Task Force on Managing Canine Behavior in Animal Shelters
International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants

Executive Summary

In the fall of 2005 the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC) formed the Task Force on Managing Canine Behavior in Animal Shelters (Task Force). The purpose of the Task Force was to develop strategies which could be used by animal shelters around the world when determining their own policies and procedures surrounding canine behavior problems seen in their organizations.

The task force focused on domestic dogs for three reasons. First, dogs and cats represent the largest sheer numbers of animals entering our shelters. This of course is dependent on where a shelter is located as there are those that do not see any dogs or cats either by design or because their community does not have a large homeless dog or cat problem. Nonetheless, the IAABC is an international organization, so we attempted to look at things as a whole for this project, Secondly, a large percentage of the dogs given up to shelters each year are relinquished due to behavior problems. This does not mean that other animals coming into our shelters are not surrendered due to behavior issues, but the task force felt that behavior problems play a larger role in dogs ending up homeless compared to other animals. The third reason is that there are already established behavior assessment and management tools available for the domestic dog. There are other groups trying to establish temperament assessment procedures for the domestic cat, but they are not complete yet, so we felt it best to give these groups a chance to finish their work before we look at how to incorporate their work into shelter processes.

As stated above, canine behavioral assessments are already being used in our shelters today, so why would we want to look at this again? Also, this is not the first time a group has tried to provide information on working with canine behavior problems in a shelter environment, so again, why would this task force be formed? Our objective was not to introduce another assessment tool or to recommend the use of one over another. Instead we wanted to look at the dog's journey through our shelters from a behavior standpoint. Our group produced a roadmap for shelters to use when developing their own policies and procedures on handling the dogs that enter their shelters. This roadmap is not a "one size fits all" map, but instead identifies those issues of which shelters should be aware and prioritizes these issues. We recognize that shelters around the world face different problems from limited resources to the number of animals seen to overall shelter policies. Some shelters may be able to use most of our recommendations while others may only be able to use a few ideas. By prioritizing the management tools, we hope those shelters with limited resources will be able to focus those resources on those practices which will give them the greatest benefit for the animals in their shelter.

The overall journey of a dog through an animal shelter was broken down into four distinct pieces with each piece being analyzed from a behavioral point of view. We recognize there are many other issues shelters must consider when caring for their dogs, but as the IAABC is an association of behavior professionals, we only looked at how to manage our dogs from a behavior standpoint. The four pieces are Intake (animals entering our shelters), Hold (the period of time a dog resides in our shelters), Adoption (the process of finding a new home for our homeless dogs) and Follow-up (the process of a shelter contacting the adoptive family to offer help with

any problems) which we called the IHAF process. Each pieces of the IHAF process is presented separately below.

We want readers to remember that this is a roadmap or outline for them to use within their shelters framework. The Task Force did not attempt to solve all of a shelter's problems or to design a perfect behavior management process.   Each shelter must review their own resources and numbers of dogs entering their organization before using this document. This is a tool to be used when formulating animal management processes and is not the answer in and of itself. If used in this manner, we believe shelters will have more success at working with behavior problems, increase canine adoptions and will see lower return rates.

Intake Process:

A dog's journey through our animal shelters begins with the Intake Process. There are several different entry points to a shelter, each of which requires a few different behavioral processes while at the same time sharing others. The Task Force looked at three entry points and outlined steps to consider when looking at a dog's behavior. The three entry points are 1) owner surrenders, 2) strays and 3) transfers from other facilities.

Regardless of the path a dog takes into our shelters, the first thing to look at is the animal's health. If a dog is determined to be un-adoptable due to injury or illness, do not proceed with a behavior assessment. Even if a shelter's policies and resources allow for treating the medical condition, a behavior assessment should not be conducted until the condition is cured. Shelters will have to make a determination on the severity of the medical condition. Minor conditions may not require the postponement of a behavior assessment, but shelters should first look at a dog's health before proceeding.

<u>Owner Surrenders</u>

Often times the first contact with a shelter is via a telephone call. Regardless of who takes the phone call, there are two steps which will make the behavior determination process more efficient.

- Use a call script for all shelter personnel (volunteer or staff). A script will ensure each person is collecting the same information. This will also help account for different levels of expertise in staff/volunteer.
- Capture the information electronically to use later in the process. Even if a shelter only has spreadsheet software such as Microsoft Excel, collecting the behavior information electronically will allow the shelter to 1) communicate with staff and volunteers more efficiently and 2) compare owner comments to what is witnessed by shelter personnel. Many shelter software packages have screens set up to track behavior information.

