



All Roads Lead to Home

In Mississippi, a transport program administered by veterinary students is saving lives

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It was loud on the drive, and by the time our little caravan reached New York, it smelled bad, too—pungent, stale-vomit bad. The puppies were carsick, and most of them had relieved themselves in their crates, even though we'd stopped every few hours to walk them and scrub down their cages as best we could. We had put a few crates in the front seat of Megan's Blazer, and inside it, an adorable Lab pup named Buttercup had recently had a bowel movement, and every time Megan would glance over at the dog, she would wag her tail and splatter a little poop on the dashboard and onto Megan. It was very gross.

With all the stops for potty breaks, a trip that usually takes 17 hours took us about 28. We were tired, so wearily tired. But by the time we crossed the Tappan Zee Bridge over the Hudson River, we only had 30 miles left to go after a long, 1,200-mile drive from Starkville, Miss., and 26 puppies were counting on us to ignore the smell, the yipping, and our own exhaustion.

The things we do for love!

That first trip, it was just the two of us, students at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Mississippi State University (MSU-CVM), convoying north in two SUVs loaded with crates, loaded with puppies.

It had all happened so fast: We'd been wanting to start a transport program, but hadn't gotten it off the ground yet. Then, right before summer break, we'd received a call from Meg Sutton, then the staff veterinarian at Columbus-Lowndes Humane Society in Mississippi. She knew of our desire to launch a program, and she knew we were heading home for the summer. She asked if we could find homes for five shepherd-mix puppies. They had been at the shelter for two weeks, and their time was up.

Not knowing exactly what we'd do, we walked into the shelter for the five puppies. We left with 22.

Over the next few days while we packed and took care of the puppies—and even as we made the long drive to our parents' homes in the Northeast—we were constantly emailing and talking with all our Northern contacts. By the time we reached New York, we had the majority of them adopted, and the remaining pups were adopted in the next couple days.

We made mistakes that first run—for example, feeding the dogs on their regular schedule prior to travel, which certainly contributed to the poop factor on the trip! We've since learned to withhold food in the hours before we leave, which cuts down on the pups' tendency to get sick during



After a long drive, the maiden voyage of Homeward Bound—made by Megan Caulfield (left), Krista Gazzola, two SUVs, and 26 dogs including their own pets—comes to an end in New York.

the drive—and we've worked out other kinks, too. And since that first chaotic journey, we've improved our processes, expanded our program, and helped save more than 1,700 dogs.

When we started this program—now called Homeward Bound—we were veterinary students at MSU-CVM. By the time you read this, we'll be full-fledged veterinarians. But the program we helped create will outlive our time at school. We're hoping it will continue saving lives for years.

The Evolution of a Mission

How did a handful of veterinary students—with the help of Phil Bushby, our faculty adviser—turn this first, crazy trip into an official part of the Humane Ethics and Animal Welfare Program at Mississippi State?

Homeward Bound began with one simple idea: Take adoptable puppies and young adult dogs from overcrowded shelters in the South, and transport them to limited-admission shelters in the Northeast, where there is a high demand for adoptable dogs. Pretty straightforward, right? But something of this magnitude had never been done before at a veterinary institution. We wanted our program to be run by veterinary students, and there was no model to follow, no protocol to customize, and certainly no one with experience in this area to call and ask for advice. And due to the extreme numbers of healthy animals being euthanized, we felt there was also no time to wait until all the

fine details of such an effort could be calculated, predicted, and planned out. In areas like Mississippi, the pet overpopulation problem is so extreme, the euthanasia numbers so high, that we felt it was worth risking some trial and error to help our local shelters get away from the business-as-usual model of euthanasia as a form of population control. So we set to work creating the first successful transport program developed, maintained, and operated by students at a veterinary school.

How does it all work? In any health-related field, certain principles remain constant—the importance of disease prevention, the perpetuation of health and well-being for individual animals, and the ability to provide complete and ethical medical care to assure the continuation of a life free from suffering. Homeward Bound strives to uphold these standards by providing shelter animals with comprehensive veterinary care, foster care, and the chance to make the trip to the Northeast to find a new home. Homeward Bound also aims to educate shelter managers and veterinary students in the areas of disease prevention and control, companion animal overpopulation, and the importance of effective shelter medicine techniques.

Homeward Bound ultimately acts as a liaison between shelters in the counties around Starkville—where our veterinary college is located—and no-kill shelters and rescue groups in the Northeast. The Southern shelters that participate have to adhere to the medical requirements of the



program and must demonstrate the ability to maintain disease-prevention measures at their shelter.

