



Town Lake Animal Center: Placement Partners Program



Compiled by ASPCA® and distributed to the field, August 2008.
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Town Lake Animal Center Placement Partners Program

Building partnerships based on fairness and trust to save animal lives



Recognizing the critical role that animal rescues and other animal sheltering organizations can play in saving homeless animals, the Town Lake Animal Center (TLAC) in Austin, Texas, brought representatives from these organizations together to develop a highly structured, mutually agreed-upon transfer program. The Placement Partners program manages transfers of animals from the TLAC municipal facility to some 85 pre-approved partners.

Stats

The Placement Partners program focuses on quality of placement rather than quantity of placements. Even so, the number of animals transferred to partner organizations has increased from 1,440 in FY 1999 to 3,388 in FY 2007.

In all, 26,315 animals have been transferred to other agencies since 1999. Currently, 85 partner agencies participate in the program.

How Cool is That?

We're impressed with the collaborative spirit that enabled TLAC and area rescues to develop a transfer program that enthusiastically incorporates legitimate animal rescues and sheltering organizations as life-saving partners. As designed, the program also protects animals in the municipal facility from well-meaning rescuers who may not be able to provide appropriate care.

And did we mention that there are 85 partners in the program?

Adopt or Adapt

TLAC has generously shared the mechanics for running a Placement Partners program and well as Microsoft Word documents of their guidelines and applications. They stress, however, the need for a consensus building process to get the rescue and sheltering community invested. In addition, you will need to adjust their materials for local conditions and concerns.

Who They Are and What They Do



Town Lake Animal Center (TLAC) is a municipal open-intake facility in Central Texas. A division of the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department, TLAC provides shelter to more than 23,000 animals each year. TLAC also provides animal control services to all of the city of Austin and Travis County.

Order Out of Chaos

When Dorinda Pulliam took over as director of the Town Lake Animal Center, she inherited a “chaotic” situation. Provisions had been made to release animals to rescue groups, and staff had been hired to administer the program. However, no clear standards had been developed. The result, Pulliam states, was a “feeding frenzy of rescuing” without adequate programming in place to safeguard the animals.

The number of transfers shot up but, according to Pulliam, “we had no idea where those animals were going or what was happening to them.” After one rescue group was investigated for animal cruelty, drawing criticism to TLAC for releasing animals to their care, Pulliam began an investigation and discovered that there were widespread problems at receiving agencies:

- Animals were living in overcrowded conditions.
- There was often a lack of medical care for sick or injured animals.
- Animals were routinely being released intact.

“I was creating my own problems,” Pulliam remarks. “We realized that the quality of placement needed to be as high a priority as the saving of a life.” Pulliam determined that TLAC had to find a way to ensure that the groups they were working with were “doing the right thing” by their animals. But first, Pulliam says, “we had to determine what the right thing was.”

A Program Built on Consensus

After two years of consensus-building with representatives from rescues and other interested parties, TLAC launched the Placement Partners Program in 2006. Here’s how it works:

- Any agency wishing to pull animals from TLAC must complete a detailed application that includes questions about experience, housing, medical care, behavior modification capabilities, adoption programs, and financial stability.
- Partners must agree to an inspection as part of the application process.
- Approved agencies agree to abide by very specific guidelines covering everything from housing standards and medical care to micro-chipping and sterilization.

Currently, TLAC works with approximately 85 groups, including rescues, sheltering organizations, and working dog programs. There are no firm guidelines about the structure of the groups. According to Pulliam, “no particular organizational structure guarantees that a group is doing the right thing. Adherence to standards defines the good guys.”

For all animals except those in the working dogs programs, re-homing is the goal. Animals are transferred to sanctuaries only in very rare circumstances. Agencies learn about available animals by viewing the TLAC website, which includes every animal in the system, or by visiting the shelter. The groups can “express interest” in an animal but final decisions are made by TLAC Rescue Coordinators based on what they perceive as the best option for each animal. At times, TLAC staff will push animals they feel need to get out of the shelter; however, the impetus generally comes from the groups wishing to pull animals.

