework for looking at all of the primary operations within an animal shelter. In any type of animal shelter, the intake and holding components are necessary for the program to exist. Adoptions are a common goal in most shelters and the adoption component is one area for which standard procedures and policies exist in shelter programs across the country. The one component of the IHAF model that is most often not implemented is follow-up. When shelters do not have follow-up procedures in place, it is usually due to limited resources (e.g., staff shortage, no volunteers) or the need to focus attention on other areas.

METHOD

In February 2006, a subcommittee of the Shelter Task Force of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC) conducted a survey to determine the status of follow-up programs in animal shelters. The survey was sent via email to members of a Shelter List and it included ten questions regarding whether or not follow-up procedures were in place and if they were, how follow-up checks were conducted at each individual shelter.

RESULTS

States

There were 56 responses from shelters across the United States. States represented in the responses included Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, and Washington. In addition, there was one response from a shelter in Canada.

Who responded to the survey?

Individuals who responded to the survey included: Administrative (staff such as executive directors, shelter directors and managers, outreach coordinators--30 responses); Directors of adoption services or behavior counselors (10 responses); Volunteers (8 responses); Staff including animal care or vet techs, kennel supervisors, animal control officers (7 responses); Board member (1 response). In the case where a board member was also a volunteer, the response was counted under volunteers.

Types of shelters

Of the 56 shelters responding to the survey, there was a good representation of the different types of shelters: Municipal (city/county) humane society managed (18 shelters); Private, non-profit, not humane society (14 shelters); Municipal- city and/or county managed (11 shelters); Humane society or SPCA (10 shelters); and Rescue organizations or sanctuary (3 shelters).

Number of animals per day

As shown in Fig. 1, of the 56 responses, most of the shelters responding to the survey held between 101 and 300 animals per day. There was only one shelter that held less than 10 animals at a time, and one shelter that held approximately 600 animals on any given day.

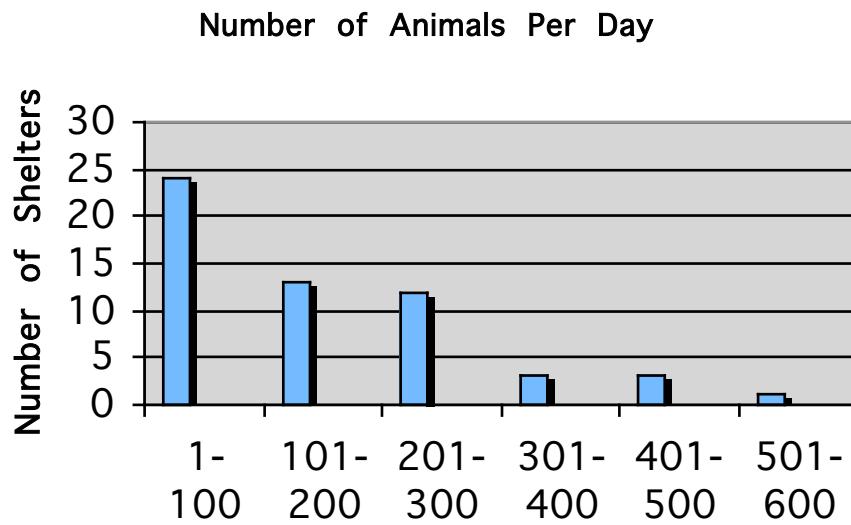


Figure 1.

Number of animals handled yearly

As shown in Fig. 2, most of the shelters surveyed handled between 501 and 2000 animals per year (13 shelters). The next largest categories were 2001 to 4000 animals per year (8 shelters) and 4001 to 6000 animals per year (9 shelters). Three of the shelters responding to the survey handled more than 20,000 animals per year.

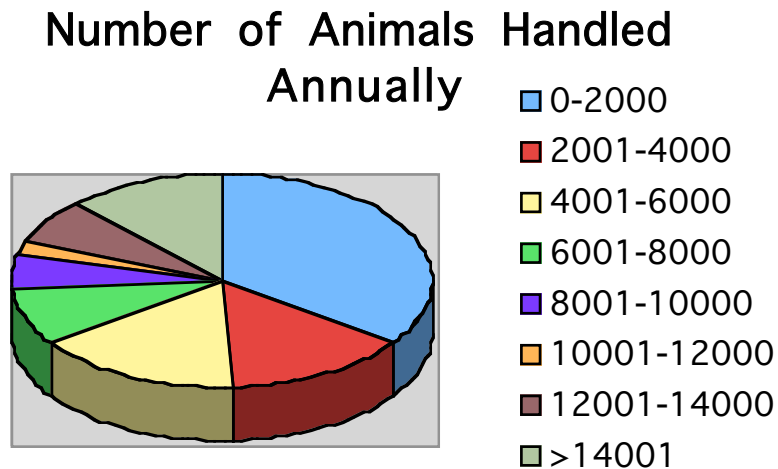


Figure 2.