Either after the phone call or if a person does not call before arriving at a shelter, the next question is what to do from behavioral standpoint when a dog arrives at the shelter. When possible the Task Force recommends having an intake questionnaire for the owner to complete. The trick with these questionnaires is to get as much truthful information as possible, yet not so much that the shelter can't use the information. The following are some recommendations on how to get the most useful information possible from the owner.
- Make the questionnaire available before the appointment when possible. Perhaps allow people to download the questionnaire from the internet. This will allow the owner's time to feel relaxed and hopefully provide the most truthful answers.
- Prioritize questions and put the most important ones first. Owners may get bored or tired filling out longer questionnaires, so put the most important ones up front.
- As noted, this is a balancing act between getting as much info as possible and getting as much <u>truthful</u> info as possible. Questionnaires that are too long will result in people putting down any answer just to get done.
- The shelter must be able to capture the data electronically, whether it's in a formal system (Chameleon, Pet Point, etc) or something more informal (Excel).
    - This will allow the shelter to compare answers to information given during phone conversation (if it exists) and to information captured during the temperament assessment.
    - Facilitates the dispersal of behavior info more effectively to all of staff. (often a questionnaire is reviewed by one person and then put in animal file which makes it harder for other staff to know what is going on)

- Some of the questions should compare directly to behavior assessment. (for example: "How does your dog react when food is removed?" will allow shelter to compare owner answer to what is seen when food is removed during the assessment)

The next step in the intake process of an owner surrendered dog is the behavioral assessment. The Task Force did not attempt to recommend which assessment to use, but highly recommends that shelters adopt some form of temperament assessment process. The following are issues to consider when developing this assessment process.

- Even if it is short and not "by the book" perform some type of assessment to get a general idea of dog's behavior in the presence of other people and animals in various situations. While there is some controversy over what a behavior assessment can and cannot do, they do provide the shelter workers with information about what they are dealing with at that particular time. There are many factors that play into a dog's reaction to these assessments, but the Task Force feels that some information is much better than none. When compared to the owner's information, the assessment process becomes even more informative.
- Once the assessment process is determined, keep it consistent (from dog to dog and across staff performing assessments).
- Staff and/or volunteers should be trained to ensure consistency.
- Prioritize the sections of the assessment. At the very least the assessment should try to elicit aggressive tendencies (food aggression, possessive aggression, etc) Other behavior problems are important if staff has the time and training to look for them (separation anxiety for example), but aggression can make a dog un-adoptable immediately.
- When resources allow, an initial assessment should be done upon intake. This sets a baseline to make future decisions.
- The dog's nervous/anxiety level at the initial assessment will determine how long it should be held before a second assessment. On average, dogs should be held 3 to 5 days before the second assessment. Very relaxed dogs may not need this long while overly anxious dogs may need a few more days. Make your determination based on the dog and not a set schedule. Note: shelter policies and the number of animals coming in will greatly affect this policy. High volume shelters may not be able to wait 3 days while limited intake facilities may have more flexibility.
- Capture data electronically to compare to owner answers and effectively communicate to all staff.
- Shelter policies will determine actions taken by the shelter after the assessments.

The next step in the overall process is the Hold period. This is covered in the next section of this document.

Dogs Transferred from Other Shelters

While there are similarities in how surrendered dogs are handled compared to dogs transferred from other shelters, there are also a few important differences.

- Was an assessment performed at the original shelter and are the results available for your shelter to review. Perhaps the assessment at your shelter

is actually the dog's second or third assessment instead of the first. This may allow the dog to be put up for adoption more quickly.

- How long was the dog at the other shelter? Dogs that have been in the shelter system for awhile don't require as much time between assessments as those new to the shelter. The reason to wait several days between assessments is to allow the dog time to relax and hopefully he/she will show more of its true nature, it doesn't necessarily matter which shelter it is at.
- Dogs transferred with little background and/or no assessment performed at original shelter should be treated as a stray (from a behavior point of view). This is covered in the next section.

As with owner surrendered dogs though, the Task Force recommends the following when performing behavior assessments.

- Even if it is short and not "by the book" perform some type of assessment to get a general idea of dog's behavior in various situations. While there is some controversy over what a behavior assessment can and cannot do, they do provide the shelter worker's with information about what they are dealing with at that particular time. There are many factors that play into a dog's reaction to these assessments, but the Task Force feels that some information is much better than none. When compared to the owner's information, the assessment process becomes even more informative.
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Strays

The third "intake" method discussed by the Task Force was stray dogs. Again, there are similarities and differences when compared to the previous two groups.

