

# The Association for **Animal Welfare** Advancement



## Adoption Model Practices

### ABOUT MODEL PRACTICES

Model practices are a set of guidelines which lay out efficient and effective methods to achieve optimal results. The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement (The Association, formerly known as SAWA) establishes model practices in a variety of areas that will lead to superior care of animals and help our members have more impact on their communities. The methods in this document are generally accepted as those that will produce the best results for animals cared for by animal welfare organizations.

We acknowledge that some of the activities described here may be beyond the current operational capabilities of many animal welfare organizations. As model practices these protocols and techniques are not necessarily the most accessible, but rather are the most effective. If an organization is not currently capable of implementing all of the recommendations in this document, services must still be provided to animals in their care, while endeavoring to constantly enhance care given to the animals entrusted to them.

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### INTRODUCTION

#### **General Introduction to the Adoption Model Practices**

Adoption is the best outcome for animals in animal welfare organizations who cannot be returned to their original owners because a home environment is most conducive to accommodating the five freedoms which guide our creation of model practices:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst
2. Freedom from discomfort
3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease
4. Freedom to express normal behavior
5. Freedom from fear and distress

The adoption process creates a relationship between pets and people as well as the community and the animal welfare organization. Much of the organizations' work is centered on preparing and supporting animals for adoption into a new loving home. This document outlines the specific best practices for the adoption process and post-adoption support for animals and families who adopt. At the core of adoption is the promotion and protection of the human-animal bond. The adoption process must

support that goal. The adoption process is based on creating trust and respect between adopters and the organization with a focus on creating the best outcomes for the people and animals involved.

This document is primarily intended to guide the placement of socialized animals into homes and generally refers to those placements. We will provide some guidance for the placement of non-socialized or 'community cats.' The standards for those placements are not the same and we recommend a process and adoption agreement that is specific to non-socialized cat placement.

Healthy relationships can be defined as mentally and physically positive and rewarding for the animal and the person, taking into account the sustainability of that relationship throughout the animal's life. Understanding what the animal and family both need and expect is paramount to creating a successful outcome. To this end, best practices create a framework for discussions and will support healthy relationships at the time of adoption and beyond. Our definition of a successful adoption is aligned with the 5 essentials of an adoption identified during Adoption Forum 2:

1. The match is suited to the individual animal and family
2. The pet would be afforded appropriate veterinary care
3. The pet's social, behavioral, and companionship needs would be met
4. The pet would have a livable environment
5. The pet would be respected and valued

This model practice document does not address the process of selecting and assessing animals for adoption. It is important to have an agreed upon selection process and criteria that is based on the organization's resources and philosophies and the community's needs. Because of the complexity and variability of assessment and selection, this document addresses the process after an animal is deemed appropriate for an adoption program.

## **Staff and Volunteer Training**

In all circumstances both volunteer and staff counselors must have access to a supervisor who can answer questions or make decisions with which they are uncomfortable with (in person or by phone) and the counselor must be trained appropriately and empowered to make decisions regarding placement.

Training must go further into how to facilitate a good adoption match, customer service, and the basics of how to handle conflict and challenging conversations. Ongoing training should occur, including shadowing. Additionally, policies and practices must be documented to ensure adoption staff and volunteers are up-to-date on any organizational changes to policy or procedures and ensure consistency.

Adoption staff and volunteers are the organization's primary point of contact with the public. Therefore, it is of vital importance that these individuals are well trained and well suited for the position. Basic training must include documented and easily-referenced adoption policies and information about your organization. Adoption staff and volunteers must be able to understand and explain the organization's policies and procedures. It is important to clearly define the level of authority that adoption staff and volunteers have to make decisions around the adoption process.

On a day-to-day basis, adoption staff and volunteers should be up-to-date on the animals available for adoption. They must be able to relay basic information about animal behavior, medical issues, and

other needs specific to the animals that are available. Counselors must provide behavior and health information based on organizational philosophy, not their personal experience.

Proper training of adoption personnel, be they staff or volunteers, is necessary to ensure adoption meetings are safe for both people and animals.

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## ADOPTION

### ***Adoption Marketing***

Organizations must actively market their animals available for adoption in a manner that provides the best opportunities for placement. The objective of an adoption marketing program should be to maximize both the exposure of pets to potential adopters and their opportunities for adoption. Organizations and animals available for adoption greatly benefit from comprehensive marketing of pets available in their programs.

Technology, to include social media and third-party adoption sites in addition to the organization's own website, must be used to increase the ease of access to information about the adoption process and animals available for adoption. Information maintained on-line must be up to date and accurate. Postings should include high-quality images of the animal that would draw a potential adopter.

Special events, off-site adoptions, and unique adoption opportunities should be considered as a part of an organization's marketing program if standards of care can be met and the adoption process remain consistent.

### **Request Lists**

Organizations may keep lists of people seeking specific animals. These lists allow potential adopters to be informed and in some cases have the first option for an animal with specific attributes. A procedure must be written to implement the list that balances the needs of animals with a desire to provide excellent service to the community. A list must only be created if the organization has the resources to identify animals that have been requested and follow up on requests in accordance with the method they have promised.

