

Rescue Group Best Practices Guide



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

This publication (*Rescue Group Best Practices Guide*) is intended to provide general information about rescue best practices. The information contained in this publication is not legal advice and cannot replace the advice of qualified legal counsel licensed in your state. The Humane Society of the United States does not warrant that the information contained in this publication is complete, accurate or up to date and does not assume and hereby disclaims any liability to any person for any loss or damage caused by errors, inaccuracies or omissions.

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Acknowledgements

The Humane Society of the United States thanks everyone who provided their wisdom and insights to make this publication as useful as possible to the rescue community, including PetSmart Charities, whose grant funding made the original (2015) publication of this guide possible; Abby Volin, who wrote that original version; and to everyone who reviewed it: Todd Cramer, Amber Sitko, Jan Elster, Kaylee Hawkins, Stacy Smith, Kathy Gilmour, Mandi Wyman, Whitney Horne, Britney Wallesch, Carie Broecker, Laura Pople and Jme Thomas. We would also like to acknowledge contributions from current and former HSUS staff: Betsy McFarland, Inga Fricke, Natalie DiGiacomo, Sarah Barnett, Hilary Hager, Kathleen Summers, Joyce Friedman, Lindsay Hamrick, Danielle Bays, Darci Adams, Windi Wodjak, Anne Marie McPartlin, Dr. Melissa Beyer, Vicki Stevens and Kelly Williams.

Last but not least, we extend our gratitude to all the rescue groups whose staff and volunteers work so hard to keep pets with their

families whenever it's possible, and to support homeless pets when it's not.

ABOUT THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

The Humane Society of the United States is the nation's most effective animal protection organization. Established in 1954, the HSUS seeks a humane and sustainable world for all animals—a world that will also benefit people. The HSUS is America's mainstream force against cruelty, abuse and neglect, as well as the most trusted voice extolling the human-animal bond. The HSUS works to reduce suffering and to create meaningful social change by advocating for sensible public policies, investigating cruelty, enforcing existing laws, sharing information with the public about animal issues, joining with corporations on behalf of animal-friendly policies and conducting hands-on programs that make ours a more humane world.



Introduction

Rescue groups are vital in the world of animal welfare and are collectively responsible for saving hundreds of thousands of animals every year. Some shelter animals, such as neonatal kittens or those with medical or behavioral challenges, may be difficult for shelters to place into homes. Rescue groups have resources to help these animals, making the groups' partnerships with shelters invaluable. They are incredible, lifesaving organizations. But what does it mean to be a rescue? Does it simply refer to an organization that takes in homeless animals and finds them homes? Does it mean being part of an organization with 501(c)(3) nonprofit status? Does it mean the rescue provides trap-neuter-return services to community cats? Actually, a rescue can meet all or none of these criteria.

This manual was designed to provide structure and guidance to all types of rescue groups. It describes best practices for these organizations and, perhaps more importantly, suggests ways to implement

them to help rescues operate at their maximum potential. This guide can be used to evaluate the health of established organizations and to help new groups get off to a successful start.

While there is no one-size-fits-all way to run a rescue group, there are standards—both from an organizational and an animal care standpoint—that all rescue organizations should meet. Above all, rescuers owe it to the animals in their care to run their rescue operations in the most professional, collaborative and humane manner possible.

Ultimately, as rescue groups adhere to best practices, they become more efficient and effective. This allows rescuers not only to humanely take in and adopt out more animals, but also to build trust within the community; support pet owners so they can keep their beloved pets, work successfully with local animal welfare advocates; and help solve the problem of pet homelessness on a community level.



Organizational standards

Rescue organizations should be run just like any other business. With a solid foundation in place, you will have more support to grow your rescue group, allowing you to bring in more animals and save more lives.

CREATING YOUR MISSION AND VISION

If you are thinking about starting a new rescue group, define your mission and vision before you do any other planning. Where is the greatest need in your community? What do you hope to accomplish, and why? [Conducting a community assessment](#) can assist you in determining the type of help the animals in your community need.

Typically, forming a rescue group consists of creating an organization that takes in animals who have been transferred from a shelter, relinquished by their owner or found as a stray; fosters them in a home environment; and adopts them out.

There are other ways to help. Consider the needs in your community before deciding what type of rescue group you want to start. If the market is already saturated with traditional, adoption-based rescues, you may want to think about creating a prevention-based organization that keeps pets in their homes and stops them from entering the shelter and rescue system in the first place. Your organization can sit at the bottom of a broken dam, holding buckets to lessen the deluge of rushing water, or you can start from the top and plug the holes to prevent the water from leaking in the first place. Prevention-based organizations might focus on low-cost spay/ neuter, trap-neuter-return for community cats, lost-and-found, behavior assistance, legal assistance, pet food pantry operation or other valuable programs.

INCORPORATING AND APPLYING FOR 501(C)(3) TAX-EXEMPT STATUS

WHY: Incorporating as a business in your state is an easy way to show the world that your rescue group is a legitimate business venture and that you are treating it as such. Further, the corporate formation protects individuals in the organization from legal liability and debt incurred by the rescue group. More importantly, your organization has a significantly better chance of being approved for 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status if you incorporate. And having that tax-exempt status is crucial for your organization's ability to grow. Not only is the organization exempt from federal income tax, but you can entice donors with a tax deduction for their contributions and apply for the

many grants that are awarded only to nonprofit organizations. Nonprofits can also apply for a mailing permit that gives them a special reduced rate for mailings.

HOW: Check your state's requirements for [incorporating a non-profit](#) with your state's corporate filing office (usually called the department of state, secretary of state or something similar) and investigate other resources. Contact the state office responsible for businesses to find out what your state's specific requirements are or check out the comprehensive [state-specific resources](#). Many offices will provide a packet of information on how to incorporate, along with sample documents. You will also need to draft articles of incorporation and bylaws in conjunction with incorporating your organization; these serve as the primary rules governing the management of your corporation. Even if your state does not require bylaws as a matter of law, it is still a good idea to draft them because they define your business structure and specify how your organization will conduct its affairs.

You can find samples for [drafting articles of incorporation](#) by searching for state-specific samples on your state's government website. When you are ready to apply for tax-exempt status, all the information you need is on the [IRS website](#). Keep in mind that it can take many months to obtain 501(c)(3) status, so do not get discouraged. Moreover, you may want to consult with an attorney or accountant who specializes in nonprofits, even if it's just to have them review the completed application.

Also remember to check whether your state has specific licensing requirements, if any, for operating a shelter or rescue group. You can usually find any laws pertaining to animals in your state's agriculture code.

FORMING YOUR TEAM

Every rescue group needs three layers of support to build a full team. At the top is the board of directors. These are the members who oversee the strategic direction, or long-term planning, of an organization. The next layer consists of staff, including an executive director, who run the day-to-day operations of the rescue group. Some rescue organizations are able to pay a few staff members, but generally these groups rely on volunteers. It is still important to call these dedicated members "staff" regardless of whether they are



paid, because it demonstrates that your organization is run professionally. Doing so also gives individuals a sense of ownership, responsibility and appreciation for the hours they contribute. The final layer of your team is the volunteers—people who help out on a regular basis by supporting the staff. Whether they foster animals, assist at adoption events, transport animals to veterinary appointments or participate in countless other activities, volunteers are the lifeblood of any rescue group.

BUILDING A BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Every organization has a [board of directors](#), which is a body of elected or appointed members who oversee the activities of the corporation. Their responsibilities are detailed in the organization’s bylaws, but typically, members of the board are responsible for governing the organization, appointing and reviewing the executive director, approving budgets, approving an organization’s policies and other similar tasks. Board members have an obligation of allegiance, care and duty to the organization. For rescue groups, it is important to recruit people who will help the organization fulfill its mission statement by providing advice and implementing long-term goals that will help the organization plan for the future and create the vision of what it will become.

Board members are not the ones who run the day-to-day aspects

of the rescue group (unless the organization has a “working board,” where board members double as staff), but instead are involved in strategic planning. That is, how will the organization get from where it is today to where it wants to be in a few years? The board of directors is a group that advances the organization’s mission by providing advice, money, time and expertise. A [sample strategic plan](#) devised and implemented by a board of directors may be helpful.

Generally, board members on working boards are expected to be heavily involved in strategic planning, fundraising and policy decisions for the organization. When forming your board, think about the type of people who are going to help fulfill the organization’s mission and goals: Someone with fundraising abilities? Public relations or marketing savvy? Legal or accounting abilities? Management background? Political connections? Choosing friends and family to serve on your board may be necessary at first, but once you become established you will want to be more strategic in selecting board members. An independent board is important for your organization’s credibility. Having family members on the board could be viewed negatively, so it is an important point to consider.

Check the laws in your state to determine the exact number of people you need on a board, but at a minimum you will need to have a president, a secretary and a treasurer. The executive director is not

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normally a board member, but is instead accountable to the board of directors and also serves as the bridge between the board and the staff who carry out the day-to-day functions of the organization. Board members will need to be willing to commit their time and resources to the organization. You may want to implement term limits for members of the board or have nonvoting members who are there exclusively in an advisory role. It is helpful to have a [job description](#) so that prospective members will know what will be expected of them.

Importantly, the board of directors is responsible for approving new contracts (such as foster agreements or adoption contracts) and authorizing certain individuals (usually the executive director, the board president and the board vice president) to sign documents on the organization's behalf. You may also want the board to authorize specific individuals to sign agreements relevant to their area of expertise. For example, the board might allow the adoption coordinator to sign adoption contracts or authorize the volunteer coordinator to sign volunteer agreements.

In keeping with good practices and to build a trustworthy organization, it is important for the board to create well-documented policies that foster transparency. For example, it is essential to have a conflict of interest policy for the board of directors, a document retention policy, a code of ethics, a harassment policy, a whistleblower policy and, if applicable, written compensation practices.

A strong board of directors is vital to the current success and future development of your rescue group. Pick your board members thoughtfully!

BUILDING YOUR STAFF

While the board of directors is accountable for the long-term goals of the organization, the staff is responsible for running the day-to-day operations of the rescue group. After you have filed the articles of incorporation and applied to the IRS for tax-exempt status, the next important task is developing your team. Although the majority of your staff will be unpaid volunteers with other jobs and obligations, it is crucial that all individuals involved are committed to their positions to ensure that the rescue runs as smoothly as possible.

Do not put someone into a role simply because they offered or because you are eager to fill the position. The person's skills must align with the post. For example, the outgoing individual who loves meeting new people but has never balanced a checkbook would better serve the organization as a volunteer coordinator than the financial coordinator. Similarly, the individual who does not bat an eyelash at mounds of paperwork, yet gets easily stressed by demanding customers, might be a great fit for the records manager but not the

adoption coordinator. Do not be afraid to move people around and try them in different roles until you have the right fit. Even though it can be difficult to leave a crucial position empty until you find the perfect match, in the long run your organization will be much better off having the right people in place.

Below is a basic template to use in building your rescue group's staff, including suggestions for job responsibilities and helpful skills. This list is not meant to be all inclusive, so use it as a starting point and tweak it to fit the needs of your organization. And do not be afraid to split these positions among several people—there is plenty of work to go around! Just remember that you do not need to fill all these positions immediately. Start small and continue to build as your rescue group gains more volunteers. Once your rescue group is established, it is certainly appropriate to pay staff according to the laws of your state. Organizations that have paid staff find that it leads to less turnover and more consistent policies and procedures.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR This person is the face of your organization and chosen by the board of directors. In addition to being the rescue group's spokesperson, this individual is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the organization and interacts with the board of directors as well as other staff members and volunteers. The executive director ensures that the organization is operating according to its mission statement and developing funds and policies for its future. The individual in this position should have business and media savvy as well as a considerable amount of patience and tact.

RECORDS MANAGER An obsessively organized and detail-oriented volunteer should fill this post. This individual should be tech savvy as she will be dealing with paperwork and animal management software. The records manager will update each animal's profile with current location, medical history and outcome, and she'll update bios and pictures for the group's website and other listings. As your organization grows and the number of animals coming in and out on a weekly basis increases, this becomes one of the most overwhelming jobs. Find a couple of people to share the work or rotate the responsibilities every few months.

FINANCIAL COORDINATOR Do you know someone who is an accountant or math whiz? This person might be a good candidate to keep track of the organization's finances, both outgoing expenses and incoming donations. When it comes time to file your 990 tax returns with the IRS, this person will prepare the information for your group's accountant. If someone in your rescue group or community is an accountant, ask if she will donate her services come tax time. If you do not have this type of contact, seek help from a professional. If your rescue group has its 501(c)(3) status, you can inquire about receiving a reduced rate.

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CORPORATE RELATIONS COORDINATOR You need someone who can reach out to corporations—such as pet stores or big-box chains—and other service providers to negotiate prices for food, veterinary services, transport and other items so your rescue can minimize expenses.

FACILITY DIRECTOR Are you going to have a brick-and-mortar facility to house some or all of your animals? Or even a few cages in a storefront? If so, you will need someone to run each facility. Ideally, this person will live close to the facility because he will have to be at the location on a frequent basis, including during emergency situations. The facility director will create protocols to care for the animals and ensure their well-being, as well as train, schedule and supervise volunteers. This position is ideal for someone with community outreach experience who can turn a job cleaning cages into a fun task in which volunteers feel invested. Good people skills are also a must as this person will be the face of the organization at that facility. It is critical to have someone on staff who knows how to handle unvaccinated animals and animals who may have been exposed to diseases in the community like parvovirus and panleukopenia. They must also have an in-depth understanding of effective cleaning and sanitation protocols, and they should be familiar with the Association of Shelter Veterinarians' [Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters](#) (which outlines best practices for running an animal facility) and understand how to implement these standards. When setting up your own facility, be sure to look into local kennel or zoning ordinances at the outset. Many other issues will have to be considered as well, such as how to fund the facility and deal with challenges such as neighbors who may oppose your group's presence.

FOSTER COORDINATOR This position requires someone with a lot of patience and good people skills. The foster coordinator needs to give prospective foster providers a clear list of what the group will provide and what the foster provider will be responsible for when caring for animals. Importantly, this person needs to be constantly accessible via email and phone to respond to foster providers' questions in a timely manner. Additionally, the foster coordinator will coordinate returns and find a new foster homes for pets when necessary. This post might also start a continuing education

program designed to keep foster providers learning and engaged. It is essential to build good relationships with foster providers to keep them happy and willing to continue fostering! It is also a good idea to have this person implement a support network (such as a listserv or a group on social media) that enables foster providers to connect with each other.

ADOPTIONS COORDINATOR/COUNSELOR The adoptions coordinator position is great for someone who has reasonable email access throughout the day and time to field the many inquiries she is likely to receive. You want someone who would not feel compelled to use rigid rules for adoptions but instead would use general guidelines as set by the board of directors and is comfortable communicating with potential adopters to support the adoption process. This is another position that requires considerable tact, sensitivity and thoughtfulness. This post is a good fit for someone who is a "people person" and understands that customer service is critical to adoption success.

ADOPTION EVENT COORDINATOR Who likes to get up early during the weekend? Grab this person to be the event coordinator and have him plan and run weekly adoption events. Responsibilities include showing up every week to set up and break down the event, having the appropriate paperwork on hand and projecting a warm and welcoming appearance to all potential adopters and foster providers who pass by.

VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR It is a good idea to have a volunteer coordinator on board to manage the various volunteer needs throughout the organization. This person will take all volunteer inquiries and direct them to the appropriate staff member, as well as handle volunteer orientation and training sessions. This person should be comfortable using social media and other methods to actively recruit volunteers when needed. Because the volunteer coordinator is also responsible for troubleshooting volunteer issues and potentially terminating volunteers who do not work out, choose someone who is just as comfortable having difficult conversations as she is engaging and motivating volunteers. It is also important for the volunteer coordinator to have a general idea of the needs within each area of the organization so she can create or modify shifts when there is an imbalance. For example, if one facility has 50 volunteers to fill 14 shifts, but another location has only 10, the volunteer coordinator can request that some people move to the second location. Because this person will have contact information for all volunteers in the group, she will be a good resource when other immediate needs arise, such as when an animal needs transport to a new home or to the veterinarian. This is also the go-to person to coordinate with any outside group, such as a local school or business, that wants to partner to provide volunteers for a day.

Having a photographer on staff (either a volunteer at your organization or someone in your community willing to donate time) is key. A good picture can make all the difference in getting an animal adopted. Watch [How to Photograph Shelter Pets](#) for some great pro tips!



MEDICAL COORDINATOR This person is responsible for scheduling veterinary appointments and working as a liaison between the rescue group and any veterinarians the organization works with. It is confusing and wasteful to allow everyone from the rescue to contact the veterinarian when an animal has a medical issue. It will make everyone's life easier if only one or two people from a rescue group are allowed to approve veterinarian appointments. Putting approved veterinarian services in writing and faxing/emailing the authorization to the veterinarian before an appointment can reduce confusion and make the experience better for foster providers and veterinarians. Many veterinarians appreciate the clarity this process provides, and it can also make it easier to cross-reference invoices with billing statements down the line. The only caution is that the medical coordinator should have constant access to email and phone, otherwise there may be problems scheduling and approving emergency appointments. Because medical situations can be unexpected and urgent, it is crucial to identify someone as the backup for this position. The medical coordinator should have a general knowledge of common animal health problems so he can readily determine when it is necessary for an animal to see the veterinarian. This person should also establish protocols for certain situations. For example, if there is an emergency and a foster parent takes his foster animal to the veterinarian without getting prior approval from the medical coordinator, who would be responsible for the bill?

BEHAVIOR AND TRAINING SPECIALIST This person (whether on staff or not) will assist animals in your rescue with enrichment, training and addressing behavior issues, as well as pets and pet owners struggling with behavior problems at home (as a means of surrender prevention). The individual should have experience in humane training techniques that use positive reinforcement. It is helpful to have standard operating procedures already drafted for common behavior issues that could occur with your rescue animals. The person in this position should work closely with the volunteer, foster and adoption coordinators to help prevent problems before they start. Reaching out to local dog training facilities is an option as well; many trainers will be happy to provide ongoing training for fosters. Check out [Fetching the Perfect Dog Trainer](#) by Katenna Jones for advice on finding a dog trainer who uses positive reinforcement training methods. The HSUS's [Guide to Cat Behavior Counseling](#) and the related online course are also great resources.

COMMUNICATIONS/MARKETING/PUBLICITY SPECIALIST Someone with excellent communication skills, social media savvy and web design experience is perfect for this job. This is also a great opportunity for someone who enjoys planning fundraising events or someone who wants to help but is not able to volunteer on a regular basis. Be careful in your choice—whichever represents you on social media will be considered the face of your organization. If you



would not trust the person to give an interview to the media, she is probably not the best person to manage your organization’s online presence. You will also want a backup administrator, someone else who has access to your social media channels, in case you lose the main volunteer.

GRANT WRITING COORDINATOR Notice the word “coordinator” on this one. It is not reasonable to expect one person to write all the grant proposals for your rescue, but it is helpful to have someone who can search through the resources to find applicable grants and form a team of people to draft the proposals. The coordinator keeps track of grant applications in progress, proposal deadlines, proposal specifications and eventual outcomes.

FUNDRAISING EVENTS COORDINATOR A fundraising team is necessary to help offset the organization’s expenses. Tasked with leading your rescue’s fundraising efforts, the individual in this position should have experience in event planning and should organize several different types of events throughout the year.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH ORGANIZER

This person will build long-term relationships with community members as a representative of your rescue group and so must be personable, engaging and have excellent customer service skills. Ideally, the candidate originates from the communities being served and/or is fluent in community language(s). The primary purpose of this role is to build trusting relationships among stakeholders—pet

owners, your rescue group, veterinary, behavioral and other service providers, other local animal organizations—to ensure pets in your community have access to all available resources needed to thrive with their families. This individual will conduct ongoing outreach to pet owners in your focus communities, connecting them with spay/neuter, vaccination and other veterinary/behavior/wellness resources for their pets when requested by community members. They may also assist with transporting pets to and from spay/neuter or other veterinary appointments, and follow up with clients via phone and home visits as needed to support the family and their pet(s). Further, this person will assist in planning, organizing, advertising and implementing community outreach events, as well as collect data necessary for ensuring your program is meeting its objectives and focusing resources in areas with the highest need.

There are countless other positions your organization can create to make the rescue group run smoothly. Think about the goals and needs of your organization and plan accordingly. And remember, nothing is set in stone—you have the flexibility to adjust positions and responsibilities to make them work for you. Once you have your team in place, create an organizational chart so that it is clear to all staff and volunteers who is in charge of each area within your rescue group.

BUILDING A VOLUNTEER NETWORK

Volunteers are a crucial part of any rescue group—you cannot run an organization without them. From taking care of animals to running

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adoption events, from transporting animals to creating pet bios and taking pictures, there are countless opportunities for volunteers to help your rescue. Having a structured program in place is essential to recruiting and retaining volunteers. Providing training, guidelines and support for volunteers will help prevent frequent turnover.

In creating your volunteer program, think about your organization's specific needs and the characteristics of your ideal volunteer. Then ask for just that in your position description. Also think about what the volunteers are going to get out of the experience. When crafting a position description, consider elements such as the purpose of the job, work involved, training required, learning opportunities offered, commitment needed, level of difficulty involved, skills necessary and type of environment expected. You should also consider listing the physical, mental and emotional requirements. At the same time, do not make your program so rigid and demanding that it discourages or excludes people who want to volunteer on a somewhat limited basis. Make room for everyone.

Communication is essential when it comes to running a successful volunteer program. What are your expectations of volunteers, and how can they provide feedback to you? Asking for a minimum time commitment (three months is usually a good length of time) provides consistency for everyone involved and gives the volunteer an out if the experience ends up not being right for them.

It is important to hold an orientation and training session before you allow volunteers to roll up their sleeves and dig in. Try to hold orientations and trainings on a regular basis so that you do not lose someone interested in volunteering because the next orientation is too far in the future. The orientation should provide an overview of the organization, details about what is expected of volunteers and additional information that will help people decide whether or not to participate. The training session should cover all relevant rules, policies and procedures, as well as detailed information people need to accomplish their specific tasks. Handing out a volunteer manual that summarizes everything you went over in the orientation and training is a good practice. You should also create "how-to" guidelines for every task volunteers are asked to do at your rescue. Even better, supplement the manual with pictures, and keep it easily accessible. This will help volunteers and create consistency within the organization. The training session is also a good opportunity to collect a liability waiver from all volunteers (you should also obtain liability insurance, which is discussed in the next section). If you hold events at pet stores and other locations that you do not own, make sure you check for any age requirements before accepting volunteers under 18 years old.

Do not forget to show your volunteers the fruits of their labor. Let people know on a regular basis which animals have been adopted,

and share a success story along with pictures. Seeing happy pets in their new homes or learning that 20 animals were adopted in one weekend is often the most fulfilling part of volunteering for a rescue group.

As volunteers get more engaged, they may also want to try new things. Take their offers of help seriously and, if possible, give them room to try new things that could benefit your group. Sometimes their suggestions might not be feasible. If this is the case, do not simply say "no," but explain the reasoning and offer alternatives. This increases their buy-in and interest in the group, and it can help retain those who are truly interested in helping long-term.

For more information, check out the HSUS's [resources on staff/volunteer management](#).

OBTAINING INSURANCE

Every rescue group should carry insurance to protect the organization, its individual board and staff members and its volunteers.

General liability insurance is important to carry; it will cover claims for bodily injury or property damage to people not associated with your organization. This ensures that your organization is covered if, depending on the policy, a customer slips on a wet floor during an adoption event, a volunteer transporting a pet to her new home has a car accident and injures the other driver, or a cat bites a potential adopter. Additionally, you need to purchase workers' compensation if your organization has paid staff, and possibly property insurance if your rescue has its own facility. You can also buy insurance to cover medical costs for volunteers and fosters who are injured while performing tasks for your organization.

Although forming a corporate entity protects individuals from personal liability for any corporate wrongdoing, directors and officers of a board can still be personally sued for reasons such as misuse of company funds, fraud, violating the law, gross negligence and neglect of legal and financial duties. As such, it is a good idea to purchase director and officer (often called "D&O") liability insurance to protect corporate directors and officers in the event of a lawsuit. This type

It is important to work with trainers and behavior experts, but they are not always easy to find. The following resources may be helpful in finding a good partner for your organization:

- apdt.com
- ccpdt.org
- m.iaabc.org
- dacvb.org

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of insurance usually covers legal fees, settlements and other costs. Sometimes the D&O insurance will also protect a corporation if it is named as a defendant in a lawsuit.

CREATING A BUDGET AND BUSINESS PLAN

As a tax-exempt organization, you are required to stay in good standing with the IRS. This means annually filing a 990, 990-EZ or 990-N tax return with the IRS, in addition to fulfilling any local and state requirements. Engaging in good accounting practices from the beginning will help you stay organized and focused. An essential step toward this goal is creating a budget for your organization. Developing a budget will require you to thoughtfully estimate costs for the year for items such as food, veterinary care and insurance, and it will help you plan fundraising events to support your efforts.

Running a rescue is a legitimate nonprofit endeavor and should be treated as such to ensure that the organization will be there for the long haul. Creating a business plan will help you think about building a sustainable future for your rescue group by outlining your mission, forecasting budgets, making priorities and setting strategic goals. You may want to consult a financial adviser to get started on the right foot. From the beginning, you need to think about where you want your organization to be in six months, one year and five years down the road. Think of the business plan as a roadmap to keeping the organization on track, achieving your goals and fulfilling your mission. Strategically planning for your rescue group will help ensure that your organization is around to help animals for many years to come.

You can find a sample business plan in Appendix A and a sample budget in Appendix B, available at humanepro.org/rescuebestpractices.

FUNDING YOUR ORGANIZATION

Funding a rescue organization requires some basic business skills in marketing, fundraising, grant writing and cost containment. Plan to set aside \$5,000 to \$10,000 for startup costs for your rescue group. This should cover startup items such as food, bowls, toys, blankets, cages, carriers, collars, leashes, litter boxes, litter and veterinary funds for your first few charges. Even if you run a foster-based organization and ask foster providers to cover the daily cost of food, it is a good idea to have backup items on hand.

Once your organization is established, it is important to have a reliable and constant source of income. Without a solid plan in place, your rescue group will not be sustainable.

TYPES OF FUNDS TO HAVE

Good accounting practices require that you keep track of how

donated funds are spent. It is helpful to have several funds to which people can donate to help you care for the animals.

- **GENERAL FUND** The majority of your donations will fall into this category, and any funds that are not otherwise earmarked will go here. You can use this money for anything needed to run your rescue, such as veterinarian bills, pet food, utility costs, animal transport and staff salaries. Having a “donate here” button on your webpage or social media accounts will help with fundraising for general funds.
- **SPAY/NEUTER AND GENERAL VETERINARY EXPENSES** You will always need more funding for spay/neuter as well as veterinary care. Make it easy for people to donate to those causes by letting them know that you are trying to build funds in these areas.
- **SPECIFIC MEDICAL CASES** Promoting specific animals with special needs is a great way to pay for unusually expensive cases. Be careful to ensure that all funds designated for a particular animal are used for that animal only. All extra funds must be returned to donors and not used for other animals. Make sure you are upfront and clear to potential donors about where and how the funds will be spent so they do not feel misled.

CREATING A DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Do not rely on adoption fees as your sole source of income. Between spay/neuter, vaccinations and veterinary fees, many times the adoption fee will not even cover the amount of money you have to spend on an animal before he can be adopted. While adoption fees are a way to defray some of these costs, you will need to develop a plan that brings money into your organization on an ongoing basis.

A rescue group based in Arlington, Virginia, exemplifies how an organization can diversify its funding base. While some of its revenue comes from adoption fees, the bulk comes from donations, fundraising events and partnerships with its for-profit subsidiary businesses—two pet boutiques and a full-service pet care company. An organization in Chicago, Illinois, uses the proceeds from its boarding and training center to fund the nonprofit rescue group. While these specific models may not be feasible for your organization, the lesson is clear: Diversify your funding base, and do not count on adoption fees to cover all your costs.

Creating a development plan will provide a path for your organization to grow and focus on long-term goals. It will also enable you to determine which fundraising efforts work and where you should concentrate your energy. Importantly, it will help ensure your organization is there for the long haul.

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MARKETING AND BRANDING Marketing and branding are essential for highlighting your organization and attracting more donors, volunteers and adopters. Do not be intimidated; marketing is simply using strategies and tactics that help you build relationships with supporters and fulfill your mission. Creating a marketing plan on an annual basis is an effective tool to help you achieve your goals as it creates a unified vision for everyone in the organization and guides decisions about resource allocation.

There are numerous ways to market your organization. Start a newsletter or fundraising appeal letter (either printed or electronic) highlighting all the wonderful animals your organization has rescued. People are more likely to give when they are proactively asked to donate. There are simple and inexpensive programs available to help you create a newsletter without the help of a graphic designer. And remember, people want to hear about the great work your group does for animals. You are the voice for the animals in your care, so tell their stories.

Another way to advertise your rescue group is to start a branding campaign—create a logo and put it on T-shirts, bags and other items to sell. There are numerous companies that will do this for your organization at little or no cost. Once you do create a logo and finalize your organization's name, protect your brand by purchasing all website domains with that name (including both [.org](#) and [.com](#) suffixes), apply for a copyright for your name and apply for a trademark for your logo. You can find information on how to apply on the United States Patent and Trademark Office's [website](#). It is possible to fill out the applications yourself, but you may want to hire an attorney to ensure it is done properly.

FUNDRAISING Fundraising efforts need to be given the same, if not more, attention as your efforts to save animals' lives. In general, if your organization is unable to raise sufficient funds to pay for its work, it is unlikely that you will be able to raise those funds at a later time. More importantly, attempting to raise funds after you have obligated your rescue group to specific projects is not a sustainable way to run your organization and makes it unlikely that the group will last for long.

[Fundraising activities](#) are regulated by state law. The majority of states require nonprofits that solicit donations from within that state to [register with its governing body](#). Each state has different registration requirements, so make sure you have submitted the correct paperwork and registered in every state where you are soliciting donations. You may want to consult an attorney familiar with fundraising regulations to ensure full compliance.

Fundraising should not be the responsibility of just one person. Create a committee charged with developing creative ways to bring

in more funds to your organization, as well as planning and running fundraising events.

