



Humane Society of Boulder Valley: Pioneers in Open Adoptions



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Humane Society of Boulder Valley

Progressive adoption program



The Humane Society of Boulder Valley (HSBV) in Boulder, Colorado, has a comprehensive approach to adoptions that focuses on meeting the needs of animals and their new guardians. They have shifted their adoption process from screening clients according to rigid guidelines to matching clients and pets through an open conversation made possible by a climate of trust, communication and understanding. The new approach has come to be known as open adoptions.

Stats

HSBV implemented its open adoption process in 1997.

- By 1998, adoptions had increased by over 30%
- By 2004, adoptions were 67% higher than in 1997.

How Cool is That?

It's not just quantity, but the quality of the adoptions that's possible with the open adoption process. Increasing adoptions is only part of the benefit. By paying attention to the needs of both sides of the pet/guardian relationship in the adoption process, HSBV facilitates stronger connections. Due to its emphasis on customer service, HSBV's approach also improves community support.

Adopt or Adapt

Your organization doesn't have to be just like the Humane Society of Boulder Valley, nor must your community be like the city of Boulder. Open adoption programs are very successful in communities across the country in big cities such as Boston and Dallas, and in small, rural communities such as Leverett, MA, and Keene, NH. With organization-wide dedication and a willingness to embrace change, you can find your own way to better adoptions by following this effective planning process.

Humane Society of Boulder Valley: The Whole Story

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Who They Are and What They Do

Humane Society of Boulder Valley
Boulder, CO
Connie Howard, Director of Operations

HSBV operates a full-service open-admission shelter, a full-service veterinary clinic, and a Training & Behavior Center in the Boulder area. More than 7,600 lost, homeless, neglected, and abused pets were sheltered in 2004. The Veterinary Clinic provided 342 discounted treatments and over 180 surgeries; 3,163 clients were served by the Training & Behavior Center.

In 1997, HSBV pioneered a new approach to adoptions. What has become known as “open adoptions” refers to a friendly and collaborative discussion between shelter professionals and potential adopters.

The stunning success of their program gained national attention, spurring the first Adoption Forum in 1999, sponsored by PetSmart Charities and organized by American Humane Association. Animal welfare leaders from around the nation met to re-evaluate traditional adoption procedures. This profile describes the research, planning, and implementation of HSBV’s pioneering open adoptions program.

Note: ASPCA® National Outreach profiled HSBV in 2006. Jan McHugh-Smith, then CEO, provided a wealth of information and insight about becoming an open-adoptions shelter. Jan is now CEO of San Francisco SPCA.

Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

- Consensus and commitment to change from all levels of the organization or agency: the board or governing council, executive, administrative, and line staff, and volunteers
- Standard operating procedures that promote the physical, emotional, and behavioral health of adoption animals
- Access to resources that support the pet/guardian relationship, such as pet training tools and classes (These can come from within the organization or from services available in the community.)

People

HSBV found it effective to involve members of the board, staff, and volunteers in the planning process:

- Volunteers or staff members who are willing and able (through training and/or experience) to let go of their reliance on using adoption criteria to approve or deny potential adopters and instead engage in constructive discussions with potential adopters in order to facilitate good pet/people matches
- Volunteers or staff who are knowledgeable about internal and external resources that will help new pet guardians get through typical and sometimes inevitable “bumps,” such as behavior issues, pets and allergies, or pets and new babies (This knowledge can also be gained through training.)

Up-front Costs and Startup Funding

According to HSBV, a transition to an open adoption process doesn't have to involve extra costs:

- Depending on your organization's resources and expertise, you may need to invest in training for staff and volunteers to enhance their knowledge in order to provide the best guidance possible to adopters during the initial consultation, and following adoption. Training topics could include providing effective customer service, knowledge of breeds, training, and animal behavior.
- Some organizations may want to provide supplemental resources to new adopters, such as training classes.

While there may be fees associated with such staff and customer training, it may also be possible to arrange for in-kind donations from local professional trainers or to utilize free handouts and resources available from various national organizations.

Timeline

The time is in the planning. HSBV formed a committee to look at its adoption program in 1996. Work was completed by 1997. After the planning was completed and introduced to the staff, they switched to open adoptions immediately.

Step by Step

1. Assemble a planning team.

In 1996 HSBV knew they had to increase adoptions in both quantity and quality in order to maintain zero euthanasia of adoptable animals in an open admission facility. A planning committee made up of board members, staff, and volunteers formed to evaluate adoption related programs, suggest changes, and create a “map” to execute these changes.

HSBV found it was crucial to have everyone represented—those who set and oversee policies and procedures and those who carry them out. Equally important was each committee member's commitment to creating a safe atmosphere where everyone could honestly and respectfully share ideas and concerns in order to develop a new vision for the adoption program.

