

# Overcoming Obstacles to Success

## A Strategic Look at Companion Animal Re-homing

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# OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

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## INTRODUCTION

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There is ample published evidence that a society that owns pets is a healthier society. The adoption of a companion animal should be a positive experience for the new owner, the companion animal and the wider community.

For too long animal shelters have accepted high euthanasia rates and have instead placed road blocks, or obstacles, in the pathway to a successful adoption program.

Surely the first statement anyone working in animal welfare should say is that we are in the business of saving lives. Now, I didn't coin that phrase, but I do live it every day. This simple notion that our role is to **save a life** rather than **end one** is such a simple one. Yet it is so misunderstood that animals continue to die in vast numbers, not only in Australia, but across the world.

The fundamental purpose of this session is to explore, suggest and encourage shelters, pounds, rescue groups and other agencies that rehome companion animals methodologies to reduce the unnecessary euthanasia of healthy treatable companion animals by removing known obstacles.

These notes apply primarily to the adoption of companion animals kept as pets in a domestic household. Procedures for the adoption of other animals, such as livestock, may differ in some details but should be consistent with the general principles outlined here.

Attachment 1 and 2 provide examples of forms outlined in this paper.

The term shelter includes pounds, rescue groups and any other facility where companion animals are kept with a view to re-homing.

We, the welfare side of our industry, say "adoption" and the for profit side of the industry use the term "sale". While the word sale connotes division among some, we must remember that for the everyday person looking to acquire a new pet they are thinking buy and sell. When people use Google to search they invariably use the phrases "puppies for sale" or "buy a new pet". We need to understand this and ensure strategies we have in place are designed to attract as wide an audience as possible.

### *A Starting Point*

The overarching position is that everyone wants to see a reduction in the level of unnecessary killing of companion animals across all sectors of the industry. Unnecessary killing can be defined as the putting to sleep of healthy treatable animals in pounds, shelters, pet shops, backyard breeders and any organisation or group whose main focus includes finding homes for companion animals.

This paper is broken into three parts

- Their obstacles
  - I've been surrendered, now what?
  - Where am I?
  - I'm sick, please help ne!
  - How should I act?
  - I'm a Pit Bull!
- Our obstacles
  - Space
  - Money
  - Resistance to change
  - Why bother?
  - What about my welfare?
  - We've tried all that already
- Other relevant information

## ANIMAL RELATED OBSTACLES

Hundreds and thousands of companion animals end up at pounds and shelters across Australia every year. Sadly many of these companion animals are euthanased for a variety of reasons. These notes go a little way to exploring some of the issues associated with re-homing of companion animals and then set out strategies to maximise the health of companion animals, explores owner suitability and concludes with a discussion on the adoption techniques that could be used to improve the homing rates of shelters and pounds across Australia. In fact all strategies outlined in this note are geared at improving the homing rates of all companion animals which end up in pounds and shelters.

A key point to remember is that animals have enough obstacles already, without us adding extra obstacles. We sometimes forget what we are doing and why we work in animal welfare. We argue with each other, we look for the easy answer, we put up with second best and we accept our lot in life. This attitude, this apathy just makes it harder for the ones we are charged with caring for. Animals have enough obstacles of their own, without us adding to the pile.

### *First Animal Obstacle: I've been surrendered, now what?*

#### The decision to surrender/abandon a companion animal

In an ideal world people would not surrender or abandon companion animals. This is not the case and our modern society still needs animal shelters. Recognition of the motivations behind some surrenders go a long way in assisting shelters with overall management of the population of companion animals within their control on a daily basis.

A cornerstone in reducing the volume of companion animals surrendered/abandoned is an increasing understanding of the reasons for surrender/abandonment. This can be achieved by undertaking a detailed interview and questionnaire at the time of surrender. A sample surrender questionnaire is included at Appendix 1. Wherever possible this questionnaire should be completed.

The benefits of the information collected include:

- ◆ An increased understanding of the history of the companion animal/s in question, which may assist with future adoption opportunities
- ◆ Identification of any behavioural shortcomings which could be overcome by a behavioural modification program
- ◆ Identification of any health issues which need to be managed or which may preclude the companion animal/s from future adoption
- ◆ Potentially more accurate understanding of the breed, and age of the companion animal/s in question. Whereas some shelters have expert staff engaged who can identify and age companion animals this may not always be the case.
- ◆ A clearer underlying of the reasons for the decision to surrender the companion animal. In most cases when a person comes to the final decision to surrender a companion animal there is little chance of this decision being reversed. Many shelters are full to capacity all the time and as such a waiting period to surrender an animal (specifically a dog) is a genuine need in many cases. This can cause some issues as animals may then be abandoned, surrendered or sold/gifted inappropriately. Appropriate management of a waiting list and regular communication with surrendering families is a must to ensure the welfare of the companion animal/s is monitored.