If such lists are created, the procedures around their implementation must minimize impact to animals' length of stay. The process for being placed on the request list, how contact will be made and whether individuals on the list have preference for adoption over those not on the list must be clearly and concisely communicated to the potential adopter (e.g., are people on the list only being informed that an animal they are interested in is available or is that animal being held for people on the list to the exclusion of others). When adding clients to the list they must be asked if it is acceptable to share their information with other placement organizations that may specialize in the animal they are looking for if sharing of information is intended.

Typical types of lists organizations may want to keep are:

- Breed specific
- Age specific

- Training potential (potential service or working animals)

### **Animals Not Yet Available**

Organizations should make animals that are likely to be adoptable viewable by the public as soon after their intake as possible. Animals that have legally mandated or other holds can still be seen by the public (either in person or virtually) with the result of shortening length of stay by having potential adopters prior to animals becoming available.

If animals that are not yet available are viewable by the public the organization must have a process for providing a reasonable expectation of what the process for adoption will be and the likelihood that they will be able to adopt the animal.

The process must include any special considerations that will be made for (or denied to) staff, volunteers, board members, donors or other stakeholders. Once an individual has been promised the first choice of an animal, they must not have the first option removed because of a stakeholder's interest. The decision to give a stakeholder priority (if such decision is made), should be done prior to the animal being made available to the general public. In the case of a stray, the animal's owner will always have the priority over other interested persons unless there is a validated suspicion of cruelty or neglect in the home, in which case a referral must be made to the relevant authorities.

Not all animals should be available for viewing including, but not limited to:

- Animals who are ill with an undiagnosed disease
- Animals that have bitten and are being held for a mandatory quarantine period
- Animals involved in a cruelty case when displaying them may put the case or animals at risk
- Animals who are unlikely to be made available for adoption
- Animals that present a danger to the public or other animals

### **Adopter Experience**

The effect of a positive or negative experience to a potential adopter can have an exponential impact on an organization in either direction based on that experience. The objective of an experience with an organization should be to have that potential adopter be educated about applicable principles and leave with a positive experience of the adoption process, the organization, and animal welfare organizations in general whether they adopt or not.

Each organization's physical design has an impact on the adoption experience and can be dependent on the size, budget and mission of the organization. Regardless, organizations must use the existing physical design of the facility to create a positive experience. Adopters must be given the opportunity to interact with pets outside of the kennel environment prior to adoption. This is uniquely beneficial for dog adoptions. Cats may be interacted with in open enclosures if a separate area for interaction is not available.

Kennel cards are primarily generated from the organization's animal management software. Many systems allow the organization to custom design kennel cards, which allows agencies to utilize their own design and logo which can help connect the unique organization to a potential adopter. Kennel cards, or any information used to identify animals available for adoption, should be brief and contain the necessary information for a potential adopter to make an informed decision about the animal. It

must include basic animal information such as a photo, age, sex, source, any applicable medical or behavior notes, and anything extraordinary or unique about the animals or its adoption.

## Physical Space and Environmental Considerations for Adoption Sites

The physical environment in which adoptions are conducted impacts agency credibility, safety for animals and people, and the likelihood of a successful adoption meeting. Recognizing that efforts to make pet adoptions as accessible as possible requires both agency and adopter flexibility. Adoptions can be facilitated in a variety of locations including, but not limited to, in a shelter, at an adoption event, retail store, mobile events, and in private homes provided the following criteria are met:

1. If adoptions are not pre-arranged, but rather depend on the display of available animals to visitors or passersby, animals must be safely contained and/or under the control of an attentive, trained volunteer or staff person at all times.
  - a. Both on-site and off-site, if the area of containment is also intended to be the animal's primary housing unit, then the space available to each animal must, at a minimum, meet the requirements outlined for animal housing in the *Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters*, published by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians and be in compliance with any applicable municipal, state, and federal regulations.
  - b. Offsite, if the area of containment is intended to be temporary, meaning less than a full day, then containment may include hard-sided or wire travel kennels, portable pens, travelling adoption units or specially outfitted trailers, or other cage units sufficient to allow an animal a reasonable degree of comfort for the transient period. Cage units must accommodate an individual animal's tolerance for noise or visual stimulation, as well as comfort around other animals, and most importantly, ensure safety for animals and people. Organizations must have the ability to remove animals from the adoption site if circumstances such as safety or animal stress require.
  - c. When animals are not confined to a room, fenced yard, cage, or kennel unit, tethering is an unacceptable means of containment. A leashed animal under the control of a vigilant and attentive, trained volunteer or staff member is allowed. No one person may be handling more than one leashed animal at a time, and retractable style leashes are not acceptable. Securely fitted collars, head-collars, and harnesses, are permitted. Special consideration to feline temperament and environmental stress must be considered and secure, quiet cage units with hiding places should always be available for cats. At no time may any animal outside a designated, enclosed area be off-leash. Handlers must be trained to spot signs of stress, aggression, discomfort or illness and to remove animals from public areas when necessary.

