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## Animal Refuge League of Greater Portland (ME): Implementing ASPCA<sup>®</sup>'s Meet Your Match<sup>™</sup>

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# Animal Refuge League (ARL) of Greater Portland, ME

*Implementing the ASPCA®'s Meet Your Match™ adoption program*



The ASPCA's innovative adoption program, Meet Your Match™ offers shelters a creative and interactive method to facilitate more appropriate animal/guardian matches based on dog, puppy, and cat assessments and surveys of adopters' expectations and preferences.

The ARL in Maine started out cautiously curious about the program, but soon became an enthusiastic Meet Your Match™ facility. The staff's complete commitment to the program shines through, making it a great success for pets and their new guardians and further promoting the image of the ARL in its community

## Stats

- By month 7 of the program, adoption returns dropped to 5%, down from 8% prior to implementation of Meet Your Match™.
- The rate of dog adoptions for the first 11 months of the program is up 3% over the previous 11 month period.
- Less tangible, but equally significant are reports of reduced staff stress and a strong sense of staff pride for having successfully implemented what has become a popular new program.

## How Cool is That?

The ARL took the ASPCA®'s Meet Your Match™ program a few steps further than implementation, developing a web based promotion that has attracted significant positive attention in their community. This in turn has led to more adoption traffic and general goodwill. Check out [ARL's Meet Your Match™ page](#).

## Adopt or Adapt

If you are interested in the ASPCA®'s Meet Your Match™ program, but wonder if your shelter can make it work, read closely. Despite reservations about a new approach to adoptions as well as time and staff constraints that are familiar to any shelter, the ARL team decided to go for it. They believed the program would help them meet their goal to place more dogs into homes where the energy level, manners, and lifestyle are a great fit for both pets and people. They were right.

Consider these wonderful stats from other groups who have implemented the program:

- Monmouth County SPCA saw a significant decrease in the amount of time a dog awaits adoption.
- Wayside Waifs enjoyed a record number of adoptions for at least the first six months of implementation, as well as significant decreases in returns.
- Willamette Valley HS increased their adoptions 27% in the months following implementation.
- HS for Tacoma\Pierce County decreased their returns from 17% to a mere 3.5 % after they implemented the program at the end of February 2006.
- Hamilton-Burlington SPCA decreased returns by 33% and increased the number of adoptions by over 27%.

But even if you don't pursue this specific program, your adoption process can benefit from the philosophy behind the ASPCA®'s Meet Your Match™ and the inspiring approach to change demonstrated by ARL staff.

## Animal Refuge League: The Whole Story

### *Implementing the ASPCA®'s Meet Your Match™ adoption program*

The Animal Refuge League (ARL) of Greater Portland, Maine, was already proud of its strong placement program:

- adopting 34% of incoming dogs into new homes and
- reuniting 43% with their owners.

But ARL staffers had grown frustrated with saying no to adopters whom they believed were making inappropriate choices.

The ASPCA®'s Meet Your Match™ Adoption Program offered a way to help adopters make sensible choices on their own. After implementing the program, staffers feel the new approach to pairing dogs with new owners is helping them to make lifelong matches by design, not just by luck.



## Who They Are and What They Do

Animal Refuge League of Greater Portland  
Dee Pecoraro, Executive Director

The ARL provides shelter for over 4,000 stray, abandoned, and owner relinquished animals from thirteen communities in southern Maine each year. The organization considers itself first and foremost an adoption agency.

## Ingredients and Prep Work

### Prerequisites

- Staff buy-in and participation. Animal care staff and front desk/adoption staff should attend a Meet Your Match™ workshop. The ARL sent several key staff members to the seminar, enabling them to share the experience:
  - Adoption counselors and kennel staff heard the same information from one source.
  - All got to participate in activities designed to help them understand the nuts and bolts, as well as the philosophy of the program.
- The organization and employees should be prepared for the extra time commitment. When first implementing the program, the Meet your Match™ assessments add another layer of responsibility to an already busy day for shelter workers. The ARL reports that it is all worth it in the end.
- Before beginning the Meet Your Match™ program, your shelter must already be implementing a behavior/aggression assessment program, such as the SAFER™ Assessment.
- Specific equipment and facility requirements for the Meet Your Match™ program (these are mostly everyday items and are listed in the Meet Your Match™ training guides available from [the ASPCA online store](#))

### People

- The ARL admits that an additional part or full time staff member would be ideal to help keep up with canine-ality assessments. While the organization did not create a new position for the purpose of implementing this program, it did require additional time commitment from existing adoptions and kennel staff.
- The ARL was already conducting SAFER™ assessments when they started the Meet Your Match™ program. If your organization does not currently conduct behavior/aggression

assessments, you will need to devote staff and/or volunteer time in order to implement a program.

- Staff members responsible for working with adopters to find the right pet should conduct the Canine-ality and Puppy-ality Assessments. These should be staff members the dog does not already know.

