

# Step 4: Train your team

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## POP QUIZ!

### How well would adoption counselors in your agency perform on this adoption pop quiz?

1. What vaccines do adopted animals receive and what do they protect against?
2. What is heartworm disease and how is it prevented?
3. What are some tips for introducing cats to each other?
4. How do you house-train an adult dog?
5. How do you prevent a cat from scratching the furniture?

## DEVELOP A FORMAL TRAINING PLAN

Lack of training, or improper training, is another barrier to adoption success. You need to be certain that counselors can answer questions like the ones in the previous pop quiz correctly, consistently and in a customer-friendly way.

Ideally, counselors will be able to train gradually. Different organizations will need to find the training method that works best for their structure and resources, but one approach could look like this:

1. Receive classroom instruction or homework on key background information for adoptions. Pass an open-book test to advance to the next level.
2. Observe senior counselors or mentors in action.
3. Practice through role-play.

4. Take the lead in counseling while being observed.

5. Demonstrate that they can implement what they've learned in training in order to graduate to counseling on their own.

This plan assumes that the counselors already completed a general orientation and received basic training in subjects such as animal handling.

## COMPILE KEY BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Counselors need to understand the mechanics of your adoption process from start to finish. They will also be expected to answer questions about individual animals and fill in any gaps adopters have in their own pet care knowledge, without being preachy. 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.

What follows is 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. We've also included a brief reading list to help counselors get up to speed on common pet care issues. This list is just a start. To make sure you've covered all the bases, ask counselors what else they need to know.

# TRAIN YOUR TEAM

## **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 make adoptions succeed by getting rid of barriers and partnering with people to help pets): \_\_\_\_\_

All related policies: \_\_\_\_\_

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

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: \_\_\_\_\_

Results of information about formal behavior assessments, if applicable: \_\_\_\_\_

Medical notes: \_\_\_\_\_

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

Where to go with detailed medical or behavior questions: \_\_\_\_\_



## PET CARE INFORMATION

What follows is a partial list of resources for counselors. Find links and more at [animalsheltering.org/counselorinfo](https://animalsheltering.org/counselorinfo).

The HSUS website: [humanesociety.org/pet\\_tips](https://humanesociety.org/pet_tips)

The HSUS offers a long list of tip sheets for pet owners that you can copy and paste into a document with your contact information. All we ask is that you credit us as a source. Topics include:

- House-training puppies and adult dogs.
- Crate-training dogs.
- Exercise, toys and fun activities for dogs and cats.
- The dangers of long-term chaining or tethering and social isolation.
- Introducing new pets to pets at home.
- Facts about declawing cats.
- Facts about flea and tick prevention.
- Facts about microchips.
- Finding a veterinarian.
- Finding a dog trainer and training tips.

**HSUS Cat Answer Tool:** [humanesociety.org/catanswertool](https://humanesociety.org/catanswertool)

This tool offers solutions to a variety of common cat behavior

problems. Some of the problems addressed include litter box issues, scratching and chewing things, hiding, biting and fighting with other cats. This tool can help with staff and volunteer training and be promoted to pet owners as a resource.

**Pam Johnson-Bennett:** [catbehaviorassociates.com](https://catbehaviorassociates.com)

Pam provides great resources focused on solving cat behavior problems for pet owners.

**HSUS Animal Sheltering:** [animalsheltering.org](https://animalsheltering.org)

In addition to accessing issues of *Animal Sheltering* magazine, you can stay current on all the tools we have to offer. Be sure to sign up for *The Scoop!* to have the latest sheltering and rescue news delivered directly to your email inbox.

**Heartworm Society:** [heartwormsociety.org](https://heartwormsociety.org)

Get info on how to protect pets from heartworm disease and why it's important for owners.

**Indoor Pet Initiative:** [indoorpet.osu.edu](https://indoorpet.osu.edu)

This amazing tool from the Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine can help counselors and adopters discover tips for helping pets live happily indoors.

**Living with Kids and Dogs:** [livingwithkidsanddogs.com](https://livingwithkidsanddogs.com)

Discover resources from Colleen Pelar for helping families with children live safely and happily with dogs.

# TRAIN YOUR TEAM

## Professional Development Links: [animalsheltering.org/faq](https://animalsheltering.org/faq)

Search under “Professional Development” to find links to a variety of websites that provide additional resources and training for adoption and more.

