

## APPENDIX G

# Intake Diversion in the Field

*By Adam Ricci, chief animal protection officer, Pima County Animal Care Center, Tucson, Arizona*

**It is important for animal control agencies to be mindful that the work conducted in the field affects both the organization and the community they are committed to serving.** Each time a pet comes into the possession of animal control, there is an impact on the resources of the agency responsible for the animals' care, which includes the cost of medical care, daily care and staffing. Often, with engagement and assistance from the animal control agency, the animal could remain in his or her home.

Of course, the impoundment or removal of a pet is sometimes the only viable option for the safety of the pet or the community. However, there are times when providing information and resources to pet owners can not only improve the level of care given to the animal, it can improve the agency's relationship with the community.

When thinking about adding what are commonly referred to as pet retention programs, each agency has to identify the major issues affecting the community, consider the workload of the agency and determine the financial implications of such work. The principle behind pet retention is to re-allocate resources to prevent pets from entering the shelter environment. Pet retention can be done in many ways: through community engagement, return-to-owner in the field, assistance with fencing, targeted licensing and vaccination, and a policy of not accepting surrender of a pet in return for not issuing a citation.

## Community engagement

All animal control agencies should consider having proactive ways to engage with their communities. Community members may be distrustful of local government and its agencies, but community engagement can go a long way toward changing that perception. Forming relationships with a few prominent citizens can have an exponential impact, as these folks become your advocates in the community, reaching those who may not be open to cooperating with the agency at the outset.

Many common pet-related issues can be resolved simply by providing information and resources to pet owners through community outreach. To address public safety concerns and reduce the number of pets entering the shelter environment, community engagement should start in the neighborhoods with the highest number of pet-related complaints and the highest pet intake.

Community engagement can involve formal outreach to various segments of the community via schools, homeowners' associations, community organizations and local businesses. It can also include informal conversations between animal control officers (ACOs) and citizens at structured events or simply while out in the field. The more information that can be provided during this outreach, the greater the likelihood that future pet-related incidents or complaints can be prevented and the lower the chances that pets will end up in the shelter environment.

## **Field return-to-owner (RTO)**

When an ACO picks up a lost pet in the field, it is common for the pet to be transported back to the shelter to await pickup by his or her owner. This policy increases the workload of ACOs (since they have to transport and process the animal) and the shelter staff (who must provide care for the animal until an owner, if one comes forward, redeems the pet). It also causes undue stress to the animal and exposure to disease.

Because of those factors, field response should include procedures that aim to increase the number of pets returned directly to their owners in the field. This can be done by obtaining license or microchip information, speaking with neighbors to identify a pet's owner, posting flyers in the area, or conducting research on previous complaints to see if the pet and the owner were previously identified.

Field RTO is best supported with proactive community engagement to encourage both licensing and microchipping. Targeted approaches, such as hosting licensing and microchipping events or providing access to resources to increase licensing and microchipping in the highest-intake areas, have proven successful in attempts to increase the rate of pets being returned to their owners in the field. Licensing and microchipping can also increase the number of pets returned to their owners even if they do go to the shelter, and can also greatly decrease their length of stay, which conserves shelter resources for pets most in need.

## **Targeted licensing and vaccination**

Licensing of pets helps to verify rabies vaccinations and normally offsets some costs of the agency. However, many communities face the issue of low licensing compliance, which

occurs not because pet owners are irresponsible, but because they lack knowledge of the requirements for licensing or their communities lack resources to get pets licensed.

Just as some communities have food deserts, some have pet resource deserts. These areas can be identified through GIS data by searching for veterinary clinics and pet stores. The areas with the fewest number of veterinary clinics and pet stores may have not only the lowest rabies vaccination and licensing compliance, they may also have the highest number of pet-related complaints.

By conducting pet vaccination and licensing events in these areas, an animal control agency can gain the trust of the community, have pet owners in compliance with legal requirements, increase the ability for RTO in the field, and collect information to reduce the number of additional pet-related complaints.

## **Fencing assistance**

In the animal control profession, complaints about stray pets and leash law violations are common, and data shows that areas that generate a high volume of stray pet and leash law complaints also have a high frequency of dog bites. It is a common misperception that the problem is the complaint itself, and not what is allowing the complaint to occur.

When an owner is identified in connection with one of these complaints, every attempt should be made to determine the cause of the violation. It is not uncommon for frequent violators of leash law requirements to lack proper containment for their pets. ACOs should be prepared to offer resource assistance to provide proper containment. Patches for fences can be created and provided to pet owners at little cost to the agency. The costs to provide such resources are minimal compared to the costs associated with bringing the pet into the shelter.

## **No owner surrender over citations**

When about to issue a citation, ACOs are often faced with pet owners offering to surrender their pet in exchange for avoiding a citation. While not getting a citation is beneficial to the pet owner, having one more pet coming into the shelter is not ideal for the community. A better alternative is to offer resources and support to solve the root of the problem causing the potential citation. This tactic prevents the citation, keeps the animal in the home, and can reduce the risk of future complaints.