There are a whole host of ways you can fundraise for your organization: Cultivate donors, establish membership tiers, offer animal sponsorships, create “in honor of” and “in memoriam” funds, sell plaques for adoption event cages, post a wish list, develop a planned giving program, encourage in-kind donations, pursue corporate sponsorships, send direct mailings, plan fun and creative events—the list is endless.

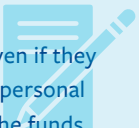
When planning an event, consider how many volunteers you will need, how much time it will take to plan, how you can advertise the event, how much money you can spend on the event, how much money you plan to raise from the event and how you can measure success. Note that it is not always about how much money you raise—sometimes the exposure you gain is even more valuable.

Many times, all you need to do to secure a donation is ask—so do not be shy! A rescue group in New York City once reached out to a cat litter company requesting a donation for the nonprofit organization. The company's response? It sent 180 eight-pound bags of litter at no cost.

This brings up another important point: Do not forget about in-kind donations, which are contributions of goods or services. Many organizations prefer to contribute in-kind donations, which can be just as valuable as cash donations.

Send thank-you emails for every donation, whether cash or in-kind, and reserve thank-you letters in the mail for larger donations. It is crucial to include [specific information in thank-you notes](#) so that donors can receive [tax deductions](#) for their contributions.

GRANT WRITING This is another area where you should build a dedicated team. Recruit people who are highly organized, know the organization well and are good writers. The grant writing process is not as overwhelming as people often fear, and once your writers have a couple of proposals under their belt, they will feel more confident and comfortable with the process. The HSUS has a comprehensive [list of grants](#), and [Candid](#), formerly The Foundation Center, is



Always send a thank-you note to your donors, even if they only give a small amount. People appreciate the personal contact, and if you can give an example of how the funds were used (e.g., picture of a dog toy or cat bed) it helps cement the connection.

ORGANIZATIONAL STANDARDS

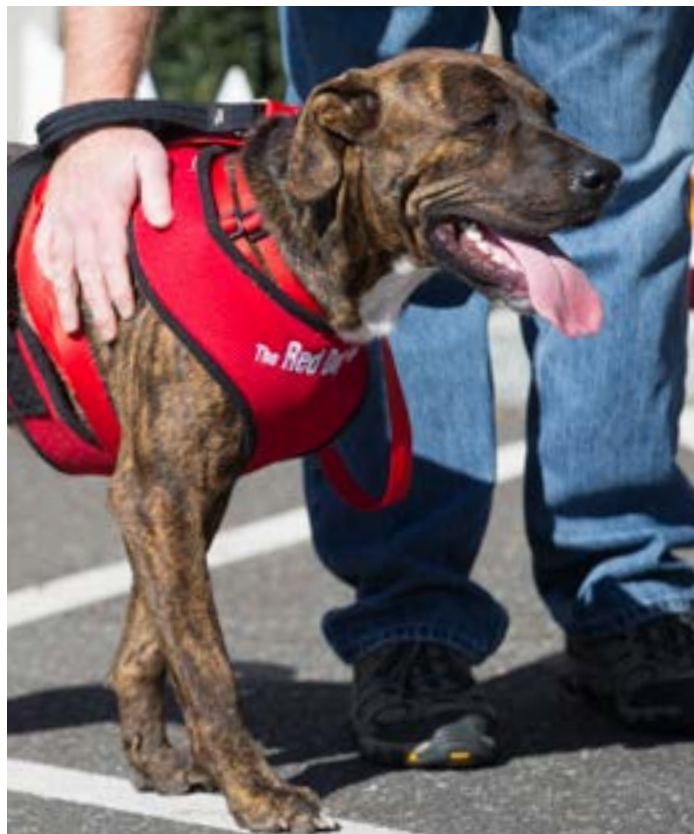
another great resource to look for more traditional sources of grant funding. Grant writing is about building relationships, knowing your organization and simply following directions.

COST CONTAINMENT To be a good steward of your donors' funds, you need to get the most bang for your buck. There are some well-known strategies such as buying in bulk, but there are also lesser-known ways to save funds for your rescue group. For example, ask [rescue-friendly stores](#) for discounts, contact local grocery stores for ripped bags of food or dented cans they can no longer use, set up an Amazon wish list for supplies, check your city and county for surplus equipment sales, and, if allowed by your state's veterinary medicine laws, talk to your local hospital about donating infant eye medication and used medical equipment for use pursuant to your veterinarian's instructions. (Note: Make sure this is legal in your state.)

IMPLEMENTING A CULTURE OF RESPECT

While we spend so many resources caring for the animals, we often forget to care for ourselves as well as the thousands of other people in the animal welfare community.

The homeless animal issue is a problem bigger than any one organization can solve. Only through a comprehensive and collaborative



approach will we be able to decrease intake at shelters and rescue groups (through such initiatives as bolstering spay/neuter and vaccination clinics, implementing TNR, increasing pet retention and shutting down puppy mills) and find loving homes for adoptable pets (by conversation-based adoption counseling, expanding foster networks and increasing transfer rates between shelters and rescue groups). No single organization can do it alone, and we have a responsibility to foster a culture of respect within our own organizations and extend it to others.

ENGAGING IN HUMANE DISCOURSE

In the animal rescue community, we all know there is no one way to rescue animals. There are more than 10,000 rescue groups in the U.S. and Canada, and each organization has a different and valid way of running its program. The animal welfare world has historically been divisive but, by working together, we will solve the problem of animal homelessness. We need to recognize that not all communities can transform overnight and that it truly takes a village to save homeless animals.

Humane discourse is not about stifling criticism, nor is it meant to excuse unacceptable practices. Instead, it is about finding appropriate ways to increase dialogue between different organizations and using suitable outlets for discussing differences. Set aside time in your next staff meeting to discuss issues of concern instead of posting your latest frustration on social media outlets or discussing it during an adoption event. Also think about the impact of the language you choose. For example, are you rescuing an animal *from* a shelter or *with* a shelter? How can changing that one word impact your relationships? We all lead by example, and when others see us always speaking positively and bringing up issues in an appropriate manner, they will follow suit. Language has an impact. When we tear down shelters, we risk tearing down shelter animals: Who wants to adopt from an entity that is considered "bad"? This only serves to create a greater reliance on limited rescue resources, and it does a disservice to animals in need.

For more information, check out the [HSUS's Humane Discourse Toolkit](#) and resources on [coalition building](#).

PREVENTING COMPASSION FATIGUE

This work of animal rescue can take an emotional toll. Many of us are called to do this work because of our love of animals, and it can be painful to see so many in need. Compassion fatigue is the emotional, physical, social and spiritual exhaustion that causes a pervasive decline in our ability and energy to feel and care for others, and it is the normal consequence of caring. On an individual level, it can manifest as anger, cynicism, inability to empathize, feeling like what we do is never enough, guilt or hopelessness, and can lead to

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resistance to change, feeling powerless and apathy. When multiple people in a group are experiencing compassion fatigue, it can manifest at an organizational level, with high rates of turnover, lack of flexibility, inability for teams to work together and undermining the mission of the organization. In order to do our best work for the animals, we must, as individuals, prioritize our own wellness and self-care, despite our inclination to run ourselves ragged “for the animals.” The animals need us at our best, and it’s our obligation to take care of ourselves first before we assist others.

Learning to recognize the signs of compassion fatigue can help us to recognize when we might need to step up our self-care, or step back our levels of engagement. Learning skills to both ameliorate and manage acute moments of stress as they are happening, as well as have a healthy relationship with our capacity to help and our boundaries, can help us thrive in the long term in the work. Conversations about compassion fatigue and self-care, setting boundaries and managing workloads should be standard in organizations, no matter the size. Anyone who is struggling should remember that they’re not alone, that it’s normal, and that help is available—whether by reaching out to others on their team, taking a break, or accessing professional mental health support. The success of our movement depends on each of us being at our best, and we’re in this together; caring for ourselves and our teams will only allow us to be that much more effective for the animals we are so committed to helping.

For more information, check out the HSUS’s resources on compassion fatigue.

CUSTOMER SERVICE SKILLS

Good customer service should be the cornerstone of every interaction your organization has with people—whether they are the general public, potential adopters, volunteers, shelter personnel or animal control officers. Every person involved with your rescue group is an ambassador for your organization. Set a good example and ensure that everyone associated with your rescue treats customers and potential customers in a welcoming and nonjudgmental way.

Most people are good and treat their animals well. Remember that many will not have the knowledge that you have, so before thinking a question such as “Can you ship a dog to me?” is a red flag, consider that the person may be legitimately unfamiliar with rescue, or that this is his first pet. Keep in mind that if someone comes to your organization wanting to adopt, they are already trying to do the right thing, and you do not want to scare them away by treating them with suspicion.

Good customer service is essential to the success of your organization as your reputation is priceless and easily destroyed with one bad

encounter. Be accepting of feedback that may not be positive, and take it as a learning experience. Keep an eye on reviews on Yelp and other review sites such as [Great Nonprofits](#) to see what the general sentiment is about your organization and your brand. One of the most frequent complaints from potential adopters is that they did not receive a response to their inquiry or application. Combat this by setting organizational standards for responding to questions and adoption applications so that, for example, all inquiries receive a reply within 24 hours, and all adoption applications— even if they’re not approved or the animal is not available—receive a response. Do not miss out on opportunities for an adoption. Make sure your available pet postings are updated frequently to ensure that all listed animals are currently available. It can be frustrating for an adopter to fall in love with a pet online only to find out the pet is not available after all.

A few practical tips for good customer service: Be prompt with responses to inquiries, and use a friendly and warm demeanor; provide accurate, current and easily accessible information on your organization and the animals in your care; actively listen and be friendly to the people who approach your rescue group; always remain calm and professional; and say thank you to the people who work with your organization.

For more information, check out the HSUS’s resources on [Customer Service](#).



Animal care standards

Regardless of whether your organization houses animals in foster homes, an adoption center, boarding kennels or some other type of facility, or even just temporarily for a trap-neuter-return program, you must ensure they receive the highest standards of care.

THE FIVE FREEDOMS

While groups can disagree on specifics (e.g., which brand of food is best, whether harnesses or collars are preferable), there are five fundamental freedoms to which every animal is entitled:

1. FREEDOM FROM HUNGER AND THIRST All animals need ready access to fresh water and a diet that allows them to maintain full health and vigor. This must be specific to the animal. For example, a puppy, an adult dog, a pregnant cat and a senior cat would all need different types of food provided on different schedules.

2. FREEDOM FROM DISCOMFORT All animals need an appropriate living environment, including protection from the elements and a clean, safe and comfortable resting area. Animals must be provided with bedding and not sleep on a cold, hard floor. Overcrowding will increase an animal's physical discomfort and should be avoided. Do not forget about temperature and environmental factors, such as noise levels and access to natural light. And if an animal is outside, he must have shelter from the elements as well as appropriate food and water bowls that will not freeze or tip over.

3. FREEDOM FROM PAIN, INJURY OR DISEASE All animals must be afforded care that prevents illness and injury and that assures rapid diagnosis and treatment if illness/injury should occur. This entails vaccinating animals, monitoring animals' physical health, rapidly treating any injuries and providing appropriate medications for treatment and pain.

4. FREEDOM TO EXPRESS NORMAL BEHAVIOR All animals need sufficient space and proper facilities to allow them to move freely and fully and to engage in the same types of activities as other animals of their species. They also need to be able to interact with—or avoid—others of their own kind as desired. They must be able to stretch every part of their body (from nose to tail), run, jump and play at will. Are you overcrowded? Are you housing too many animals in one room? If so, the animals are probably unable to experience the fourth freedom.

5. FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND DISTRESS All animals need both a general environment and handling that allows them to avoid mental suffering and stress. The mental health of an animal is just as important as her physical health. Are you providing sufficient enrichment? Allowing the animal to hide in a safe space when needed? Ensuring that there is not too much noise? Are there too many animals in one room? Remember, psychological stress can quickly transition into physical illness.

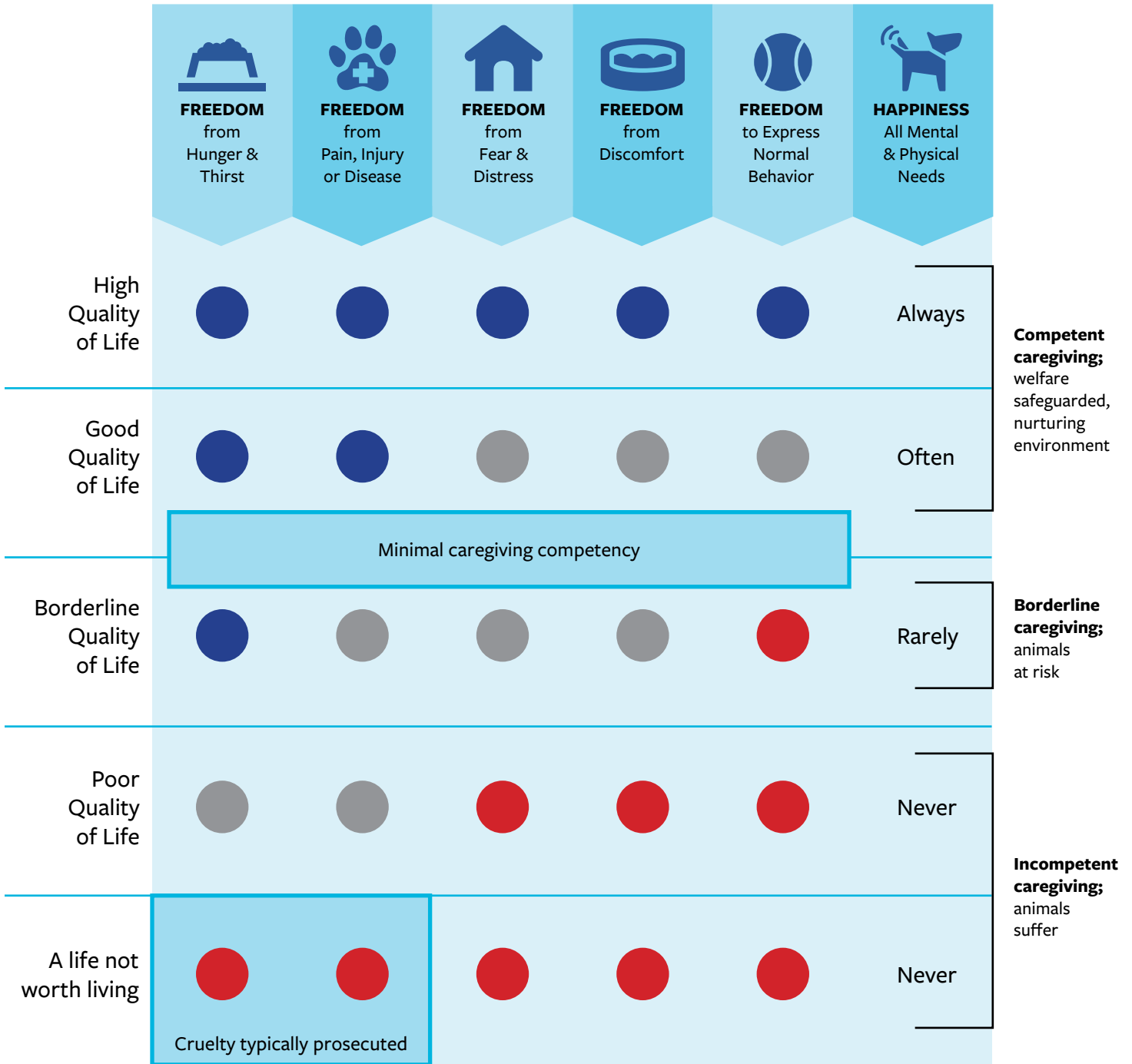
The Five Freedoms were first articulated by England's Farm Animal Welfare Council, but they apply to every type of animal in every type of setting, including shelters, rescues and even private homes. Most organizations tend to do a good job of providing Freedoms 1, 2 and 3, but 4 and 5, which focus more on an animal's psychological needs, tend to be overlooked. It is important to examine your operations from the perspective of the animals in your care. If each and every animal is not receiving all Five Freedoms, you must reexamine your policies and procedures, and you certainly must not take any new animals into your program until the situation is resolved.

