



# MAKING IT WORK

Formalizing your volunteer program is worth the effort

BY AMBER VAN LEUKEN

Trust us!

## **Volunteers. They're more trouble than they're worth!**

That's what I remember thinking one day back in 2008, as I set a pile of scribbled notes on the counter, returned a batch of unused vaccines to the refrigerator, and made my way to the front office.

The task interrupting my busy day was to welcome a kind soul to our animal shelter and orient her to our volunteer program. This was how we used to do orientations: Drop everything, provide a quick, on-the-run spiel as we walked the newcomer through the facility: "Dogs go here, cats go here; here are the sink, brushes, and leashes; be careful to wash your hands; don't let the dogs fight; good luck," and then let the new volunteer sink or swim.

I was the Ark-Valley Humane Society's assistant manager at the time—and I knew better. If we made some changes, got a bit more organized, and trained our volunteers more thoroughly, there was no doubt in my mind that we'd improve volunteer retention, cut down on staff interruptions, and reduce the nagging worry about volunteers getting bitten—which we felt every time a new volunteer picked up a leash or opened a kennel door.

But where should we start?

We knew we didn't need to reinvent the wheel. But it took a while before we committed to change and sat down to hammer out a new direction. I teamed up with the shelter manager and two longstanding volunteers who were also board members. Our goal was to revamp the volunteer program.

There are plenty of great resources that give information about how to structure a basic volunteer program for an animal shelter. *Animal Sheltering's* website, [animalsheltering.org](http://animalsheltering.org), includes numerous articles on volunteer management in its resource library, and the book *Volunteer Management for Animal Care Organizations*, by Betsy McFarland, senior director of the Companion Animals section of The HSUS, is available in PDF format at [humanesociety.org](http://humanesociety.org). Using some of the guidelines we found there, we strove to address our shelter's specific challenges.

## **Building a Program that Fits**

Our humane society is located in Buena Vista, Colo., and serves our rural county of about 16,000 residents. It inhabits a plain green building with a dirt parking lot and a welcoming flower garden. Surrounded by an industrial park and open fields, the building sits on a flat valley expanse. The Colorado Rockies make for a dramatic backdrop; there are breathtaking views of snowcapped peaks from every dog exercise yard. The stark juxtaposition of natural beauty with chain-link fencing encircling the daily drama of homeless pets is poignant.

It's been a balancing act for us, but even though we accept impounds from Chaffee County, our shelter has been able to maintain a no-kill policy. The shelter also takes in owner-surrendered animals as space allows. Of the 695 animals cared for last year, more than 90 percent were either returned to their owners or were adopted into homes. Only a small percentage was euthanized as a result of serious health or aggression problems.

In a small town, you get used to taking the volunteers you get. The idea of molding a volunteer workforce that would fit our shelter's needs, rather than making do with whoever walked in the door each day, was a daunting task. But what we discovered was that we could require more structure and training for our volunteers, as long as we continued to encourage people to employ their own talents and be creative in the ways they help the animals.

As a limited-admission facility, our shelter has the specific challenge of caring for the animals we take in until they get adopted—no matter how long that takes. While the average stay at the shelter is a month, some animals live at the shelter for the better part of a year.

A year is a long time, but for the animals in our care a loving home is well worth the wait. Since the animals may be with us a while, ensuring a high quality of life is of utmost importance. Dogs sleep with thick blankets and toys. They're paired off or grouped with buddies and play in large yards at least four times each day. Cats snuggle in

## Structuring Volunteer Programs



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Taylor Gibb, a volunteer at the Ark-Valley Humane Society, spends some cuddle time with Faye. Shelter cats thrive when they get some one-on-one time every day.

soft beds in private or shared kennels and are rotated into a playroom with roosts and a windowsill that gets sunshine 330 days a year.

For some animals, though, that's not enough. The longer an animal stays at the shelter, the more that cat or dog needs extra care. For some animals that means staying at a foster home, or taking a mountain hike with a volunteer instead of a short walk around the shelter. It may mean more cuddle time, or advanced obedience training to keep their minds engaged.