Efforts to reduce behavioral or physical stress must be considered even during special, remote events or private, in home adoptions. Enrichment activities referenced in The Association Animal Enrichment Best Practices Guide can be adapted for nearly any setting and may help to reduce stress and help an animal display more normal behavior during these experiences.

2. It is essential to successful adoptions and adopter education that adoptions be conducted in places where it is possible for potential adopters to engage in a private or semi-private conversation with adoption staff or volunteers prior to taking their new pet home.

- a. In most cases, a private room is ideal. The room will eliminate other distractions, allow for a confidential discussion, and permit the potential adopter to interact more freely with the pet they have chosen. These rooms should be minimally equipped with a place for both the potential adopter and any family members to sit comfortably, as well as a place for the adoption counselor. Access to animal records, either through hard copy documents or via a computer must be available. Rooms must be free of clutter, debris, or chemicals.
- b. In the absence of a designated room, a separate allocated space for adoption counseling will suffice. This area should be far enough removed from other animals and people so as to reduce interruption or distraction. Ready access to animal records is essential, so paperwork must accompany pets to offsite locations or electronic documents must be easily accessed. This area should be comfortable and away from high traffic areas, other animals, and other members of the public. Consideration to weather conditions, physical comfort, and the ability to conduct a conversation should be made.
- c. In the event an adoption takes place inside a private home, arrangements to ensure trained volunteers or staff are in attendance must be made. Every effort to engage potential adopters in a conversation about the specific needs and requirements of the pet in question must be made. Relevant documentation must be accessible from the home and consideration for the safety of both the animal to be adopted as well as any animals or children in the home must be considered. Adoption personnel must be trained to manage animals, people, and the environment in these variable circumstances. Above all, safety for people and pets is of the utmost concern.

It is not enough to merely make animals available for adoption or to deliver them to a pre-arranged adoption location for a hand-off. The conversation and discussion which take place during the adoption process are as essential as any pre-evaluation of animals or people done prior to the adoption meeting.

### **Adoption Counseling**

The objective of the adoption counseling process is to look for matches between an adopter and a prospective pet. We must be looking for reasons that we can place an animal into a home rather than why a home is not a good fit. The goal is to match the right animal with the right family and lifestyle as soon as possible. The decision for the adoption should be made same day and every effort should be made to send the animal home as soon as possible.

Organizations should consider the adoption process as an open dialogue and interaction rather than an application and interview. The conversations should be thorough and educational while gathering as much practical information as possible to match the potential adopter with the appropriate pet.

Animals currently living in the adopter's home do not have to be spayed or neutered and confirming that they are up to date on vaccinations is not required.

Specific physical characteristics of a home must not be a requirement for all animals of a specific type. For example, all dogs do not have to be adopted to a home with a fenced yard.

Adopting a pet is a family decision but all members of the family should not be required to be present prior to adoption.

Requiring confirmation from a landlord or checking leases to confirm pets are allowed must not be a required step in the adoption process.

Requiring home visits must not be a mandated requirement.

### **Behavior and Medical Disclosures**

Behavior and medical disclosure and waivers (see examples in exhibits) must be offered for pets with special needs. If possible, in instances where animals with extreme or extraordinary behavioral or medical issues are being adopted, the potential adopter should have the opportunity to consult with a veterinarian or behavioral professional from within the adopting agency with firsthand information on that animal in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the issues.

The end result of an adoption must be a home where in principle the *five freedoms of animal welfare* are met.

### **Adoption Holds**

Animals available for adoption must be provided the first best opportunity at a home.

If you do have a hold policy for adoptions, it must be a written policy that is communicated and applied consistently.

### **Fee Structure**

Each organization should make an individual determination of its adoption fees. The fee structure utilized must be consistent with any mandated ordinances for government entities or non-profit organizations with government contracts and consider the community demand, size, age, temperament, and costs incurred by the adopting in preparing the animal for adoption. The fee should not be a prohibiting factor to placement.

Reduced, variable, or waived-fee adoptions are tools utilized by organizations at various times throughout the year or on an ongoing basis. These initiatives are acceptable and viable ways to adopt animals. There is no proven correlation between the fee paid for an animal and the care it will be provided. Reduced or fee-waved adoptions must follow the same adoption counseling process as all other adoptions and must remain consistent with all other policies or procedures.

### **When to Deny an Adoption**

The goal of any adoption should be to place an animal into a permanent home. While an overarching goal, it is understood that it is not always possible. Factors outside the control of the adopting family may result in a return or rehoming of an adopted pet. The application and interview process must reasonably match the family/individual with the appropriate pet. If, during this process, factual information is obtained that indicates an unlikely positive outcome for either the animal or the family the adoption should be denied. Factors such as the following should be considered:

1. A documented history of animal neglect/abuse.
2. There is intent to breed the animal.
3. There are incompatible animals in the home.

4. The animal is being adopted for a purpose other than companionship – with the exception of working cat programs.
5. Compliance with and knowledge of local ordinances to include breed regulations and pet limits.