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians' [Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters](#)—which were developed for “traditional brick and mortar shelters, sanctuaries and home-based foster or rescue networks”—are our profession's most useful tool, largely because they are premised on the Five Freedoms. The guidelines should be used as your touch point for answering every question from “Is my animal housing humane?” to “Is my organization trying to care for too many animals?” The operating guidelines below are adapted from the ASV guidelines, and following them is necessary to ensure the Five Freedoms. Note that these are minimal considerations, not complete operational plans. We recommend that you read the ASV document in its entirety and consult your veterinarian to develop written standards for your organization.

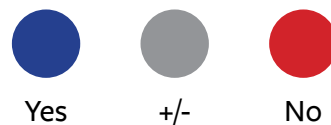
STANDARDS FOR PRIMARY ENCLOSURES

The physical space that will serve as an animal's primary enclosure—the place where he will eat, sleep and spend the majority of his time—must be safe, sanitary and of sufficient size to provide a humane quality of life. **IMPORTANT:** *Cages, crates and carriers that are intended for travel or short-term, temporary confinement are unacceptable as primary enclosures; it is also unacceptable to keep animals on wire or gridded flooring.*

Five Freedoms for Companion Animals



ADAPTED FROM A CHART CREATED BY GARY PATRONEK FOR THE FARM ANIMAL WELFARE COUNCIL, 2009.



ANIMAL CARE STANDARDS

Ensuring that an animal has adequate space can be a challenge, particularly when several animals are kept in the same room or when an animal must be confined in a kennel or cage. Regardless of the type of housing used, every animal must be able to:

- Stand up, sit down and lie down comfortably.
- Stretch fully from tip of front toes to back toes.
- Carry her tail in normal carriage (for cats and certain breeds of dogs, that means having the tail fully extended).
- Engage in normal sleeping, eating/drinking and urinating/defecating behaviors (most animals prefer not to eliminate near where they eat and sleep, so allowing sufficient space to distinguish a “potty area” is important).
- Assume normal posture when sleeping, eating/drinking and urinating/ defecating.
- See out of the enclosure, but also avoid being seen.

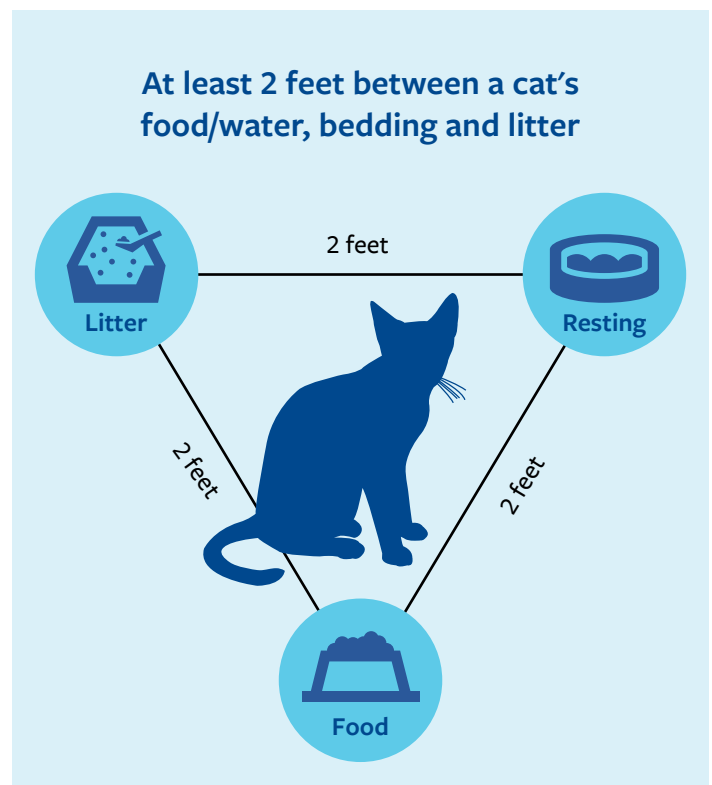
With respect to dogs, there are no hard-and-fast rules about kennel dimensions because there is so much variation in size among breeds—what is essentially a palatial kennel for a Chihuahua can be cruelly small for a Saint Bernard or Great Dane. Therefore, when determining the appropriate enclosure for dogs in your care, use the rules of thumb above as your guide. Does each dog have enough room to stand up, sit down, turn around and lie down comfortably? Can the animal establish a potty area sufficiently far away from the eating and sleeping areas (even dogs who are housetrained and walked regularly may have an accident or two, particularly while adjusting to a new routine)? Does the animal have room to express normal behaviors, like running and playing? If not, the primary enclosure is not large enough.

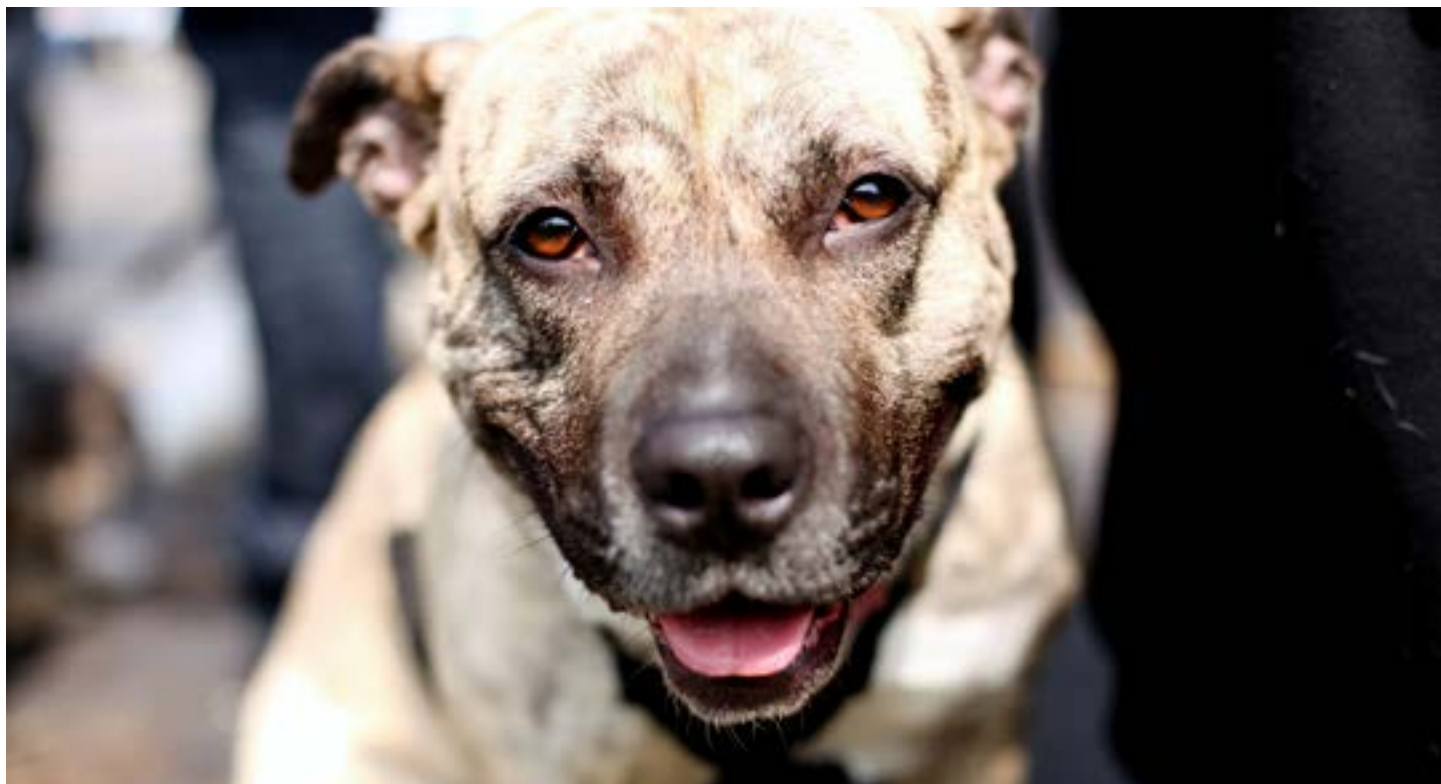
For cats kept in cages, it is vital to ensure that their enclosure allows them to hold their tails in normal posture (straight up) and lets them stretch from the tips of their front toes all the way to their back toes. While the [ASV guidelines](#) state that there must be at least 2 feet of triangulated distance between cats’ food/water, bedding and litter box areas,[†] this is a bare minimum, and they should have as much space as possible. When cats are housed in groups, each requires a minimum of 18 square feet of floor space, and regardless of the size of the room, ASV guidelines recommend a maximum of 10–12 cats per room.

For TNR programs, it is acceptable to keep cats in appropriate-sized traps the day before and after surgery, as these are temporary enclosures. In most cases, cats can be returned and released the day after surgery. Minimize stress by keeping the trap covered with a towel or sheet. More details on housing cats for TNR can be found in

[The Return-to-Field Handbook](#). In addition to size, there are other factors to consider in determining whether an animal’s environment is humane. Inside the enclosure, the animal must have a comfortable place to sleep—typically that means soft towels or bedding materials on a bed or other platform raised off the floor. They should also have toys, particularly those that provide mental as well as physical stimulation. Cats need places to hide, scratching posts and options for sleeping and perching (they prefer to be off the floor, so vertical space is a must). The longer the animal will stay in your care, the more mentally and physically stimulating her primary housing area must be.

The environment in which the primary enclosure is located is equally important; for instance, the animal must have an appropriate temperature. The American Veterinary Medical Association recommends ambient temperatures between 60–80 degrees, but individual animals may have needs outside that range. Fresh air is important and can help prevent disease. Appropriate lighting is vital—just like people, animals need regular light/dark cycles to support healthy sleep patterns. And while adding music can be soothing and help mask unpleasant sounds like barking and electronic machinery, animals should also have periods of quiet to facilitate rest. Consult your veterinarian for guidance on establishing the appropriate environment for the animals in your care.





Animals' primary housing areas must also be safe and able to be thoroughly sanitized. Ensure that there are no sharp edges on cages and that there are no gaps or spaces where a pet's head or paw might get stuck. If animals will be kept in foster homes, encourage care providers to look around the entire area and remove any breakables, items that they do not want potentially soiled or damaged and items that may be hazardous to a pet (e.g., poisonous houseplants, exposed electrical cords, trash, household cleaners). You may want to encourage foster providers to invest in outlet safety plugs and childproof latches for drawers and cabinets.

PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

Appropriate health care, including routine and preventive care, should be provided to all animals in your organization's charge. Track and record typical indicators of health like weight, temperature and [body condition score](#), but also pay attention to anything that seems out of the ordinary for the animal, as this may be an indication that something is wrong. Create a list of health issues to look for with your veterinarian, draft a written protocol for foster providers and document any health issues you suspect an animal may have.

To prevent the spread of disease and safeguard the public (including foster homes), immediately isolate any animal showing signs of contagious disease. Have medical contact information readily

available for all foster providers in case of an emergency, and provide fosters with clear guidance as to what is considered normal, what symptoms are indicators of illness and what symptoms require immediate veterinary attention.

VACCINATIONS AND PARASITE CONTROL

Ensuring that all animals are appropriately [vaccinated](#) is a critical part of running a safe and humane rescue organization. In addition, animals need protection against parasites (e.g., fleas, heartworm) and zoonotic diseases (diseases that can spread between species, such as the rabies virus). Consult your veterinarian to determine what vaccinations and medications should be given to the animals on a routine basis, and consult your state's laws on vaccinating animals. Keep individual veterinary records on each animal with specific dates of each vaccination or treatment.

DISEASE PREVENTION

Remember that animals may arrive with diseases that are difficult to remove from the environment (like ringworm or parvo), so limiting them to places that can be completely and easily disinfected is essential. In shelter settings it is recommended that all surfaces, including walls and floors, be made of nonporous materials so disinfectants like bleach can be easily applied (and remember to always clear all organic material before applying bleach—otherwise the bleach can be

deactivated). In foster home situations, that can prove more difficult. Bedding and other materials should be routinely washed with bleach and machine dried to kill any viruses. Creative holding options (e.g., children's baby pools and pet exercise pens) can be useful, particularly for puppies and kittens. While foster settings are definitely more challenging in terms of thorough sanitation, the risks may be outweighed by the benefits: Animals are less stressed when kept in a home setting. Talk with your veterinarian about the best isolation protocols to follow.

SPAY/NEUTER

Ideally, every animal should be sterilized prior to adoption. Some rescue groups have an adopter pay an extra deposit that is returned upon proof that the animal has been sterilized. This system does not ensure 100% compliance, and it requires organizations to spend extra time and resources on follow-up. [Pediatric spay/neuter](#) is safe, effective and common practice. All animals who are 6 weeks of age, weigh at least 2 pounds and are healthy should be sterilized prior to adoption. However, do not let strict adherence to this rule undermine a potentially successful adoption. If an animal is too unhealthy for surgery, your group may want to hold off on finalizing the adoption until after she has recovered in her new home and been altered. Get a letter from a veterinarian that details the animal's condition if she will always be too unhealthy for spay/neuter. This is particularly important in areas that have different licensing requirements for altered and unaltered pets.

MICROCHIPPING

According to a study published in the [Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association](#),[‡] only 22% of lost dogs and fewer than 2% of lost cats that enter shelters are reunited with their families. Those statistics are drastically different for microchipped pets. More than 52% of microchipped dogs and more than 38% of microchipped cats are returned home. However, further research reveals that only 58% of the animals' microchips are registered in a database with the owner's contact information, making nearly half of the chips ineffective in helping pets return home.

Your rescue should ensure that all adopted animals are microchipped and encourage adopters to register and update it with their current contact information, listing your organization as the second contact. This way, if the animal gets lost and the microchip does not have current contact information, your organization will be notified. In addition to microchipping, keep a collar and an identification tag on all animals, including indoor cats, before they go to their new homes. Animals in foster care and those attending adoption events should also wear collars with identification.

Check out the HSUS's tips for [reuniting lost pets](#) with their owners.



FOOD

Just like many people, some animals have specific dietary needs to accommodate issues such as food allergies or weight management. Have a veterinarian assess each animal's dietary needs. The following are standards for providing nutritious food and water:

- Animals should have access to fresh, clean water at all times, and it should be changed at least daily.
- Animals should have access to nutritious food at an amount appropriate for their age, weight and health. Conduct research and talk to your veterinarian to determine the best food for your pets. There are resources that can help you determine how much food to give your pets as well as which foods are appropriate.
- Throw out uneaten food after a maximum of 24 hours.
- Store food carefully to protect it from spoiling and keep it safe from insects and rodents.