But being a no-kill shelter also has benefits for volunteers. No one has to worry that an animal might be euthanized due to time or space constraints. As a result, the idea of volunteering is more attractive to some self-described "softies," and the potential for daily heartache is replaced with the feeling that it's OK to get attached. Meaningful staff and volunteer connections with each animal ensure that our pets receive excellent care.

### Design for Living

Creating volunteer training and opportunities that would best support these human-animal bonds became a guiding goal for us as we started hashing out a volunteer handbook. (*Animalsheltering.org* came in handy here, too; a search for "volunteer handbook" on the site brings up a handful of shelter handbooks in use across the country).

Composing a handbook specific to our organization was a tall order. But, in following a basic outline and putting our programs, policies, history, mission, and goals on paper, we answered a lot of questions ahead of time.

Going through this process helped us get clear on what we wanted the volunteers to know about how the shelter works and how they can best help the animals. With the handbook in place, staff and volunteers would, for the first time, have a shared reference point.

We then took a big leap and changed our volunteer orientations from brief, rushed overviews to scheduled group training sessions. We decided that if someone wanted to volunteer, he'd need to sign up and come back later for training and orientation. We worried: Was this too much to ask? It felt like we could be turning away help as it walked through the door. At what cost?

Not everyone who decides to volunteer at a shelter wants to commit to orientations and scheduled days and times. We wondered how we could stick to our principles and create a more organized and safe program without turning away those who just wanted to visit with the animals or give a dog a quick walk. The last thing we wanted to do was alienate potential helpers—and in fact, we figured, the same people who were too busy to commit to our program's current requirements might be potential or past adopters—or donors—and might make excellent volunteers in the future. We didn't want people who'd showed up to help find us to be overly strict or ungrateful, so even as we increased our rules and regulations, we made an effort to remain flexible and appreciative in our interactions with potential volunteers.

We decided that prospective volunteers, like any visitors to the shelter, should be encouraged to interact with the pets for adoption. Like prospective adopters, spur-of-the-moment helpers are permitted to pet cats, cuddle with



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Janet Sellers, a volunteer at the Ark-Valley Humane Society, makes friends with shelter cat Sketchers.

dogs, or take a dog for a walk near the building under routine staff supervision. The oversight allows staff to answer questions and explain the volunteer program's opportunities and training requirements while we have a captive audience. We've found this flexibility works: Once the animals work their magic on the prospective volunteers, they're encouraged to sign up for an orientation to become official volunteers. Those who return do so feeling valued. Those who just dropped by still leave with a good feeling, knowing they've helped to brighten the day for a few animals.

### Getting Down and Dirty

Those people willing to commit to our volunteer requirements now attend a structured orientation. By providing it, we're able to ensure that every volunteer starts with an education about our shelter's history, programs, and policies; how to handle animals and improve their well-being through touch and exercise; how to report any problems, avoid spreading diseases, prevent accidents and bites; and whom to ask for help.

We decided that if we made orientations very "hands on," they'd be less boring and a lot more informative. So now, after new folks attend a walking tour of the building and get all the basic spatial and policy information, the new volunteers who plan to work with the animals actually get their hands dirty.

It takes time. For example, each cat volunteer is shown how to pick up and carry a cat, and then must demonstrate a basic proficiency doing it themselves. They need to show that they know how to open and lock kennel doors and sign off on their time with an animal on the appropriate dry erase board.

For dog volunteers, orientation is a lengthy—and, if the dogs are excited, loud—process that involves learning the proper technique for entering kennels, fitting a Gentle Leader harness on a somewhat hyper dog, and learning to check the halls for other dogs and walkers before going through doorways (so as to avoid potential run-ins between less dog-friendly dogs).

This is a lot of work, but well worth it. Most volunteers leave feeling confident enough to return to the shelter and start working without having to ask a million questions. Just as importantly, they feel needed because they've been formally invited to connect with the heart and soul of these animals and their shelter.

### Special Projects

We've found that providing specific pet projects is a great way to get volunteers involved and keep them coming back. For some people, the thought of walking 15 dogs in a few hours is overwhelming, not to mention emotionally and physically taxing.

