

Dumb Friends League:
Maintaining a Successful Board

Compiled by ASPCA® and PetSmart Charities® and distributed to the field, September 2007. Visit the ASPCA® National Outreach website for animal welfare professionals: www.ASPCApro.org.

Dumb Friends League

Maintaining a Successful Board.



Founded in 1910, the Dumb Friends League is a privately-funded open admission humane society with two full-service shelters in Colorado: a recently renovated and expanded main facility in Denver and the newer Buddy Center in Castle Rock. In addition to providing shelter for more than 25,000 lost and abandoned animals each year, the League offers a full range of programs such as cruelty investigations, humane education, animal behavior assistance, foster care, pet-friendly housing referrals, and spay/neuter to help unwanted and abandoned animals in the seven county metro-Denver area.

Stats

In 2006, the Dumb Friends League:

- Saved 18,573 companion animals
- Achieved a placement rate for healthy animals of 99% as calculated per the standards set by the Asilomar Accords
- Reunited 2,736 lost pets with their people
- Spayed/neutered 8,448 animals prior to adoption
- Nurtured 3,226 animals in the Homes with Hearts foster care program
- Brought educational programs to 20,304 children
- Helped 973 unsocialized and/or timid shelter dogs through in-house behavior programs
- Provided animal training classes 20 times a week to 658 pet owners
- Provided free pet behavior help by phone and e-mail to 3,995 people
- Brought in 3,595 dogs and cats from other shelters for adoption
- Reached 2.5 million pet lovers through the Web site
- Investigated 1,686 new cases of animal cruelty and neglect

How Cool is That?

For the past 20 years, the Dumb Friends League has been governed by a highly functioning, dynamic board of directors. This strong and consistent leadership has enabled the League to become the largest animal welfare organization in the Rocky Mountain Region and a national leader in shelter operations, adoption programs, behavior and animal training, humane education and the development of strategies to keep animals in homes.

Adopt or Adapt

The Dumb Friends League Board of Directors can serve as a model for any organization seeking to improve board performance.

Dumb Friends League: The Whole Story



Dumb Friends League President/CEO Bob Rohde and Board Chair Judi Heady agree that the Dumb Friends League board is one of the best. Rohde said he'd give the board a 9 out of 10, holding back on a perfect score only because he believes that "you never achieve perfection" and there is always something that can be done a little better. When asked what they'd change, both Rohde and Heady had to pause before coming up with some minor changes they are considering to "tweak" board performance. In this profile, we look at both form and function to discover the secrets of their success.

[Who They Are And What They Do](#)
[Ingredients and Prep Work](#)
[Step by Step](#)
[Board Overview](#)
[Some Words of Wisdom](#)

Who They Are and What They Do

Dumb Friends League
Robert Rohde, President/CEO

The goal of the Dumb Friends League is to work with community partners to save the lives of all healthy and treatable dogs and cats (in accordance with the Asilomar Accords) and keep pets in good, lifelong homes. To that end, the League has increased the number of animals in foster care by 40% over the past three years, hosted adoption events, mounted public awareness campaigns, brought animals from other shelters to provide more opportunities for them, worked with placement partners to save dogs that need more help than they can provide, and helped reduce the number of unwanted pets born through the Colorado Pet Overpopulation Fund, SNIP program and the newly established Meow Mobile. In 2006, 99% of the Dumb Friends League's healthy animals and 82% of animals deemed treatable were adopted or referred to placement partners. In the metro-wide area, 65.7% of the animals received in 16 shelters were placed or reunited last year up from 38% in 1989. Through aggressive foster, adoption, education, and spay/neuter programs, the League hopes to stop euthanizing all of its healthy and treatable dogs and cats in 2007 and continue the positive trend across the metro area.

Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

- A strategic plan that the full board understands and supports. At the Dumb Friends League, all annual plans are based on a strategic plan that is reviewed and updated every five years in a two-day retreat of the full board and senior staff.
- Clear separation of board and staff responsibilities coupled with a culture of mutual respect. Board members do not volunteer in the shelter or foster animals, but they do get involved in specific projects at the request of senior staff. Board members get to know the staff personally and communication flows freely. According to Rohde, nothing is hidden from anybody. "We're all in it for the same thing," Heady remarked. "It's a friendly community."
- A strong CEO whom board members trust. Rohde has been President/CEO of the Dumb Friends League since 1977. According to Heady, the organization "has been privileged to have consistent strong leadership. We have lots of faith in (Rohde). He has no hidden agenda."

Timeline

According to Rohde, when he became President/CEO in 1977, the Dumb Friends League had a paid staff of only 28 people and the board was highly involved in day-to-day operations, even approving

every expenditure. Within ten years, however, the board had become the high functioning governing board it remains today.

Step by Step

1. Establish term limits

According to Rohde, this was the most important element in making it possible for the Dumb Friends League board to evolve to its present state. Before term limits, he recalls, one member had been in place for 53 years and, although she was a remarkable woman, to a degree everyone deferred to her on all important matters, stunting the growth of the board as a whole. Board members are now elected for an initial three year-term and may be elected for a second three-year term. After the second term, members must leave the board for at least one year. They may then be re-elected for a final three-year term.

2. Focus on bringing in members with the expertise to meet specific identified needs.

The Dumb Friends League Board Governance Committee works from a matrix that lays out existing areas of expertise and areas where expertise is needed. Committee members then recruit individuals who will bring specific knowledge and skills to the table. Currently, the following areas of expertise are represented on the board: accounting/finance, administration, banking and trust management, business and corporate education, fundraising, human resources, insurance/risk management, investments, law, marketing, media, public relations, real estate, retail, strategic planning and non-profit management.

3. Establish a very strong program of board education.

According to Heady and Rohde, the Dumb Friends League's thorough orientation of new members and clear statement of expectations virtually eliminate problems down the line. New board members sign off on an 80 page manual, updated annually, that includes information on everything from board responsibilities and expectations to League internal policies and position statements on animal welfare issues. There is even a glossary since, as Rohde explains, "every organization has its own terminology". Members attend a six hour orientation during which Rohde, senior staff members, and the chair of the governance committee review every part of the manual. Financial statements and other reports are also reviewed to insure that all members know how to read and interpret them. Finally, each new board member is assigned a mentor an experienced board member who keeps the new member under wing through the first few meetings and remains available to answer questions. According to Rohde and Heady, the education program works so well that there is no need for a formal system to evaluate members' performance. Instead, if a member is getting out of line, others will step in to the correct the situation.

Board Overview

Board Basics

Here's what the Dumb Friends League board looks like:

Size: not less than 15 members or more than 30

President/CEO role: member of the board with no vote

Terms: two three year terms with a final three years possible after a year off. Emeritus status may be granted to highly qualified members who have held three terms.

Meetings: Ten meetings per year. 60-90 minutes long. Run by the board chair. Chair and President/CEO prepare agenda.

Committees: Executive, governance, development, finance & administration, audit

Committee Structure: Members of the governance and audit committees are elected by the board as a whole. Members of other committees are appointed by the board chair. Members are invited to state committee preferences but are generally happy to serve where most needed. Only the audit committee has members who are not board members.

Board focus: business affairs of the organization, strategic planning, policy and fund-raising.

Board training: Extensive training with six hour orientation session to review board manual. Mentorship program.

Role in operations: The board develops the strategic plan and approves annual plans and annual budgets developed by staff to implement it. Board members do not volunteer in the shelter or foster.

Role in fundraising: All board members required to make annual $350 gift, though the average gift is actually much higher. Board members are actively involved in two annual letter-writing appeals. In addition, they assist development committee members and development staff through their personal influence in the community, involvement in special events, and cultivation of major donors.