- If different assessments exist for animals coming from different sources (owner surrender, transfer or stray) the assessment for strays should be the most stringent.
- Whenever possible, two assessments should be performed before putting a dog up for adoption.
- If limited resources prevent 2 assessments from being conducted, then the assessment that is performed must push the dog to determine if aggression exists.

The behavioral assessment recommendations that follow are the same as those outlined above.

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Hold Process:

The Hold period for a dog in our shelters comes after they have been accepted into the shelter and before they are adopted. The Hold period encompasses the time shelter workers have to further assess and/or work on a dog's behavior. The adoption counseling process will be discussed in the next section.

The Hold period for a dog is determined by local laws/ordinances, shelter policy and a dog's behavior (which leads in part to his/her adoptability). This is the period when the shelter uses the results of owner information and temperament assessments to make its dogs more adoptable.   Resource availability is the major factor during the Hold period. Nonetheless, shelters should review the recommendations listed below and encompass as many as possible into their processes.

There are many things a shelter can do during a dog's stay at their facility. Which activities are enacted and when they are done not only depends on resources, but also depends greatly on how long an animal is in the system. As there is no way to know for sure when a dog will be adopted, the Task Force can not possibly recommend a set process to follow. Additionally, each dog is different and therefore will not require the same amount of intervention. Shelter staff and volunteers should develop a behavior intervention plan for each dog in its care. Even if the plan is just an informal conversation, this will ensure resources are utilized to the fullest extent possible.

Behavior intervention recommendations:
- Institute a training program. This will be as formal or informal as dictated by resources, expertise and demand. Some shelters use staff, others utilize volunteers and some are able to work with professionals outside of the shelter. A standard program can be used or a more individualized program

can be instituted. Either way, the dog's progress should be tracked and changes made required.

- Implement a behavioral enrichment program. Training programs themselves can be a form of behavioral enrichment, but there are other programs that shelters can implement. Examples include, but are not limited to: dog beds, dog walking program, music in the kennels, individual play sessions, play groups, quiet rooms, foster homes and scent games.
- Even if a shelters formal process calls for "x" number of beahvior assessments, a shelter should have plans in place to assess dogs periodically the longer they are in the shelter. This will identify behavior changes, both good and bad, and will help direct any training/enrichment programs which may exist.

Behaviorally speaking, the hold period is a very important time of a dog's stay. The intake phase gives information about the dog as he/she enters the shelter, but it is during the hold phase when a dog has had a chance to acclimate to it new surroundings and potentially show more of his/her true personality. It is also the time when the shelter can influence a dog's behavior the greatest.

Adoption Process:

The third leg of a dog's journey is the Adoption process. This has less to do with actually working with a dog's behavior, but instead is the process responsible for matching the right dog with the right family. Shelters rarely have the opportunity to completely modify a problem behavior or put a troublesome behavior under control, so it is vital that adoption counselors find adopters able to continue the work already started.

More importantly though, the Adoption process is about matching each dog with the appropriate family. For those dogs with problem behaviors, it is here where shelters have the opportunity to counsel new owner's on what needs to be done to ensure a loving relationship with their new family member. Shelters should consider the following when establishing an adoption process.

- Shelter should have an adoption questionnaire. This can be given before or after a person is allowed to view the dogs for adoption, but one should exist. This gives adoption counselors background information on the potential new home and can help them lead a person or family to the best dog for them.
- The questionnaire should contain question(s) about what behavior problems the person is familiar with and how they have worked with them in the past. If they are aware of certain behaviors, but never experienced them, the questionnaire can ask how they would work with their dog in the event that said behavior appears. These questions open the lines of communication and help the counselor identify where more information is needed.   It also assists in the selection process as the counselor can steer someone away from a dog possessing a behavior of which the potential adopter may not be prepared to handle.
- Shelter workers must be honest and provide full disclosure about an animal's behavior. It does not help an animal at all if shelters don't tell potential adopters everything they know about a particular dog.
- The adoption process is the perfect opportunity to educate the potential adopter about services offered through the shelter itself or outside

organizations. Knowing behavior support and/or training services exist may be all someone needs to adopt a particular dog.