There are other factors that could result in the denial of an adoption. Each situation must be weighed against the best interest of the animal and a prospective family with the end goal of a permanent, loving home. If information is used to deny an adoption it must be factual, verifiable, consistent with your organization's principles and beliefs, and in the animal's best interest.

As a profession, we understand that reasonable life circumstances can result in animals being surrendered or create situations that would be a red flag for potential adopters. These reasonable situations should not be used to permanently prohibit a family from adopting an animal.

The intent of an adoption is to match the appropriate animal with the appropriate family. If denial is the result of the animal simply not being an appropriate fit for the family and their lifestyle, efforts should be made to present alternative animals that are a more appropriate match.

### **Do not Adopt Lists**

"Do not adopt lists" can be a way of identifying an ill-suited home or situation prior to adoption counseling. In the event an organization uses its own such list or considers information from another agency to deny an adoption the underlying reason for the denial must be factual and clearly identified. Be cautious of decisions that may be discriminatory.

### **Alternate Placement**

Placement programs are focused on creating outcomes that are positive for both people and animals. Those outcomes may be achieved in a variety of ways and no one set of circumstances is a good fit for every animal and person. The outcome of the adoption must be an environment that creates a healthy relationship for both people and pets.

Alternatives to 'traditional' adoption, as long as they can meet the five freedoms, the five characteristics of successful adoptions, and local laws, include:

- Law enforcement working dogs where these dogs are housed in the home of a handler during non-working hours.
- Animals who reside in communal residential facilities such as nursing homes.
- Individuals without a permanent residence.
- Animals that will reside in a business rather than an individual's home.
- Working cats that will have access to a barn or similar facility.
- Animals placed with organizations whose intentions are to train service animals.

### **Feral cat/ working cat**

If a cat is to be placed as part of a working cat program the cat must be assessed to determine that it is an appropriate candidate for that program and that external factors are not prohibitive of a positive outcome. Reasonable assessment of compatibility for a working cat program must be based on the cat's experience and any applicable information that can be gathered. At minimum cats must be evaluated as healthy, be vaccinated, and spayed/neutered.

## Foster to adopt

Foster to adopt is an effective way to place animals that would benefit from being in a home environment for behavioral or medical reasons with the intention of ultimately being adopted by the fostering family. While in foster status, the animal is still property of and under the care of the organization that remains responsible for all care, including medical care. If, during the foster to adopt process, the animal is brought back to the organization for treatment, procedures or examinations the foster/adopter must be provided the necessary resources to ensure the animal's basic medical, behavioral and general needs are met. At any point, typically after a full recovery, the animal may be formally adopted to that foster/adopter following the organization's standard adoption process.

All medical decisions during that time, to include those up to and including euthanasia for humane reasons, are the organization's sole responsibility. Foster to adopt policies must be written and applied consistently.

## **Completing Placement**

### Elements of model practices agreements (contracts)

- Examples of adoption agreement elements can be found in Exhibits.
- In its most basic form, an adoption agreement is a transfer of property. While it can be difficult to think of animals as property, the agreement is a document that codifies a transaction and the terms of that transaction. Central to a good agreement is the transfer of liability. No agency can guarantee health or behavior. Most adoptions involve animals that are only with the adoption agency for a few days or weeks. The agreement must state clearly that, along with ownership, legal and medical responsibility shifts completely to the new owner upon execution of the agreement. Liability includes anything the animal may do to cause harm, damage, or spread disease. The document must clearly state that the adoption agency makes no warranty as to health or behavior, and the new owner assumes all risks. Some agencies may be willing to continue to support the health needs of an animal after it has been placed in a home. If this is the case, then there should be an acknowledgement in writing that includes the limits of that support. Agencies must also disclose certain medical and behavioral conditions (see adoption disclosure section). This is an area where precision in language is vitally important and it should be written in consultation with an attorney. Liability laws vary by state, and even if an organization must pay extra to get sound legal advice, it is worth it.
- An adoption agreement should have clear provisions that allow for the return of the animal at any time during its life, for any reason. However, the agreement should not require the return of an animal to the adopting organization. An animal owner should feel comfortable finding the pet a new home if they wish to do so. If the animal has been with them for a while, it is likely they know more about the animal than the organization did. It is very difficult to force the return of an animal to the adopting agency, even if required by the agreement. The focus of this section of the agreement must be supportive of the owner's needs – whether that is to return the animal, find a new home on their own, or to find a new home with the help of the adopting agency. There are many resources to help an animal owner find a home for their pet, including literature to explain how to re-home pets and websites that will help with instructions and matchmaking. Demanding that the owner return the pet if it isn't working out may make them less likely to work with the adoption agency. Facilitation is the key to a successful rehoming process when an adoption doesn't work.
- Organizations have varying practices about whether to refund money if an animal is returned. In most cases, organizations treat adoption fees as non-refundable unless an illness or other issue is

discovered shortly after the adoption (usually within 10-14 days). Some organizations use the time frame of the jurisdiction's licensing period to determine whether it is a return adoption or owner surrender. Some organizations are offering 'adoption satisfaction guarantees' that promise a refund if the animal is returned for any reason within a specified time frame. Some organizations will offer full refunds and/or returns if the new owner takes the animal to a veterinarian in a specified amount of time and the veterinarian discovers a previously unknown health issue.

