



DAKIN PIONEER VALLEY
HUMANE SOCIETY

Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society:

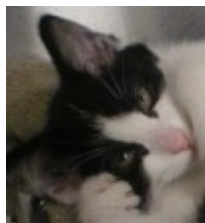
Progressive Adoptions that Serve People



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Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society

Progressive adoptions that serve pets and people



Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society, a small shelter in rural Leverett, MA, recognizes that serving people well is critical to serving the animals in their care. The shelter made a decision to create "a culture of understanding and respect" for the human customers, coworkers, and volunteers who come to the shelter.

A key element of this cultural shift is their open adoption program, in which communication with potential adopters is congenial and collaborative rather than bureaucratic and rule-bound.

Stats

Their emphasis on customer care has made them the busiest animal shelter in their region in less than 10 years.

They continue to receive terrific feedback about clients' experience with Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society.

Their adoption numbers have soared to record heights in the past 3 years (without any increase in the return rate). Part of this is due to more outreach efforts and staff specifically devoted to outreach, but part of it is due to a change in shelter culture that began about 4 years ago.

How Cool is That?

At ASPCA® National Outreach, we're impressed by Dakin's grasp of the "big picture": they understand that animal welfare goes beyond treating animals well. Dakin Executive Director Leslie Harris says it very well: "If we aren't able to help humans, we won't be able to help animals. It's that simple."

Adopt or Adapt

You don't have to be a big shelter to think big, as this modest shelter's experience clearly shows. Dakin has taken advantage of the access to information and ideas offered by the internet to find new ways of doing things. One helpful model for them was the Humane Society of Boulder Valley, CO, which has numerous progressive programs, including an open adoption program profiled by ASPCA® National Outreach.

Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society: The Whole Story



The Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society believes that in order to help animals, they need to help their people.

Their adoption process isn't governed by the standard "application/interview" process used by traditional shelters. Instead, they use a "pets and people profile" designed to gather basic information from the humans, but most of the process is conversational.

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Who They Are and What They Do

Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society, Leverett, MA
Leslie Harris, Executive Director

Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society cares for approximately 1200 animals per year at its shelter and provides low-cost spay/neuter services to approximately 1000 more animals in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts. Their objective in moving to a more open adoption process is to put the right people together with the right animals while providing exceptional customer service. They have also committed to making adoption follow-up—counseling, support, and accepting their own returns part of the adoption process.

The changes in the adoption process were part of a larger organization shift to create a culture within the shelter "that celebrates relationships with humans (clients, volunteers, each other) as much as it does relationships with cats and dogs."

Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

The great news about the prerequisites for implementing an open adoption process in your shelter is that lots of money, people, and material resources aren't necessary to make it happen. For Dakin, two critical prerequisites were:

- A willingness to use their own creativity and energy to change the way they did things.
- The creation of a "culture of understanding and respect" within the organization that can then extend to the people the shelter serves

Timeline

The adoption process that is in place today took about two years to plan and implement. They can already see that the process will continue to evolve as they meet new needs or incorporate new ideas.

Step by Step

1. Have a series of discussions about where staff members were in their own thinking and behaviors 10-15 years ago.

According to Leslie Harris, candid answers to questions like the following helped staff see potential adopters in a more sympathetic light:

- Did we allow our animals to breed?
- Did we let our dogs run off leash?
- Did we put ID tags on our cats?
- Was there a time when we weren't perfect animal lovers, and if so, what changed us? Was it being called ignorant or cruel? Or was it being directed to a great book or being told of another's enlightenment regarding the treatment of animals in their care?

These discussions became the starting point for getting the buy-in of adoption staff for making changes to both the adoption process and the culture of the organization itself.

2. Understand the role people play in the organization's existence and therefore in the lives of the animals in its care.

As a result of their discussions, the Dakin staff "have a better understanding of the role people play in the very existence of our shelter. As a private, nonprofit shelter, we rely on the good graces and generous donations of the people who use or appreciate our services. Mistreating them will get us nowhere," says Leslie Harris.

"And if we aren't able to help humans, we won't be able to help other animals. It's that simple."

3. Identify current practices that may work against creating a culture of respect.

Dakin previously had policies such as insisting on proof of home ownership and making adopters wait 2 days before allowing them to take a dog home. Harris says, "In reality, such measures mean you insult far more terrific people while you are trying to 'catch' the rare person doing the wrong thing."

4. Seek out models for better practices.

The internet is a wonderful resource for models, ideas, and materials. Harris recommends joining some of the e-mail listservs (online "bulletin boards" where members can post questions to the group and read all the responses via e-mail) that are available for those in the animal welfare field. Members of those lists are willing to answer questions and share materials and experiences. In addition, many shelters and animal welfare organizations have websites that provide good information about the organizations' successful practices.

5. Adapt models and materials to fit your needs, and try them out.

Expect this to be an ongoing process. Harris recommends talking to people who use the forms about how they work and continuing to experiment. She says, "Anytime we see something we like, we find out more about it and adapt it to our use." For example, Dakin's Pets and People Profile is based on a similar document from the Humane Society of Boulder Valley. (HSBV's open adoption program is also profiled by ASPCA® National Outreach.)

6. Bring personnel policies in line with your customer service goals and the culture you want to create.

Dakin's original personnel policy was about 4 pages long and covered only the nuts and bolts of employment, such as days off and comp time. They recently completed a new personnel policy that is 30 pages long. Harris says that in addition to covering the nuts and bolts, the new policy "also talks about how we expect staff to treat clients, animals, and one another. This gives managers more of a tool to address staff who are struggling to treat people well."

