Using Technology to Facilitate Behavior Treatments

There were many lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, including how to creatively leverage technology to support the behavioral health of sheltered animals housed both in a shelter and foster homes. At the ASPCA Adoption Center in NYC, our staff identified ways that technology can support the behavioral health of sheltered animals during times of reduced staffing or when staff must work remotely.

Technology Tips for Animal Shelter

- Use remote treat dispensers that allow staff to deploy rewards from off-site.
- Install wi-fi cameras that make it possible to see what animals are doing when staff is not present.
- Utilize social media and video conferencing to ensure staff and volunteers are up-to-date and engaged about shelter animal behavior support and animal care
- During times of reduced or remote staffing or volunteer support, preemptively set up remote treat dispensers in kennels typically utilized with challenging intakes and positioned Wi-Fi cameras to monitor those kennels.
- Use video conferencing for virtual coaching sessions for staff, volunteers, and foster caregivers to assist with implementation of behavior support (e.g., enrichment, training, and troubleshooting problem behavior).
- Host a virtual classroom where members of the behavior team demonstrate basic training and behavior modification techniques.
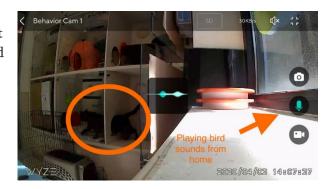
Remote treat dispensers

Our Behavior Team deploys remote treat dispensers during the normal course of operations to help with modifying some of the challenging behaviors in the canine population, using a treatment protocol based on counter conditioning. These behaviors are usually the result of shelter stress, and often manifest as difficulty returning to the kennel, persistently attempting to follow staff members out of the kennel, and/or reacting with aggressive behaviors toward either dogs or people passing their kennel. Staff are able to remotely dispense treats to dogs to reward appropriate behaviors in their kennel.

Wi-Fi cameras

Inexpensive cameras are being used to remotely monitor animals of particular concern, including quality-of-life concerns and animal displaying aggression toward staff. We have monitored animals exhibiting behaviors consistent with isolation-related anxiety or stereotypy, as well as fearful animals who primarily hide with minimal instances of "normal" behavior during operating hours.

We use a Wi-Fi camera to remotely monitor the behavior and welfare of a fearful and defensive cat recently rescued from a hoarding case. We've used the camera with this particular cat in a variety of ways, including recording a treatment with a behavior specialist to create staff training videos and playing bird sounds from home to offer him extra enrichment in his habitat. Remote monitoring allows us to gather a more complete picture of the monitored animal's day-to-day behavior and welfare.

We used Wyze Cams and Pet Tutors. Other examples of easily-accessible tech alternative items include smartphones, Treat & Trains, and Furbos.

Social media & video conferencing

Social media is a great way to keep staff and volunteers engaged with the shelter and its animals. At the ASPCA, we primarily use WorkPlace, a division of Facebook, to engage with other staff members. The Behavior Team has created two successful groups to facilitate interdepartmental interactions. One group organizes an obedience class where staff choose and bring a shelter dog to learn basic obedience cues. This group is typically used to indicate which dogs are approved for class and post videos of staff training the dogs during class. At times, the group has been used to post virtual lessons instructed by our behavior staff to facilitate remote learning. The second group offers general tips and tricks from the behavior team on a variety of subjects, including feline behavior. In addition, our fosters and foster team utilize a private Facebook group to stay connected, to ask and answer questions, and share experiences. Video conferencing is a fantastic and easy way for staff and volunteers, both remote and onsite, to interface.

What Other Shelters Can Do

Shelters that rely heavily on volunteers to manage the behavioral well-being of animals in their care may be having a particularly difficult time when volunteers are not able to report in. Senior handlers with the most experience may not always be available in person due to limited staffing. Remote training offers these individuals the ability to still provide support to staffers who are onsite.

The ASPCA uses Wyze Cams and Pet Tutors, other examples of easily accessible tech alternative item's include smartphones, Treat & Trains, Furbos, FaceTime, or video chats through Facebook Messenger, which can also help with real-time communication, with the added benefit of remote staff or volunteers being able to witness the animal's behavior directly, reducing discrepancies in behavior reporting. All shelters using recording technology should ensure people give permission to be recorded and be sure to inform staff and volunteers that the equipment is present. We highly suggest placing signs on all rooms or kennels to alert staff that they may be viewed or recorded.

Video conferencing can be utilized to allow remote staff to train staff physically present in the shelter on providing easy and enriching interactions with animals in the shelter or in foster.

Local dog trainers unable to see clients in person may be looking for opportunities to support their communities as they shelter in place. Shelters that send out a call for virtual support may receive numerous responses from experienced professionals who could then be assigned to support the welfare of the shelter's most compromised dogs and cats. These virtual collaborations may have the added benefit of leading to lasting relationships in the future.