WORKING WITH A VETERINARIAN

Veterinarians are critical partners in helping rescue groups carry out their mission. Some states legally require a veterinarian to oversee your medical protocols, so it is important to build relationships early on. In addition to having a partner for spay/neuter procedures, many of the animals in your organization will need extensive veterinary care before they will be ready for adoption. Some things you will need a veterinarian for are spay/neuter, general care, emergency care, preventive medications (such as flea/tick and heartworm medication), rabies vaccinations, implanting microchips and—for animals who are suffering and for whom there is no treatment to alleviate their pain—humane euthanasia. Some rescue groups prefer to work with veterinarians who have experience in shelter medicine, as they may be more familiar with the types of issues the animals in their care experience.

Veterinarians enter the profession because they want to care for animals. They are also business owners and have a bottom line to manage. Financial pressures, especially in a down economy, are often

[‡] [JAVMA \(Vol. 235, No. 2\)](#)

a major concern for veterinary practices, and veterinarians often find themselves pulled between the pressure to provide pro bono care and the reality of paying their bills. Be mindful of these pressures when approaching them to partner with your organization, and aim to build a mutually beneficial and successful relationship. You should be honest and upfront with what you will need and continue to have an open dialogue along the way.

Your relationship with a veterinarian may take on a variety of forms, from offering discounted prices or vouchers for animals in your care or providing care for a limited number of patients per month. If one practice is not able to meet all of your veterinary care needs, it may be necessary to establish partnerships with several providers. Review services and prices at the outset and put your agreement in writing, including names of individuals authorized to approve veterinary appointments and care. This will help prevent misunderstandings before they occur. And make sure you highlight how working with your organization will be beneficial for the veterinarian's practice; e.g., by referring adopters. For veterinarians who are just starting out, partnering with a rescue group is a great way to build clientele and quickly gain experience in a wide array of skills.

MENTAL WELL-BEING

Animal welfare organizations tend to focus their attention on the first three freedoms, ensuring their animals receive proper nutrition, veterinary care and adequate shelter. But the last two freedoms are equally important, and your group must take steps to ensure that each animal's mental well-being receives just as much attention as their physical. Ensuring the mental health of the animals in your rescue's care is just as important as ensuring their physical welfare.

STRESS

Failure to meet Freedoms 4 (freedom to express normal behavior) and 5 (freedom from fear and distress) causes animals to experience stress, and stress translates directly into disease, which can increase veterinarian bills, decrease adoptability and put a strain on your entire organization. Therefore, it is in your best interest to make sure that the animals in your care stay as stress-free as possible.

Even though many animals are stoic, meaning they do not disclose early symptoms of distress or disease, there are behaviors that to the careful observer indicate stress:

- Urinating/defecating on bedding
- Extreme overstimulation or fear response at the sight of people or other animals
- Barrier/kennel aggression

- Repetitive behaviors (e.g., pacing, spinning, licking)
- Being shut down, unresponsive, withdrawn or hiding
- Under- or over-grooming
- Not eating
- Cats using the "litter box lounge" (it is not normal for cats to lie in their litter box)
- Excessive or inappropriate vocalizing (especially loud/repetitive sounds)

Remember, you need to know what is normal to recognize what is not. If a cat who is normally very vocal suddenly stops "talking," or if a dog who normally greets people politely in the kennel suddenly starts lunging or barking, those could be indicators of stress. All signs of stress should be addressed immediately, either by adding enrichment to relieve boredom, removing the stressor (e.g., placing the animal in a quieter room) and/or obtaining veterinary attention.

FEAR FREE

The [Fear Free Shelter Program](#) provides free online trainings to shelters and rescues. They cover how to identify emotional stress in homeless pets, how to minimize stress and how to treat animals experiencing emotional challenges.

ENRICHMENT

Enrichment is not a "nice extra" for animals awaiting new homes; the [ASV guidelines](#) expressly state (Page 34) that it is not optional:

The purpose of enrichment is to reduce stress and improve well-being by providing physical and mental stimulation, encouraging species-typical behaviors (e.g., chewing for dogs and rodents, scratching for cats), and allowing animals more control over their environment. Enrichment should be given the same significance as other components of animal care, such as nutrition and veterinary care, and should not be considered optional.

The good news is enrichment does not have to involve a lot of time, expense or expertise.

Easy automatics

There are ways to provide enrichment almost automatically, just by incorporating it into cage/kennel setups and the general environment. Hiding boxes for cats, toilet paper rolls for rodents, scratching posts for colony rooms and safe chew toys for dogs can all be incorporated into your basic cage/kennel setups along with food and water bowls. Putting up window perches for cats, playing a nature video or perhaps even installing a fish tank can be "add-ons" that all residents of a room find stimulating and enjoy.



Win-wins

Using enrichment techniques to help make cleaning and other processes easier is another way to incorporate enrichment without adding undue burdens. If you hold several dogs in a kennel situation, [incorporating playgroups](#) gets everyone outside for easier cleaning while the dogs exercise and play. Give cats interactive toys to distract them while their cages are spot-cleaned.

In-cage enrichment

For most people, shelter/rescue volunteering and “dog walking” are synonymous, and that is definitely a much-needed service for animals living in kennels or cages. But walking alone is not enough for many shelter dogs. Integrating comprehensive enrichment programs, like feeding dogs out of interactive puzzles or “brain” toys rather than feeding from a bowl, rotating different scents like lavender in their kennel, and working on training are all critical to the mental health of shelter dogs. In addition, when a dog is taken out for a walk, it’s important to integrate training into the process. For example, many dogs will jump and bark out of excitement. Waiting for them to settle before opening the kennel door can help reduce their stress and teach them valuable impulse control behaviors. Dogs should be

allowed to sniff on walks. A fast-paced stroll around the property may help burn energy, but dogs reduce stress much faster when they are allowed to sniff and explore their environment. Quality over quantity is the key.

Enrichment does not have to be fancy or expensive. The key is to be creative and give animals safe—in terms of avoiding accidental ingestion of foreign materials, etc.—activities and toys that not only prompt physical stimulation, but also engage their brains and require them to solve problems.

Out-of-cage enrichment

Enrichments that provide both mental and physical stimulation should also be provided outside of the animal’s cage/kennel. Dog walks, for example, are often either just a quick potty break or a long hike designed to tire the dog out physically. Both opportunities are important, but how often do dogs catch on and take longer and longer to potty, knowing that once they do they will immediately have to go back inside? Trips outside the kennel should not be just for exercise; they should provide opportunities to engage the animal’s brain. Reinforcing polite walking manners, for example, or using

IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO ENRICH THE INSIDE OF A KENNEL/CAGE FOR AN ANIMAL AWAITING A NEW HOME:

FOR DOGS:

- Stack cereal boxes and smear the innermost box with peanut butter so the dog has to rip the boxes apart to reach the treat.
- Place their dinner in water and freeze it so the dog has to lick his kibble out, or serve meals in Kongs with kibble on the bottom and wet food on top. Throw out uneaten food after a maximum of 24 hours.
- Fill Kongs with peanut butter, or better yet, freeze stuffed Kongs (Kong has a program where shelters and rescues can get free or low-cost, slightly flawed unsaleable Kongs).
- Blow nontoxic bubbles throughout the room, and let dogs try to catch them.
- Read or do paperwork while sitting in the kennel.

FOR CATS:

- Add objects like caps, paper bags, tissue paper or empty boxes to cages.
- Place treats in balled-up paper or another ingestible material so the cat can bat it around and work to open it and find the goodies.
- Grow fresh cat grass or catnip.
- Groom cats inside their cages.
- Put catnip inside socks or strips of fleece, and knot them.
- Stuff tuna or other treats inside an old toilet paper tube, then plug the tube with tissue paper as an extra obstacle for the cat to remove.
- Put strips of carpet or scratching posts inside the cage.
- Feed wet food in half of a plastic egg to make the cats work to get the food out.

clicker training to teach a new skill not only engages the mind, it helps increase the dog's adoptability. And it does not have to be all work—creating scent trails for dogs to follow or letting them dig for treats in sandboxes or wading pools allows them to expend energy and use their senses.

You can also engage cats both physically and mentally. Believe it or not, cats can be clicker trained just as easily as dogs! And there is an added benefit to engaging cats—research shows that people are most likely to adopt a cat who engages with them and initiates a physical connection. Thus, encouraging cats to approach people and even teaching them to politely paw at passersby can be lifesaving!

Other stress relievers

For animals whose stress is not relieved by enrichment alone, there are other techniques you can use. Sometimes just changing their location can make all the difference. If an animal needs a quieter space, moving him away from sources of noise and stress can help; conversely, for the dog who needs lots of stimulation, putting her in a kennel right in the center of the action can do the trick. Some groups swear by products like Feliway and Comfort Zone, which simulate natural calming pheromones. Thundershirts are available for both cats and dogs to help relieve anxiety, and music and techniques like Tellington Touch (TTouch) and Reiki can be used to calm anxious animals. Medications are viewed by many as a last resort, but an argument can be made that animals are better off being successfully medicated before their stress behaviors become lasting bad habits. Talk with your veterinarian about options and protocols.

SOCIALIZATION

Not too long ago, fosters were warned to keep foster pets far away from their own pets and children to avoid spreading disease. Puppies, in particular, were to be kept isolated until they had their full series of vaccinations. Nowadays, we know that the benefits of proper socialization far outweigh the risks to anyone involved. Of course it is vital to ensure that all pets are properly vaccinated and that all interactions are closely monitored, but ensuring that foster pets are acclimated to all types of animals, people and environments is a critical component of preparing them for adoption.

Kittens and puppies experience their socialization period between birth and 16 weeks of age, which means that time in a foster home directly shapes the kind of dog or cat these young animals will become. Foster homes should be provided with a socialization checklist for kittens and puppies to ensure that the animal is introduced to a variety of floor surfaces, men, women, children, objects and places in a positive manner. It is imperative that young animals be encouraged but not forced to interact with objects or people if they are afraid.



Using high-value treats like cheese (for puppies) or baby food (for kittens) will ensure they create positive associations with many of the situations they will need to navigate as adults.

VETERINARY POLICY

It is important to have a policy in place, approved by the board of directors, regarding veterinary care. This policy should include instructions to the executive director on various aspects of veterinary care so that the director does not have to ask the board for permission every time the organization seeks medical attention for an animal in need. The policy should cover issues such as how much the organization can spend on an animal without board approval, which conditions will be treated and under which circumstances, and which health situations require board approval prior to treatment. It is critical to have a protocol in place so that a rescue group does not overextend its resources and jeopardize the entire organization by addressing more medical issues than it can handle.

EUTHANASIA POLICY

There are times when the only humane option for an animal is euthanasia. The issue of euthanasia in rescue groups generally arises when an animal is suffering (physically or mentally) from something from which there is no medical or behavioral treatment and the most humane decision is euthanasia.

The decision to euthanize is never easy, but you can find guidance within the Five Freedoms (Page 22). While euthanasia philosophy may differ between individual organizations, policy should always

ensure that an animal receives all Five Freedoms through the end of life. Once an animal's quality of life has deteriorated to the point where freedom from discomfort and pain (physical and mental) is no longer possible, euthanasia becomes the humane option.

Drafting a clear euthanasia policy and having it approved by the board of directors will allow you to create a policy that adheres to the values of the organization. It will also help your rescue group maintain consistency and avoid problems down the road. You can find a sample euthanasia policy in Appendix C, available at humane-pro.org/rescuebestpractices.

All euthanasia must be conducted humanely by a veterinarian or certified euthanasia technician who administers an injection of sodium pentobarbital. While not always required, pre-euthanasia sedation should always be available and used as appropriate to provide the most low-stress experience possible for the animal. The animal must be made comfortable throughout the procedure. Find humane euthanasia trainings by searching humane-pro.org/trainings.



Operational standards

Having strong day-to-day operations will help ensure that the animals in your rescue group's care receive all Five Freedoms (Page 22). It will also get your animals into loving homes faster, enabling your organization to save even more lives.

RECORD-KEEPING

Good record-keeping is crucial for the operation and growth of a rescue group. Having the ability to review what you have done in the past is the best way to make adjustments and plan where to concentrate your resources in the future. If you are not getting enough adopters or are receiving too many returns, perhaps it is time to change your adoption procedure and policies. Noticing a trend where you have a dip in intake in December but an overload in May? Start shifting your marketing efforts and promotions to get as many animals as possible adopted by April. Is that foster provider really trying to adopt out her charges, or is the animal who is taking a year to place a particularly difficult case? Are you taking in more animals with severe medical issues than you realize? Is there a particular type of animal who you are having difficulty adopting out? Are there common reasons why people are returning pets? You will not have this valuable information without keeping good records. Moreover, keeping good records is crucial when applying for grants because funders want to know about your organization through data and demonstrated outcomes. Grant reporting will also likely require this type of information.

What types of records should you keep? For the animals in your care, keep records of their name; microchip number; species; physical description (e.g., breed, color, identifying marks); age; sex; source (owner, another shelter, Good Samaritan, etc.); where the animal came from (location found if stray, address of person surrendering owned pet); medical history, including sterilization, rabies certificate and vaccine history; behavior issues; location within your organization; adoption applications and contracts; outcomes (e.g., fostered, adopted, returned); and full body, side and close-up facial photographs. Monthly adoption reports will help you determine adoption trends and pinpoint why some animals are returned. Once you know why people are returning pets, it will be much easier to devise solutions to stop returns for common reasons.

Software will help you track the number of foster providers in your network along with the average length of time animals stay in foster

care until they are adopted. You can also determine whether you are taking in too many severe medical or behavioral cases, as well as the average amount spent per animal. All of these statistics can help you plan your fundraising efforts and convince your board when it is time to change course.

It is also important to maintain up-to-date records on your volunteers, foster providers and donors. Having current contact information on file will make communication quicker and easier when you want to send out a call to action, such as finding a foster for an animal in need or asking people to attend a fundraiser. And keeping notes on which foster providers can handle specific types of medical or behavioral issues will make it that much easier to make good matches.

It is also essential to keep track of your funds—where they are coming from and where they are going. This will help you plan your budget, determine where you spend the majority of your funds and decide where you can cut costs.

In order for us to collectively end pet homelessness, having data from across the country is essential. We recommend submitting your data to [Shelter Animals Count](#), which collates data from thousands of organizations across the country to help guide lifesaving programs. There are also many software programs available that will help you track the different types of data. Join the [Maddie's Pet Forum](#) to ask other rescuers for advice on which software program might best fit your organization's needs.

TRANSPARENCY

Transparency is essential for building trust, both with the public and other shelter and rescue partners. Keeping records and providing them upon request, or even posting them on your website, is one way to show potential adopters and partners that you manage a professional and well-run organization. Rescue groups should readily share information about their operations, experience and the animals in their care. They should also always be upfront about how donors' funds are used and the impact they make; an animal's outcome; policies and procedures for adopting and fostering; and all statistics, such as the number of animals in the organization's care. Transparency also means allowing people to visit your facility (if you have one) or the foster homes where your animals reside (unless personal safety



is an issue). Make it easy for people to contact your organization by providing current contact information on your website and responding to inquiries promptly.

