



Training Playbook: Adoptions

Program Overview and Introduction

In shelters, we often feel that it is our ultimate responsibility to ensure the care of our animals even after they leave our facilities. This ongoing commitment often leads to agencies searching for the “perfect” adopter and implementing practices or philosophies that “weed out” those who don’t fit our criteria. But what is “perfect” or even “good enough”? And how many prospective adopters go elsewhere to adopt (or even purchase) animals simply because they don’t fit our concept of an ideal home?

It’s a great question and one that has years of research behind it. Studies have been conducted looking at everything from retention rates to lifetime care provided (veterinary or other) for adopted animals in different types of homes (surveying people with different socioeconomic status, those with children, single adults vs. married couples, those with other pets and those without). With all this research, one clear conclusion is that our fears about adopters usually are unfounded. Consequently, many agencies are finding that in the search for perfect homes, they are missing out on lifesaving opportunities.

This playbook outlines some of these practices and philosophies, discussing their intent and efficacy, and provides an overview of considerations for shelters that wish to be more open in their adoptions. In addition, a few sample standard operating procedures (SOPs), applications and tutorials have been provided to demonstrate best practices that can be modified easily to fit within an existing operation.

Open-Adoption Program Considerations

The following describes some basic considerations and steps that every agency can take to create a well-rounded open-adoption program.

Applications vs. conversations

First, consider the adoption process itself. Many agencies rely on lengthy adoption applications to gain insight into how their animals will be cared for by prospective adopters. However, research has revealed that prospective adopters find this process stressful, and some adopters don’t answer the questions truthfully. In addition, adopters may see the level of scrutiny as an indication that the agency distrusts them, thus undermining the goal of the process — to place animals in loving homes.

Rather than having prospective adopters fill out applications, we recommend that you approach adopters with conversations. Conversational adoption counseling allows agencies to collect the information needed to make adoption decisions in a stress-free way, while simultaneously educating their adopters in an organic way, and building trust between the agency and the adopter. Another benefit to this approach is that it can

improve community engagement and client service.

When adoption counselors first start using this approach, they may need a checklist to remind them of the key points they need to touch on, but as they become more experienced with the process, they may be able to process adoptions completely paperless, which ultimately will reduce wait times and speed up the time that it takes for animals to leave the shelter.

For more information, check out this training [module on Open Adoption](#) practices and protocols, or this great resource from the Richmond SPCA: [A Guide to Create A Successful Adoption Experience](#).

Screening vs. putting up barriers

The second consideration is to evaluate your current criteria for adopters. Examine whether the things you are screening for are putting up barriers to adoption and preventing positive outcomes. Any restriction placed on an adoption should be done simply to increase the animal's overall chance for survival or to allow for a successful adoption. (For example, for a dog who's an "escape artist," there might be a requirement that his adopter's yard have an eight-foot fence or other measures are put in place to keep the dog safe.) The following are some of the things typically used to screen adopters:

- Home checks and visits
- Landlord checks
- Fence checks
- Background checks
- Vet references
- Income verification

If your agency uses any of these as part of your screening, application or overall adoption process, take some time to think about how they benefit the animals. For example, if a potential adopter doesn't currently have a veterinarian, does that mean she wouldn't find one if you adopted to her? If an adopter makes less than a certain amount of money per year, does that mean he won't provide adequate care for the animal he's hoping to adopt? As mentioned above, you'll most likely find that these criteria are based on unfounded fears and need to be revisited.

Same-day adoptions

Many agencies veer away from same-day adoptions, feeling that those are impulsive

decisions on the part of adopters and don't lead to long-term placements. And some agencies create practices that obligate adopters to "prove" their commitment before taking an animal home. These practices, which include enforcing home checks and asking adopters to return to the shelter multiple times before the adoption is finalized, can lead to missed opportunities for good placements.

