



## Richmond SPCA: Surrender Counseling

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## Richmond SPCA: Surrender Counseling

*Nonjudgmental conversations about relinquishment*



In 2001, as part of their pledge to end the killing of healthy homeless animals in the city, the Richmond SPCA began developing a network of programs designed to keep animals in their homes and out of shelters. Surrender Counseling was developed to identify real reasons for relinquishment and direct owners to good alternatives through meaningful, nonjudgmental conversations.

### Stats

In 2006, 2,600 people were counseled.

### How Cool is That?

As animal welfare professionals, it's easy to become angry at those who relinquish pets. We're impressed with the attitude adjustment that enables the Richmond SPCA staff to get past the anger, explore the reasons for relinquishment, and work with owners to find workable alternatives.

### Adopt or Adapt

While Surrender Counseling costs nothing to implement, it does require extensive training. It is also helpful to have good alternatives such as behavior training, low-cost spay/neuter, a guide to pet-friendly housing, and re-homing services to offer. Encouraging staff to be non-judgmental and giving them the tools to help people with their pet problems is an essential step in creating a lifesaving partnership with the public.

## Richmond SPCA Surrender Counseling: The Whole Story

In 2001, the Richmond SPCA began working actively to end euthanasia of healthy homeless cats and dogs in their facility and throughout the city. An essential first step was reducing the number of animals coming into the shelter.

In a dramatic shift, the Richmond SPCA stopped taking every animal that came in the door, instituted an appointment system and developed an array of resources, including Surrender Counseling, designed to uncover the real reasons for relinquishment and help people find good alternatives.



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### What's Behind the Program

As a symbol of the change, the name of the Surrender Desk was changed to Admissions Desk implying a process and a privilege rather than a right.

Now, when an individual comes to the shelter or calls about bringing in an animal, a Richmond SPCA staff member engages the person in a scripted, open-ended conversation. The goals of the conversation are to forge a positive relationship, get at the real reasons for relinquishment and offer resources and solutions that will keep the animal out of the shelter. According to CEO Robin Starr, even when that isn't possible, the counseling process provides an important opportunity for community education and builds good will for the organization.

Surrender Counseling is the cornerstone of Project Safety Net, a sweeping program agenda designed to address the most frequent causes of pet relinquishment. Project Safety Net was built on programs developed at Monadnock Humane Society (West Swanzey, NH) and Maricopa Animal Care & Control (Phoenix, AZ).

### Ingredients and Prep Work

#### Prerequisites

People

- Staff members open to a dramatic shift in their approach to people who plan to surrender animals.
- A qualified person to develop the counseling questions and train the staff.

#### Up front costs and start-up funding

The only cost associated with this program is staff training. If there isn't anyone in house who can train, the Richmond SPCA recommends turning to national organizations to see if they can send in a trainer.

#### Timeline

According to Starr, getting the program up and running took about six months of training. While the Richmond SPCA trained the entire staff so that everyone would know the direction the organization was taking, Starr now says it might have been better to begin by training just the admissions staff in order to speed up the launch.

## Step by Step

Here are the steps the Richmond SPCA followed to implement Surrender Counseling.

### 1. They developed a questionnaire to guide counselors' conversations.

According to Starr, having a questionnaire at the admissions desk not only creates a record of the conversation but also enables anyone who answers the phone or greets a visitor to start the process. The questions should be open-ended and designed to start a non-judgmental, personal conversation about the animal and the reasons for relinquishment. Starr stresses that the counselor should refer to the animal by name throughout the conversation. Questions should cover a wide range of potential trouble spots. Some examples:

- Why can't you keep Name ?
- Would you be interested in keeping Name if you had the resources?
- Have you had any behavioral problems with Name?
- Have you tried to find a home for Name?

In addition to uncovering the problem that has brought the person to the shelter, the questions should teach about the responsibilities of pet ownership in a non-threatening manner.

### 2. They trained the staff.

According to Starr, the decision to stop killing healthy homeless animals, and the implementation of programs to make that possible, required a total change in mind-set on the part of the staff. Instead of the traditional negative view of the public as the ones responsible for animal suffering, the staff had to embrace the ideas that people are basically good and want to help; that the behaviors they find so reprehensible in the public are often the result of ignorance; and that, given the skills and resources, people will do the right thing. In short, they had to learn to trust the public. That took time.

The Richmond SPCA trained their staff to do Surrender Counseling in-house using the Dumb Friends League's (Denver, CO) Pets for Life materials. Weekly training sessions over a six month period included basic customer service skills, extensive education about dog and cat behavior, techniques for dealing with typical behavior problems, and information about community resources such as breed rescue groups or dog trainers. According to Starr, the training included a lot of role-playing to get staff members comfortable with the conversational techniques.