DETERMINING CAPACITY

According to [humane care standards](#), it takes approximately 15 minutes per day to provide basic care for each animal in a shelter environment (to clean the living environment and provide daily nutrition). So, for example, if you have one hour per day to care for the animals, that means you have the capacity to care for four animals, including your own pets. You can use the [UC Davis Virtual Consultant](#) to assess whether your housing for animals is adequate to ensure humane care.

If you provide more than minimum care (e.g. enrichment, grooming, monitoring health and behavior and showing the pet to potential adopters), you'll spend even more time caring for each animal. You can determine whether you've calculated the correct capacity by

checking whether all animals have access to the Five Freedoms (Page 22).

Rescue groups often have a variety of types of temporary homes for their animals—from brick-and-mortar facilities to cages at pet stores to foster homes. You should calculate the correct capacity, still using the Five Freedoms as a guide, for each of these different types of environments to ensure that your organization is not exceeding capacity and putting your charges at risk of inhumane treatment.

The foster coordinator or another staff member needs to ensure that foster providers are not overwhelmed with the number of animals they take in and that all animals in the home are receiving humane care. One way to implement this is for the foster coordinator to have ongoing discussions with each foster provider to determine capacity (the upper limit of animals who should be kept in that home) based on predetermined factors (e.g., space, time the foster provider spends at home, potential for creating an isolation room, the foster provider's own pets), while also taking into account

the needs of the foster pet. For example, special medical treatment or behavior modification will reduce the foster provider's overall capacity to care for additional animals, while a mother and her babies can be considered just one animal if the babies do not need specialized care. You can also ask foster providers to send a health and behavior report on a regular basis and require them to attend at least one adoption event per month so an organization can keep an eye on the animals. It is important not to set a capacity number in stone, but to use it as a starting point and allow room to adjust for the specific and evolving situation of each foster home.

In determining capacity, it is essential that all animals have sufficient space in their primary enclosure, whether it is a cage or a home. According to the Association of Shelter Veterinarians' *Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters* (Page 7):

Primary enclosures must provide sufficient space to allow each animal, regardless of species, to make normal postural adjustments, e.g., to turn freely and to easily stand, sit, stretch, move their head, without touching the top of the enclosure, lie in a comfortable position with limbs extended, move about and assume a comfortable posture for feeding, drinking, urinating and defecating. In addition, cats and dogs should be able to hold their tails erect when in a normal standing position. Primary enclosures should allow animals to see out but should also provide at least some opportunity to avoid visual contact with other animals. Tethering is an unacceptable method of confinement for any animal and has no place in humane sheltering.

Crates should never be the permanent residence for an animal. That being said, whenever an animal is in a crate (whether for transport, an adoption event, crate training or any other reason), it should be large enough for the animal to lie down, sit and stand in a natural position. Animals should not share a crate unless it is a female with offspring or when there is a behavioral benefit. Even then, such confinement is acceptable only if the crate size allows the above criteria to be met without the animals having to lie on top of each other.

Some states may require your organization or the state Department of Agriculture to inspect your foster homes to ensure they meet basic standards of care under state law. Be sure to check your state laws as they pertain to foster homes.

EXCEEDING CAPACITY

While most rescue groups responsibly help animals and only take in the number of animals they can properly care for, there are rescue groups that have had their animals confiscated due to animal cruelty and neglect. Being over capacity is especially heartbreaking because often the people involved started out with the best intentions but

eventually took in more animals than they could humanely care for and became overwhelmed. Until we cure the root problems of animal overpopulation, there will be a never-ending source of animals who need our help. It is so easy to take in more animals than your organization truly has capacity for. The truth is, however, when a rescue group exceeds its capacity for humane care, whether or not it is intentional, it can ruin the lives of both the animals and people involved. Being over capacity is considered a form of animal cruelty because it inflicts widespread suffering over a long duration of time. Learning the signs of exceeding capacity and reporting someone you suspect to the proper authorities will prevent animal abuse and save an organization that is going down the wrong path.

If your organization transfers animals to another rescue group, whether that group is local or many states away, it is important to ask to see the group's policies on animal care, foster home inspections and veterinary care. Consider requesting to see the conditions of the home or facility most often used to house animals.

In extreme cases, animal hoarding is defined as having more pets than one can provide humane care for; failing to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter and veterinary care; denying both the inability to provide basic care and the impact that failure has on the animals and people in the household; and continuing to accumulate more animals. Hoarding is less about the number of animals a person has in her possession and more about the quality of care provided to each one.

Many times, the continued accumulation of animals occurs because the individual wrongly thinks that only she can provide adequate care for them. In many cases, the person really does care about the animals and tries to provide for them. The typical profile of a rescuer who has exceeded capacity is someone who is preoccupied with animals, believes she has special abilities to communicate with them, spends most of her time and funds on the animals and tends to be socially isolated, having little contact with others besides a veterinarian.

Signs that a rescuer may be over capacity include:

- Having many animals with a poor external appearance to people or other animals.
- Keeping many unsocialized or undersocialized animals.
- Maintaining impossible adoption standards because no one else is "good enough" to care for the animals.
- Facing widespread disease that is usually only present in overcrowding situations (e.g., URI, parasites, kennel cough, FeLV).

- Taking animals to the veterinarian only once, even when follow-up care is needed.
- Refusing to euthanize animals whose physical health is compromised to the point that they no longer have a good quality of life.
- Keeping the bodies of animals who have passed away.

If you suspect that someone in your organization or elsewhere is exceeding capacity, what should you do? If it is both possible and safe, you should try to visit the person's home and see whether the animals are in danger. Convey your concerns to the director of the rescue group or members of the board of directors. If that is not possible, you can talk to your local animal control agency or shelter, public health department, mental health department, adult or child protective services or your local district attorney's office. If you suspect animal cruelty, you should call the police department in the town in which the animals are housed. In many cases, you can request a welfare inspection anonymously. You can use these [resources](#) for other suggestions on how to report suspected cruelty.

For more information, check out the HSUS's resources on [cruelty and neglect](#).

ANIMAL INTAKE

Rescue groups often do not feel that they have much choice when it comes to bringing animals into their organization. They tend to bring in the ones in the greatest need—animals from the local shelter when the shelter has reached its capacity, or animals with treatable medical or behavioral challenges that may be better addressed in a foster home. Despite the temptation to always take on the hardest cases, organizations should try to balance the types of animals who come into the rescue.

Once an organization accepts an animal, the rescue may be expected to keep the animal until she has been adopted unless another arrangement is in the best interest of the animal, such as transfer to a well-resourced animal shelter. If a rescue group is regularly transferring animals to other organizations because it does not have the necessary resources, the group needs to immediately reevaluate its policies. Further, the organization should stop accepting additional animals until it has a handle on its current population. This situation is different from when an organization partners with other rescue groups in a different area of the country and responsibly transfers animals to them on a regular basis.



SOURCES OF ANIMALS

Taking in animals from the streets, owner surrenders and local shelters are traditionally acceptable sources of animal intake, based on your organization's mission. If you take in strays, make sure you notify the local animal shelter and other rescue groups so that a unified effort can be made to reunite the pet with his owners. It is important to recognize that not all "stray" cats need to be rescued. Many community cats, whether feral or friendly, are cared for by residents and do not need to be scooped up by your rescue in order to find them homes. But they may need a little help. Community-focused programs like TNR, affordable/accessible spay/neuter for owned cats or services to support community cat caretakers may be what's needed in your area. If a rescue group purchases animals directly from breeders, dealers or auctions, they are inadvertently creating demand for dogs for sale and perpetuating the problem of puppy mills. If your rescue group acquires pets from bulk sources of animals, make sure you consider all of the ramifications and avoid creating a situation where unscrupulous breeders are profiting from your kindness. If you take in a litter, make sure the mother is also safe—whether from a breeder, puppy mill or shelter.

Under no circumstances should a rescue group acquire pets by stealing them from their owners, no matter how poorly the animals are being treated. Instead, if you see an animal being neglected or abused, you should immediately [report this](#) to your local animal control department or the police.

When determining the source of your organization's pets, consider the impact that it will have on your local community. For example, take stock of the shelters in your state and, if they are overcrowded or overwhelmed, think about reaching out locally before spending significant resources importing pets from other areas. Or ask whether there is a particular niche you can fill, such as caring for neonatal kittens.

CREATING A PLAN

It is important to create a plan for every animal that comes through your organization. While most rescue groups have the luxury of time with their charges, it does not mean the animals should languish in foster homes. The faster you can adopt out your organization's animals, the more animals you can save. To create a plan, your rescue group should evaluate, both medically and behaviorally, every animal upon arrival and then keep the animal in a quiet and stress-free environment. You should also create a protocol outlining every step taken for each new animal who enters your rescue, such as creating a new record in your system, scheduling a spay or neuter appointment, implanting a microchip, administering vaccinations and setting reminders for booster shots.

A formal behavior assessment may be helpful to your rescue group. It should be done in conjunction with regular monitoring of behaviors in the foster home, at the veterinary clinic and in public. By creating a holistic picture of the animal's behavior, you can more effectively place the animal into an appropriate home.

Talk to your veterinarian about best practices for bringing a foster into a new home. You will probably want to isolate the foster from all other animals for a certain amount of time after arrival to ensure that there are no disease concerns. During that time, it is also important that the animal is housed in an area that can be properly and easily sanitized. Use the first few days to allow the animal to transition from her previous situation, feel safe, show her true personality and exhibit any health issues. After the animal has adjusted to her new situation, or after a time period of your organization's choosing, you should reevaluate the animal and update your findings and description.

While most rescue groups do not hesitate to take their charges to the veterinarian, it is also a good idea to have a list of trainers and behavior experts that you work with regularly to evaluate and train animals who have potential problems. Nipping treatable behavior issues in the bud as early as possible gives the pet the best chance for a successful adoption.

When creating a plan for the animals who come through your organization, you should consider their age, health needs and psychological needs. A healthy young cat with special markings or a litter of 10-week-old puppies should be fairly easy to adopt, and the organization should try to find those animals a home as quickly as possible. Animals who need more time to heal or become comfortable in their new environment should not be pushed into adoption until they are truly ready. Then again, some people love adopting the hard-luck cases. You do not need to pass up such an adoption as long as you fully disclose any medical or behavioral issues (as with all adoptions). With some coaching, a doting adopter may be able to socialize that shy street kitten just as well as your foster can. Some organizations use a medical waiver to ensure the adopter knows the animal is sick and promises to provide proper treatment. Your state laws may also require you to disclose medical and behavioral histories on the animals you place.

While the [length-of-stay](#) concept was developed for shelters, the same theme applies to rescue groups. Essentially, this entails calculating how long on average animals stay in your organization from in take through adoption or other disposition to help determine your



organization's efficiency. This also means putting more adoptable animals on a fast track to adoption and giving more space and time to pets who need a longer period of adjustment prior to going to a new home. This approach benefits all animals in your organization and allows you to rescue more animals over the course of a year. Check out [these resources](#) on fast-tracking your highly adoptable animals.

Any animal who is in your care for more than six weeks should be regularly assessed to ensure the Five Freedoms are being met. You can find a sample intake plan in Appendix D, available at humanepro.org/rescuebestpractices.

For organizations that use multiple adoption coordinators, each one should be in charge of a set number of animals that includes a range of fast-track and slow-track charges, along with any who are in boarding or have to remain at a veterinarian's office. For example, if each adoption coordinator is in charge of 10 animals at a time, they should ideally have four who will be easy to adopt, four who will be

more difficult to adopt and two who are staying at the veterinarian or boarding facility. This will ensure that someone is keeping tabs on all the animals who come into the rescue group and that no animal is inadvertently left at the veterinarian's office or boarding for months at a time. This system also sets the adoption coordinator up for success and prevents the frustration of having too many difficult charges at once.

PARTNER WITH A LOCAL SHELTER

Partnering with the local shelter is a great way to build relationships and help solve the animal homelessness problem in your community. Building a successful and productive relationship takes a lot of work and trust, and it requires building mutual respect between rescue and the shelter staff. Once you get to know each other as individuals, it will be much easier to work together on difficult issues. A few ways to start building mutually respectful and trusting relationships include:

- Taking the shelter director and/or rescue coordinator out to lunch or holding an informal gathering.
- Holding monthly meetings to discuss animal welfare issues in your community.
- Asking the shelter staff to identify what they see as the major needs in the community and where they need the most help.
- Implementing “no bash, no trash” agreements—if the shelter staff is not worried that anything they discuss with you could be used against them, they will be much more willing to work with you.
- Being accountable for things your volunteers and staff say and do—if they start spreading rumors, it is your reputation that is on the line.
- Asking the shelter staff to identify scenarios that concern them most about a partnership and building solutions to those issues before they even arise.
- Being a role model—if volunteers see the rescue group's staff engaging in respectful behavior, they will follow suit.
- Eliminating the “us vs. them” mentality—the language you use matters.
 - Provide a “lifetime commitment to the animals” or an “adoption guarantee.”
 - Instead of saying that you are “rescuing an animal *from* a shelter,” say you are “rescuing an animal *with* the shelter.”
- Treating the shelter as your partner.
 - Talk to the shelter staff to get the full story about each animal, and include that information in the animal's bio.

- Follow up with the shelter staff to let them know the animal's outcome.
- Sharing successes. Credit each other through social media and other outlets when there are happy stories that took the efforts of multiple animal welfare organizations. This will show that you are a united front and not separate agencies competing for public support.
- Identifying issues and troubleshooting problems through open communication.
- Planning ahead. Map out the year so you can solve problems before they arise. For example, if you know kitten season starts in April, you can launch a joint campaign to adopt out as many cats as possible by March to make room. Or better yet, launch a “beat the heat” spay/neuter event in January so there will be fewer kittens needing rescue in April.

This is not to say that if you see or hear of something happening in your local shelter that sounds questionable, you should not do anything. Instead, go to the shelter with your concerns in a respectful manner, and get to the bottom of the problem. Building strong relationships with shelter staff will make those difficult conversations much easier to have.

When developing new relationships with shelter staff, it may be helpful to put yourself in their shoes. Rescue groups have the luxury of only taking in animals when they choose, but imagine if you could not limit the number of animals who came into your organization on a daily basis, nor know how many would be coming in every day. How would you feel if you found out that one of the rescue groups you transferred animals to was later charged with hoarding or cruelty? When we start to understand other people's viewpoints, it allows us to be more compassionate toward them.

PET RETENTION STRATEGIES

There is tremendous value in realizing that many of the people who contact your organization to surrender their pet, or individuals who return a pet they adopted from you, do not truly want to give up their animals. Thankfully, many reasons for pet relinquishment are solvable problems. While the traditional solution to owner surrender placement requests is to automatically take in the pet for care and adoption, this can lead to an overwhelming number of pets to rehome. Moreover, this approach assumes that the pet's current home is not a good one because the animal is being surrendered, but even the best pet owners sometimes need a little extra support and knowledge. Many people are happy to be presented with a solution that might allow them to keep their pet.

By having either a few retention strategies or a formal program set up to offer guidance, solutions and free or low-cost resources, you can help pets stay in the homes they already have and save time, space and funds for animals who truly have nowhere to go.