- ◆ You may also discover that during the surrender process the single reason for surrendering can be overcome. This is a very powerful opportunity that may in fact stop the animal from entering the shelter in the first place. A new baby is a prime example. Refer to our “preparing for a new baby” document, attached.
- ◆ The provision of a well resourced help desk service is a must to assist stop surrenders before they happen. In Canberra, we manage about 70,000 phone calls a year. You name it, we are asked for advice on it. The most popular questions in Australia asked of RSPCA are:
  - How do I house train a puppy
  - What should I feed my puppy
  - What should I do when I bring my new puppy home
  - What do I need to know before buying a pet
  - How should I exercise my puppy

You can see from these questions that without quick, sensible support a decision to surrender the puppy in question could be made quite easily.

Having a clear strategy, with supporting documentation to aid in the phone call stage is a must for any shelter. Some larger shelters operate fully fledged call centres and help desks. In Canberra my facility offers five staff, three for face to face visitors and two for telephone callers. Staff are trained to identify potential surrender situations and assist people with not surrendering if at all possible.

- ◆ Increased intelligence surrounding motivation for surrenders can assist with policy development in other areas, such as the unit title and body corporate legislation vis-à-vis improving access to companion animal friendly accommodation, the need for off leash parks, cat containment zones etc. One of our drivers must be to reduce intakes

***Overcoming this obstacle is as easy as...***

- ***Compulsory puppy training to guard against future surrender***
- ***Developing and encouraging animal friendly accommodation options***
- ***Discounted vet care***
- ***Advisory/Help Desk services to intervene prior to surrender***
- ***Community support by way of free food, dog walking, grooming, vet care***
- ***At risk support by way of emergency boarding, discounted veterinary support, referrals services***

## *Second Animal Obstacle: Where am I?*

Once a companion animal arrives at a shelter the following suggestions should encompass the bare minimum requirements afforded the companion animal. Initially the universally acceptable five freedoms should always be available. These are:

- ◆ Freedom from hunger and thirst
- ◆ Freedom from discomfort
- ◆ Freedom from pain, injury and disease
- ◆ Freedom to express normal behaviour
- ◆ Freedom from fear and distress

From this point on everything should be done to make the animal's stay as comfortable as possible. Sometimes we forget where an animal has come from. In many cases the animal was a loved pet. She may have been allowed inside, even to sleep on the end of the bed. She was probably fed at regular times and had shelter and felt safe in her environment.

Now place yourself in her shoes, or cage! You are plunged into a world of strange noises, strange smells, lots of different people looking at you, prodding you, poking you and at night you are all alone. The shelter is a difficult environment for most companion animals and we should do everything we can to make their stay as normal as possible.

### *Overcoming this obstacle is as easy as...*

- *Giving an animal time to settle before making any life changing decisions*
- *Engaging appropriately trained, qualified and compassionate behavioural experts to work with animals within your shelter*
- *Hold regular review meetings to review animals and their progress to explore alternate options*
- *Ensure your shelter processes and progresses animals "through the system" quickly.*
- *Avoid unnecessary delays with desexing*
- *Utilise an active and progressive adoption strategy*

## *Third Animal Obstacle: I'm sick, please help me!*

### **Veterinary health check and vaccinations**

Companion animals should be vaccinated against common/serious infectious diseases as appropriate for the species and in accordance with legislative requirements. In some areas additional vaccinations or treatments may be given or recommended to new owners. All dogs and cats must be wormed in accordance with regional requirements. Worming regimes should follow the manufacturer's specifications. Consideration and advice should also be provided on flea and tick treatments and heartworm treatments where appropriate.

A companion animal with an infectious disease or permanent disability may be adopted provided that:

- ◆ Based on veterinary advice, the vet is fully satisfied that the condition will not cause the companion animal undue stress or discomfort or result in a poor quality of life.
- ◆ Other companion animals in the community will not be placed at unmanageable risk because of the animal's condition.
- ◆ The condition and requirements for care, including associated costs, are fully disclosed to prospective owners.
- ◆ The prospective owner is able to meet the needs, both current and future, of the companion animal.

A veterinary health check should be undertaken on all companion animals before or immediately after sale to determine whether the animal is fit and healthy, and any veterinary treatment can be implemented as appropriate.

