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Foreword

FINDING A LOVING AND HAPPY HOME FOR EVERY ANIMAL

waiting to start a new life—that’s the goal of everyone who works in, for or on behalf of shelters and rescues. Our field is closer than ever to achieving this goal.

While organizations are finding new and effective ways of promoting pet adoption, our colleagues in the animal welfare field are conducting research to evaluate old ways of thinking and investigate the success of new strategies. What we once considered progressive policies have changed over time as we accumulate new experiences and evidence. In fact, in this manual we challenge adoption policies that the Humane Society of the United States promoted decades ago. We, like you, know that serving animals requires a commitment to ongoing honest reflection and constant evolution.

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 available adopters open up doors that were previously closed. This can mean a new friend for your organization, or an open spot for an animal in a nearby shelter. Increasing positive outcomes motivates staff and volunteers and inspires communities to increase their support. Just as important, more adopters are rewarded with great companions and getting connected to 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 and irresponsible breeders, thereby slowing the flow of intact and unvaccinated animals into the community. In other words, adoption success has a positive ripple effect on animal welfare.

We hope you will use the practical tools provided in Adopters Welcome to realize this success in your community.



Why do we need this manual?

AT THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES, 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 treatment, calls and emails that aren't returned and denied adoptions drive away pet lovers who are trying to do the right thing and sends them to less humane options. Not all experiences are negative, but each one can have a devastating impact. It's much better to have a happy adopter spreading the word about their experience and their wonderful pet.

We have also identified adoption blind spots—areas of communities historically untouched by traditional animal services. Pet lovers in these areas are unfamiliar with animal welfare organizations as a resource and as a place to find their next pet. Surveys conducted by the HSUS Pets for Life team have identified neighborhoods where only 3% of pets come from shelters or rescues.¹ When we compare this to a national average of about 40%, it's clear that more homes are available.²

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 the adoption message. People—adopters!—are the solution to your pet adoption goals, but you aren't connecting with all of them.

Research on adoptions

Throughout this manual you will see references to research. A list of these studies is included on page 76. Stay current on new research findings that will inform and enhance your policies.

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? These barriers can be taken down easily and safely and replaced with an approach celebrated by organizations that have adopted a fresh perspective.

“The Shelter Pet Project is a partnership between the Humane Society of the United States, Maddie's Fund and the Ad Council to make adoption from shelters and rescues the first choice for people seeking to add a pet to their families. We often hear from those who were inspired by our public service announcements to choose adoption. Unfortunately, their feedback is not always positive. Potential adopters have told us their applications have gone ignored, they were turned down without being given a reason or for unrealistic expectations for a pet parent, like working full-time. Once they have a bad experience, it lessens the chance that they'll try again. It becomes easier to purchase the pet than adopt.”

*—Amy Nichols, Vice President,
Companion Animals and Equine Protection,
the Humane Society of the United States*

The Shelter Pet Project

For more information about the Shelter Pet Project, visit theshelterpetproject.org.





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 may turn into judgmental attitudes toward people. We need to engage people for all of our efforts on behalf of animals. Hating them, judging them or avoiding them will hold us back from achieving our mission.

Your work regularly exposes you to animals in need: unclaimed strays, surrendered pets, injured or ill pets and victims of abuse. If you let it, this can shape your perspective and damage how you approach adoptions and adopters. In reality, only a small percentage of dogs and cats, around 6.5 million, enter the shelter and rescue system.² Meanwhile, according to 2016 estimates from the AVMA, there were more than 135 million pet dogs and cats living in American homes.³ That means fewer than 6% of pets end up in shelters.

You can't afford to let your experience with a fraction of pets and their owners influence your perceptions of adopters. The consequences of denying an animal a home because of an unfounded fear or a prejudice are too severe:

- Long stays in a facility may compromise quality of life.
- Resources such as time, funds and space are diverted from other pets within your organization and your community.
- Limited space forces you to make euthanasia decisions.
- Demand grows for inhumane sources of pets, such as puppy mills and questionable breeders.
- Pets and owners who may need help down the road are cut off from the safety net you provide.

These are not imagined risks. They are real. The majority of pet owners cherish their pets. If statistics aren't convincing, Google "pet shaming" to see images of cats and dogs (being naughty) shared by proud owners. 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 more active as donors, volunteers and cheerleaders for your organization.

Intake 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 can and should shape proactive pet retention services, such as spay and neuter outreach, ID clinics, behavior helplines and pet food banks for pets at risk. At the same time, approaches to adoptions should be inspired by the majority of pet relationships that are successful.

THE ADOPTER'S PERSPECTIVE

You've got the animals; what you need are the adopters. It is in your best interest to learn as much as possible about pet owners and what makes them tick.

"For the longest time I thought I really just hated people. Somewhere along the way I realized I don't actually hate people, I love them. It's only the [jerks] I hate. Now I focus on the good. ... Expect the bad, it's gonna happen no matter what, but there's always more good than bad."

—JOSH SELLERS, PROVIDENCE ANIMAL RESCUE LEAGUE

Don't let your experience with a fraction of pets and their owners influence your perceptions of adopters.



135 million

estimated owned dogs and cats in U.S. homes (AVMA, 2017-18)

6.5 million

estimated dogs and cats entering U.S. shelter system each year (ASPCA, 2019)



ADOPT A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

LEARN FROM YOUR COMPETITION

A national survey of pet owners reveals that the majority of pets came from sources other than shelters or rescues.⁷

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

- Stray 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. Stray 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.