For example, since many cat behavior issues are solvable, having a volunteer trained to provide cat behavior counseling over the phone can help many cats and owners stay together. This can prevent your group from being overloaded with cats who already had a good home, but whose owners just needed a bit of guidance. The HSUS's [Guide to Cat Behavior Counseling](#) is a good learning tool for new cat behavior counselors and can also be a helpful resource for cat owners. If feline behavior counseling becomes a big part of your work, consider having volunteers take the self-paced, online companion [Cat Behavior and Retention course](#).

Other pet retention solutions and services you might offer are dog training using partner dog trainers who offer free or low-cost positive reinforcement training, including phone sessions; covering protocols to resolve common behavior issues such as house training, separation anxiety and squabbles among pets; tenant advocacy to help people keep their pets in the face of landlord threats when the law is on their side; low-cost temporary boarding through partner kennels for pets of people in crisis; referrals to free or low-cost spay/neuter and veterinarian care through partner veterinarians; the creation of or referral to a pet food bank for people going through a financial rough spot; and allergy and shedding solutions.

Start small, with one resource—perhaps one that addresses the reason you most frequently encounter for owner surrenders. Then assess how the program is going and add to your list of solutions and resources when possible.

Offering your pet retention strategies to adopters from the beginning goes a long way toward preventing returns and setting your adopters up for success. Build relationships with your adopters so that they feel comfortable coming to you for assistance when issues arise. Some other ways to set your adopters up for success include sending them home with pamphlets on how to handle common behavior and medical issues; letting them know about the pet retention methods you offer; always telling adopters about any existing issues with the pet upfront; and letting them know that you are there for assistance if they need help.

You can start your pet retention efforts by simply putting some supportive text on your website, in an automatic reply email and on your outgoing voicemail message. Look at the following websites to get ideas for wording you can use:

- **Humane Society Silicon Valley**
hssv.org/services/pet-surrender
- **Philly Animal Care and Control Team**
acctphilly.org/resources/
- **Asheville Humane Society's Safety Net Program**
ashevillehumane.org/community-solutions
- **Nevada Humane Society Online Behavior Tips**
nevadahumanesociety.org/?s=behavior+tips
- **Maddie's Fund Pet Retention Resources**
chewonthis.maddiesfund.org/category/pet-retention
- **Keeping Families Together Eviction Response Toolkit**
humananimalsupportservices.org/keeping-families-together

OWNER SURRENDERS

If none of your pet retention strategies work, another option to offer people looking to rehome their pets is a courtesy post with your organization. Under those circumstances, the owner keeps the pet in his home while the rescue group helps find a new home by listing the pet through the usual means or bringing the pet to adoption events. A potential new owner fills out your organization's application, and the old owner typically decides whether or not to approve it.

For those owner-surrender pets you do take in, get as much medical and behavioral information about the pet as possible. You also need to ensure that the person surrendering the pet is indeed the actual owner. Ask for information (e.g., contract from wherever the individual obtained the pet, veterinarian bills, microchip registration, licensing) that suggests that the individual surrendering the pet is the only owner and have him sign a document stating that fact. You do not want to be in a situation where someone surrenders an animal and later the actual owner or co-owner comes to your facility to get the pet back.

When someone returns an animal they adopted from your rescue, make sure you record the reasons for the return. This will provide insight on what types of pet challenges the community can and cannot handle, and it will help you determine which surrender prevention resources you should work on first.

You can find a list of information to consider, including an owner surrender agreement, in Appendix E available at humanepro.org/rescuebestpractices.

STRAYS

If your organization takes in strays, check your local laws regarding

stray hold periods. Many communities have stray hold laws that require an organization to hold animals for a certain period of time to allow owners to find their lost pets. In some communities, only the organization that has the county contract is allowed to take in stray animals, or only certain types of organizations (shelters versus rescue groups) are required to adhere to the stray hold.

If you do decide to take in strays, make sure you also have a program that tries to unite lost pets with their owners. Having a microchip scanner is essential, as is creating some sort of community resource that allows lost pets and their owners to be reunited. Two good resources for developing an effective lost-and-found program are Mission Unite and Missing Animal Response Network. Always notify the local animal control department and other rescue groups when you take in a stray; many owners do not think to contact multiple organizations when searching for their lost pet. This is a great opportunity to coordinate efforts with your local shelter or animal control agency. Having a centralized lost-and-found program for your community will help reunite more lost pets with their families.

As with owner surrenders, you should collect information about the stray from the finder. Include as specific a found location as possible, how long they have seen the animal outside and any observed behavior. This kind of information can help you determine whether a stray cat is really a community cat who can be sterilized, vaccinated and returned home. You can find samples of stray cat intake forms in the [Return-to-Field Handbook](#).

TEMPORARILY HOLDING AN ANIMAL

Some rescue groups may want to offer people a temporary home for their pets to prevent owners from surrendering their animals while they solve a specific issue, such as a hospitalization or recovery from a natural disaster. Before offering this service, however, you should think through all the potential issues and design a contract that addresses them. For example, how long are you willing to hold the animal, and what happens if the owner fails to return? Who makes medical decisions for the animal while the pet is in the rescue's care? Who is responsible for veterinarian bills? What happens if the animal gets lost or escapes and causes damage or an accident? If the animal becomes seriously ill or injured, who makes the decision about euthanasia?

It is helpful to require the owner to have some sort of contact with you about the pet on a regular basis (in the form of in-person visits, emails or phone calls) to help ensure that the human-animal bond remains strong during the absence. Importantly, do not forget to listen carefully when people come to you asking for temporary help. Someone might think she's asking for temporary fostering when perhaps what she really needs is help with transport or keeping allergies



at bay. If you dig a little deeper, you may be able to solve the problem without having to take in the animal at all.

You can find a list of information to consider, including a temporary owner-surrender agreement, in Appendix F, available at humanepro.org/rescuebestpractices.

USE OF BOARDING FACILITIES

Some rescue groups have the luxury of their own holding facility or a relationship with a veterinarian or boarding facility that will provide them with kennel space. Best practices dictate that these types of housing facilities should be used as short-term and/or emergency situations only, and no animal in a rescue group should be boarded indefinitely. For any boarded animals, you need to make a plan (including evaluation, training and marketing) to get them into a foster or permanent home as soon as possible. Moreover, daily enrichment and socialization is a must for any animal in boarding or a cage. Warehousing animals and letting them languish in a cage is unacceptable.

TRANSPORTING PETS

Transporting pets is an important part of the rescue process for many communities. But doing it according to best practices is crucial to ensure the health and safety of all animals involved—the ones you are transporting, as well as any animals they come into contact with before and after transport. At a minimum, you need to comply with all state and federal laws, which in most states require a health

certificate prior to transport. In addition, some states require a license to transport animals from other states for resale or adoption. The United States Department of Agriculture also requires animal transporters to obtain a license, adhere to certain standards for cleanliness and safety, and undergo regular inspections in certain circumstances, and failing to obtain the proper license, especially if the transporter is transferring animals for a fee, could result in a fine or other penalties. Consult ask.usda.gov for details on federal laws that may apply.

The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement created a [list of best practices](#) for transporting animals that every transporting vehicle and organization should follow.

SHELTER-TYPE FACILITIES

For those rescue groups that would like to use a facility to hold some or all of their animals, there are several options. One is to partner with a local pet store for some space. PetSmart Charities and other organizations have programs that include rescue groups as [adoption partners](#), where approved rescue groups can keep animals in their stores. If you do not have any of these stores in your area, talk to a local pet store. It can be a mutually beneficial relationship if done correctly—your animals have a place to stay, and they may draw more customers into the store. Just make sure you have a contract in place that lays out what each party is responsible for (e.g., who cleans and cares for the animals, who provides the food, protocol for an emergency) to ensure a peaceful partnership.

Another option is to open your own adoption center or have office space that provides space for some of your animals. Just remember to comply with local laws, such as department of health requirements for facilities that house animals, zoning laws and any other relevant regulations.

It is also vital to comply with humane standards of care. See Standards for Primary Enclosures (Pages 21-24) for information on what constitutes sufficient space in a primary enclosure. For cats, it is important that they have at minimum 2 feet triangulated between their food, resting place and litter. For vertical enclosures or group housing situations, it is important that each cat have at least 18 square feet of space.[†]

Keep in mind that it is essential to have a plan in place to get any animal whose primary enclosure is a cage into a foster or permanent home as quickly and as appropriately as possible. It is not fair to the animals to leave them in cages for an unlimited period of time. Animals who live in a cage must also receive daily enrichment and socialization.

PROGRESSIVE ADOPTIONS

Having an innovative, progressive adoption program is essential to getting your animals into new homes and expanding your organization's ability to save more lives.

PROCESS

It is unfortunate, but the public's perception* is that many rescue groups have standards so strict that it is almost impossible to adopt from them. This only discourages people from adopting a pet and instead drives them to purchase an animal from a breeder or pet store. Keep in mind that if someone comes to your organization wanting to adopt, they are already trying to do the right thing. You want to make potential adopters feel welcome and make dealing with your organization a positive experience to increase the chance that they will adopt a pet.

Building a barrier-free adoption program starts with a philosophical commitment to celebrating people's willingness to adopt, meeting them where they are in terms of their attitudes toward and their understanding of pet care, and investing in their success with guidance

[†] [Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters](#), The Association of Shelter Veterinarians, 2010, Pages 8 and 31.

* PetSmart Charities, *Pet Adoption & Spay/Neuter: Understanding Public Perceptions by the Numbers* [webinar] (November 27, 2012).

and practical support. Putting this philosophy into practice requires several steps:

- Implementing progressive policies that remove barriers and increase options for homeless pets in your community
- Offering adoption counseling that relies on open and easy conversations to set pets and their owners up for success
- Developing marketing strategies that overcome barriers
- Training team members to deliver the program appropriately

The animal welfare field is moving toward greater adoption success by building adoption programs that are based on research and data. A progressive, barrier-free adoptions policy means that rescue groups approach potential adopters in a nonjudgmental manner that allows adoption counselors to get to know the potential adopter, reveal what issues concern the person and determine how to create a successful adoption. Through these conversation-based adoptions, you can build relationships with adopters so that they view rescue groups as a lifelong resource for their pets and return for advice and support when concerns crop up.

Progressive adoption programs put less emphasis on written applications and instead use open conversations to better understand and communicate with adopters. While rescue groups should collect basic contact information and a list of topics that the potential adopter wants to discuss, the application should forgo any lengthy inquisition. When organizations throw up barriers to adoptions—such as landlord checks, home visits, veterinarian checks, fence requirements and verification of current pets' vaccinations—it can prevent one of your animals from going to a loving home. But it will not stop a potential adopter from getting a pet from another source. Barriers merely provide a false sense of security. As unsettling as it may be, in reality, you have no control over what happens to a pet from the moment she and her new owner walk out your door and head for home. And despite commonly held fears, agencies that aim for barrier-free adoption policies are not placing animals carelessly; they just take care not to miss out on opportunities to place their animals into good homes.

While there are millions of pet dogs and cats living in U.S. homes, according to the American Pet Products Association's 2019-2020 [National Pet Owners Survey](#), only 43-44% of these pets come from shelters or rescue groups. This statistic suggests that the majority of pet owners are able to successfully care for their pets without the need for approval or assistance from animal welfare organizations. By trusting adopters and providing them with the support and information they need without judgment, you can place more animals in loving homes and save more lives.



Ensuring that your policies are current with the latest research will help you reach more adopters and increase your lifesaving capacity. For example, [studies](#) show that, despite fears in the animal welfare community, adopting out animals for a reduced fee, or even no fee, does not increase the likelihood that pets will end up in the “wrong” hands. The bond created between people and their pets means more than any amount paid. Research also indicates that [pets given as gifts](#) are not more likely to be relinquished. Thus, rescues should reconsider blanket policies that ban adopting out pets to be given as gifts. Of course, in such cases, organizations should work closely with adopters to learn about the gift recipient and ensure a good match.

Another way to gain the trust of potential adopters is to implement a “satisfaction guaranteed” adoption policy. This entails judgment-free adoptions as well as judgment-free, no-fault returns. In addition to always taking back an animal the organization has adopted out, it means allowing the individual to adopt another animal without judgment. Keep a positive spin on returns. Realize that they can provide your organization with crucial information about a pet so that a better match can be made in the future. Staying positive also increases the chance that your group will retain the former adopter as a supporter and a potential home for another animal. And while it is a good idea to keep a few spots open for inevitable returns, rescue groups should also allow adopters to rehome an animal themselves.

Because returns can be unpredictable, allowing adopters to rehome

an animal can save rescue groups time and resources. Adopters should provide rescue groups with the new owner’s contact information so that the organization can continue to offer support to that pet.

It is important to make adopters feel welcome at every stage, including returns, without fear that they may be ridiculed. Above all, it is crucial not to vent about your customers or potential customers through social media or any other means of communication, as no one wants to adopt from a group that might criticize them. Avoid creating a culture in your organization where people are labeled bad, wrong or stupid—they are who rescue groups rely on to find homes for the animals, and organizations should embrace the opportunity to share helpful information.

At the end of the adoption process, many rescue groups use an adoption contract to formalize the agreement between the adopting organization and the adopter. In addition to demonstrating transfer of ownership from the adopting agency to the adopter, adoption contracts also serve to protect adoption agencies from future liability.

Consult with an attorney who is licensed in your state and familiar with issues pertaining to animal law when drafting or implementing legal documents such as contracts. Not only do you want to ensure that such documents are tailored to meet the requirements of all

federal, state and local laws, you also want to ensure that your organization is protected in the event that there are future issues with the pet.

Examine your contract to make sure you are not undermining your adopter-friendly approach. For example, replace “no refunds” language and demands to return animals to your agency if adopters cannot keep them. Instead, focus on influencing pet care through engaging adoption conversations and follow-up support.

As far as deciding what fee to charge, conduct market research in your area and find out what other shelters and local rescue groups charge, as many adopters check prices at various organizations in a community before deciding which one to adopt from. It is important to set the fee at an amount that is not so high that it constitutes a barrier to adoption; charging a reasonable and competitive fee offers adopters an additional incentive to choose your organization.

SETTING YOUR ADOPTERS UP FOR SUCCESS

A crucial part of adoptions is setting your adopters up for success. Remember that it should be up to the potential adopter to determine what makes a good match. Adopters have a sense not only of what kind of pet they are looking for, but more importantly, what their concerns are. Many people looking to bring a new pet into their lives admit to worrying that a rescued pet will be unhealthy or that not enough is known about the animal’s background. Find out what issues concern a potential adopter about adopting a pet, and have a direct conversation addressing those issues.

While there are several programs that help adopters make a match based on personalities and lifestyle, no matching system is perfect, and many potential adopters choose with their heart. The avid runner may want a lazy pet around the house. The couch potato may want a more active dog to motivate him to exercise. The adults in a family with young children could be seasoned dog trainers. If a potential adopter wants a specific pet, there is no reason an organization should not let the individual try out the adoption. Call the arrangement a trial period, a foster-to-adopt or something similar. What is the worst that could happen? The pet is returned after a couple of weeks, and you and the pet are no worse off than before the trial. Remember not to judge the adopter for a return. Allow the person to adopt another pet from your organization, and view the experience as an opportunity to gather more information about the animal. The best outcome? The adoption works out, and you have a happy adopter and a happy pet.