### *Overcoming this obstacle is as easy as...*

- *Engaging compassionate, well qualified veterinarians*
- *Put in place detailed quarantine and health protocols – in a short period of time with a complete review of our cat handling and one extra holding area we eliminated cat flu transfer from our facility in four weeks.*
- *Most illnesses, sicknesses and conditions can be overcome, sometimes we are reluctant to spend donor's money on these things – why else do people donate? With careful, sensible financial planning, allocating financial resources to heal animals can be achieved*

## *Fourth Animal Obstacle: How should I act?*

When in her original environment a companion animal may have done things that caused her to be surrendered. She may also have developed behaviours that were tolerated by some people, but not others. We owe it to her to observe her natural behaviours and put in place a sensible plan that can correct negative behaviours and improve her chances of going home.

### **Temperament assessment**

The behaviour of companion animals should be observed and assessed prior to making them available for adoption, to help ensure that the companion animal is appropriate for adoption/sale, to determine the behavioural needs of the companion animal, and to better match companion animals to prospective owners.

All adult companion animals (ie at or after puberty) should undergo temperament assessment prior to adoption to the extent available and appropriate. For young animals, temperament is assessed by observation and during handling, as appropriate for the species (see Attachment 1). If a companion animal is observed to exhibit inappropriate behaviour during the pre-adoption period, her suitability for adoption should be more fully assessed by the appropriate trained and qualified person.

It is imperative that the animal when assessed is not hungry, thirsty, in pain, under undue stress, or scared. The shelter environment is a difficult place for any animal, we owe it to her to ensure when we are asking her to show us her behaviour that we don't stack the odds against her.

The concept of "failing" a temperament test is a difficult one. At my shelter it is very rare for a dog, or cat, to be failed outright and then euthanased. A temperament test is simply a barometer of behaviour, it should not solely be used as a rehome or kill tool.

### **Behavioural modification**

A behavioural modification program, as opposed to an initial temperament assessment, is a necessary and fundamental tool that can dramatically improve the homing potential of a companion animal, especially an adult dog. In some cases the length of time a companion animal remains at a shelter will determine the opportunities for behavioural modification. I believe that arbitrary time limits on the length of stay of animals should not be used. The length of time a companion animal spends in a sheltering facility should be determined by other factors including:

- ◆ The companion animal's welfare, both physical and mental
- ◆ The companion animal's ability to cope in the shelter environment
- ◆ The behavioural modification program and likelihood of success
- ◆ Measurable improvements in behaviour are an excellent way to determine the prognosis for success and the amount of time invested into a specific companion animal.

### **Dogs**

- *A program of walking and socialisation, which can be combined with behavioural modification techniques*
- *Access to food puzzles and games*
- *Frequent access to external runs and play areas*
- *Grooming sessions to stimulate and enhance human contact*

- *Regular review and updating of environmental enrichment strategies to ensure against boredom for dogs spending longer in a shelter*
- *Exploration of foster care programs to allow dogs to have time away from the shelter*
- *Excursions into the real world so the shelter environment doesn't become the norm*
- *Behavioural modification programs should focus on keeping dogs calm so dogs do not become over excited or aroused, which can be a turn off for some adopters.*

### Cats

- *In the ACT we are noting significant improvements in the homing rate of cats following behaviour modification programs.*
- *Strategies that can be implemented to ensure the time in a shelter is physically and mentally stimulating for cats include:*
- *A program of socialisation*
- *Access to puzzles and games*
- *Frequent access to external runs and play areas*
- *Grooming sessions to stimulate and enhance human contact*
- *Regular review and updating of environmental enrichment strategies to ensure against boredom for cats spending longer in a shelter*
- *Exploration of foster care programs to allow cats to have time away from shelter*
- *Quiet time – simply sitting with a cat aids in building its confidence.*

### Small Companion Animals

- *Small animals (mice, rats etc) thrive on human interaction and as such these animals should be socialised wherever and whenever possible to maximise their chances of finding a home.*
- *In the ACT we ensure cages are interesting and that staff have regular contact*

## *Fifth Animal Obstacle: I'm a Pit Bull*

Some animals carry with them a stigma, or a preconceived attitude that sometimes defines who they are, despite not ever meeting one. This is certainly true of pit bulls. Other breeds, and even species in some quarters have this obstacle placed in front of them which makes it harder for them to find a home.

I am sure we have all heard someone say, oh I won't adopt a black cat, they are unlucky. We have also had people come to RSPCA and refuse to adopt desexed kittens (we desex at eight weeks of age) because we have not allowed her to have her first litter. One person refused to adopt a puppy from us once because she was micro chipped and we had interfered with her physical being.

These obstacles, old wives tales, urban myths can all be overcome with well thought out community education and a team of compassionate staff and volunteers who are well informed.