Financial oversight: The finance & administration committee approves the budget. Board members receive management and financial reports and shelter statistics and the board treasurer gives an overview of the financial status at each board meeting.

Code of Ethics: Expectations included in the board manual

The Numbers

In 2001-2002, board members contributed $7 million and spearheaded the raising of an additional $7 million for shelter renovations in a campaign that came in a year ahead of schedule and exceeded the goal by $2 million.

Critical Factors

- An expectation that all board members will be actively involved in fundraising. The Dumb Friends League depends on the board to play an active role in raising 70% of the organization's $10 million budget. According to Heady, most League board members are comfortable asking for money. In addition to a minimum personal gift requirement of $350 (the average is much higher according to Rohde), members are expected to make phone calls or write personal notes thanking donors, write letters twice a year to solicit donations, reach out for major gifts, host cultivational events in their homes and attend donor recognition and fundraising events.
- Strong, working committees. According to Heady, most of the work of the board is done by the committees where the expertise lies to drill down through complex issues. Committee recommendations are nearly always approved by the full board. Rohde respects the fact that the committee members possess expertise in specific areas that he doesn't have and welcomes their advice. "It's what they do professionally," he remarks.
- A willingness to work for the common good. According to Heady and Rohde, League board members don't just look out for the interests of their own organization. Instead, they seek opportunities to work collaboratively.

Thinking Outside the Box

- Pocket Facts. To help board members represent the organization accurately, they are provided with Pocket Facts. As the name implies, these frequently updated handy reference guides fit in the pocket or handbag and contain up-to-date statistics, as well as clear policy statements, so board members are always informed.
- Fundraising manual. To encourage all board members to be actively involved in fund-raising, development staff provides them with a detailed manual containing a clear statement of expectations, including specific dates, and a variety of tools such as sample letters, conversation starters for prospect calls, and detailed instructions for hosting a cultivational event. "We try to make it as easy as possible," Heady remarked.

- Emeritus board members. In order to get around the down-side of term limits, the Dumb Friends League names highly qualified individuals who have termed out, but whose participation the organization doesn't want to lose, as emeritus board members. These members attend all board meetings and remain actively involved in the work of the board.

How They Feel About What They Did

Both Heady and Rohde express real pride and confidence in the way the board functions and the good work that enables the organization to do for the animals and the community.

Their Next Steps

The board continues to struggle with issues of diversity is working towards making a closer match to the demographics of the community. According to Rohde, it's a problem for non-profit boards in general.

Some Words of Wisdom

What Works

- The clear expectations established during the board education process make it possible for Rohde to seek the advice of board members with expertise in particular areas without fear that they will get overly involved in operations. "The roles are very clear," Rohde remarked. "It's a partnership. If you don't understand that, you're not going to be successful".
- Mini-presentations at board meetings by staff members. According to Heady, the presentations give recognition to staff, provide an excellent opportunity for board members and staff to interact, and keep board members informed about Dumb Friends League programs.
- WAGS award. At each regular meeting, the board presents a League employee with the WAGS (We Appreciate Great Service) award. The employee then has the opportunity to tell the board about his or her work.

Be Prepared For

The continuing struggle to find good people on both the board and management side.

Your Next Steps

With the information we've provided, can you start a program like this one in your organization? Click here to send an e-mail to ASPCA® National Outreach with your feedback.

Dumb Friends League: Thumbnail Sketch

Dumb Friends League
2080 S. Quebec St.
Denver, CO 80231

Dumb Friends League - Buddy Center
4556 Castleton Court
Castle Rock, CO 80109

(303) 751-5772

http://www.ddfl.org



The Dumb Friends League is committed to the welfare of animals. To that end, the League provides shelter and care for animals; provides programs and services which enhance the bond between animals and people, and serves as an advocate for animals ... speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Staff

125 FTE paid staff

Approximately 550 active volunteers gave 129,000 hours in 2006.

Operating Budget

$9.5 million

Business Type

501(c)(3) nonprofit