The practice of accepting owner-surrendered pets in lieu of issuing a citation should not be acceptable to any animal control agency or ACO. In low-level violations, remedies to the problem should be explored before a citation is issued. By allowing ACOs the discretion to offer resources instead of citations, the owner is held accountable, the issue is resolved, and the pet does not enter the shelter. Employing this strategy drastically reduces costs

for the animal control agency and also improves public perception of animal control in the community.

## Conclusion

Every animal control agency should have programs and plans in place to mitigate the number of pets entering the shelter environment. In general, the best place for pets is at home with their families. The role of ACOs should be to encourage and assist citizens with responsible pet ownership, and to provide short-term resources to allow families to properly care for their pets and to keep communities safe.

**The following are examples of two agencies that effectively perform RTO in the field.**

### **Austin Animal Center, Austin, Texas**

*By Lee Ann Shenefiel, interim chief animal services officer*

Below is some data from 2014 to 2017. Returns in the field reduce intake and the number of animals in care, ensure a live outcome, provide a good public service and provide an opportunity to talk to residents about root causes, which may prevent future issues with their animals.

Calendar year	Number of returns in field	Intake at Austin Animal Center	Percent deferred
2014	519	17,087	2.9%
2015	693	17,700	3.7%
2016	771	15,956	4.6%
2017	819	16,445	4.7%

### **Washoe County Regional Animal Services, Reno, Nevada**

*By Shyanne Schull, director*

At Washoe County Regional Animal Services (WCRAS), we take the responsibility of reuniting animals with their pet parents seriously. WCRAS handles an average of 13,000 animals annually, with an average of 9,000 of those being live, stray animals. If not for vigorous proactive efforts to return animals in the field, WCRAS would expect average intake to increase by approximately 1,400 animals per year. RTO in the field reduces sheltering costs, reunites animals with their people, and minimizes the stress on both animals and people.

In 2008, WCRAS initiated a practice of returning animals with identification back to their owners in the field, if at all possible. In 2013, WCRAS returned more than 1,600 animals to their

owners rather than taking them to the shelter. The number of animals returned in the field has dipped only slightly since then, to just over 1,500 animals in 2017. (See the graph below.)

Some of the success of this program is due to a free microchip program, which was kicked off in 2012. WCRAS has microchipped more than 23,000 cats, dogs and horses collectively to date, and since 2012, 7,868 animals have been returned in the field by way of a microchip. WCRAS keeps microchip numbers for registered pets in our database, which is easily accessible by field staff on their vehicle computers. Field staff routinely track any microchips through the national registry if a record is not found in our database. In addition, since field staff have access to the WCRAS database in their vehicles, they regularly research lost reports to attempt to locate any matching reports. Staff utilize social media pages that frequently share information on lost and found animals to scan for potential matches.

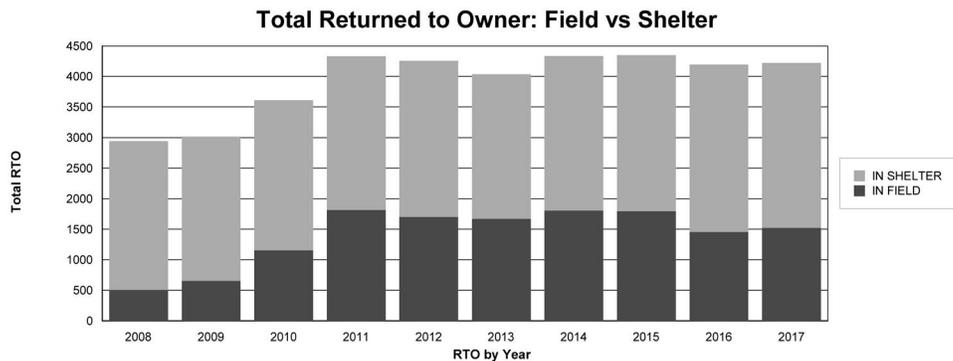
The strategies to return animals in the field can be laborious and somewhat frustrating at times, but the payoff is in the number of animals who didn't have to spend one day in the shelter. We find that if we make good-faith efforts to build rapport with pet parents, we in turn gain support, compliance and understanding. It's a win-win!



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### ALL STRAY DOGS & CATS RETURNED TO OWNER IN FIELD AND SHELTER BY YEAR



	Total	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
<b>IN FIELD</b>	<b>14,071</b> 36%	508 17%	654 22%	1,155 32%	1,814 42%	1,700 40%	1,670 41%	1,803 42%	1,794 41%	1,452 35%	1,521 36%
<b>IN SHELTER</b>	<b>25,208</b> 64%	2,433 83%	2,363 78%	2,454 68%	2,515 58%	2,554 60%	2,365 59%	2,531 58%	2,555 59%	2,740 65%	2,698 64%