*Overcoming this obstacle is as easy as...*

- *Turning the negative into a positive, why not host a black cat special*
- *In the ACT we homed three pit bull siblings recently and we have used these dogs at events and social gatherings to highlight how good this particular breed can be.*
- *Well thought out website articles and on line information can go a long way to restoring the balance and ensuring the public is better informed*
- *Embrace social marketing and use your social pages to educate followers and fans*

## HUMAN RELATED OBSTACLES

As you can see, the animals we are charged with the responsibility of caring for already have enough obstacles. We owe it to all of them to minimise and eliminate the human related obstacles. Here are a few ideas.

### *First Human Obstacle: We don't have enough space!*

Many shelters and pounds suffer from a lack of space. This means from time to time companion animals are not able to be housed and people wishing to surrender a companion animal may be turned away or added to a waiting list.

#### People who are turned away and not added to a waiting list

If this happens advice can be given as outlined below:

- ◆ Strongly recommend against offering the companion animal as “free to a good home”. People who do not pay for companion animals often assign a low value to the companion animal and as such the companion animal may be seen as easily disposable at some future point.
- ◆ Offering the companion animal for sale through a newspaper, whereas not being an ideal outcome, may be an option if the family is in a hurry to surrender the companion animal. Families should be advised that they need to exercise caution, can do a back yard inspection if they so desire, they don't need to sell the companion animal to the first person and have ultimate control over where the companion animal ends up.
- ◆ The No Kill Advocacy Centre already has an excellent paper on finding homes for homeless pets.

#### People who are turned away and added to a waiting list

The use of a waiting list can be a powerful tool for managing the overall population in your shelter. In most cases people are willing to hold on to their pet for a short period of time pending space becoming available in your facility. Why not offer them some free food, or a free vet check up while they wait for a space to become available.

It is important during this time that open and honest communication between the facility and family is maintained.

A surrender questionnaire can also be completed before the companion animal presents at the shelter. This can aid in assisting the shelter when planning for incoming companion animals. A sample questionnaire is included at Attachment 2.

At the end of the day it is a numbers game. The more throughput you can achieve the more positive outcomes you can attain. These positive outcomes and the more work you do quickly permeate your local community and broader society. In Canberra people now bring us dogs from as far away as 500kms because they have heard how successful our homing program is. We have other shelters and pounds bring us dogs because they know we will find them a home. And we do, we have had a dog homing rate of 95% - 96% for the past three years. Success breeds success, but it also brings challenges so you need innovative strategies to keep achieving at high levels.

Helping people rehome their own pet is a powerful tool. You can also offer space on your website, newsletters or other social spaces to assist people rehome their own pet. We sometimes forget, or think that our shelter is the best place for an animal, when at the end of the day, tis not. A loving home is the best place, working to achieve that and not seeing yourselves as the be all and end all is a good place to start.

## *Second Human Obstacle: We don't have enough money!*

If I had a dollar for every time I heard someone say that, I'd have enough money! I don't know what it is like in the US but in Australia it would seem we never have enough money to do what we really want to do. **One of the things I have said to my team is that no matter how little money we have, there is always money for animal welfare.** Now, you might not have the latest computer, or a new car to drive around in. But if the turtle tank area needs a new filter, you've got it. If we need a new surgery light, you've got it. If we need to spend a few hundred dollars on exploratory tests to determine the best way forward for an animal, you've got it.

Good financial planning is less about how little money you have and more about how you use the little money you have.

Raising money is hard, there is no doubt about it, but it is not impossible.

When I commenced with RSPCA in 2005 we had a projected operating annual loss of \$600,000 per annum. This was about a third of our overall budget. Our reserves at the time, about \$1.8 million, would be gone in three years' time and we would be bankrupt.

I started an expansive program of animal care and coupled this with a media blitz and started to have a conversation with the community about how we were going to save all companion animals. I coined phrases like "It's your RSPCA", "We love what we do, we know we make a difference", "We are the rescuers". My first mail appeal was a resounding success – we hadn't done mail appeals before I started and our donor development was unsophisticated, ad hoc and poorly managed. The community immediately supported us, they embraced the new bright imagery, the honest information and communication they were getting from us and the successes we were having.

Christmas 2005 provided me with a real opportunity. A dog had been discovered in a box in a dumpster, it had a broken leg and was the victim of a hit and run accident and was left to die. This story, before my time would have had a focus on the horrible person who left this dog to die and that we would have no choice but to put her to sleep.

My focus was on the opportunity we could create for this dog and that our community expected us to do something for her. So we did. We arranged first class care, which included a leg amputation and homed the dog, now known as Roxy. We followed her story and she was featured at our annual million paws walk and led the walk, on three legs. She met Michael Milton – some of you may know who is he, he is a one legged world champion snow skier from Australia. The press loved the synergy, the community loved it and started to see us as the rescuer, not death row or a place where bad animals go.