## Up-front Costs and Startup Funding

- There are potential costs associated with designating and outfitting a quiet room and/or an outside play area where assessments will be performed.
  - The ARL was initially concerned about this requirement. However, they looked at their facility with a “new pair of eyes” and to their surprise managed to find the space they needed for an assessment room AND a get-acquainted room where adopters could visit with dogs. The assessment room, which had previously been unused, was refurbished with the help of a donor. Management rearranged their office space to make way for the get-acquainted room.
  - Many of the props and equipment may already be on hand or easily obtained from garage sales or through donations.
  - A Safety First Child View Monitor/TV model # 48016 is available at most baby supply stores and toy stores and retails for approximately \$150. The ARL placed the monitor on their wish list and it was granted.
- In retrospect, the ARL would have budgeted for an extra full or part time kennel staff member to help with Meet Your Match™ assessments. Instead, they paid existing staff overtime for extra hours they spent when the program was first started.
- The ARL also recommends allocating funds for advertising the Meet Your Match™ program in various media outlets. They also promote the program through their newsletter and website.
- A Flash media presentation (available from ASPCA®) promotes and explains the Meet Your Match™ program to visitors of the ARL website <http://www.arlqp.org/>. While not a requirement, it generated significant interest in the community, leading to more adoption traffic.
- The ARL purchased a laminating machine on hand for cage cards and guest passes.

## Timeline

ARL staff attended the first Meet Your Match™ Training in November of 2004. On April 20, 2005, Dr. Emily Weiss conducted on-site training at the shelter and the program kicked off the next day.

Staff and community members needed time to adjust to the new program, but ARL found that it was worth the wait. Two years into being a Meet Your Match™ shelter, the ARL has witnessed a tangible return on their commitment to this new approach, especially in terms of fewer adoption returns.

## Step by Step

### 1. Decide how your shelter will introduce key staff to the Meet Your Match™ program.

The ARL decided to participate in regional training. Several key ARL staff members representing adoptions and animal care, along with their Director of Operations, attended a seminar. You can also introduce the Meet Your Match™ Adoption Program using the training guides and materials available from the ASPCA online store.

### 2. Take your plan to the entire staff.

Seminar attendees used a survey issued by the ASPCA to discuss what they liked about the program as well as what they feared or questioned about it. After receiving feedback from the ASPCA, the

group decided that they wanted the program at their shelter. However, having the commitment of seminar attendees was not enough because all staff members would be involved in the transition.

Staff who participated in the seminar became ambassadors for the program, sharing their insights and excitement with the rest of the staff. Every employee was given a Meet Your Match™ manual to review. Finally, the entire staff came together for a lengthy discussion on the opportunities inherent in the program before the final decision to implement the program was made.

### 3. Follow the recipe, and “Go, dogs, go!”

The Meet Your Match™ guides provide the background information and tools needed to create a structure for performing and reporting assessments and for utilizing the adopter surveys. During a customized training for ARL, ASPCA facilitators worked directly with 12 shelter staff members, performing a dress rehearsal for the program launch. The ARL officially kicked off Meet Your Match™ the day after their onsite training.

### 4. Remember: It pays to advertise.

The ARL advertised their new program in multiple ways. The Flash media presentation promotes and explains the Meet Your Match™ program to visitors of the ARL website. The program was also highlighted in the ARL’s newsletter, “The Inside Scoop.” ARL found that, in addition to preparing the public for a new adoption experience, the launch of a positive and fun program like Meet Your Match™ makes for great press.

### 5. Check in with yourselves.

The ARL team found it was necessary and helpful to regularly take stock of how the program was going and whether or not they were staying on track. As part of the customized training, facilitators from the ASPCA returned 6-8 weeks after the program’s launch to help staff work out kinks they’d come across during implementation.

ARL offered the following example of the importance of evaluation: The follow-up team found that ARL staff members were not consistently asking potential adopters to bring resident dogs to meet new dogs, which is part of the Meet Your Match™ program. Once they put this into action, the shelter saw a decrease in new dog/resident dog conflicts.

## Results

### The Numbers

Three months prior to starting Meet Your Match™, the ARL had an 8% return rate for adoptions. Interestingly, 6 months into the program, the return rate increased to 12%. However by months 7, 8, and 9, returns dropped to 5%.

ARL leaders speculate that the initial increase in returns may reflect the different dynamic between adopter and adoption counselor inherent in Meet Your Match™. At the same time, ARL was re-instituting a follow-up program, which extended communication with adopters. It is possible that adopters felt more comfortable bringing an animal back to the shelter, feeling less likely to be judged or blamed.

While formal public surveys have not been done, the shelter reports more positive public interactions and few “I need to speak to the manager” moments. Also, staff members are denying fewer adoptions—not because they have become less cautious, but because the Meet Your Match™ program guides adopters to make smarter choices.