Partners pay a \$20 fee for each animal pulled from the shelter. In return, they receive the same package adopters receive - a microchip, appropriate vaccinations, internal and external parasite control, heartworm and feline leukemia testing. The partners are responsible for having intact animals altered and for having animals temperament tested before re-homing them. TLAC is to be notified of the final disposition of all transferred animals.

Ingredients and Prep Work

People

According to Pulliam, it's essential to have qualified staff who are able to think independently and deal with tough issues to administer a Placement Partners Program. The TLAC program is managed by two full time Rescue Coordinators who are considered administrators and are paid at that level. Pulliam explains that the coordinators do much more than handle the nuts and bolts of over 3,000 transfers a year. In addition, they are the ones who manage the relationships with the partner organizations. "Sometimes, the groups do run amuck," Pulliam says. "You have to have someone with the ability to rein them back in."

Timeline

According to Pulliam, it took "two long years" to create the Placement Partners Program.

Upfront Costs

Aside from the salaries of the two administrative-level Rescue Coordinators and the creation of considerable paperwork, there were no major costs associated with this launching this program.

Step by Step

Step 1: Bring all interested parties together.

Pulliam began by convening a meeting of all interested parties with the goal of building consensus around guidelines and processes for transferring animals from TLAC. In addition to representatives from "a good mix" of fostering and sheltering organizations, Pulliam invited "anyone who had an opinion."

That included not only those involved with saving homeless animals but also those who were seeing "the other side of rescue" – veterinarians, trainers, behaviorists and others who worked with re-homed animals. According to Pulliam, the initial meeting was huge, but the group eventually dwindled to approximately 15 people who continued to meet every other week for a four-month period.

Step 2: Examine the situation honestly.

The group began by identifying problems with the existing system – areas where there were opportunities for improvement. They then identified possible solutions. In order to allow participants to feel safe and avoid confrontations, they were able to list their concerns anonymously on sheets that were posted for general discussion.

Step 3: Focus on the solutions that will have the greatest impact.

In order to focus the discussion, Pulliam developed a scoring matrix that enabled the group to determine whether a proposed solution would have minor, moderate, or major impact. They then focused on the 10 – 15 solutions that would have major impact.

Step 4: Develop tools to implement the solutions.

According to Pulliam, this was by far the hardest part. After the group had zeroed in on the most impactful solutions, she then went away and considered, in detail, how each would be implemented.

For example, requiring inspections as part of the application process was one of the solutions. Pulliam had to figure out just how that would work – who would do it, when and how.

Documents such as applications, criteria for evaluating applications, and guidelines for a variety of kinds of participating groups were developed at this time. Next, the group came together to examine the documents. According to Pulliam, some ideas that looked good before didn't look as good when the participants realized that they would have to comply with the specifics. However, Pulliam says, the participants "were really invested" by this time, and just about everything was adopted.

Step 5: Implement the program.

Pulliam reports that there were very few bumps once the program was adopted. She attributes that to the painstaking process used to develop the guidelines.

Results

The Numbers

The number of animals transferred to other agencies rose dramatically (from 2,079 to 4,362) in FY2001, the year of the "feeding frenzy of rescuing." That, however, was the year when it became evident that there were serious problems with some of the rescues and that animals were being put at risk. Since the adoption of the standards, the number of transfers has leveled out at a little over 3,000 per year.

According to Pulliam, the program is important because it stresses quality rather than quantity. By establishing guidelines and an approval process, TLAC can now ensure that any group they are working with is legitimate, financially stable, and able to provide appropriate care.

Critical Factors

- A leader who has the ability to build consensus among the interested groups.

A former human resources professional and experienced consensus builder, Pulliam brought in an outside facilitator to handle the first group meeting but then took over the facilitation herself.

- Involving anyone who had an opinion.

According to Pulliam, it made the process take longer, but it was worth it. Giving everyone a voice made it clear that it wasn't just TLAC or Pulliam that had concerns. Many groups and individuals felt that changes had to be made. Later, when it became time to start implementing the program and groups realized they were actually going to have to comply, there was some resistance. It helped, Pulliam said, when she could remind them that they were involved in developing the guidelines. "I say that a lot," Pulliam remarked.

