Competitive Pet Placement (CPP) Project Case Study
Cincinnati Animal CARE

Overview

Like many shelters across the country, Cincinnati Animal CARE (CAC) was seeing a decline in adoption rates in 2023. Eager to reverse a trend at the root of shelter overcrowding, CAC elected to launch multiple interventions in collaboration with a support team from Human Animal Support Services (HASS) as it participated in the Competitive Pet Placement (CPP) project. Data that helps the shelter understand how to improve customer service and increase adoptions, along with a strong foster program as an additional means for improvement, were where CAC placed its bets on success.

*The CPP project first paid close attention to factors that would influence success, either as potential obstacles or as strengths to build on.

CPP Project's Participating Shelters at a Glance					
	Cincinnati Animal CARE Shelter & Resource Center	**Charlotte-Mecklenburg Animal Care and Control**	**Riverside County Department of Animal Services** *(Western Riverside Shelter)*	**LifeLine Animal Project: DeKalb County Animal Services**	**Wisconsin Humane Society** *(Milwaukee Campus)*
Organization Type	Non-Profit With Government Contract	Government/ Municipal Shelter	Government/ Municipal Shelter	Non-Profit With Government Contract	Non-Profit
Location	Ohio	North Carolina	California	Georgia	Wisconsin
2022 Intake*	7,268	9,969	22,899	6,402	5,820
Admission Type	Strays: Open O/S: Managed, some walk-ins	Strays: Open O/S: Managed, some walk-ins	Strays: Open O/S: Managed, some walk-ins	Strays: Open O/S: Managed, some walk-ins	Strays: N/A** O/S: Managed, some walk-ins
Intervention Type(s)	Foot traffic data tracking, strategic in-person adoption events, virtual adoption meet and greets	Foot traffic data tracking, volunteer adoption matchmaker role	Foot traffic data tracking, adoption field trips, streamlined interest forms	Foot traffic data tracking, matchmaking process improvements	Foot traffic data tracking, matchmaking process improvements

Intakes: Includes born in care, owner surrender, owner requested euthanasia, returns, seized/confiscate/quarantine, stray, transfer in, and wildlife. Excludes disposal/DOA, foster return, other, report, service in/public assistance.
**The Wisconsin Humane Society Milwaukee Campus itself does not hold a contract for holding strays, but does place strays transferred to them past their holds.*

CAC and HASS in Brief

CAC is a nonprofit organization with a government contract to provide animal services in Hamilton County, Ohio, which has a population of some 825,000.* The county is the least prosperous area among those participating in the CPP project. In 2022 CAC saw an intake of 7200 pets.

*The characteristics of both the shelter and community can influence success in improving adoptions.

Since 2020, CAC has been one of 22 HASS pilot organizations working to pilot the implementation of a new model for animal services. HASS prioritizes working with families and communities to

divert pets from shelters by offering resources to help people and pets stay together, thereby interrupting conditions that lead to shelter overcrowding and high rates of euthanasia. The CPP project aligns with one of the four main parts, or pathways, of the HASS model, called Intake to Placement. This pathway comes into play for animals that have no other option but shelter care. It is designed to move them as quickly as possible to foster homes and permanent live outcomes, primarily adoptions. HASS project staff, based at Austin Pets Alive!, provide expertise in education and training, data, policy, and communications to support the 22 pilot organizations, including CAC, that are bringing the HASS model to their communities.

Preparing to Launch the CPP Project in Cincinnati

CAC was the first of the five shelters participating in the CPP project to be visited by the HASS implementation support team, which traveled to Cincinnati in early November 2023 to work alongside CAC staff and volunteers. Prior to their week-long visit, the HASS team had already met several times virtually with CAC leadership s to understand their processes, assess the shelter's daily flow of operations, identify key managers or department staff to be involved, and dig deeper into their challenges.* The HASS team also learned about differences between CAC's two locations to ensure the differing services at each location were taken into account.

*This detailed assessment of operations proved to be critical for all shelters participating in the CPP project. Where the HASS team spent less time on pre-visit planning with other shelters, we noticed that we spent more time addressing unanticipated issues in the project's rollout.

The HASS team and CAC identified several indicators that the shelter would be a good fit for the CPP project:

- CAC was seeing a **10% decline** in dog adoption rates in 2023—an ideal opportunity for intervention
- CAC could build from a key strength, a robust foster program that saw 4,000 foster placements in 2023*
- CAC has a culture of creative problem-solving and data-driven innovation
- CAC has had a strong interest in gaining insight into foot traffic in their facilities, an activity focused on assessing customer service, a key need among shelters for making them more competitive in pet placement

*Working from the shelter's strengths was a key factor in succeeding at improvements, in part because staff doing the work felt positive about the changes they were asked to undergo.