Now that the program is in place, new counselors learn by shadowing experienced staff members for a number of weeks. Once they begin counseling, they are observed for a week or two and given guidance as needed.

### 3. They put in place resources for counselors to recommend as alternatives to surrender.

The Richmond SPCA developed Surrender Counseling before they put other Project Safety Net programs in place. Starr, however, recommends creating some resources designed to address major causes for relinquishment before launching the counseling program. These might include a Pet-Friendly Housing Guide, Re-Homing Services, Foster-to-Surrender, Behavior Helpline, manners classes or some kind of spay/neuter assistance. According to Starr, however, all you really need to get started is a knowledgeable staff willing to listen.

## Results

- Surrender Counseling impacts every person who calls or comes to the Richmond SPCA to inquire about relinquishing an animal. In 2006, 2,600 people received Surrender Counseling.
- Staff morale improved.

According to Starr, empowering the admissions staff to become counselors and providing them with tools to do it effectively gave them a whole new approach to their work. Instead of feeling

powerless and angry in the face of “irresponsible people dumping animals on them,” staff members were able to get past the anger, analyze the reasons for the decisions to relinquish, and work with pet owners to find workable alternatives. They began defining themselves as professionals who could help people with their pet problems. According to Starr, that is viewed as “a great job”. “If we treat staff as pooper scoopers, they will be pooper scoopers,” Starr remarks, “If we treat them like professionals, they will be professionals.”

- The public perception of the humane society changed.

According to Starr, the Richmond SPCA receives a lot of positive feedback from people who are helped through the counseling. Instead of viewing the humane society as the place that has to take animals nobody wants, the organization is now viewed as a partner and a resource working to solve a community-wide problem.

## Critical Factors

- Providing a safety valve for the counselors

Starr acknowledges that sometimes it’s virtually impossible not to become judgmental. Richmond SPCA counselors are trained to remember that becoming judgmental never helps the animal. If they feel themselves becoming emotional, they are trained to excuse themselves and either take a moment to regroup or find someone else to help the client.

- Making expectations clear and expecting a very high standard of performance

According to Starr, it is critical to make staff members understand the importance of their role. The organization prepares admissions staff with the skills and resources they need to be comfortable counseling people and then holds them to a very high standard. “Anything less would compromise the counseling effort and cause the public to see us in a negative light.”

## How They Feel About What They Did

According to Starr, Surrender Counseling is the most important piece of the entire Project Safety Net Program.

## Some Words of Wisdom

### Be Prepared For

Change takes time and not all staff members will be able to make the transition. At the Richmond SPCA, even after six months of training, some staff members left and others had to be reassigned.

You’ll need to engage in refresher training. It’s easy for staff members to slip back into old approaches to the public or to slide back into making poor admissions decisions. Training with role playing every six months or so will keep the program effective.

### Next Steps

According to Starr, the Richmond SPCA is always on the lookout for better ways to communicate with the public and educate them about animal welfare issues.

## Richmond SPCA: Thumbnail Sketch

Richmond SPCA  
Robin Starr: CEO  
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Richmond, VA 23220  
www.richmondspca.org



The Richmond SPCA is a No Kill humane society dedicated to the principle that every life is precious. Since 1999, the organization has worked to make Richmond one of the safest cities in the United States for homeless animals. In addition to adopting a new and progressive operating model that includes aggressive rehabilitation, adoption, spay/neuter, pet retention, and humane education programs, the Richmond SPCA developed a formal cooperative arrangement with the City of Richmond to create an environment in which all animals ending up in shelters would have a much stronger chance for survival. As a result, nearly 5,000 fewer homeless animals lost their lives citywide (Richmond SPCA and Richmond Animal Care & Control combined) in 2006 than in 1999 (a 77% reduction) and the live release rate in Richmond climbed from 46% to 76%.

The Richmond SPCA provides training and consultation as a partner in ASPCA® Mission: Orange™, a national initiative to train and support other cities across the country interested in becoming humane communities.

### Stats

From Oct. 1, 2005 to Sept. 30, 2006, the Richmond SPCA:

- Saved the lives of 4,325 animals through adoption, re-homing and behavioral assistance programs.
- Rehabilitated approximately 2,300 sick and injured pets
- Achieved a citywide save rate of 76%, giving Richmond one of the lowest euthanasia rates in the country
- Spayed or neutered 11,017 animals in their on-site clinic
- Delivered 8,512 hours of humane education to area school children and 3,060 hours of adult education

### Staff

43 full time. 43 part time

175 active volunteers

### Operating Budget

\$3.3million

### Business Type

501(c) (3) nonprofit