People still talk about Roxy six years on. We generated over \$100,000 from the Christmas appeal that year and haven't looked back since.

You need to promote and showcase your shelter, your work as successful. For too long shelters have been seen as these dark and unhappy places. We have promoted ours and made it look happy, friendly, inviting and we continue to maintain a very high profile in the local press. People talk about us; we are seen now as influential, respected, well regarded, professionally run. This in turn gives people confidence to donate.

I was chatting with a chap at a donor function in late 2010. He was telling me how impressed he was with what he read in the press with us, our attitude to finding homes, our stance on a range of local issues. He then wrote me a \$10,000 cheque. He is now contributing \$5,000 to \$10,000 every few months to assist us with major local campaign work.

Lack of money can be an obstacle if you want it to be, but all you really need to do is look internally and see what great stories you have to tell and the money will start rolling in.

## *Third Human Obstacle: But, I don't want to change!*

Six years in and my staff of 25 employees is now 55 employees – two who were there when I started. Don't view staff turnover as a bad thing. Staff unwilling to change or staff who simply expect things not to change will not make long term valuable employees. Staff who get tied up in the pettiness and gossip will self select and leave.

Sadly many shelters are mired in out dated thinking and when “outsiders” come in and suggest different ways of processing, homing, health care, marketing etc, they are often scorned upon.

I remember wanting to move our annual dog walk event from a local park to a major venue in the centre of our city in Canberra. The last time the event was held before I commenced with RSPCA a mere 500 people attended and it raised \$6,000. The venue was a low profile waterway near a shopping centre. It had difficulty with parking, no real central gathering area, was not geographically central to the general population and was a difficult logistical site to manage. I suggested moving our event to Commonwealth Park – the major park and scenic walk around our major lake – an area so heavily managed by three tiers of government that everyone told me it couldn't be done. People also said we didn't need it, we weren't that big. People would not join in the event. It would not be popular.

Well, I went ahead anyway – that's the thing, you have to push through with change sometimes.

We secured approval, put in contingencies, attracted some popular personalities to add weight and lo behold we attracted a crowd ten times the size in year one. This year we held the event on that same site for a 6<sup>th</sup> time and more than 12,000 people attended and we raised close to \$175,000. The government are so impressed with the event that it is now expected to be held around the central lake and they go out of their way to help us to ensure it runs smoothly.

Another example of change that I pushed through on was our shelter management software. We used to use this old access database. We had no real intelligence about the flow of animals and no real clear monitoring or understanding of our workloads – well our euthanasia rates were high I could tell that!

I purchased and installed shelter mate, you guys know it as shelter buddy. Staff hated it. They refused to use it, they tried to circumvent it. But again I pushed through. I managed some people out, some quit, some reformed. Today, if I tried to take it off them I would have a revolt on my hands.

You must be the change you want to see, you must be the yeast as Stephen R Covey puts it, in the loaf to allow it to rise and reach its potential. Change is hard and sometimes it takes a strong leader to see beyond the complaints, beyond the short term pain for the long term successes.

The last section of this paper talks a little bit about strategies to improve adoption and some pitfalls and ways to ensure success.

## *Fourth Human Obstacle: Why bother?*

I arrived at the shelter on my first day, a cold winter's day in June 2005. I was a CEO going into an organisation locally that I was aware had some issues. Financial. Reputational. Strategic. It was going to be a tough road. Plus I knew nothing about animal welfare!

About an hour or so into my first day I was observing our customer service staff work with customers, animal drops offs and the like. I noticed a litter of puppies being handed in. The staff member was friendly and courteous and the customer left happy with the outcome. I then observed what happened next. The staff member who took the puppies instructed another to take them to the vet clinic. Good, I thought, a vet check straight away, wow we were efficient, we don't have any problems. I went over to the staff member and congratulated her.

She said, "Oh no Michael, not a vet check, they are getting put down." She said this in such a blasé off handed way that it concerned me deeply.

I was horrified.

"Put down." I questioned?

"Oh yes, we don't have room, they are too young, it will takes weeks of work and then we probably won't find a home for them anyway. We can't blame ourselves Michael. This is our job. It's better if we do it now. We are a recycling plant Michael. We take in people's rubbish and recycle it, in most cases it isn't worth recycling."

I think it was at that time that I go it. It took me an hour. Our job wasn't to kill these animals, our job was to home them, recover them, rescue them, release them, repair them.

Wow, we had a problem.

I immediately put in place a regime of not killing any healthy and treatable animals, no matter the age. I expanded our enrichment team, added some more staff to our care teams and vet teams, added facilities and embarked on some major marketing and awareness campaigns.