Some people feel the need to plan and do research before adopting, while others don't. Life decisions can be, and often are, made quickly, and your adoption policies should be flexible enough to accommodate this. Ultimately, same-day adoptions are about building trust with your community and using each opportunity to educate and prepare adopters.

Reduced-fee or fee-waived adoptions

Discussions surrounding reduced-fee or fee-waived adoptions almost always start with these two arguments:

- Someone who doesn't pay a fee, or who can't afford a larger adoption fee, can't afford to take care of a pet.
- Adopting out animals for free or at reduced fees devalues the animals and attracts less desirable adopters.

In recent years, these assumptions have been disproven as more and more agencies offer promotions that feature reduced-fee, "name your own price," or free adoptions. These adoption promotions have been extremely successful, and shelters that have used them have not seen a substantial increase in their return rates. In fact, the opposite is true for many shelters; they see not only an increase in adoptions, but a decrease in returns. One shelter, the Humane Society of Tacoma & Pierce County, found that "name your own price" promotions were so successful that all their cat adoptions are now handled that way.

Working with your community to establish appropriate adoption fees or being flexible with your adoption fees is almost always the way to go. For more information, read about the [results of a study](#) done by Maddie's Fund to answer the question "Do free adoptions increase the risk of poor care and abandonment?"

Returns

When an animal is returned, it's important to learn as much as you can about both the adopter's and the pet's experience, to help make a better match in the future. Gathering information from the adopter allows you to find out more about the pet's behavior in a home environment. Also, find out what the adopter's expectations were and why they were not met by that particular pet. There may be another pet in the shelter who would

be a better fit.

People return animals for an array of reasons, and a return does not mean there is something inherently wrong with the pet or the adopter. If the traditional stigma surrounding returns exists for your staff, volunteers or other stakeholders, take a look at the following for more insights:

- *Animal Sheltering* article titled "[Return Is Not a Dirty Word](#)"
- *Animal Sheltering* article titled "[Rethinking Returns](#)"

Animal restrictions

If you're trying to create more open adoption programming, consider any restrictions placed on the animals at your agency. For instance, if your shelter has restrictions on the adopter's age for certain breeds, on the number or types of animals in the home for certain breeds or ages of animals, then we recommend that you examine the reasons why those restrictions exist. Similar to the barriers we place on prospective adopters, these restrictions are often not based on fact and ultimately reduce your lifesaving opportunities.

Keep in mind that every animal is an individual, with individual needs and desires. When someone is interested in adopting a pet, you should evaluate whether that particular pet is a match for that particular adopter. Restrictive policies do not give people the broadest range of choice in selecting an animal or allow them to tell you how they would handle any issues that might arise.

Measuring success

So you've made a few changes and have incorporated more open adoption policies at your shelter. How do you know whether your efforts have been successful? Think about what data you could collect to measure success with your new approach to adoptions. Here are some data points to consider:

- Number of adoptions (the end goal, a major metric)
- Time from intake to adoption or length of stay (key to helping more animals)
- Increase or decrease in returns
- Diversity of adopters (Are there any zip codes that are being left out?)
- Diversity of animals adopted
- Perception of the shelter in the community
- Number of adoption denials

Sample Procedure and Program Information Documents

Now that you have a general understanding of what open adoptions are and what to consider to broaden or enhance your program, the following documents may act as templates for implementation. Keep in mind that there is no exact or perfect form of implementation. Using the considerations and program composition notes above, you should use the following only as guidelines or building blocks when creating your own SOPs or documents (both internal and public).

If you need further assistance or clarification, please reach out to your [regional strategist](#), [regional director](#), or the Best Friends national shelter support team at team2025@bestfriends.org.

- [Best Friends Lifesaving Training Module: Open Adoptions](#)
- Maddie's Fund: [Removing Barriers to Adoption](#): How Evidence, Innovation and Compassion Grow Pet Adoptions
- HSUS: [Adopters Welcome](#)
- Best Friends Pet Adoption Survey Results: [Infographic](#)