2. Identify strengths and weaknesses.

The planning team took a hard and honest look at the current adoption program. They looked at the adoption process itself and found that it was unreasonably lengthy (lasting up to two days), causing bottlenecks with cages and kennels. The team recognized that their adoption protocol was driven entirely from the perspective of shelter policy, with no consideration given to what the adopter brought to the table; adoptions procedures seemed designed to screen people out, instead of guiding successful matches.

Community feedback was essential to gain objective insight. HSBV realized that if they wanted to know about their adoption program, they had to be willing to hear the perspective of their adoption pool. Their opinion matters most when considering why people adopt and why they don't.

The HSBV team found that all they really had to do was listen—really listen-- to what the public was already telling them:

- Members of the public were turned off by a complex adoption procedure that didn't seem to take them into consideration.
- They complained that the process felt more like an interrogation, which put them on the defensive, discouraging the type of communication that is important in an adoption exchange.
- Despite having to jump through hoops to adopt a shelter animal, the public felt inadequately served, sometimes finding it hard to find out information on available animals.
- Ultimately, many adopters were leaving the shelter with a negative impression and going somewhere else to get a pet.

The HSBV team also took the important step of examining their strong points. They understood that their strengths would serve them through the change process:

- People who successfully adopted from the shelter generally turned out to be long term supporters and referred friends and relatives to the shelter.
- HSBV had a strong foundation that resulted in happy matches—as long as adopters met all the criteria.
- Staff members were dedicated, friendly, and committed to offering good customer service.
- HSBV had implemented temperament testing in the early 90s, so they could feel more confident about the safety of their adoptable animals.
- Effective shelter operating procedures, including cleaning protocols and disease prevention also ensured healthier adoptable animals.
- Because of the organization's commitment to end the euthanasia of adoptable animals, dogs and cats were staying in the shelter longer. In response to this, HSBV developed a strong focus on behavioral enrichment and in-shelter training. In addition to promoting better health, this also made adoptable animals even more desirable to the public and reduced post adoption behavior problems, which are a common cause of relinquishment.

The team realized that they had something special to offer—great animals at a highly competitive price.

Finally, a look at statistics showed that adoptions had been increasing each year, not as much as they could, they knew, but still an increase. The team identified marketing efforts for adoptable animals and mobile pet adoptions as effective strategies for increasing adoptions. By knowing where they stood, the committee was better able to identify where they wanted to go as well as what they had and what they would need to get there.

3. Look at the research.

Rather than following their "gut" or operating on assumptions, HSBV planners looked into a number of studies that provided insight into areas such as pet relinquishment and adoptions, especially those commissioned by the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy (NCPSP).

As a result, they realized that some of their long held adoption policies were unfounded:

- Despite the common suspicion that pets should never be given as gifts, one team of researchers found that guardians who had received a pet as a gift from friends or loved ones were less likely to surrender that animal to a shelter.
- Several studies revealed behavior problems as a primary threat to the human animal bond. This told HSBV that they needed to pay more attention to behavior issues at the shelter, including being prepared to offer assistance to new guardians after they'd taken their pet home.

4. Look in the mirror.

Strict and complex adoption guidelines come out of a desire to protect the animals. Adoption staff have such a short time to decide if a person or family could offer the perfect home for an animal that the temptation was to ask as many questions as possible to uncover any problems.

But does this work? HSBV staff took a closer look at their own lives and own pets and asked the difficult question—Would my shelter adopt to me? Following the letter of the law, the answer was often No. Shelter staff work long hours, don't get paid high salaries, often have multiple (special needs) pets, and don't always have a fenced-in-yard or even their landlord's approval for their companions. None of this diminishes their love or commitment to their pets. Was it the case that staff members were the only ones capable of responsibly caring for pets outside the bounds of their adoption criteria? HSBV realized that most "imperfect" members of the public were at least as qualified as they were to give a good home to an animal.

5. Tear down the walls.

HSBV wanted to provide for animals' needs as well as the needs and expectations of the guardians who would care for them. They considered all of the good homes they'd turned away in the past because someone, who was probably feeling on the defensive, didn't correctly respond to questions during a brief and rigid interview. Not only had they lost a home for a shelter animal, but they had also lost their ability to influence that pet guardian.

The intricate rules designed to protect animals didn't seem to be serving the animals' best interests. Instead of building a relationship with their community, which would lead to support and greater impact on their mission, they were building barriers and bad feelings. So HSBV decided change was necessary:

- Instead of an adoption interrogation, they would institute adoption consultations.
- Instead of question and answer, in which the shelter staff asked all the questions, there would be a conversation.
- And instead of avoiding risks to "protect" the animals, they would take risks for the sake of the animals.