Does the shelter conduct post-adoption follow-up checks?

Thirty-three shelters said “yes” (59%); twenty-three said “no” (41%). Of the 23 shelters who said they did not have follow-up procedures in place, 15 shelters indicated that they were currently developing follow-up plans.

Who does the follow-up?

In addition to the 33 shelters who had an existing follow-up plan in place, 10 shelters described plans for follow-up procedures that they were “currently developing.” For these shelters, follow-ups were most often conducted solely by volunteers (21 shelters). Twelve shelters had staff and volunteers working together to conduct follow-up checks and ten shelters relied on staff to conduct all follow-up checks. One shelter had a Board member who managed the follow-up for all adopted animals. Other results included: Volunteers conduct all follow-up (21 shelters); Staff + volunteers do follow-up (12 shelters); Staff only do follow-up (10 shelters).

A variety of staff positions were used to conduct follow-up checks. Some of these positions included: customer service staff, adoption and behavior hotline counselors, animal control officers, front office staff, kennel staff, kennel supervisors, receptionists, paid behavior consultants, and in a few cases, shelter directors or managers. When shelter directors or managers conducted follow-up checks, these were most often spot checks that were done periodically in order to assess staff performance related to customer service and the assistance that was provided during the adoption process.

How many staff/volunteers do follow-up?

Respondents to the survey were asked to reply to how many staff or volunteers were involved in conducting follow-up checks by choosing from the following categories: one person, two to five people, and more than five people are involved in follow-up. The results showed that the majority of shelters who had follow-up practices in place used between two and five people to do follow-up. Responses to this question were: One person does all of the follow-up (5 shelters); 2-5 people do the follow-up (26 shelters); More than 5 people do the follow-up (9 shelters).

Of the shelters that had more than 5 people working on follow-up, one shelter required all of the 15 staff members to follow-up on adopted animals and another had 26 staff and 12 volunteers dividing up follow-up calls.

Is there any special training for people who do follow-up?

Of the 33 shelters who conducted follow-up checks on adopted animals, 18 shelters (55%) had special training related to conducting follow-up phone interviews or home visits, phone calls, sending emails, or sending letter surveys. Nearly half of the shelters that did follow-up (15

shelters, 45%) did not have any special training for staff or volunteers related specifically to follow-up.

How long after adoption do you conduct follow-up checks?

There is some overlap in the data for this question because some shelters conducted follow-up checks more than once. Although the most common time for follow-up was when the animal had been in the home between one and two weeks, for the most part, the data for this question were very evenly distributed across most categories. The shelters in this survey reported that they conducted follow-up checks at the following times:

Follow-up at one week (9 shelters)

Between one and two weeks (10 shelters)

Between 2 and 3 weeks (7 shelters)

Follow-up at one month (9 shelters)

Follow-up between 1 and 3 months (9 shelters)

Follow-up between 2 and 6 months (7 shelters)

Follow-up whenever staff can do it- may be 1 week to months- (1 shelter)

It appeared from the answers to questions regarding when follow-up checks were conducted that three respondents had attended workshops or read materials where follow-up was suggested at 3 days, 3 weeks, and 3 months. Other than this consistency, follow-up practices varied from shelter to shelter.

To demonstrate the variability as to when follow-up checks were conducted, in this survey, examples of when other shelters did follow-up were:

1 week, 1 month, 6 months, 1 year

1 week, 3 months

3 days, 1 month, 3 months

3 weeks, 3 months

1 week, 2 months

2 weeks, 1 month, 6 months

2 weeks, 6 months

1 month

1 month, 3 months, 6 months

Between 1 week and 30 days

How frequent is follow-up?

The most frequently reported number of follow-up checks conducted for adopted animals was one, that is, when a follow-up system was in place, most shelters checked up on adopted animals one time. No shelter in this survey routinely conducted more than three follow-ups, although some shelters indicated if problems were discovered in the initial follow-up, additional phone consultations with the owner may occur. Responses to this question were: Shelters conducted one follow-up check (24 shelters); Shelters conducting two follow-up checks (5 shelters); Shelters conducted three follow-up checks (4 shelters, two more plan to do 3 checks for adopted animals).

What methods are used for follow-up?

