



## Wisconsin Humane Society: Adoption Program

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## Wisconsin Humane Society: Helping the Community Adopt Animals

*A great shelter experience helps animals and the people who adopt them*

When Wisconsin Humane Society (WHS) decided to revisit its adoption program, they had a simple but substantial goal: "to eliminate any barriers that may exist to adopting from WHS." WHS looked at improving adopters' experiences with the shelter, from first impression to post-adoption follow-up.



### Stats

- WHS has found a strong correlation between the increasing confidence the community has in their organization and the increasing financial support they receive.
- WHS has also seen their volunteer numbers soar: from 350 volunteers to over 800 (Be sure to check out the Volunteer pages of the WHS website to see the extensive volunteer opportunities.)
- Surveys of adopters indicate that they are extremely satisfied with their adoption experience at WHS and that they would recommend WHS to anyone interested in adopting. Positive factors that adopters mention include:
  - A pleasant, "no pressure" environment and good customer service
  - Assistance in finding a pet who is a good match for their personality and lifestyle
  - Confidence that WHS will provide whatever support they need to be an effective guardian for their new companion animal

### How Cool is That?

We're really impressed that Wisconsin Humane Society has transformed its adoption process into an open, transparent experience. While still providing careful stewardship of the animals, WHS builds relationships with adopters based on trust, education, and support.

### Adopt or Adapt

Wisconsin Humane Society uses some simple approaches to great customer service that even very small organizations can implement at little or no cost. Check out this profile and visit the WHS website for great customer-service ideas that you can put into effect today.

## Wisconsin Humane Society: The Whole Story

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### Who They Are and What They Do

Victoria Wellens, Executive Director

Founded in 1879, Wisconsin Humane Society is the largest shelter in Wisconsin. The humane society services Milwaukee County, and provides care and services for nearly 18,000 animals annually. This very large number includes over 5,000 wild animals that are treated in special facilities designed for wildlife care and rehabilitation. See the [Thumbnail Sketch](#) of Wisconsin Humane Society for more information about the comprehensive animal services, information, and advocacy they offer.

This profile focuses on strategies Wisconsin Humane Society uses successfully to define itself as an open and inviting community within its geographic community, and how these strategies have benefited the shelter and the animals in its care.

### Ingredients and Prep Work

According to Victoria Wellens, WHS's new relationship with their community began with asking a very broad and fundamental question: "What will it take for my community to fully participate in re-homing all of our at-risk animals?" For WHS, the answers included some basic elements:

- A clean environment for all animals to live in
- Reliable information about the temperament and health of animals
- Friendly and well-trained staff with a commitment to helping the public adopt
- Mechanisms for feedback from clients to drive improvements
- A marketing and communication program to help the community access your services, including client-friendly hours and local media visibility

### Step by Step

#### 1. Hold focus groups with adopters.

A focus group gathers a group of people who respond to questions on a specific topic. WHS held focus groups with adopters who gave feedback on:

- What they liked about their adoption experience
- What prevented them from adopting at WHS
- What undermined their confidence in shelter animals, practices, or procedures

#### 2. Evaluate the results and set specific goals.

For WHS, the focus groups pointed to challenges in two categories:

- Animal-centered services: proper care and treatment

- Client-centered services: customer-friendly staff and practices

WHS staff defined goals for improvement in these areas. Victoria Wellens' advice is to "set goals to do absolutely the best you possibly can in each category, and keep improving it."

### 3. Consider all sources of inspiration for improvements.

WHS adapted customer-friendly techniques they observed in retail, restaurant, and even museum settings:

- Greeters who welcome visitors to the shelter and direct them as needed; these WHS volunteers are known as the Public Arrival Welcome Service (yup, the PAWS)
- Evening and Saturday hours
- An orderly sign-in process
- Staff circulating among visitors rather than waiting behind desks to be approached
- Handing out beepers at busy times so that visitors can explore the shelter until an adoption counselor can meet with them
- Arranging the shelter into distinct functional areas: "Dogtown," "The Royal Cat Hotel," "Small Animal Boutique," and "Adoption Avenue" are some of the public areas set up to showcase the animals at their best

### 4. Look for opportunities to educate, engage, and de-mystify.

- WHS set up interactive exhibits and informational bulletin boards in its lobby and hallways.
- In addition to up-to-date adoption listings, the WHS website has a wealth of educational information for children and adults.
  - Visitors to the website can take online "tours" of the shelter and the wildlife center. The companion-animal tour follows one dog from its arrival at the shelter through its adoption by a delighted new owner.
  - The website provides easy access to great how-to information on becoming an adopter, a volunteer, a foster family, a donor, or an employee.
  - The website even includes very practical information on how to choose a reputable dog or cat breeder, and how to distinguish between legitimate breeders and puppy mills.
- WHS offers regular in-person tours of the shelter to individuals and groups.

### 5. Open up to the community.

A few years ago, when WHS had the opportunity to build a new shelter, they chose a location right on busy Wisconsin Avenue, close to an interstate interchange with two state highways. Approximately 56,000 vehicles per day drive by their building.

They have taken other steps to position themselves as a community resource:

- The shelter is a polling place for Milwaukee elections.
- They offer public meeting spaces that neighborhood groups use regularly.
- A local garden club has "adopted" their property and keeps the WHS grounds attractive and inviting.

### 6. Seek feedback, evaluate, and improve – constantly.

Providing great service and a positive experience is an ongoing process. As you implement new ideas and strategies, monitor the results to find out what you're doing well and where improvement is needed.

## Results

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## Critical Factors

- Listening to and learning from what the public has to say about the organization
- Becoming a visible and active part of their community
- Recognizing that providing excellent customer service is a moving target: they need to constantly evaluate and adapt their strategies to stay on top of the needs the animals in their care and of the people who will adopt them

## Thinking Outside the Box

At ASPCA® National Outreach, we're impressed by the culture of transparency that Wisconsin Humane Society has created. The open and inviting environment is key to building their community's trust. We're also impressed by the number of simple, common-sense practices they've instituted to provide a friendlier face to their community.

## Your Next Step

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.

## Wisconsin Humane Society: Thumbnail Sketch

Wisconsin Humane Society  
4500 West Wisconsin Avenue  
Milwaukee, WI 53208

<http://www.wihumane.org>

The Wisconsin Humane Society (WHS) is a private nonprofit organization whose mission is to build a community where people value animals and treat them with respect and kindness. For more than 125 years, WHS has been saving the lives of animals in need. As the largest and most recognized shelter in the State of Wisconsin, WHS offers a number of specialized services:

- A comprehensive adoption program that matches homeless companion animals with new families and provides follow up and support
- Lifesaving medical care for nearly 18,000 animals annually, including more than 5,000 wild animals
- A spay/neuter clinic for animals from low-income households
- Educational programs for children and adults designed to teach respect and care for animals and to end neglect and abuse
- Companion animal and wildlife tip lines in addition to individual recommendations to assist the community at large
- Manners classes for dogs and puppies
- One of the largest wildlife rehabilitation hospitals of its kind in the nation, rescuing thousands of animals annually

In 2004, the Wisconsin Humane Society merged with the Ozaukee Humane Society to expand their opportunity to help at-risk animals. This new partnership also enables them to operate more efficiently.

### Staff

90 paid staff

800+ volunteers

### Operating Budget

\$5.5 million annual operating budget.

### Business Type

501(c)(3) non profit organization.