Medical requirements encompass proper intake protocols for animals accepted into the general population at the shelter, as well as the ability to provide the veterinary care needed in the weeks before the transport. A proper intake protocol means that the facility has the ability to protect the health of the general population of animals already present. This means that all animals should be vaccinated for Bordetella and parvo/distemper upon intake, examined thoroughly, and isolated for an observational pe-

riod before being introduced into the general population. When an animal from a participating shelter is enrolled in the Homeward Bound program, the shelter is required to have the ability to perform a fecal, deworm with the appropriate anthelmintic, complete the animal's vaccination series, have access to a veterinarian who can spay/neuter accepted animals, and provide foster care for a minimum of 14 days before the scheduled transport. The shelter has to have proper disease-prevention measures in place at its facility, with staff who are properly trained to help decrease disease spread.

Role-Playing: Who Does What?

An effective transport program requires a variety of people working together. Homeward Bound has found the following core roles to be crucial.

The adoption coordinator assembles a PowerPoint presentation that consists of animals from multiple Southern shelters and rescues. The presentation includes pictures, physical descriptions, histories, and personalities of each of the dogs. Five weeks prior to transport, the presentation is sent to the Northern shelters and rescues, and they begin claiming animals. The adoption coordinator is responsible for all contact with Southern and Northern shelters/rescues and maintains a master list of all animals to be transported.

The transport coordinator schedules the date of the transport and ensures the availability of Northern/Southern drivers and vehicles. The coordinator assembles a team to load the transport and a team to clean the cages and vans once the transport returns. She also e-mails all shelters and rescues, notifying them of the estimated time of arrival, and sends updates if the transport is off schedule.

The foster coordinator recruits fellow pet lovers to shelter, feed, and love each animal for two weeks. We used all public resources such as newspapers, TV, radio stations, veterinarians, and local shelters to build up all of our foster homes. The foster coordinator organizes a foster drop-off day, and makes sure that all foster dogs have flea and heartworm medications and other necessary medical attention. While the animals are in foster care, the coordinators keep a close eye on their behavior and health.

The medical care coordinator is responsible for the animals' health needs. All of our animals are

spayed/neutered, vaccinated with age-appropriate vaccines (rabies, DA2PPV and Bordetella), checked for intestinal parasites and appropriately dewormed, heartworm tested, and had all other medical needs addressed. Any medical problems that the dogs develop while in foster care are directed to this coordinator, who arranges medical care.

The medical records coordinator organizes all medical records and notifies the medical care coordinator of any missing elements. Once the animal has been in foster care for a week, the coordinator requests a personality description and updated pictures from the foster home that are added to the medical record and forwarded to the Northern shelter/rescue that is taking in the animal. The medical records are sent electronically to the Northern shelters/rescues prior to the animals' arrival. All health certificates and rabies certificates (if applicable) are provided in paper form.

The accountant is responsible for maintaining the bank account, issuing all payments necessary, and emailing invoices after a transport to all Southern and Northern shelters/rescues. Our costs include medical supplies and procedures, payment for transport drivers, vehicles, gas, and a small adoption fee that we donate back to the Southern shelters once their animals have been transported. The majority of the cost goes to transport and medical procedures for the abandoned animals.

Resources: If you're considering a transfer program, check out the recommendations for best practices from the National Federation of Humane Societies. humanefederation.org/TransferBestPractice.cfm



Are we there yet? Four pups who made the first trip north with the Homeward Bound program survey their new terrain.



Homeward Bounders Amy White, Megan Caulfield, and Krista Gazzola (left to right) snuggle up to some of the dogs headed to shelters up north.



Laden with paperwork detailing their names, health certifications, and final destinations, some Mississippi pooches prepare to hit the road.

This means that Homeward Bound volunteers—all vet students at Mississippi State—perform an inspection of every participating shelter, ensuring that cleaning practices are in place and being implemented daily, that there is an isolation/quarantine area present, and that there are enough staff to clean all areas of the shelter in a way that prevents cross-contamination. Homeward Bound also requires that shelter workers be able to identify potential infectious diseases such as parvovirus or distemper virus, and are prepared to handle those situations appropriately. If these standards are met, a shelter can participate in the program.

Staff at participating shelters take pictures of adoptable animals, and e-mail those pictures and brief descriptions to the students who act as shelter coordinators for Homeward Bound. Those students in turn e-mail the listings of available animals to cooperating shelters and rescue groups in the Northeast. Those shelters let Homeward Bound know which animals they've chosen to receive on the upcoming transport. Once an animal has been chosen, the shelter in the South is notified, and that animal is scheduled to begin the process of preparing for transport.

Keeping Them Healthy

At this point, it becomes the Mississippi shelter's responsibility to make sure that the puppies and young dogs leaving the shelter are spayed or neutered, vaccinated with age-appropriate vaccines, have received fecal examinations, been dewormed with the appropriate anthelmintic for the appropriate amount of time, and are free from any contagious or life-threatening diseases such as parvo, distemper, and even more "benign" ailments such as kennel cough, sarcoptic mange, demodectic mange, and ringworm.