Results

The Numbers

Leslie Harris identified several key indicators of success due to the changes in their shelter culture and their more collaborative relationship with their customers:

- Their emphasis on customer care has made them the busiest animal shelter in their region in less than 10 years.
- They continue to receive terrific feedback about clients' experience with Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society compared to other shelters they have visited.
- Their adoption numbers have soared to record heights in the past 3 years (without any increase in the return rate). Part of this is due to more outreach efforts and staff specifically devoted to outreach, but part of it is due to a change in shelter culture that began about 4 years ago.

While Dakin is a limited-admission animal shelter, they do keep track of the number of animals from their service area who are admitted to the open-admission shelter located in a city outside the service area. Those numbers continue to fall, due in part to Dakin's ability to help more animals through their adoption program or their prevention programs.

Critical Factors

Harris identifies her colleagues at Dakin as the critical factor in their success: "A great staff that has been willing to change or gracefully step aside so that change could happen. I've never met a harder working, more dedicated bunch of humans than those I've worked alongside in animal shelters over the years. They should all be dressed up in tights and capes and be featured in comic books!"

Thinking Outside the Box

- By abandoning rigid one-size-fits-all adoption criteria and replacing them with a more flexible, open-minded approach, Dakin has been able to set up programs that match people and animals with special circumstances:
- Their Seniors for Seniors program waives the adoption fees for dogs and cats over age 5 that are adopted by people over age 60. Mature animals who might otherwise languish in the shelter can more easily find loving homes with mature folks who still want an animal in their lives.
- Their Barn Cat program matches felines who aren't house-cat material (due to extreme independence, fear of people, or intractable litter-box issues) with people who have working barns or heated outbuildings where one or more of these cats can live.

Their Next Steps

Leslie Harris says that at Dakin, they see their programs as works in progress and are always open to new ways of doing things. They intend to revise their adoption contract and the release statement people sign when they bring in an animal. Dakin would like to make both forms more user-friendly.

Some Words of Wisdom

What Worked

- Getting the buy-in of staff to make changes
- Investing in the time and effort through meetings, discussions, and planning to enable staff to understand that better serving people ultimately serves the animals
- Using the internet to find models to try out

- Contacting colleagues at shelters whose materials they admire. Harris says, "I've NEVER met resistance from anyone in all the times we've asked for help. People are proud to share what they do. We are, after all, in this together!"
- Developing a personnel policy that makes conscientious treatment of other people an essential responsibility for all employees
- Establishing hiring criteria that emphasize great people skills

What Didn't

Dakin learned that retaining workers with great animal skills but very poor people skills interfered with the positive human culture they wanted to create.

Be Prepared For

Leslie Harris says that staff who were unwilling or unable to change the way they related to other people was their most serious challenge:

"Be patient. Be understanding. Change is hard for some people. Give your staff time and allow them to find their own way. At the same time, don't tolerate abusive behavior toward people any more than you would tolerate it toward animals.

"The biggest challenges we faced were staff who were jaded by their experiences. Part of this stems from the fact that these were staff members who came to the work because of their love of animals—and that continued to be their primary motivation. While that is laudable, those aren't necessarily the people with the best interpersonal skills. And we could watch that spill over into other human relationships—they would be short-tempered with volunteers or unfairly critical of their co-workers. But with non-humans, they were amazingly tender and patient.

"We needed to help these folks see a couple of things: that mistreating humans (whether clients or co-workers) was unacceptable; that they did not have a monopoly on a love of animals; that our work could not be done—in fact it would suffer if we did not treat people well. After a while, many of these employees came to see that this was not a culture they fit into. The standards for extraordinary customer service or mature relationships with co-workers were simply not something they were able to meet. They parted as amicably as possible, and we were able to replace them with people who met our hiring criteria of prioritizing great people skills on the principle that animal-handling experience could be learned."

Tell Us What You Think

With the information we've provided, can you start a program like this one in your organization? [Click here](#) to send an email to ASPCA[®] National Outreach with your feedback and questions.

Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society: Thumbnail Sketch

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The Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society works with their community to strengthen the bond between animals and people, enhancing the quality of their lives through compassionate sheltering, responsible adoptions, education, and community outreach.

Originally founded in 1982 as Friends of Amherst's Stray Animals by the late Janet Wilder Dakin and friends, the Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society opened its doors to the public in 1995. Today, the Dakin Pioneer Valley Humane Society serves more than 1,200 cats, dogs, puppies, and kittens at its small shelter in rural Leverett, Massachusetts. The shelter serves nearly 1,000 more animals and their people through its various free and low-cost spay/neuter assistance programs.

Their programs include:

- Adoptions (including Dixie Dogs, Retired Greyhounds, Barn Cat Relocation, Seniors for Seniors, Lonely Hearts Club)
- Spay/Neuter (including Feral Spay Sunday, King Fund, SNAP, and all shelter animals)
- Education (including humane education for schools, colleges, & adults)
- Outreach (including Safety Plan for Animals, Red Cross Service Partnership, Pet Visitation to Nursing Homes, Pet Food Bank, Companion Dog Training)

Staff

- Full-Time: Executive Director, Development Director, Humane Educator, Shelter Manager, Assistant Shelter Manager, 2 Adoption Counselors
- Part-Time: Bookkeeper, Administrative Assistant, 2 Adoption Counselors, 2 Animal Caregivers
- Lots and lots of volunteers!

Operating Budget

For FY 2005, \$492,000

Business Type

501(c) (3) nonprofit