## MODEL ENGAGING CONVERSATIONS

Knowing the answers is important, but counselors also have to feel comfortable sharing their knowledge with adopters. The next step in training is to help future counselors feel comfortable having meaningful counseling conversations. To help get you started, we’ve created a cheat sheet that follows the same order of the adopter questionnaire introduced earlier. We’ve even included some sample language to help with role-play exercises. The details of the adoption process, from introductions to congratulations, will be different for each agency. Use these examples to enhance your method. Download additional sample language at [animalsheltering.org/conversationtips](https://animalsheltering.org/conversationtips).

**Start with a warm “hello:”** As silly as it may sound, a genuinely warm greeting can make a big difference to a potential adopter. Whether you are helping them get to know the animals in your adoption program or are meeting them after they’ve picked “the one,” introduce yourself and let them know you are happy to help them adopt. Visitors may be intimidated by the adoption process or may not know what to expect. They need encouragement to ask questions.



*“I’m so sorry your last cat ran away! That’s actually one of the reasons we try to help families keep their cats indoors. It’s safer and healthier for the cats and prevents heartbreak for owners. I can’t promise that Whiskers will stick around if you allow him to go outside, but I can help you keep him happy inside. How does that sound?”*

*“Hi, I’m Rosie. Thanks for being here today! Pepper is a real sweetie and very handsome. Can I help you meet him?”*

*“Hi, I’m Rosie. I see you’ve fallen for Pepper. Thanks for getting started with our questionnaire. Let’s go over it together. Feel free to ask questions as we go!”*

**Keep your biases in check:** Sometimes — without even knowing we are doing it—we form opinions about people based on what they look like or how they speak, rather than on objective facts. Making such snap judgments can have negative impacts on our interactions with potential adopters and potentially deny animals good homes. The Pets for Life team of the Humane Society of the United States has created a guide to help you explore, uncover and overcome your biases so that you can help more people and pets. Visit [animalsheltering.org/pets-for-life/sustainability-guide](https://animalsheltering.org/pets-for-life/sustainability-guide) to download your free copy.

**Support gift adoptions:** Make gift adoptions easy and meaningful. Our sample questionnaire includes a prompt for anyone adopting a pet as a gift to answer from the perspective of the soon-to-be owner.

*“I see you are adopting for a friend. What can you tell me about the lucky recipient? I can help you find a great pet and we can follow up with them in the future to let them know about our services. Is this a surprise? We don’t want to spoil it.”*

**Engage adopters who rent:** Our sample questionnaire does not 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, expose them to helpful advice and trust them to work through bumps.

*“If you rent, let me know if you have any questions about possible pet restrictions such as size limits or pet deposits. We don’t want*

*you to be caught off guard!”*

**Learn about household members:** You have access to information about each animal, including historical information from owners or finders, observations from staff and volunteers and in some cases, results from a formal behavior assessment. Be transparent with this information and cover positive, neutral and negative interactions the pet has had with adults, children and strangers. Combine this information with the insights you gather from potential adopters to identify suggestions that can help the match succeed.

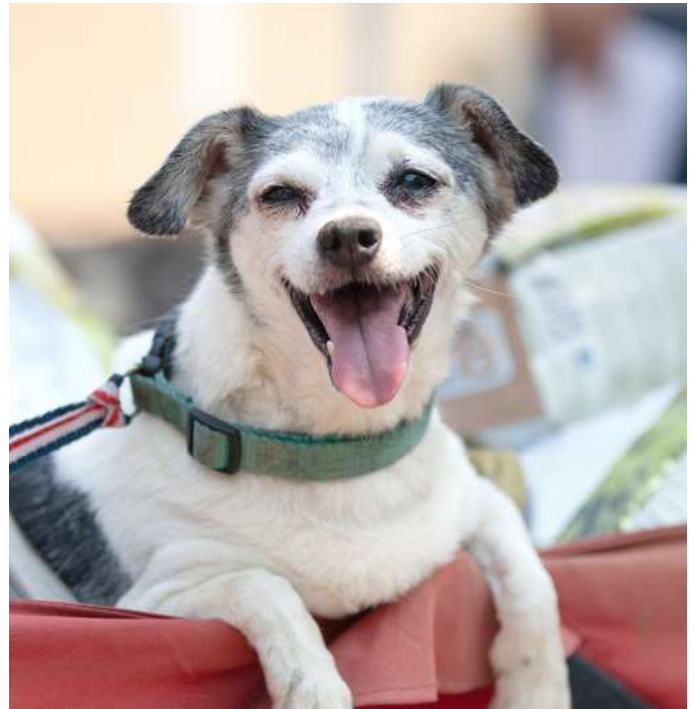
*“We’ve noticed that Sophie is a very active dog. Even the Good Samaritan who found her said she was friendly but very strong! You mentioned that your grandma stays with you and is a little nervous about your new family member. Do you want to look for a dog who is more low-key, or would you like to discuss ideas to harness Sophie’s energy so she isn’t too much for your grandma while you’re away?”*

**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 are 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. Dogs are very social and can actually develop problems when separated from their family. Would you be interested in some tips on keeping Squeaky inside with you?”*

**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 agency’s care. Answer questions (or connect the adopter with someone who can) and share your perspective on the benefits of veterinary care. Clarify terms of any discounted or free veterinary visits that your organization may offer directly or through partnerships.