I dismantled the culture of why bother and instead heralded in a culture of bothering. I took away their excuses. Some staff left, I helped others decide to leave and some changed.

**Remove the obstacles, remove the excuses and success will follow.**

Kittens are a prime example. As most shelters experience a huge influx of kittens during summer one of the common problems I heard in the first couple of weeks of my role was, wait until kitten season. Now I didn't know what kitten season was, but as any good CEO does, I asked questions.

People could tell me we got busy, but they couldn't tell me much else.

Had we thought about planning for this time of year? Did we get extra staff in? Did we have extra medicine on hand? Did we do any publicity? Did we host any kitten related events?

Generally the answer was a resounding no, why bother. We will simply kill two thirds of them and maybe home a few hundred. I removed their excuses.

I built a Kittery. A dedicated space for nursing queens, young kittens, undesexed weaned kittens. This facility can manage up to 120 kittens at any one time. I added staff to assist with care.

I allocated resources to provide care. We explored kitten disease issues and had on hand medication and treatment regimens to manage outbreaks of disease. Sure we lost a few and we euthanased a few. But by and large we added 10-15% to our homing rates very quickly.

We built a kitten foster care network. This network could take sick kittens, unweaned motherless kittens, unsocial kittens. Again, we didn't have 100% success, but we saved hundreds and hundreds of kittens from certain death. I personally have fostered over 70 kittens in five years, not all have made it, but the ones I have saved, about 75%, didn't stand a chance five years ago.

We marketed kittens and offered value adds to kitten adoptions. We have increased kittens adoptions to an all time record, 851 in 2010 and very few if any healthy treatable kittens, weaned or unweaned, are ever put to sleep.

## *Fifth Human Obstacle: What about my welfare?*

One of the toughest things to achieve is the ideal balance between animal welfare and human welfare. To get the best balance you need to go back to your recruitment procedures and ensure you are appointing people who are in the right place already.

The sad fact of the matter is that no matter how good you're at homing or your reclaim strategies, no matter how high your homing rates, no matter the volume of foster carers you have, death is never too far away. To this end you need people who can cope.

You also need strategies that allow staff to say good bye to animals in a compassionate, pragmatic and legal way.

We allow staff to spend time with a dog prior to euthanasia and we allow staff to choose the setting for the procedure. Sometimes it's outside under the sun, others it's in a quiet room. Having said this, it is always legal and a vet is always on hand.

Your recruitment strategies need to screen out people who don't care or people who may care too much.

We screen our staff through a double interview process and we understand and learn about their motivations for wanting to work at an animal shelter. We don't employ people "who love animals". We engage people from outside of the industry or we engage career animal welfarists and career animal care professionals.

My executive team is largely from outside of the animal welfare sector. People who are strategic business managers, but compassionate about their role and the role we play.

We offer counselling services, regular training opportunities and staff activity evenings.

Staff activity evenings are very successful. A small team of operational staff choose an activity and get buy in from their colleagues and we fund it. It might be an outdoor movie night on site where we hire a big screen and popcorn and staff sit around and enjoy a movie or two. It might be a ten pin bowling night, or laser zone. The activity isn't important, what is important is that staff get a chance to chill out, let their hair down and enjoy each other's company with not an animal in sight.

## *Sixth Human Obstacle: We've tried all that already!!!*

From time to time I hear of people saying, yes Michael, we have done all that but our euthanasia rates are still too high, or we haven't increased adoptions. When I go into a little deeper I invariably find that they have tried a couple of things and either given up or not persisted or failed to implement other strategies.

In 2010 I was asked to assist RSPCA Tasmania (that little island state off the southern point of mainland Australia). Tassie were having a few problems. Euthanasia rates were high, disease was rife, and the Board were having issues and interfering with managements. Staff were ignoring veterinary instructions and money was tight. They had also recently sacked their CEO and some new board members were diverting interest away from animal welfare and focusing on prosecutions and animal welfare cruelty inspections.

I was asked to visit and spend some time with the Board and managers to try and put things right.

We first turned our hand to high euthanasia rates and what we could do quickly to improve outcomes and stop animals from being put to sleep. The first thing I did was double animal welfare space. RPSCA Tasmania used to run boarding kennels. These were run to raise revenue. However this also meant that 50% of our space was idle a lot of the time and that welfare animals were being put to sleep despite empty cages everywhere.

Staff then complained they didn't have the resources to manage the increased volume of animals. So I examined our budget and made some small cuts. I also secured alternate income to cover the lost income from the boarding kennel area and allocated that to new staffing.