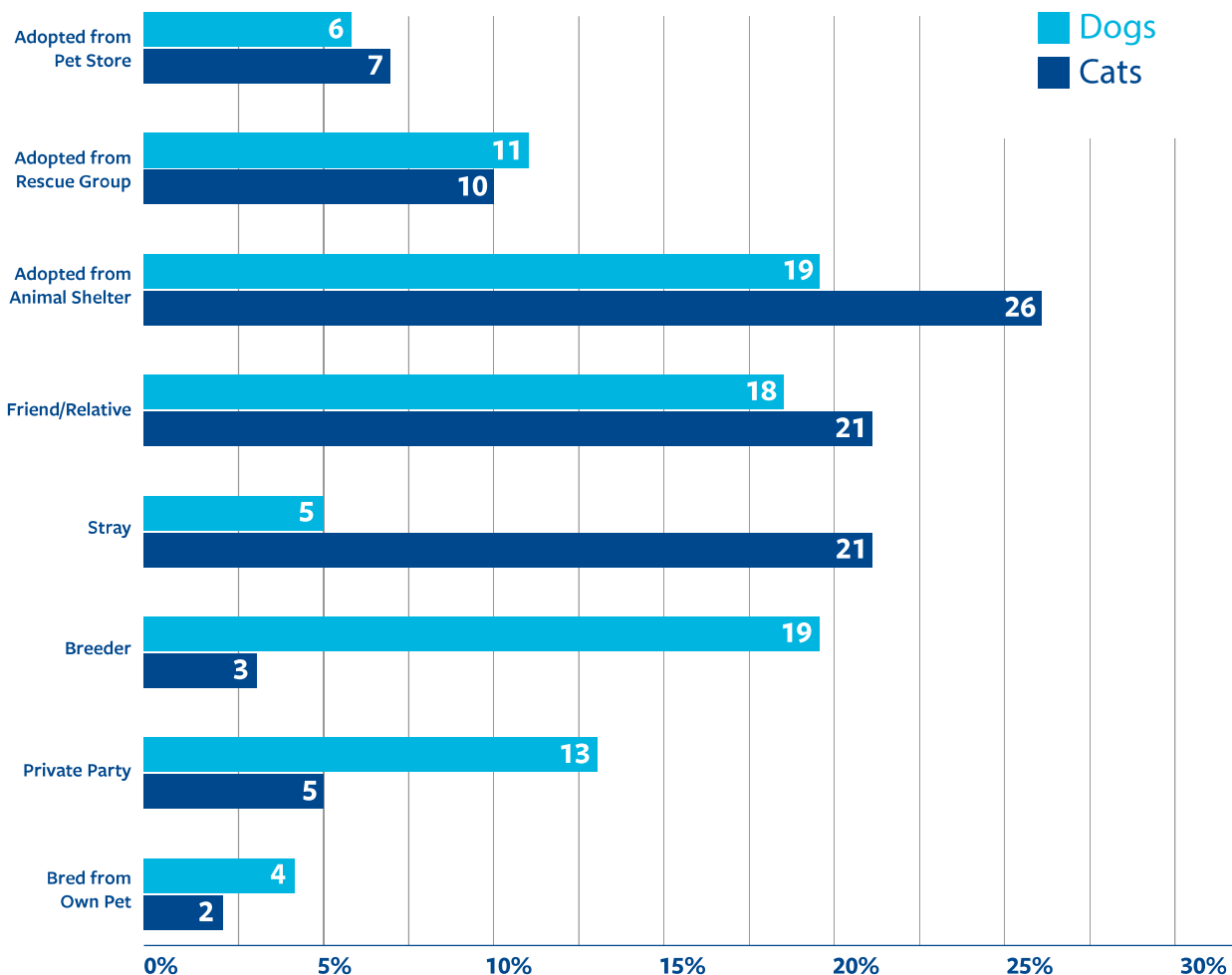
- People feel like they know what they are getting from a breeder, even if that isn’t always the case. Quality breeders also offer health screenings and socialization.

RESEARCH ON ADOPTERS

Research into the public’s perspective on pet ownership and adoption backs up the lessons learned from competitors.^{4,5}

- Many people admit to concerns that shelter and rescue pets are unhealthy and have behavior issues. They worry that there’s no way to know what they’ll get with a rescued pet.
- People think the adoption process is too difficult (it’s too long; they’ll have to answer prying questions, etc.).

Adopted animals compared to top five alternative sources of pets in surveyed homes (2019/2020 American Pet Products Association National Pet Owners Survey)



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 PARL. “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!

- People see breeders as “experts” and tend to trust them above others.
- People who have adopted take a certain pride in the fact that they saved the life of their pet.

Getting people’s attention, helping them know what to expect, making interactions convenient and pleasant and rewarding their desire to do the right thing are all within reach for adoption agencies. You also have even more to offer: a mission that sets your organization up 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 celebrating people’s willingness to adopt, meeting them where they are in terms of their attitudes and understanding of pet care and investing in their success with guidance and practical support. Putting this philosophy into practice requires several steps:

1. Implement policies that remove barriers and increase options for homeless pets in your community.
2. Offer adoption counseling that relies on open and easy conversations to set pets and their owners up for success.
3. Develop marketing strategies that overcome barriers.
4. Train team members to deliver the program.