Regardless of the refund policy chosen, it must be clearly stated in the agreement.

- The agreement should include a statement that the new owner will follow all local animal laws, including keeping the pet confined, maintaining any vaccinations required by law (rabies), and prohibiting any neglect or abuse. This section should also contain a statement or acknowledgement that the new owner will provide proper food, care, water, shelter, companionship, and veterinary care as needed and that if for some reason they cannot, they should return the animal to the organization or find a new home, but under no circumstance will they abandon the animal.
- Dogs should not be tethered as a form of confinement, nor should the pet create a nuisance in the neighborhood. Most jurisdictions require dog licensing. If the government operates the adopting agency, then a dog license must be included as part of the adoption process. When the adopting agency is non-government and cannot provide a license, the new owner should be provided with information on how they can follow up to get a license. Typical license laws allow up to 30-day to acquire a license after a person gets a new dog.

#### Paperwork/things to process

- An organization should determine which forms of payment they accept from a client and make sure this information is visible and accessible to the public. A client should be aware of adoption pricing before the adoption is being finalized.
- An organization must have a policy on cash/credit handling in place prior to accepting any payments and a policy on how they handle client's confidential information (e.g. how information is stored and entered into a database, security measures, and appropriate staff access). No client information may be given to any member of the public without prior consent. If giving information to a corporate partner that company must provide the organization with opt in/out language prior to any transaction and the staff must be able to explain how/when that information would be used to a client. Personal information must not be given away or sold without prior consent.
- If paper agreements with personal information and signatures are being generated the organization should have a record retention policy in place and a secure storage location with limited access.

#### Delivery of necessary documents (digital, hardcopy, mixture)

- Organizations have more than one way to deliver adoption documents. Some clients will want these electronically while others will prefer print. Documents should be delivered based on customer preference.
- Topics of paperwork to provide
  - All adopters must receive, at minimum, copies of adoption agreements, medical records, behavior information and disclosures for behavior/medical conditions, and a receipt indicating a transaction of payment.
  - Organizations must be transparent about the animal's behavior and medical needs. The important highlights should be reviewed again at the processing of paperwork and final transaction.

- Organizations should provide access, either in paper form or electronically, to information to help transition a pet into their new home. This could be done in house or referred to other websites with information that could be of use.
- Items to provide
  - Providing food that the animal has been eating at the point of adoption can ensure clients are able to support providing a consistent diet or a means to transition their animal onto a replacement diet gradually. During this process, provide new owners with the information they need to successfully transition if that is their intent.
  - If an animal is on medication it is important that the customer be made aware of the details, including how to deliver the treatment, so they can support full administration of the treatment. If possible, demonstrate for the adopter how the medication is given and have them attempt. Ensure they are able to ask questions and have the ability to reach out to your organization with questions post-adoption.
  - Many organizations will establish relationships with local veterinarians that provide free or reduced cost services for a short period after adoption. This is a good incentive to get the new owner to establish a relationship with a veterinarian and can also help assess the health of the animal in situations where the local organization may not have the resources to provide full medical services or examinations. A list of participating veterinarians should be provided to adopters if these relationships are in place.

Animal medical records including vaccination history/certificates are a vital first step to supporting a successful veterinary client-patient relationship. Notes collected while a pet was in care may provide adopters insights into the individual pet's needs and must be made available to the adopter. Each organization must decide what their policy is for sharing all general staff and volunteer notes collected while an animal was in their care. Consideration should be given to weighing transparency of information with *relevancy*, for example, in an instance where previous owner information should not be shared.

In addition to general notes and medical records mentioned throughout this document, any behavior plans or training resources should also be provided. Such documentation will support the pet's transition into the new home and may provide the adopter a basic behavior foundation or introduction into the importance of pet training.

Adoption agreements or guarantees in which the adopter is acknowledging they are taking possession of and responsibility for the animal must be provided to the adopter at time of adoption.

At any point during the adoption or return process, financial exchanges must always be documented and copies provided to the adopter.

Animal medical record retention and release regulations vary by state and must be in compliance. A summary of statutory provisions and retention time frames by state is available online by the American Veterinary Medical Association (see reference list).

## **Final Steps of an Adoption**

After adoption conversations are completed, there are more actions, listed below, that should be taken to ensure a thorough adoption process has been completed.

### Identification

If the animal is microchipped, a final scan must be performed before the animal goes home. This will ensure that the discovered microchip number matches the number listed in the animal's record. The microchip must be registered in a national database that is linked to the American Animal Hospital Association's microchip lookup tool. As a side note, organizations must scan each animal with a universal microchip scanner for the presence of a microchip upon presentation to the organization and before final decisions.

All other adopted animals must be provided with traceable identification. Any companion animal can escape or unintentionally be lost. This is particularly true prior to an animal acclimating to his or her new environment.