Staff then complained that we had too many animals available for adoption. So we started advertising, writing media releases, hosting twilight adoption evenings. We grew adoptions. We generated more revenue. We appointed more staff. We grew adoptions. We generated more revenue. We appointed more staff. Can you see what I am saying.

We created a foster care program, we met with other homing agencies and discussed strategies for working together.

We rebranded our facilities and retrained our staff, again some left and we recruited, but our culture was changing and so we knew who we wanted and what type of personality would fit the new culture we had created

In five months in Tasmania we grew adoption by a staggering 56%. We dropped the euthanasia rate by 20%. This turn around saved almost 400 more animals in five months.

I don't accept that if you try everything, if you are strategic, if you are hard working and drive through on change and not get waylaid that you won't succeed.

Think of an animal shelter as a cake. You have a set of ingredients available to you and you need to ensure they are measured and balanced effectively to get that perfect cake. You cant simply just not add an ingredient or change the overall quantities. The cake will be ruined.

To truly succeed you need to implement all of the strategies available to you and keep at it.

## SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

### ASSESSMENT OF THE SUITABILITY OF OWNERS

#### *Pre adoption interview*

It is suggested that prospective new owners answer a number of questions to assess the type of companion animal best suited to match their lifestyle and residential circumstances. All members of the household (including existing pets) must be considered in the decision to adopt a companion animal and in the selection of that animal.

The following issues should be covered in this assessment:

- ◆ Expectations of the prospective owner and the reasons for wanting an animal.
- ◆ The long-term costs and commitment associated with animal ownership.
- ◆ Basic requirements for the care of the animal including diet, space, housing, environmental enrichment, exercise etc.
- ◆ Relevant laws relating to animal ownership, including animal housing and restrictions on the numbers or types of animals that can be kept. It is the responsibility of owners to be aware of and to comply with the laws of their area.
- ◆ The residential circumstances of the prospective new owner including conditions pertaining to rental agreements. I feel that state based unit title and body corporate legislation should provide protection for pet owners and an independent assessment panel to assist with animals living in rented accommodation or accommodation that makes up part of a unit title or body corporate.
- ◆ Lifestyle of the owner/household (e.g. available time, age, activity level etc.), the attributes of a suitable animal and whether their needs will be able to be met.
- ◆ Compatibility and health status (vaccinations, age, etc.) of other animals in the household. The adoption of an animal must not be detrimental, or have a potential to be detrimental, to existing animals or the adopted animal. Where other animals are present in a household the owners must be able to meet the needs of their existing animals as well as any additional animals.
- ◆ Any special needs (including, but not limited to, health or behavioural needs) that relate to the individual animal, species or breed that need to be considered by the prospective new owner.
- ◆ A sample questionnaire is included at Attachment 1.

# THE ADOPTION PROCESS

## *Psychology of adopters*

Generally speaking companion animals have two prime opportunities to impress and increase their chances of being adopted. These are:

1. The first time a potential adoptive family walks past a kennel/enclosure and sees a companion animal. Training and modification programs should focus on strategies that ensure animals remain calm in their enclosures.
2. The second chance is at the time of meeting and greeting. Calmer and attentive companion animals have a higher likelihood of going to a new home.

## *Suggestions for smooth adoptions*

A successful adoption can be described as one where the new owner and companion animal remain together for a lifetime. It is accepted that people's circumstances change and as such from time to time the necessity to surrender a companion animal becomes apparent, however careful selection and processing at the time of adoption can address some of the common reasons a companion animal is surrendered.

Some of the common reasons<sup>1</sup> companion animals are surrendered include:

- ◆ Moving house
- ◆ No time for the dog
- ◆ New baby
- ◆ Relationship breakdown
- ◆ Animals behaviour
- ◆ Cost

By undertaking detailed pre adoption interviews some of these factors can be explored and explained to the prospective new owners.

Part of the adoption process should also include reference to a lifestyle matching system which is based on types of animals and family lifestyles. Systems of this nature have proved very successful in some shelters and I strongly suggest the adoption of this strategy to assist with creating an environment of awareness prior to an adoption decision being made. A sample lifestyle matching program is included at Attachment 3.

I also strongly suggest for puppy adoptions that encouragement to attend training at a recognised dog and puppy training school is included in the adoption interview. I would also go so far as to suggest making training compulsory. We do with all puppy adoptions. We have the luxury of offering our own training school so it is easy, but this can be problematic if your facility does not offer its own dog training school.

Other strategies include:

- ◆ Ensuring the whole family, including existing pets, meet the prospective new companion animal.
- ◆ The adoption agency should always reserve the right to inspect the living conditions of the companion animal, this is very important in the case of dogs.
- ◆ A record of adoptions and surrenders should be kept in an easily accessible and retrievable format to allow for searching of serial surrenderers/adopters.

