Using Technology to Facilitate Behavior Treatments

The current health crisis has affected every shelter in the United States, resulting in low staffing due to illness or social distancing precautions and increased shelter populations as pet owners become ill or otherwise unable to care for their pets. At the ASPCA Adoption Center in NYC, where COVID-19 has hit the United States particularly hard, our staff has turned to technology to fill some of the gaps.

Tech We're Using

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 in 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.

Wi-Fi cameras

Inexpensive cameras are being used to remotely monitor animals of particular concern, including quality of life concerns and aggression to 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 are currently using 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.
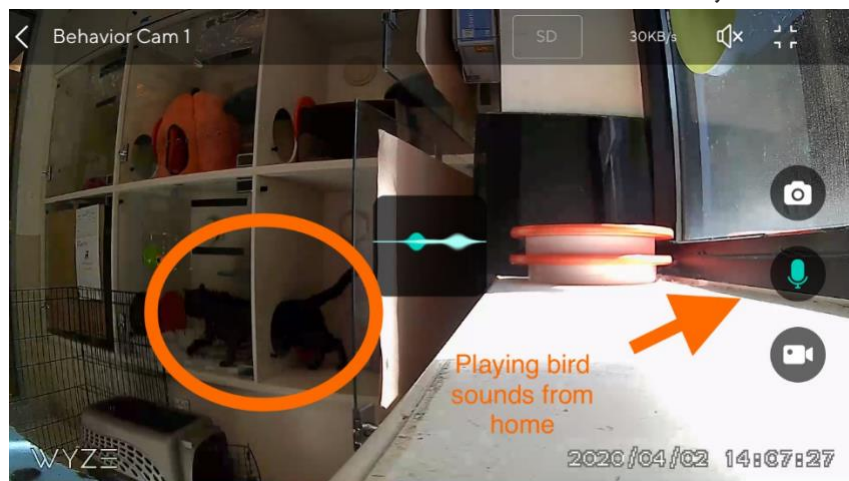
Social media & video conferencing

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.

Corinne Fritzell to *Virtual* Group Obedience Class
March 31 at 5:59 PM · Add Topics ·

Hi Team! Check out our very first video for our Virtual Obedience Class! Follow along to learn how to teach your personal dogs or your foster dogs the Touch and Look cues. Check back tomorrow for a video on working with these cues with distractions!

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COVID-19 Change-Ups

Our shelter, like many others, has been operating without volunteer assistance and with a greatly reduced staff presence due to the current pandemic. To ensure that animals in our care are receiving the same high quality behavioral and welfare support that they would under usual circumstances, we've preemptively set up remote treat dispensers in kennels typically utilized with challenging intakes and positioned our wifi cameras to monitor those kennels. This new setup ensures that if any animal--new intakes or animals in the existing population--present challenging behaviors, daily care staff who continue reporting each day are fully supported by our behavior team as we work offsite. This provides our team the ability to guide interactions with these animals, supporting our onsite staff with immediate assistance and feedback when necessary.

Our Behavior Team has prepared easy-to-follow behavior treatment and management plans for onsite staff to implement when or if animals exhibit concerning behaviors, and easy-to-follow plans for arrival of new intakes. Video calls enable us to provide virtual coaching sessions to assist staff with implementation of these plans. We've also started

offering a virtual classroom, where members of the behavior team demonstrate basic obedience cues like "look" or "sit," and encourage staff to practice these cues themselves.

Teaching staff how to reinforce behaviors like "auto-sits" (encouraging dogs to sit without being prompted), maintaining all four feet on the floor, hand targeting, and remaining quiet can make a great difference in quality of life for our dogs on site. Training staff to teach hand targeting and offer drive-by treats can help shy or fearful animals come out of their shells. We've also created easy-to-follow instructions for enrichment activities like "find it", where dogs hunt for hidden treats, or foraging play, where cats hunt down scattered treats. This virtual support and knowledge sharing can empower staff in their ability to help manage and improve an animal's welfare.

What Other Shelters Can Do

Shelters that rely heavily on volunteers to manage the behavioral well-being for animals in their care may be having a particularly difficult time in recent days 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.

We are currently using Wyze Cams and Pet Tutors, other examples of easily accessible tech alternative item's include smartphones, Treat & Trains, and Furbos. FaceTime or video chats through Facebook Messenger 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.