It is also the shelter's responsibility to test dogs who are 6 months or older for the presence of heartworm. If an animal is found to be positive, that animal can still enter the program and will either be treated at the shelter or treated through Homeward Bound once in foster care.

Foster homes are critical to the success of the program. All Homeward Bound animals are required to be in foster care for a minimum of 14 days prior to transport. The backbone of the whole program rests on the shelter's ability to remove a puppy or dog from the shelter environment and have the animal stay in a home environment before traveling to the Northeast.

Foster care provides a multitude of things, but most importantly acts as a socialization tool for the animal and also prevents the re-exposure of communicable diseases that an animal would continually face in a shelter setting. Foster parents who participate in the program are usually veterinary students, professors, veterinary technicians, graduate students, and faculty members at the school. The foster parents are responsible for caring for the animal in the weeks leading up to the trip, as well as notifying Homeward Bound of any problems

that may arise while the animal is in their care. Foster homes also provide Homeward Bound with vital information on the behavioral characteristics of individual animals and allow the program to send the animal to the respective shelter with a fairly in-depth description of the pups' personality traits.

As the transport date approaches, Homeward Bound animals are required to be present at a "medical day" that takes place one week before the scheduled date of departure. At this time, all medical records have been reviewed, and animals are scheduled to have the required vaccinations, a brief physical examination, and a fecal test. Any animals with either positive fecals or other medical issues are treated; if the issue can be resolved within a week, the animal is still scheduled for transport. If the medical issue is contagious—such as sarcoptic mange or ringworm—then the animal is held in foster care until the next possible transport.

Miles to Go

Finally, the big day arrives. Beginning at 7 a.m., all puppies and dogs are dropped off for transport at a central location. This usually means that 60-90 pups on average are brought together, given any final vaccinations or medical treatments, and then placed in crates labeled with their state and shelter of destination. Every pup travels with a complete medical history form, including a detailed description from their foster parents of any training that has been done and details about their personality. They also travel with health certificates and rabies certificates if they are old enough to receive the vaccine.

On top of all that paperwork, Homeward Bound is required to have U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) forms listing all the animals on the transport who will be crossing state lines. A certified USDA veterinarian is required to be at the departure site the morning of departure in order to examine every animal and to sign the USDA travel forms stating that the animals are free from obvious communicable disease and ready for travel.

Then the dogs are loaded into Homeward Bound's transport trailers and begin the final stretch of their long journey.

As the program has developed, the Mississippi end of Homeward Bound no longer makes the whole trip to the Northeast. Drivers from the New Hampshire end of the program meet the Mississippi drivers in Winchester, Va., load the pups into their own transport vans and continue on to deliver healthy dogs and puppies to shelters in New Jersey, Connecticut, New York, New Hampshire, and Vermont.

A program such as Homeward Bound is not designed to act as a sole solution. Rather, Homeward Bound has been developed as a response to an already overwhelming problem of overpopulation of companion animals. The ultimate solution to the problem is through public education and awareness of the importance of spaying and neutering companion animals. Homeward Bound is part of the Humane Ethics and Animal Welfare Program at MSU-CVM, which is

designed to be all-encompassing, helping both shelters and the community with spay/neuter through the MSU-CVM Mobile Veterinary Clinic. The program is also involved in educating children about the importance of companion animal care and the responsibility of spaying and neutering.

In the meantime, Homeward Bound is helping to provide a second chance for those animals who have already been affected by the crisis. In doing so, we're also helping to raise awareness, increase education about spaying and neutering, and generate concern about the problem of pet overpopulation.

In an ideal world, the solution would be simple: People would take care of their pets and commit to caring for them for life. They would spay and neuter to ensure that more unwanted animals weren't born.

But especially in the South and other rural areas, the problem is complicated: Low spay/neuter rates, a large number of animals allowed to roam, and areas of extreme poverty and low education levels all affect the animal population. Due to the huge number of unwanted companion animals, most shelters do not have a choice whether or not to employ euthanasia. If they did not do so, the presence of disease would be so great that the animals in these facilities would be extremely unhealthy, and more than likely die from natural causes. Without population control, public health risks would be insurmountable, rendering the work environment of a shelter unacceptable.

We know we cannot transport our way out of the problem, but in the face of all this suffering, we feel that Homeward Bound can act as an alternative option to euthanasia for those animals who are highly adoptable. Our overall goal is to act as the voice for those who are affected by this problem and to help those who cannot help themselves. Much is being done in the South to address the root causes of the pet surplus, and we would like to see those efforts come to fruition. In the meantime, though, we're working to save those we can.

The Homeward Bound Project hopes to act as a model for other veterinary schools and private rescue organizations. As we work to reduce the numbers of animals who are born, we still want to help those who are already here: They, too, deserve a chance for better lives. 🐾