Shelters conduct follow-up checks on adopted animals by phone, email, letter surveys, home visits, or some combination of these methods. As one might guess, due to time constraints, limited staff, and the reported desire to not invade the privacy of the adoptive family, home visits are rare as a routine follow-up measure. (Animal control officers routinely conduct follow-up home visits for cruelty and neglect cases). The most common method of follow-up was a telephone call. A number of respondents submitted comments about the difficulty in this day and age of telemarketing of reaching many owners on the telephone. Many people work during the day and avoid phone calls that cannot be recognized on caller-id during the evening hours. Despite this, for the shelters responding to this survey, the phone method of follow-up outnumbered other methods.

Follow-up by phone call only (21 shelters)

Phone plus email follow-up (5 shelters)

Email only (2 shelters)

Letter survey (3 shelters)

Phone call plus letter survey (2 shelters)

One shelter that conducted phone plus email follow-ups also did home visits. This shelter was a small private shelter that held approximately 15 animals at any one time with a total estimate of 200 animals per year.

If an adoptive owner reports problems during follow-up checks (or they call in), what do you do?

Almost every shelter that responded to this survey had some type of plan in place to address behavioral and medical issues. For behavior problems, there was some overlap in responses

because some shelters would have more than one response to reported problems, such as give a referral to the Behavior Hotline and ask a local dog trainer (who was a shelter volunteer) to contact the adoptive owner. The responses to this question can be seen in the lists below.

BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

Refer to trainer/behaviorist for problems (21 shelters)

(This referral may result in a suggestion that dogs attend training classes.)

Ask the designated trainer/behaviorist (may be a volunteer) to contact the owner (17 shelters)

Refer to the Behavior Hotline (11 shelters)

Have staff call and offer consult (7 shelters)

Send packet of printed information (3 shelters)

MEDICAL ISSUES

Assist with medical referrals, funding, help with problem (14 shelters)

Provide pet health insurance for 30 days (2 shelters)

Is there is script/checklist used for follow-up checks on the phone?

When follow-up is conducted via letter or email, there is obviously a set list of questions.

However, when follow-ups are conducted on the telephone, a surprising number of shelters did not have a script or checklist that was used. Several respondents indicated they just “called and asked them how it was going.” Responses to this question included: Yes, use a script for follow-up phone calls (11 shelters); No, do not use a script for phone follow-up (22 shelters).

What are the most important issues at your shelter related to follow-up?

While there was clearly variety in the responses to this question, the one area that was repeatedly reported as a problem was the lack of time or resources (staff/volunteers) needed to conduct follow-up checks consistently (18 shelters). Unless otherwise indicated, a sample of other single responses included:

“We need ways for follow-up to be productive.”

“Accuracy of behavioral assessment is important re: follow-up.”

“Matching right animal with right home is important.” (4 shelters)

“Hard to do phone calls because people won’t answer at night.”

“We are busy so it is hard to maintain contact and do follow-up.”

“Separation anxiety is the most common problem and hard to handle.”

“Health problems need the most follow-up.”

“We need to get them help before they surrender the pet.”

“We know what the animal needs but training help is hard to find.”

“Owners call us too late and they’ve already made up their minds to surrender.” (this shelter did have a follow-up plan)

“Follow-up can end up being convincing them to keep the animal.”

“We want them to want to adopt from us again.”

“Helping them form a strong bond with the pet.” (5 shelters mentioned the human-animal bond.)

CONCLUSIONS

As can be seen from the results in this survey, if there is one area in best practice for shelters that needs development, improvement, and standardization, it is the area of follow-up. At this time, there are significant differences of opinion among some of the most highly regarded shelter programs in the country as to when follow-up checks should be conducted. Further, many shelters do not provide training on how to conduct follow-up checks, and many do not use a standard script or checklist. This suggests that the results of a follow-up phone interview may not even be recorded.

Considering that the point of follow-up is to save placements for adopted animals, shelters may want to analyze their owner surrender data for adopted animals to determine when the owners are most likely to return pets. For shelters that have training and behavioral resources, adoption packets should include a very prominent stimulus that lets each adoptive owner know the shelter can and should be called at the first sign of a behavior or medical problem. In some communities, in order to develop a follow-up plan, it will be necessary to develop a cadre of volunteers who have dog training skills, a great deal of knowledge about cats, and the ability to work with exotic pets. For researchers, there is a need for research on all of the aspects related to following up on adopted shelter animals.

Shelters are lightyears ahead of where they were two decades ago. The development of systematic, effective follow-up programs will be a goal for many shelters in the near future.

REFERENCES

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