*“I am 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 are not 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 are used to, or would you like a list of local options? We know that finding the right veterinarian for your family is just as important as finding a doctor, so I can offer tips on*



*what to ask, if you are interested!”*

**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 and/or cat behavior professionals, or offer these services directly, this is a good time to discuss what is available.

*“Rocco’s former parents told us that he got into trouble playing with cushions and shoes when he was just out of sight. Let’s come up with a few things you can do to manage things more easily. Have you used baby gates or crates with dogs before?”*

**Cover additional topics that the adopter wants to discuss, even the tricky ones:** In addition to covering topics important to the adopter, you can also check in on their understanding of certain topics they may not yet see as priorities.

**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. We recommend alternatives that I’d be happy to go over with you. You might also want to consider a cat who is already declawed. What are your thoughts?”*

# TRAIN YOUR TEAM

## Heartworm prevention:

*“Heartworm disease is a big concern for dogs in our area, so we always like to ask pets owners if they are aware of this disease and how to prevent it. How familiar are you with heartworm, which is different from other kinds of worms?”*

## 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 are always worth it!”*

**Saying “no:”** As hard as you try to help make matches successful, there will be times when adoption is not 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. We aren’t comfortable doing this adoption now. Can we talk about some steps you can take before adopting?”*

**Explain your return policy:** Even though you aim for success, it’s a good idea to clarify return policies to adopters, including your approach to rehoming.

*“We expect everything to work out great, and are here if you have bumps along the way, but I want to make sure you know about our return policy. Are you familiar with our Satisfaction Guaranteed policy or how we can help if you need to rehome Scooter?”*

**Offer follow-up support:** Be sure to let adopters know you are available to help after they take their new pet home. Follow-up programs will vary by agency, so let them know how yours works. The relationship built through your outstanding customer service and engaging conversations will encourage them to call before a problem is out of hand.

**Offer any extra services you can:** Adopters are a captive audience. If your organization offers extra services such license tag sales, ID tags, microchip registration 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.

**Wrap up with a “thank you:”** This is a nice time to reinforce that your agency welcomes and appreciates adopters. Close with a sincere “thank you!”

## HIRING FOR ADOPTIONS

Too often, agencies either aren’t picky or tend to look more for animal handling and husbandry skills rather than human skills when adding people to the team. Knowing a little something about animals is great, but we all know that we need satisfied customers and supporters to succeed in our mission. The truth is that customer service matters, so why not hire people who are already good at it? The types of people who will easily become stellar representatives for your organization are already out there. You just need to find them!

## CONTINUING EDUCATION

Visit [animalsheltering.org/trainings](http://animalsheltering.org/trainings) to search training opportunities offered by the HSUS and other national and state agencies by category, type and location. Find many recorded and live webinars by visiting the sites listed under “Professional Development” at [animalsheltering.org/faq](http://animalsheltering.org/faq). Networking sites like The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement ([theaawa.org](http://theaawa.org)) and Maddie’s Pet Forum ([maddiesfund.org/maddies-pet-forum](http://maddiesfund.org/maddies-pet-forum)) also offer opportunities to learn about training practices from colleagues across the nation.

## HSUS VOLUNTEER RESOURCES

The HSUS Volunteer Management portal offers resources that can help you start, grow or enhance a powerful volunteer program. You will find a resource library that includes guides and samples, magazine articles and tools from the HSUS, including a free list-serv dedicated to volunteer managers, and free access to Everyone Ready, a training resource for all things volunteer. Visit [animalsheltering.org/volunteermanagement](http://animalsheltering.org/volunteermanagement) to learn more.

## SHARE YOUR SUCCESS

Adopters Welcome reflects the knowledge and research of our time while remaining open to future insights. It is 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—all with good intent, but missing the optimal outcomes we could achieve.

To view this manual and related resources online, visit [animalsheltering.org/adopters-welcome](http://animalsheltering.org/adopters-welcome).