The rate of dog adoptions for the first 11 months of the program increased by 3% over the previous 11 month period.

### Critical Factors

- Addressing staff concerns about the organization’s new approach to adoptions

- Widespread attendance at the Meet Your Match™ seminar and two way communications amongst ARL staff members and leadership
- Flexible and dedicated staff members who were willing to take a plunge and work extra hard at the outset because they believed in the benefits offered by the program

## How They Feel About What They Did

They cannot imagine going back to their former adoption procedures. This is especially significant given that members of ARL staff at first had concerns about being able to let go of what they now see as their perceived control over adoptions.

Meet Your Match™ is not just another way of controlling adoptions. By design, this program relies on and thereby fosters a better relationship between the shelter and its community. The public appreciates and understands the shelter's user friendly efforts to find them the best companion possible.

## Their Next Steps

The ARL became a test site for the Meet Your Match™ Feline-ality Adoption Program, and now uses Feline-ality for all its cat adoptions.

## Some Words of Wisdom

### What Worked

ARL leaders name staff enthusiasm as the greatest factor for the success of their Meet Your Match™ program. Staff members not only took a chance on a new approach, they devoted themselves to its success. They were rewarded with a decrease in adoption returns, many more positive interactions with the public, and ultimately --less stress for themselves.

### Be Prepared For

In addition to the behavior and temperament evaluation prior to adoption, Meet Your Match™ requires two additional components—the Canine-ality or Puppy-ality assessment and the adopter survey. These are on top of an already busy shelter schedule. What was once a jammed pack day became a jammed pack day run with military precision. Ongoing communication between kennel and adoption staff becomes more important than ever. This was challenging but surmountable due to the energy and motivation of the ARL team.

Even welcome changes are challenging. The ARL was moving from a traditional adoption program based on rigid screening of adoptive parents by shelter counselors, to a program that relies on assessment tools and emphasizes customer service and two-way communications. Even after training, staff members were having a tough time letting go of long-held adoption requirements. These requirements included landlord checks, vet checks, and requiring all pets in the home to be spayed or neutered.

Staff members and supervisors teamed up to take an honest look at what they were holding on to, why, and whether or not they should continue. Together they worked out new policies aimed at maximizing shelter animals' potential to be re-homed. For example:

- They let go of requiring all animals in a home to be altered prior to adoption approval. Now, the ARL focuses on the fact that the animal they are placing is sterilized, and they take the opportunity to discuss their spay/neuter assistance program with those folks who have intact animals at home.
- In the past, the ARL required pet owners who had gone through their low-income spay/neuter program to wait one year before adopting a new pet from the shelter. Through discussion, team members conceded that this policy was punishing people for doing the right thing. As a result they suspended the year requirement if it seems the client is now in a position to provide for a pet. At the same time, staff members maintain the ability to make extra inquiries

(i.e. with veterinarians or landlords) if warranted. These changes have been embraced as improvements by staff and by the adopting public.

The ARL offers a few additional suggestions to help things move more smoothly.

- Keep all of the materials related to color coding of dogs (kennel cards) and people (guest passes) organized and in a central location. Adoption staff code adopter surveys and provide guest passes, so the adoption desk works best. This is also a good location for the laminator.
- Kennel staff struggled with logistics of proper signage on dogs in their adoption ward. Too many papers and forms can be overwhelming and confusing because they are written in terms or codes the public doesn't always understand. Only two pieces of information are kept on the kennels, the color coded cage card and the individual animal's "web story." This creates a uniform appearance and provides adopters with useful information in a digestible format. All supplemental paperwork including medical forms, behavior evaluations, and Meet Your Match™ assessments are kept in each animal's personal folder (just like you have a folder at your doctor's office).
- A staff member with a knack for writing prepares short stories on each animal. Each story is posted on the ARL website with the animal's photo. In the shelter, the stories are posted with the Meet Your Match™ cage card on the animal's kennel/cage. These stories act as a unique way to tell adopters what is known about each animal based on input from owners and shelter staff.

## Animal Refuge League of Greater Portland: Thumbnail Sketch

Animal Refuge League of Greater Portland  
449 Stroudwater Street  
Westbrook, ME 04092

<http://www.arlgp.org/>



The mission of the Animal Refuge League (ARL) is to provide temporary care and shelter for stray, abandoned, and relinquished animals, and to place as many as possible into responsible and caring homes. The ARL also works to create awareness and support for the humane treatment of all animals and to end animal overpopulation through education and the promotion of spaying and neutering.

### Staff

19 full time and 1 part time staff members:

- Management level positions: 4
- Administrative: 1
- Department coordinators: 4
- Visitor Services department: 3
- Animal Care Technicians: 6
- Adoption counselors\*: 6-7

\*Adoption counselors include Animal Care Technicians and Visitor Services staff who work with animals and the public.

### Operating Budget

\$1.41 million

### Business Type

501(c) 3 private, non-profit corporation