Suitable methods of identification would include at least one of the following:

- Collar and tag – These must be applied prior to an animal being released to an adopter. It must be remembered that this is not a permanent method of identification, as collars and tags can be lost, removed, or wear out. At minimum a tag must have a phone number to call if the animal is lost. If a unique organizational ID tag is supplied, a registry must be maintained for the anticipated lifetime of the animal.
- Licensing-The issuing of a municipal or county license is a form of traceable identification. As with other forms of tags, it must be attached to a collar when a license is issued and the animal is present. Similarly license tags are not a permanent form of identification.
- Microchips – This method offers a permanent, unalterable method of identification. Adopters must be provided with clear, written information about the microchip and the database registry, as well as instructions on how to update their contact information in the database in the event of any changes. Microchips must be registered in their appropriate database by the organization.
  - The microchip must be registered with the adopter's name and contact information. Any animal with a previous existing microchip must be re-registered to the adopter when adopted.
  - Implanted microchips must be registered with a database that partners with the American Animal Hospital Association's Microchip Lookup Tool.

#### Transporting animals home

- Ensure that a dog is leashed or a cat or small animal is contained and secure. Monitor the comfort of your adopter and provide support and guidance, including potentially walking the individual to their vehicle and assisting with transitioning from parking lot to car as this is often challenging for people and animals.
- Depending on the organization and available resources, adopters may be asked to provide their own means for transporting animals home (leash or crate), or the organization may provide them, either for free or at low cost to the adopter. Regardless of who bears the responsibility for having these items ready, they must meet the same criteria in all instances.
- Cats must go home in a secure carrier that allows air to circulate freely. This could be a cardboard or other temporary carrier or something of a more durable material. Latches and other closures are secure and adopters are advised not to allow the cat out of the carrier until they are safely inside their home.
- While small dogs and puppies may be transported in a carrier similar to that for a cat, most dogs will require a collar and/or harness and leash.

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## POST-ADOPTION

### Adoption Returns

#### General approach to returns

Returns must be accepted without judgment to encourage the adopter to provide the best possible information on the animal and guidance on future placement.

Refunds or credits should be given in accordance with the policy outlined in the adoption agreement. In certain circumstances it is understood that issuing refunds and accepting returned animals is not feasible. Often in municipal shelters these activities are prohibited. Regardless of whether the organization is a municipal shelter or animal protection organization, the policies for accepting a returned animal and issuing a refund must be consistent with the original adoption contract/agreement.

Returns are a natural part of the adoption process. An adoption that results in the animal being returned is still preferable than having an animal stay in a home where they just don't fit or are unwanted. Returns result in a better quality of life for the adopter and animal and better reputation for the organization. Care needs to be taken to remove any negative stigma around adoption returns.

An open adoption process necessitates an open return policy. Our goal is to have an animal in a home where they can be successful, so a return must not be seen as a failure. We want to keep potential adopters engaged, so with the exception of extreme situations (e.g. cruelty, belligerence, behavior on social media, etc.), returning an animal must not, in itself, exclude a person from adopting an animal again.

#### Policy for accepting returns

If an organization adopted an animal, the organization must accept that animal as a return no matter its condition or how much time has passed. To help facilitate this process, returns need to be given priority for admission.

#### Tracking returns

Adoption returns need to be tracked as they can give valuable insight into your adoption policies and process. Your return rate is the number of adoption returns divided by the total number of adoptions done during a period of time. Dividing return rate by age and species can give valuable information as there are definite variations based on those properties.

Additionally, information about how the animal behaved in the home must be captured as it can help when evaluating for future placement. It can also give insight on what animal would fit best for the adopter. This information can inform insight into ways to make an adoption process likely to be more successful in general and for the individual that returned the animal. This information must not be used to deny an adoption unless there is reason to deny the adoption as outlined in the adoption counseling section.

## **Adopter Support**

To maximize the permanent placement of animals into their adopted homes, an adopter support program must be instituted. Adopted animals may have special medical or behavioral needs or other challenges. Assisting adopters with the introduction and assimilation of a new companion animal into their family is critical to the long-term success of the adoption process.

### Medical health support

A natural consequence of time spent in a sheltering facility will be a higher frequency of animals adopted with veterinary medical needs. These will include both infectious disease and pre-existing health problems. Both can be frustrating to adopters and can be a source of adoption returns. A support mechanism to address medical problems after adoption is essential. These programs will vary depending on the individual organization's focus and resources.