6. Prepare for change.

HSBV prepared for the difficulties inherent in any cultural shift by involving staff representatives in the initial evaluation and planning process. Once they had developed their new vision for a streamlined adoption process that would serve both pets and potential guardians--they were careful about how they introduced the vision to the full staff. First, based on individual meetings with management, HSBV leaders determined what staff members would need in order to feel comfortable about the change.

Then, they presented the concept at an all staff meeting. Staff members who championed the open adoption concept actually introduced the idea. The meeting covered:

- the society's goal of changing their approach to adoptions
- how the change would affect staff personally
- management's responsibility in making the change
- how the change might affect animals
- how it would change the staff's jobs
- how staff could implement the change
- asking for additional changes could be made to refine the adoption process that weren't addressed by the planning committee

Staff concerns were also heard at this meeting and addressed in the new adoption paradigm. It was a new policy, but one which reflected input from all levels of the organization.

7. Define the new vision.

HSBV identified a few main points and ground rules for adoption counseling:

- People who come to an animal shelter to relinquish, drop off a stray, or adopt an animal are trying to do the right thing, and we acknowledge that by respecting them.
- In adopters we trust. Through open communication about the animal's needs and adopter's ability to meet those needs, we will facilitate pet/guardian matches.
- If adopters return an animal because their adoption did not work out, they are trying to do the best thing for that animal, they can provide additional information to assist placing that animal again, and they are complying with our request to bring the animal back to us. We respect them for their honesty. We do not make them feel guilty. We offer them another chance. Adoption returns do not mean failure.
- If adopters are interested in an animal inappropriate for their lifestyle, we empower staff to counsel and guide adopters to an appropriate animal or refuse an adoption.
- There will be times when we are not sure an adoption will work. Adopters will be given the opportunity to introduce the animal into their home before an adoption. No hard feelings if it is not the right match. The animal gets a few days out of the shelter, and the adopter will be encouraged to try again.
- We are committed to providing post-adoption support to the adopter to assist with the transition into the new household, and beyond.

8. Implement the vision.

After completing the planning and introducing it to staff, HSBV felt it was important to make an immediate and complete switchover to the new adoption paradigm. The adoption supervisor constantly checked in with staff in order to assess how well the change was working and to address concerns as they happened.

They replaced the old 4-page application with a "Pets and People Profile" customized for each species available for adoption. This profile captures basic information about the adopter and about those qualities each adopter is looking for in a pet. Adopters are asked to identify the topics they want to discuss, such as housetraining or new pet introductions. They are also given options that would once have been mandatory, such as whether or not they would like the shelter to contact their landlord as a courtesy. These open-ended questions don't have right or wrong answers; they facilitate the adoption process by stimulating discussion that leads to better matches.

HSBV leaders also created an additional list of open-ended questions to guide counselors. In line with the profiles, questions are aimed at capturing potential adopters' expectations as well as what they wanted and needed to know in order to become a guardian to an HSBV animal. Examples of questions include:

- "What would you do if this dog didn't get along with other pets?"
- "I noticed you are looking for a declawed cat. What are your concerns about taking home a cat with claws?"

Even the adoption contract reflects HSBV's new approach. It opens with the shelter's contribution to the adoption agreement, including statements such as, "We recognize some pet matches may not be successful through no fault of the person or pet. We will welcome you and your returned pet back. If you are able to rehome the animal, we ask that you provide us with the new family's contact information so that we may continue to provide support to that animal."

9. Test your concerns.

HSBV tracked adoption return rates in order to feel more confident about their new approach to adoptions. After the first year, despite a 30% increase in adoptions, the average return rate increased only from 8.4% to 9.6%.

HSBV also made another crucial change: they started to look at an adoption return in a more positive light rather than as a failure on the part of the shelter or the adopter. Because many of the animals adopted out were strays with little or no history, an adoption return facilitated getting information about the animal to better match the animal's needs with the next guardian.

Results

The Numbers

Within the first year of the new program, adoptions increased by over 30%, despite an increase in total incoming animals. In 2004, adoptions were 67% higher than in 1997, the last year of the old adoption process.

Critical Factors

- Cooperation and involvement from all levels of the organization
- A willingness to challenge long held beliefs and preconceived notions about adoption placement
- A commitment to trusting the public
- Acknowledging that effective customer service is as important to animal shelters as proper cleaning procedures and disease control

Thinking Outside the Box

Often in the animal protection field, staff and volunteers focus all of their energy and attention on the animals. While the animals are obviously important, they are not the entire story. No shelter can care for every animal in a community. It must rely on the help of citizens for support—as volunteers, donors, word-of-mouth advertisers, adopters and impressionable pet guardians who have the option of listening to an organization's messages about responsible pet care or not. This reliance requires putting trust in others and acting in a way that invites their trust in return.