<sup>1</sup> These reasons have been taken from RSPCA based information collected from surrender forms.

## *Criteria for refusing adoption of an animal*

The right to refuse the adoption of a companion animal to a person should rest with the adopter. Reasons for refusal may include:

- ◆ There is reason to believe that the area where the companion animal is to be housed is not safe, secure or does not provide sufficient shelter or space, e.g. inadequate fencing or containment to reasonably prevent a dog from escaping a yard.
- ◆ The person is known to have a conviction for cruelty to animals or is the subject of an investigation.
- ◆ The person is under the age of 18 years old (proof of age may be requested).
- ◆ The person has a known history of surrender of companion animals, for reasons that are not consistent with socially responsible ownership.
- ◆ The interaction between the prospective new owners and the prospective new companion animal, or an existing companion animal, raises significant concerns about the potential rehoming of the companion animal.
- ◆ The person seeking to adopt a companion animal is not adequately meeting the needs of the other animal/s they own.
- ◆ The companion animal is to be used in a functional environment that may cause it injury, distress or death.
- ◆ The person's judgement is affected by drugs and/or alcohol.
- ◆ Written or verbal approval that companion animals may be kept on premises during tenancy has not been provided from the agent or landlord.
- ◆ The adoption would breach the local government regulations in which the prospective new owners are residing.
- ◆ The adoption is a gift for a person who has not been involved in the decision, except where a parent is selecting an animal for their child.

## STRATEGIES TO ASSIST WITH REHOMING COMPANION ANIMALS

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Given the large numbers of companion animals in pounds, shelters, and with rescue groups, there are some successful and already identified strategies that may assist with the rehoming of companion animals

Suggested strategies include, but are not limited to:

- ◆ Homing strategies that focus on matching prospective owners with animals suited to the lifestyle of the prospective owner. See Attachment 3
- ◆ Cooling off periods for puppies are an option. We do not employ cooling off periods for any animal other than a puppy. Our cooling off period is only 24 hours. We don't have a problem in our community with excessive puppy milling or over breeding and our puppy homing rate is well above 95% so this strategy has never impinged on our ability to home puppies.
- ◆ Opportunities for prospective owners to enquire about and enrol in companion animal training at the point of adoption.
- ◆ A uniform set of guidelines/instructions to be provided to every adopter/purchaser at the time of adoption including, as a minimum, details on
  - Feeding
  - Health care
  - Exercise
  - Environmental (physical and mental) enrichment
- ◆ Adoption questionnaire to be completed by all prospective new owners. See Attachment 1
- ◆ Internet based listing of available animals for adoption. Although internet adoption is not considered an ideal method of adoption UNLESS the prospective owners are assessed by the rehoming agency and meet the animal/s prior to adoption.

# Attachment 1: Example Pre-Adoption Questionnaire

**RSPCA-ACT**

## Application for Adoption

*Working together to find you the best match*

24 hr cool off  Application  
 Interested  Withdrawn

### Shelter Dog details

Dog identification # ..... Dog's Name: ..... Age:..... Breed:.....

Dog's 'find-a-friend' code: *Blue / Green / Yellow* Children: *Recommendation / Stipulation*

### Client details

*Client to fill in this section please*

First name: ..... Surname: .....

Phone #: (h)..... (w)..... (m).....

Address: .....

Please indicate your age bracket    18-25   26-35   36-45   46-55   56-75   76>

*Staff to fill in this section please*

Do you have children: **YES/NO**    Number: .....    Ages: .....

Who is this dog for: **Self / Other**

*(If 'other', please refer client to PAC Manager for approval  OK Initials .....*)

What appeals to you about this dog? .....

Is this your first dog: **YES / NO** (breed of previous dog).....

Do you own your home: **YES / NO OR** Do you have written permission from owner of the property to have a dog on the premises: **YES / NO**

Will the dog be allowed inside: **YES / NO**

Is your yard fully secured: **YES / NO**    Are your fences in good repair: **YES / NO**

What material are they made of:.....    Height: .....

Do you have any other pets (what):.....

### Meet and Greet

Client has met the dog: **ALL FAMILY / SOME FAMILY** Who hasn't .....

Client has resident dog: **YES / NO**    Length of Meet and Greets.....

Resident dog has met: **YES / NO/ N-A**    Dog-to-dog meeting: **OK/2<sup>nd</sup>** opinion required

### Adoption Assistant

Adoption Assistant's name: .....    Date: .....    Time: .....

Client has been briefed on the Adoption Plan: **YES / NO**

*ShelterMate*   
*PAC Initials .....*

*Internal charge: 1 2 3 4 5 6 -  PAC: sheet to follow*