- Managing a client's expectations – An adopter must be fully informed of any existing health problems, the required care for that condition, veterinary follow up, potential expense, and prognosis. Similarly, any conditions or diseases recently seen in the organization's animals that may likely develop must be explained, such as upper airway disease. An adopter that is informed and prepared will be more tolerant and accepting of any special needs of the animal.
- Availability for subsequent advice – Organizations must be available to discuss any health-related problems or questions that arise following adoption. Additionally, organizations must actively reach out to an adopter if a health issue is identified through a subsequent contact. Care must be exercised when discussing medical issues with adopters. Recommendations and activities that are considered the practice of veterinary medicine, such as diagnosing and prescribing, must be avoided unless performed by appropriate licensed personnel. General guidance, recommendations on whether veterinary care is needed, and providing resources for veterinary care are appropriate.
- Veterinary medical care – Provision for follow-up veterinary care must be discussed with an adopter. Organizations must be clear about what services they will perform or reimburse for and what services are the adopter's responsibility. Depending on the individual organization, subsequent veterinary care may take the form of any of the following:
  - Providing veterinary care at the adopting organization if the facility has clinical capabilities.
  - Referring the adopter to an established veterinary partner.
  - Instructing the adopter to return to his or her own veterinarian.
- Pet health insurance – Insurance can often defray unexpected costs of veterinary care following adoption. Pet health insurance may be recommended and offered as part of the post-adoption support system.

### Behavioral support

Analogous to health problems, behavioral challenges and issues are common in homeless animals. Post-adoption support programs must be available to adopters.

- Disclosure – Any behavior issues must be fully discussed to an adopter, including any ongoing interventions that may be required.
  - Internal consultations – An animal welfare organization must be able to provide basic consultation for common behavioral problems and training both during and after the adoption

takes place. Animal welfare organizations must advocate current best practices for training, including positive reinforcement and redirection techniques.

- Difficult cases – There will be times when more intensive training and behavioral modification will be required beyond the basic case. Provisions must be made to refer these cases if in-house capabilities do not exist within the organization. These may include:
  - Referral to a behaviorist for individual consultation.
  - Referral to a class setting for repetitive training and/or socialization.
  - Referral to a veterinarian for assessment of pharmaceutical intervention.

#### Financial support

When adopting animals, an unforeseen medical or behavioral issue may develop subsequent to adoption or a pre-existing problem may surface in a home environment that cannot be observed in a shelter. These problems are likely to result in increased expenditures for the adopter.

An organization must determine at what level, if any, financial support will be provided to the adopter in these cases and make the limits of that support clear to the adopter. This will vary among organizations depending on the availability of services and resources.

Often, being a partner with an adopter in this regard can salvage a bad situation and result in a successful adoption and a favorable adoption experience. Common examples include:

- Discounted or complimentary services if provided in house.
- Refund of adoption fees.
- Partially or fully subsidized care for a particular problem.
- Referrals to partners that can provide reduced-fee services.

#### Sterilization compliance

Adopted dogs, cats and rabbits must be spayed or neutered prior to being released into their new homes (see Veterinary Care in a Shelter Setting Best Practices for more detail). A temporary or even a permanent medical exemption may preclude this. In these cases, steps must be taken to ensure that those animals are sterilized after the adoption process.

- A signed agreement must be obtained from the adopter agreeing to have the animal sterilized.
- A deposit must be collected to encourage compliance with the sterilization requirement.
- The deposit must be refunded only upon proof of subsequent sterilization.
- In cases where a sterilization is not performed within the agreed upon timeframe, subsequent contact with the adopter must be made to facilitate the sterilization of the animal and remind the adopter of his or her obligations.

At a minimum, all dogs, cats, and rabbits must be included in a sterilization requirement. It may not be practical to extend this requirement to other species; however, individual situations must be assessed to ensure that reproductive activities are prevented.

### Adopter follow-up

Contact with adopters following an adoption is an important component of the adoption process to help ensure pets stay in their new homes.

- Follow-up contact can be through surveys, email, or personal calls.
- Contact information for a point person at the adoption agency must always be given in case further questions arise or additional information is needed.
- A standard interval to contact adopters must be followed. At minimum, both a short term and long term follow up is recommended (contact after 3 days, 3 weeks and 3 months is common industry practice). Many issues will present themselves within a short time following an adoption however there are others that may surface later on. Multiple contacts are required to both identify potential problems with an adoption and address them contemporaneously.
- Information must be solicited as to how well the animal is assimilating into the new home, as well as information about any problems encountered.
- Any issues that are identified by an adopter must be addressed through direct service programs provided by the organization or by providing additional resources through a referral. Any recurrent themes that occur with the population of adopted animals must be analyzed from the standpoint of overall adoption practices and policies.
- Adopters must be asked about their level of satisfaction with the adoption experience. Any needed corrective actions must be taken if a deficiency is identified. Satisfied adopters are more likely to return to adopt again, refer others to adopt, and provide financial support to the organization.
- All interactions with adopters must be documented in the organizations animal management database.

### **Return to Owner Considerations**

If the previous owner of an adopted animal comes to reclaim an animal after an animal has been adopted, the organization does not have the obligation to attempt to reclaim the animal from the new owners if a legal transfer of ownership has been completed.

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## **ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Collaborative Relationships (Third-Party Partnerships)**

There are many relationships with other entities that can be established to provide ongoing services to adopters and their animals following the adoption process that are mutually beneficial to all parties. Organizations should seek out these relationships and collaborate when a program fits the mission and needs of the organization. Entering into these third-party partnership programs requires careful consideration of multiple factors, including:

- Commitment to a product or service provided
- Release of information to a third party
- Opt in/out option for the adopting family
- Ensure no violation of any confidentiality policy

- Evaluation of the product or service available from the third party and how it will best serve the animal
- Considering whether the agreement will result in the organization being subject to unrelated business income tax.