In addition to copies of all medical and behavioral information on the specific animal, send adopters home with information that lets them know what to expect with a new pet. For example, how can they

expect the pet to behave on the first day in a new home? What kind of food should the pet eat, and how much per day? What are some common medical and behavioral issues and ways to resolve them? When it is time to take a pet to the veterinarian? Addressing common pet issues, as well as specific concerns identified by the adopter, and explaining the “satisfaction guaranteed” policy will put adopters on the path to success.

When resources allow, it is a good idea to follow up after an adoption to build your personal relationship with the pet owner, provide support to the adopter and her pet and possibly enhance your visibility and reputation within the larger community. A happy adopter can become a repeat adopter, recommend the organization to a friend or become a volunteer, donor or foster provider for your rescue group. So, if possible, have someone contact adopters after they take their new pet home to check in and offer support if needed. Ask the adopter when and how he prefers to be contacted (usually phone or email), and let him know that your organization is available for assistance and advice. If it is not possible for your rescue to proactively follow up with adopters, be sure to let them know that the organization is always available to assist with questions or concerns. Provide adopters with a phone number or email address that gives them direct access to someone at your organization. Setting your adopters up for success from the beginning will make it much more likely that you will end up with satisfied adopters in the long run.

EVENTS AND OTHER ADVERTISING

A large part of adoption success also depends on where you hold adoption events and how you market the animals, especially ones who may be more difficult to place. Partnering with PetSmart Charities or a [puppy-friendly pet store](#) are good options, but don’t forget to think outside the box. Holding adoption events in areas that get a lot of foot traffic, such as grocery stores, big-box stores, farm supply and garden centers and even car dealerships allows you to reach potential adopters who might not stop at a pet store.

The UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program recommends having different types of animals at an adoption event, while keeping in mind that too many animals at one time can be overwhelming. “Consider species, age, breed, color, behavior, and special characteristics when evaluating the need for variety. While many adopters are seeking friendly, healthy, young animals, some will seek out hard luck cases, older animals and those with special challenges.”[†]

As far as advertising the animals in your organization, always be truthful about any medical or behavioral issues. You can put a positive spin on them (“Fluffy prefers to have you all to herself” as opposed to “Fluffy hates other cats”), but never lie—it will ruin your organization’s credibility. Do not forget to promote your harder-to-

adopt pets (e.g., special needs, geriatric), too. Using special promotions or cute marketing gimmicks will help move those difficult cases into homes in no time.

For more information, including a complete guide on how to create a progressive adoption program, check out the HSUS's [resources on adoptions](#) and the [Adopters Welcome](#) manual.

FOSTER HOMES

Foster homes are the backbone of many rescue groups—without a strong network of foster providers, rescue groups simply could not take in as many animals. Having a structured fostering program is essential to the organization's ability to care for animals.

Once you decide how to structure your fostering operations, develop a manual explaining your standard operating procedures. A foster manual for staff, volunteers and foster families to reference is critical; it should make clear how your program is structured, what the expectations are, who the primary contacts will be, how certain common situations will be handled and who to contact in case of a veterinary emergency. The foster manual must be easily accessible to foster providers at all times.

Make sure you are clear upfront about what expenses the rescue group will handle and which will be the responsibility of the foster provider. Be honest with foster providers about what they are getting themselves into, and try to ease them in. Give new foster providers the easy charges until you have seen their dedication and pet care abilities. It is of course important that foster providers' own pets are all healthy and generally well cared for. Provide plenty of opportunities that help the foster providers get their animals adopted. Morale and motivation are higher when foster providers have frequent success and do not have animals staying in their homes for years on end. Remember that your foster providers may need an occasional break, especially the ones who take in hard cases.

Keep track of how many pets (owned and foster) each foster provider has at any given time and do not let well-intentioned people take on too many animals. Keep in mind that some states—Kansas, for example—require animal foster homes to be licensed or inspected.

For more information, check out the HSUS's resources on [foster programs](#).

† sheltermedicine.com/library/resources/?r=adoption-driven-capacity

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Regardless of the type of organization you run, it is important to have a disaster preparation plan in place so your group is prepared for the unexpected. If you have a facility, make sure you have overhead sprinklers in case of a fire and conduct a walk-through with a member of your local fire department. Foster-based organizations should provide foster homes with clear instructions about what to do in an emergency situation and also determine how they are going to communicate with foster providers if a disaster occurs. Every organization should have emergency contacts and know where boarding facilities and pet-friendly hotels are located in case of an evacuation. Foster providers should have an emergency kit for their charges containing food and supplies for at least three days.

All organizations should ensure that their files are backed up on a regular basis and are available from anywhere. You do not want to be in a position where, for example, you cannot board a pet because your vaccination records are inaccessible.

For more information, check out the HSUS's disaster preparedness [toolkit](#).



Community building

Your rescue will not be able on its own to find a home for every homeless animal in your community. To solve the problem of pet homelessness, it will take a concerted effort from many members of the community. Building strong relationships with others will help keep the focus on the animals.

WITH OTHER ANIMAL WELFARE ADVOCATES

A significant reduction of the euthanasia rate in a community is not possible without strong collaboration among many community actors.

POTENTIAL PARTNERS TO INCREASE LIFESAVING EFFORTS

Joining forces with other animal welfare advocates will greatly enhance your ability to save lives and find more homes for animals. A collaborative effort between your organization and the following programs and partners is required to create a safe community for pets. Many of these programs and partners likely already exist in your community; determine which organizations are advocating for animals, and reach out to them to figure out a way to work together. And if any of these programs are missing, it may be the perfect time to start one.

- **SHELTERS** Most communities have several different types of shelters that take in animals. An open-admission shelter takes in every animal that comes through its doors, as well as strays and other animals in need. Limited-admission shelters have more input as to which and how many animals they take in. As a community, we need to try to keep animals out of the shelter, but once they arrive at the door, shelters can provide them with the safe and enriching environment they need until they can be adopted.
- **RESCUE GROUPS** These organizations often act as transfer partners to help keep shelter populations at a manageable level, allowing all animals to receive humane care and more pets to find loving homes. In addition to foster-based groups, this category also includes prevention-based organizations and trap-neuter-return groups that manage community colonies and keep those cats out of the shelter.

- **HIGH-VOLUME, LOW-COST SPAY/NEUTER AND VACCINATION CLINICS** These organizations make sterilization and vaccination accessible to everyone in the community. This, in turn, helps to reduce the number of homeless animals.
- **VETERINARIANS AND COST ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS** It is crucial to have a partner within the veterinary community that provides services to shelters and rescues at a reduced cost. Veterinarians can also potentially provide cost assistance programs that cover sterilization, medical care, vaccinations, pet food and other pet-related products for low-income households, enabling families in need to give their pets the best care.
- **EDUCATION** Rescue groups and shelters need to be a resource to the public for informed pet ownership. Offer a bevy of free information sessions to encourage people to use certain programs, such as vaccinations, licenses, spay and neuter opportunities, training and so on. It is also essential to implement a surrender prevention program to help keep pets in their homes and out of the shelter. Developing a lost pet program will help reunite pets with their families.
- **BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS** Develop relationships with local vendors to get them involved. Pet stores can donate products or space for events, while other local businesses can help raise funds or donate supplies. This also provides additional channels to spread the word about adoptions or other services that your organization may offer. Get local trainers and behaviorists involved with your organization. Ask the media to cover a special event or donate remainder advertising space.

BUILDING A TRANSFER PROGRAM WITH LOCAL SHELTERS

Part of having a good relationship with your local open-admission shelter or animal control agency involves becoming eligible to accept animals from them. This helps the shelter keep its population at a manageable level and allows you the chance to provide assistance to animals in need of specialized care that the shelter does not have the resources to cover. Many shelters already have a process in place through which they approve new partners, but do not be afraid to have an honest conversation with them if there is something in the

application or overall program that concerns you. Offer to send the shelter data that will give them the information they want, such as the number of animals you took in during the prior year, number of animals you adopted out, number of foster homes, average number of animals per foster home and average length of time an animal stays in your foster program. If necessary, you can agree to permit an inspection at a mutually agreeable time if a problem should arise. You should also offer to send the shelter monthly statistics on the animals (e.g., whether they have been adopted, any health issues) as transparency helps build trust.

Make sure that any agreement has clear policies on who is eligible to pull animals, how the shelter determines which animals are available for transfer to rescues, how it notifies rescue groups of the available animals, how much time you have to accept an animal and pick her up from the shelter, how the animal is transferred from the shelter to the rescue, what is included in the transfer (e.g., sterilization, vaccines, microchip, medication, FIV/FelV testing) and what fees the shelter will charge.

Also, do not be afraid to negotiate. If a shelter typically insists that rescues accept whatever animals it selects, but your organization specializes in Pomeranians or senior cats, let them know. (By the same token, do not insist on taking every Pomeranian, for example, who comes into the shelter, as the shelter may want to adopt out certain animals itself.) While you cannot take all the highly adoptable animals, try to take easy cases from time to time to give your organization a break. Let the shelter know what medical and behavioral cases your organization can and cannot handle. If the shelter charges fees for pulling animals or medical treatment it has provided, talk to the staff if those fees are prohibitively high for your organization, and work on a compromise. If you approach the staff in a respectful manner, talk about your concerns, listen to theirs and can think a little creatively, you should be able to reach a mutually acceptable agreement that will allow you to save more lives together.

BUILDING A TRANSFER PROGRAM WITH OUT-OF-STATE RESCUES

Many organizations transfer animals to rescue groups in different parts of the country where the supply of animals is low. Always adhere to state, [federal](#) and local laws when transferring animals across state lines. At minimum you will need to get a health certificate from your veterinarian. If your organization does transfer animals to other rescue groups or sanctuaries, ensure that the receiving organization provides the same level of care that you would provide. Find your “rescue soul mate”—a partner organization that shares your group’s philosophies on core issues such as adoption policies, temperament testing, fostering, training, medical protocols and when it is appropriate to euthanize.

Visiting a facility, or meeting with people from the receiving rescue in person, is a crucial step in confirming that the animal is being transferred to an organization that follows best practices.

Some transfer programs take animals from the shelter and transport them directly to adopters. But fostering makes a huge difference, not only helping to ensure that the animals are physically healthy when they are sent on their way, but providing the animals with some time in a home to grow more emotionally and behaviorally healthy. Allowing animals to settle down and relax in a home environment can be an important step in preparing them for a long trip and the new environment that awaits.

Placing animals in foster care before their trip also gives the organizations insight into the animals’ true personalities, allowing your partner to advertise the animals with accurate descriptions before they even arrive at their destination. It is also important to provide the destination partner with all medical records and behavioral notes.

BUILDING COALITIONS

Building a coalition of many animal welfare and protection organizations in your area is another method of getting the message out concerning homeless animals on a community level. It is also a great way to keep tabs on the progress your community is making and to identify and troubleshoot any problems as a team. While coalitions are not always easy to build, the payoff can be well worth your efforts.

Reach out to other shelters and rescue groups, and insist on humane discourse among all parties. You want to create a safe space to work together. Early meetings should focus on establishing a culture of respect, trust and accountability. Start small, with a limited and specific focus; determine why you are meeting and what you hope to accomplish; and identify your short-term and long-term goals and projects. Early projects could be as basic as having joint events to establish a culture of respect and trust.

It is vital to always keep your common goals in mind and remember that this is about the animals, not individual egos. Some common goals could be:

Do keep in mind that if the shelter is able to adopt out an animal, it is a win-win situation for everyone as the shelter gets an adoption while your organization has one fewer animal to care for.



- Keep animals from entering the shelter.
- Create a safe environment for those who do end up in the shelter.
- Improve rates for adoptions, returns to owners and transfers to rescue groups.
- Eliminate euthanasia of adoptable animals.

It is important to acknowledge that there will be differences in opinions among the players; know that it is perfectly acceptable to disagree!

Choose someone to lead the group who has a calm demeanor and strong interpersonal skills. The person should be neutral, fair, patient, a good listener, open-minded, determined and experienced with conflict resolution. Instead of someone who may criticize the participants' current efforts, choose someone who will focus on everyone's strengths to determine how to solve areas of weakness. It may even be preferable to get an outside facilitator to lead the early meetings.

Remember to identify other benefits of working in a coalition and resources you can share, such as trainings, adoption space and workshops.

When set up carefully, a coalition can be a great resource to all animal advocates in a community and help organizations save more lives.

For more information, check out the HSUS's resources on coalition building.

WITH YOUR SUPPORTERS

While having solid operations is crucial, it will not mean as much if you do not have a way to get your message out. A communications plan should include ways to engage supporters in both one-way conversations (such as a website and newsletters) and two-way conversations (such as social media sites) to make the biggest impact.

WEBSITE

Building a good website is essential to your operations. Your website is often the first place people come to get to know your organization, so make sure it tells a story. There are many programs out there that make it easy to build a website, even if you do not have any computer programming experience. Having a clear and professional website will allow you to make the best possible impression on potential supporters.

Some items you should post on your website are: your organization's

contact information, including email, phone number, city and state; your mission statement; a list of staff and board members; a current list of adoptable animals; information on how to adopt, foster and volunteer; and a very easy way for people to donate.

Many of the universal pet adoption sites (e.g., Petfinder, Petango) make it easy to link your list of adoptable pets to your organization's website. Many [software programs](#) will update the list on the pet adoption site and your webpage simultaneously.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Using social media is one of the best ways to build a community for your organization. It is great for marketing your rescue, showcasing adoptable animals, engaging new and existing supporters, recruiting additional foster providers and volunteers, and fundraising. The list of social media applications is growing by the day. Think about which sites will work most effectively for your organization, as well as how many you will have time to keep current. Remember, if you open up a dialogue with supporters, responding to their comments and questions in a timely manner is an essential part of maintaining good customer service.

Think of your website as a one-way conversation that allows you to disseminate information about your organization, and view social media as a tool that allows you to have a two-way conversation with your supporters. It is important to create a social media policy so that your organization is strategic in terms of the content and timing of any posts. This is especially important when more than one person has access to the organization's social media account. You want to ensure that your messaging is consistent across every medium you use. Thus, it is a good idea to have at least one person in charge of monitoring your group's postings and ensuring that inquiries are answered in a timely manner. Social media is also a great way to show you are part of a team by giving praise or "shout-outs" to partner organizations.

Keep the posts interesting and diversify the content to hold the attention of your supporters. For example, showcase an animal ready for adoption one day, then make a fundraising appeal for an animal in need of extensive medical attention, and then follow up with an announcement about your upcoming adoption events. Use stories that pull on the heartstrings sparingly, and be sure to show the end result—"before and after" photos make it easier for your viewers to handle the difficult parts of the story. Consider highlighting, with the owner's permission, situations where your pet retention program successfully kept a pet in their home.

It is important to keep your followers updated on all action requests, whether you are asking them to donate for medical costs or meet

a special need to foster or adopt an animal, so that your supporters remain engaged and ready to help again.

Above all, remember to always be professional in your postings and comments—your online presence is the face of your organization, and you want it to be a positive one.

Our Promise

We fight the big fights to end suffering for all animals.

Together with millions of supporters, we take on puppy mills, factory farms, trophy hunts, animal testing and other cruel industries. With our affiliates, we rescue and care for thousands of animals every year through our Animal Rescue and Response team's work and other hands-on animal care services.

We fight all forms of animal cruelty to achieve the vision behind our name: a humane society.
And we can't do it without you.



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
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