But how about spending a calm hour with old Maggie? She's been at the shelter for six months. A lab mix, white

around her muzzle with a vague cataract haze in her right eye, Maggie would really benefit from some extended care.

Volunteers who once would have been walking a whole string of dogs can now spend quality one-on-one time with animals like Maggie, who barks twice and dances on her front legs when she gets a visitor. Even though she's older, she's nervous and excited, and volunteers learn from her kennel card that she has a tendency toward separation anxiety. They'll get to spend time with her and learn what a special dog she is—and they can help find her a stable, calm, and loving home by making her their pet project.

When a volunteer has a pet project, they take extra time to help out one or two special animals of their choice until those animals find homes. For dogs, the extra time can include grooming, long walks, visits to the park while sporting a snazzy "adopt-me" vest, overnights at the volunteer's home, or obedience lessons with the volunteer. Volunteers will often post fliers featuring their special pet to entice potential adopters, sponsor adoption fees, write an article about the pet for the local paper, and add detailed personal observations to the generic pet description on the shelter's website. For each volunteer who invests in the animal's care, the pet's eventual adoption is an especially tangible and emotionally rewarding event.

For a different volunteer, of course, walking 15 dogs is just the challenge he needs to get in great shape for an upcoming marathon. A well-trained volunteer can jog with three friendly dogs at once, and everyone involved will get a great workout—for dogs, nothing beats a jog away from the sights and sounds of the shelter. The air is always sweeter down the road.

And occasionally a volunteer's special talent comes in handy. A gentleman certified in Reiki, a technique for re-

**Matching dogs with play buddies is a great way to improve their quality of life while at the shelter. Here, two dogs enjoy each other's company at the Ark-Valley Humane Society.**



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Hayden Gibb, a volunteer at the Ark-Valley Humane Society in Buena Vista, Colo., takes Miss Madeline for a walk. Teaching puppies about leash walking gives them skills that adopters appreciate.

laxation and stress reduction, works with timid cats who arrive at the shelter. Some of these kitties are teetering on the verge of a “feral cat” designation, but this volunteer’s efforts sometimes make the difference between a particular cat getting a placed on someone’s lap or placed on a hay bale upon adoption.

Groomers, of course, are great to have as volunteers—perfect to call on when a matted, small-breed, “Is there a poodle under here somewhere?” dog arrives. A local dog trainer might be open to volunteering her services to include a free consultation for new adopters, resulting in fewer dog returns and a boost in her business.

And a dedicated volunteer with a green thumb can do a lot to enhance a shelter’s entrance with pretty landscaping.

### And That Has Made All the Difference

When volunteers show up, help out, and fit in, our staff rejoice. Our hope is that by making a commitment to formal training for volunteers, and remaining open to their input, the volunteer-induced headaches we experienced in the past will remain in the past.

We noticed that existing volunteers who graciously attended the new orientation and training seminar saw that their work was appreciated by staff and the board of directors. As one board member noted, “I think the new orientation program is a tonic to longtime volunteers—they see the investment and know they are valued.” The feedback from longtime volunteers also helped shape successive orientations. New volunteers have shown greater confidence and a stronger sense of dedication to their work. They’re more competent and committed overall, and as a result, our staff has developed greater trust and appreciation for volunteers.

The benefits of well-trained volunteers are, in theory, endless. They’re great to call in a pinch when an employee phones in sick first thing in the morning. Who else would arrive with a smile to scrub cat kennels for two hours on short notice?

Good volunteers stand out and make an excellent pool of applicants when a job or board of directors position opens up. Most importantly, they invaluablely enrich the lives of the animals they help care for.

I admit that as an employee, I didn’t always look a new volunteer in the face and see myself looking back. But I should have. Years ago, while in college, I walked dogs as a volunteer for my local animal shelter. Unbeknownst to me, I had already started my career in animal welfare. Shelters that take the time and make the effort to train volunteers may be creating lifelong advocates.

I’m hopeful that our efforts have been a worthwhile investment in our shelter’s future. If we’re lucky, there will be a lot more dependable shoulders around to help us carry the burden and share the joys of our seemingly endless work. [AS](#)



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