- Trust.

Before this process started, Pulliam had earned the trust of the rescues by trying always to do anything she said she would do.

- Respect.

Pulliam stresses the importance of treating the rescue groups as honored, valued customers, nurturing the relationships and acknowledging the good work they do.

Thinking Outside the Box

It took courage to look honestly at the situation and accept the fact that the transfer numbers in FY 2001 weren't telling an honest story. Stressing the quality of each transfer instead of simply touting an increase in transfer numbers put the interest of the animals above the interest of the facility.

Including agencies that use working dogs in the program opened up new options for the animals. According to Pulliam, approved organizations include:

- Texas Hearing and Service Dogs
- Government agencies that use sniffing dogs
- Security companies that look for high energy dogs

Pulliam is particularly proud of the fact that the Austin police department has stopped buying K-9s and now gets all their dogs from the shelter.

Their Next Steps

According to Pulliam, TLAC continues to wrestle with quality control. She acknowledges that there is never enough time to monitor all the groups and make sure all the guidelines are being followed.

In order to help the Placement Partners do their work better, TLAC launched a new Professional Development series. The idea is to bring the partners together to learn from each other and from outside experts more about issues that impact their work with the animals. Pulliam acknowledges, however, that it's hard to get them together because they are all so busy caring for their animals.

Words of Wisdom

What Worked

- Opening up the discussions to everyone with an opinion, including "the angry people." Pulliam's advice: "Always invite the angry people or they'll shoot the system down later on."
- Allowing people to list perceived problems and recommend solutions anonymously at first. According to Pulliam, "everyone had seen bad stuff but most wouldn't say it in front of each other." Pulliam didn't want the meetings to become "blood baths" between groups and yet she wanted people to be honest about what they had seen going on and what would have to be done to correct the situation.

For example, many of the rescue people would have been hesitant to recommend inspections because of the wrath they would draw from other groups. Allowing them to suggest that anonymously solved the problem.

Be Prepared For

- Pulliam believes it's very important to be open to working with rescue groups. At the same time, she advises establishing criteria before releasing any animals. According to Pulliam, making the rules up front will ensure the safety of the animals, define the relationship, and avoid hurt feelings down the line. "Rescuers can be distrusting," Pulliam says, "and changing the rules after they've been established can break the trust."
- Just when you think everything is under control, someone can throw a wrench. After nine months of work, TLAC was ready to implement the program. That's when the city's Animal Advisory Commission, a state mandated commission that recommends policies to city council, stepped in with some concerns. That group made only minor changes. However, implementation was delayed for a year and a half, destroying much of the momentum that had been generated during the planning and stakeholder process. When they finally approved the plan, Pulliam had to get everyone re-engaged.

- According to Pulliam, a few groups will “scream and yell,” threaten not to pull animals anymore and even accuse you of wanting to kill all the animals. Pulliam found, however, that, in the end, most groups came around and started playing by the rules. “They really are dedicated to the animals,” she says.
- It is very important, Pulliam says, to make it clear from the beginning that your staff members make the final decision about the disposition of every single animal. Her advice: “The rescue groups have to understand that they are expressing interest, not claiming ownership. Never let it go down that path because you will eventually need to make a decision that they don't like. When you do, the affected group will see that as a breaking of the trust.”
- The hardest thing for the groups is the amount of paperwork – in particular the required proof that they have had animals sterilized within 90 days of transfer. According to Pulliam, TLAC has never had to “fire” a group for non-compliance, but they have had to work with some groups to help them into compliance. Pulliam believes that this requirement is important, not just because the animals must be sterilized before re-homing, but also because it is a good barometer of the organization's financial stability and ability to provide proper care for the animals.

Town Lake Animal Center: Thumbnail Sketch

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Staff

81.5 full-time equivalent staff

Operating Budget

\$5 million a year

Business Type

Municipal animal control