- Even though many shelters don't have the resources to hire and/or train staff who are experienced in dog behaviors and how to work with the troublesome ones, shelter staff should at the very least know what their organization is doing to work with the dogs in their care. Counselors should also know what the shelter recommends to new adopters to work with their dogs. This ensures consistency across the staff and can avoid potential future conflicts as everyone knows what and what is not being recommended.
- A list of local behavior resources should be available to adopters. These resources may be within or outside of the shelter itself, but offering this assistance increases the chance that people will seek help if needed and therefore increases the chance that a dog will stay with his/her family. The names on the list should be only those which the shelter workers would use themselves. While individual staff members may differ in their opinions on which behavior resource to use, the shelter should have its own recommendation list and these are the ones provided to adopters. As before, this ensures consistency across staff and across adopters.
- Some shelters are able to implement "foster to adopt" programs. In this program, a person's adoption is contingent on them working with the shelter on the behavior in question. This may be individual consultations, obedience training, home visits or whatever the shelter feels is necessary. This program increases the chance that a dog with behavior issues will find an appropriate home.
- As noted in the Intake and Hold sections, communication about a dog's behavior between staff members is vital. Not only is this information needed in these previous processes, the Adoption process also needs it to match a dog with its new family. Often the adoption counselor for a particular dog is not the same person who evaluated him/her in the Intake process or worked with him/her during the Hold process. Ensuring the information gathered during the first two stages is available for and communicated fully to all staff members will ensure something isn't missed when pairing a dog and a person(s).

The Adoption process uses information gathered in the Intake and Hold processes and sets up the Follow-up process. If what was discovered and worked on earlier in the IHAF process is not known about during the Adoption phase, then a shelter may discover that problems exist during the Follow-up phase.

Follow-up Process:

The fourth phase of the IHAF process is the Follow-up process. This is where a shelter contacts adopters to find out how things are going with a dog and its new family and offers assistance where needed. The Task Force recommends the following steps when establishing a follow-up process.

- First and foremost, some level of follow-up should be established. This helps shelters evaluate how placements are working for animals and adopters. It also gives the shelter the chance to provide assistance when it is needed.
- There is considerable variability with regard to the frequency of follow-up. Shelters should review their own data for the point at which most animals are likely to be returned and conduct follow-up prior to that time. A general suggestion would be to check on the animal between 3 days and 1 week, then again at 1, then 3 months. In the most ideal situation, there would be 4 follow-up checks including long-term follow-up. When 4 follow-up checks are done, they could be done at 1 month, 3 months, 6 months and 1 year.
- Follow-up can be done by staff or volunteers. In some cases, Advisory Board members participate in follow-up checks. Some administrators do sample follow-up checks themselves to get a feel for how the adoption program is going. The critical issue is not who does the follow-up, but that they are well-trained. If follow-up is done on the phone, the person conducting follow-up should have excellent phone skills.   Records should be kept on follow-up checks so that the results can be monitored by the appropriate management at the shelter.
- While many shelters now have people doing follow-up who have had no training, training is clearly recommended to ensure quality of the interactions, accurate information, etc.   Scripts or checklists for follow-up checks via phone and email will ensure the same information is gathered for each follow-up check.
- Follow-up can be done via the phone, email, a letter survey, or a home visit. Few shelters have the resources for home visits for every animal. When letter or email surveys are conducted, it is important to assess the return rate to ensure the shelter gets replies from the majority of adopters.
- To ensure consistency in gathering follow-up information, it is recommended that follow-up scripts (which can be in the form of a checklist) be used.
- When a shelter has very limited resources, options for follow-up include a 1 time letter that can be mailed by a volunteer. If resources are so limited there are no volunteers, while not ideal, the shelter can have a staff member conduct random follow-up checks. Shelters can also develop printed material to be sent home with the owner when the animal is adopted. The message in the printed material would be, "Call us as soon as you have any problem."

- Methods of follow-up will depend on the resources the shelter has. Ideally, there would be at least one phone contact to actually talk to the new owner. This is particularly important for animals who had behavioral or medical issues. If animals had no health or behavior problems, an email message or letter may be suitable. A more detailed follow-up report should be considered for dogs who were "borderline" adoptable.

While a shelter will have to stop contacting an adopter at some point, the Follow-up process should not be viewed as an end. Even after the last phone call is made, email sent or letter mailed, the closing message should be for the adopter to contact the shelter with any questions or concerns at anytime. Shelters do not want their adopters to ever feel that they are completely on their own. This not only helps with the current adoption but also increases the chance the adopter will get their next pet from a shelter.

Conclusion:

The most important idea for shelters to take away from this document is that regardless of size, resource availability or process names, shelters should do their best to diagnose the behavioral issues of all dogs when they enter the shelter, do their best to work on the most troubling behaviors find the best possible family to adopt a particular dog and contact the adopters after adoption to provide assistance when needed. The Task Force recognizes that there are many other aspects of each of these processes that must be considered during a dog's journey through our shelters. As many dogs enter shelters because of behavior problems (real or perceived) though, our goal was to provide helpful information from a behavior point of view on how to increase the probability that a dog will have a successful adoption. Individual shelters will need to take these recommendations and fit them into their own situations.