**Examples of common collaborations include:**

- Veterinary care – Veterinary clinics will often provide discounted veterinary services for a first visit or during an introductory period in exchange for the referral or a list of adopters. Veterinarians should be chosen that understand and are sympathetic to the challenges that shelter medicine presents.
  - Licensure – Municipalities will often reduce the cost of a license for an animal and/or provide a stipend for each license “sold” if a license is acquired by an adopter at the time of adoption. This also helps to provide traceable identification to an adopted pet.
  - Insurance – Companies that offer pet health insurance often will provide limited coverage for an adopted animal for an introductory period free of charge to help defray the cost of common post-adoption illnesses following adoption or order to gain a long-term customer.
  - Feeding program – Pet food producers may subsidize the cost of feeding animals in exchange for promoting and recommending their products to adopters.
  - Behavior consultations – Similar to veterinary care, behaviorists or animal trainers may discount services to adopters if cases are referred to their practices.
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**REFERENCES**

American Veterinary Medical Association: <https://www.avma.org/Pages/home.aspx>

The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement: <https://theaawa.org/>

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**Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters**, Association of Shelter Veterinarians 2023: <https://www.sheltervet.org/shelter-standards-task-force>

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**GLOSSARY**

**Adoptable** – Animals meeting the criteria identified and set forth by an individual group as being a safe, healthy, and responsible candidate to be rehomed in their community through their adoption program.

**Adoption agreement** - An adoption agreement (or contract) includes terms and conditions about adopting a pet.

**Assessments** - Making a judgment about the adoptability of an animal.

**Behavior Assessment** – A method of information gathering regarding an animal’s behavior that can be utilized as part of the decision making process to determine adoption candidacy. A variety of formal assessments are available to be utilized.

**Behavior and medical disclosure** – It includes all records and other information regarding health history, treatment, health and behavior tests, care, including medical history, physical exams and test results.

**Disposition** - The final outcome of an animal (e.g. action of distributing or transferring (adopting) property (an animal) to someone.

**Do not adopt lists** - Lists of people who you want to look at closer before adopting.

**Enrichment** - A process for improving the environment and behavioral care of confined animals within the context of their behavioral needs.

**Foster to adopt** - Volunteers act as adoption agents for their foster pets—including finding a match and completing the adoption, right up to handing over the leash or carrier.

**In-shelter, at offsite or mobile events** – Locations where adoptions can take place.

**Kennel Cards** - To give adopters complete profiles of the animals they’re visiting with, include the following information on cage cards (making sure you leave enough space for a good “sales pitch”):

- Name
- Identification number that matches the animal with organizational records
- Sex
- Spay/neuter status
- Age
- Color(s)/Markings
- Reason for the animal’s stay (whether stray or owner-surrendered)
- Date of arrival
- Date first made available for adoption
- Known characteristics or special qualities
- Special needs

**Length of Stay** – The length of time an animal stays in order to get the care they need and the best outcome that is possible without delays.

**Licensing** - Usually a license identifying number is issued to the owner, along with a tag bearing the identifier and a contact number for the registering organization. Licensing is governed by state and local laws, which vary by jurisdiction. Licensing helps the recovery of lost or stray animals and helps protect the public from rabies.

**Media Release** - An organization or website may use this form in order to ask an individual for permission to use a photograph that contains their likeness.

For the form to be complete, it must include information about both parties: the organization that wishes to use the photograph and the individual represented in the photograph. The individual will need to make a sworn statement allowing the organization to use the photograph. Before it is official, it must be signed and dated.

**Quarantine** - Kept confined and secluded.

***Stipend*** - A predetermined amount of money that is provided to help offset expenses.

***Universal Microchip Scanner*** - Microchip scanner that read all brands and frequencies of microchips currently sold in the US.

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## RESOURCE LIST

***9 Tips for Drafting a Clear Cut Contract***, Rocket Lawyer: <https://www.rocketlawyer.com/blog/9-tips-for-drafting-a-clear-cut-contract-913657>

***Adoption and Placement***, ASPCAPro: <https://www.aspcapro.org/adoption-placement>

***Adoption Forum II***: <https://www.petSMARTcharities.org/sites/default/files/report-on-adoption-forum-ii.pdf>

***Animal Friendly-Customer Smart: People Skills for Animal Shelters & Rescue Groups***, Jan Elster, Shelter Skills: <http://shelterskills.com/>

***Confidentiality of Veterinary Patient Records***, American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) <https://www.avma.org/Advocacy/StateAndLocal/Pages/sr-confidentiality-patient-records.aspx>

***Drafting Effective Contracts***, Susan Chesler, American Bar Association:  
<https://apps.americanbar.org/buslaw/blt/2009-11-12/trainforthefuture.shtml>

***Unrelated Business Income Tax (UBIT) for US Organizations***: <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/unrelated-business-income-tax>