HSBV acknowledged that members of the public are essential partners in carrying out their mission on behalf of animals. This has paid off in increased adoptions, which equals more lives saved. The impact of more constructive interactions with the community is harder to measure but equally significant.

How They Feel About What They Did

HSBV staff grew to appreciate the flexibility of the new adoption process. They found that having discussions with adopters in a non-judgmental atmosphere facilitated a better decision on the part of the adopter. They also found the process of follow-up easier because of the trusting relationship that had been forged with the new pet guardian. Today, almost seven years after the new program was implemented, their innovative idea just makes good common sense.

Their Next Steps

HSBV will always look for new ways to better serve their community of pets and guardians. The shelter is currently working with The ASPCA to implement the Meet Your Match program in order to provide even stronger pet/people matches.

Some Words of Wisdom

What Worked

The public didn't let them down. The risk of giving folks who didn't quite match the old adoption criteria a chance to provide a loving home to a pet proved not so risky after all. Given an encouraging

and non-judgmental atmosphere, potential adopters really did engage more in the adoption consultation and kept in touch after they had taken their new family member home.

In addition, clients were more open to taking advantage of other HSBV resources such as training, behavior consultation, and veterinary services. And, they must have been telling their friends because more animals found homes.

Be Prepared For

Despite careful efforts to help shelter staff cope with the change, not everyone was able to make the transition, and some staff left. This created an opportunity for HSBV to shift their focus when hiring new staff. Management sought out people who were client friendly, recruiting from areas that required positive interaction with people, such as restaurants. They also recruited recent college graduates who were eager to find employment where they could make a difference. Fortunately, the shelter was able to find new employees who worked well in the new adoption program.

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.

Humane Society of Boulder Valley: Thumbnail Sketch

Humane Society of Boulder Valley (HSBV)
Animal Shelter & Veterinary Clinic
2323 55th Street
Boulder, CO 80301

Training & Behavior Center
5320 Arapahoe Avenue
Boulder, CO 80301

<http://www.boulderhumane.org>



The Humane Society of Boulder Valley in Boulder, Colorado, is a private non-profit corporation with the mission of protecting and enhancing the lives of companion animals by promoting healthy relationships between pets and people. HSBV defines itself as “a complete pet resource dedicated to protecting, healing, matchmaking, teaching, and reuniting.” The organization promises supporters, “From the first moment you fall in love with your pet to sharing your lives together, the humane society will be there to help you every step of the way.”

HSBV operates an open-admission shelter, a veterinary clinic, and a Training & Behavior Center in the Boulder area. HSBV sheltered more than 7,600 lost, homeless, neglected, and abused pets in 2004. Of these 6,600 were placed through adoptions or were reunited with owners (1,000 animals were euthanized because of significant health or temperament issues). In 2004, the veterinary clinic provided 342 discounted treatments and over 180 surgeries; 3,163 clients were served by the Training & Behavior Center.

HSBV has an exceptional reputation locally. Nationally, it is known for its progressive and effective programs including:

- Cruelty and neglect investigations and animal care and control services
- 24/7 emergency rescue
- Medical care for unwanted or stray domestic animals
- Animal assisted therapy and animal visitations for facilities serving people in need
- Subsidized sterilization surgery and veterinary care for pets of low-income families
- Lost and found animals service
- Foster care for injured, orphaned, and abused animals
- Behavior and training classes for pets
- Summer camp partnership with the YMCA to teach children empathy and compassion
- Training to teach respect and care for animals, the importance of reducing pet overpopulation, and preventing neglect and abuse
- A Safe Haven program for pets whose guardians are in crisis situations

Staff

80 full and part-time staff members supplemented with over 590 volunteers

Full time equivalent staff include:

- 4 Animal Care and Control
- 14 Administration/Development/IT/Facilities Management
- 5 Behavior and Health
- 2.5 Behavior and Training Center

- 20 Shelter (2 supervisors, 2 managers, and 16 Animal Welfare Associates who clean, care for animals, and handle adoptions)
- 3.5 Thrift and Gift Shop
- 16 Veterinary Clinic
- 2 Volunteer department

Operating Budget

\$3,800,000 for 2005

Business Type

501(c) 3 private, non-profit corporation

HSBV also contracts with the city of Boulder to provide animal care and control, including cruelty investigations and after hour emergency service. HSBV provides housing services for stray animals from unincorporated Boulder county and Broomfield County, and from the towns of Louisville, Lafayette, and Erie.