Aware that the shelter needed much better data to drive all decisions around operational improvements, CAC had already been trying to capture foot traffic data through a paper sign-in sheet to determine how many visitors coming to the shelter with the intention of adopting left with a pet (their adoption conversion rate), but they were not confident in the accuracy of the

process and the data it was yielding. Another issue was with a large percentage of foster caregivers not feeling empowered and knowledgeable enough to find adopters and complete the adoption process on their own. This was causing a strain for both caregivers and foster management staff, and CAC was seeing a significant decrease in adoptions among fostered pets in 2023. Last, CAC leadership suspected that the adoption program was not reaching some parts of their community: CAC had recently taken on the contract for county animal services and was not yet well-known throughout the city and county. They also knew that reaching their shelter's location was challenging for some parts of their community. They wanted to test strategically holding adoption events offsite to both spread awareness and improve adoptions.

Based on all of this information, HASS and CAC settled on implementing three interventions to improve CAC's adoption rates:*

- Foot Traffic Data Tracking
- Virtual Meet and Greets for Fosters
- Strategic Adoption Events

*It would have been beneficial to narrow our scope and launch no more than two new initiatives. Change-making requires focus and time!

Onsite Implementation: Foot Traffic Data Tracking

Foot traffic at CAC includes people coming through the doors of its two locations for a variety of reasons). Knowing why members of the public are coming and if, among potential adopters especially, they are leaving having had their needs met is the core goal of the project.* The CPP foot traffic project uses free Google tools to not only collect and understand this data, but to help staff more easily manage customer flow. The premise of the project is that improving customer experience will translate to improved adoption rates as the shelter learns where visitors run into problems with connecting to a pet and adopting, and uses this information to solve issues.

Learning that CAC lacked an efficient way to collect visitor data nor manage visitor flow, the HASS implementation support team created a visitor flow process and a relatively simple tool to manage both needs.* In the new process, visitors arriving at the shelter would use tablets at the front counter or a QR code on a poster with instructions to access a Google check-in form. The form asks for a visitor's name, contact information (phone and email), the reason for the visit, how they heard about the shelter (to guide marketing and outreach), and—for potential adopters—what kind of pet they are looking for. The form feeds to a Google spreadsheet, and creates a customer queue on the digital screens of staff. Alongside the queue of customer names, staff can see the details of why they are there, and more easily connect them with whatever services they are seeking.

*Good data collection depends on staff being trained in its importance and in learning what and how to collect it. Making this simple for busy staff was imperative to the success of the project

While the new foot traffic tool is relatively simple, the key challenges of the project were in providing adequate training and gaining internal buy-in to use the new process consistently. The HASS support team dedicated time to walk shelter staff through the process and collaboratively problem-solved what wasn't working well.* The HASS team also provided a one-page FAQ to ensure staff had resources to consult once the HASS team had left, and set things up so that trained staff could teach those absent during the training how to carry out the new process. To ensure that the most critical data points would be recorded consistently, the teams emphasized capturing them for those inevitably busy times when processes may not be fully carried out: what are people coming in for, and did they leave having accomplished what they came for?

*Including staff in collaborating around how to work out the process and troubleshooting issues was key to the successful use of the new process.

In pre-visit conversations with CAC staff, the HASS team learned that one of the shelter's departments, Community Services (where pet owners are connected with resources to help them keep their pets), was already using a Google form to track visitors to the shelter. Having this successful example of using a digital check-in process to track customers helped build buy-in from staff in other departments and troubleshoot potential roadblocks. The HASS team simply made some adjustments to the existing form for broader use and added a new QR code for shelter visitors to access the form.

To assess the customer service experience, the shelters sent a follow up survey at the end of the day, using both a text sent out by Google voice and an email asking about customer experience, and, if the visitor had checked-in stating they had come to adopt or foster, asking why they had not.

The HASS team also realized that providing a visual dashboard showing the customer queue and performance metrics that staff could see on their digital screens would help them understand and buy into the advantages of the new process.* A visual dashboard built into the foot traffic spreadsheet was created by the HASS support team and sent to CAC. The CAC outcomes team was able to see their customer service success almost in real-time on the dashboard. In the first two weeks of foot traffic data tracking, that team had scored a 4.6 out of 5 customer service rating on their customer follow-up surveys. Outcomes leadership was able to take this early success and use it to both celebrate and motivate their team to continue not only collecting foot traffic data, but serving adopters, fosters, and any other customer that came in with great customer service.

* We found over and over again during the CPP rollout that managers and frontline staff, some not wholly bought into the importance of data or reluctant to add data collection to heavy workloads, respond with enthusiasm when they can see it in visual form.

Onsite Implementation: Virtual Meet and Greets for Fosters

The second CPP intervention addressed the need to correct an evident decline in adoptions among fostered pets, and the need to give foster caregivers the support and confidence they had been lacking to turn this situation around. CAC had policies allowing foster caregivers to carry out the adoption process on their own, but found that fosters were hesitant. Fixing this situation was seen as especially critical because the easiest-to-place pets tended to be in foster care.

On the first day of the HASS support team's visit, a roundtable was held with seven foster caregivers of varying experience to hear their perspective directly. The fosters felt overwhelmingly positive about the initiative to solve problems and offered many helpful suggestions. In the roundtable, the team learned that the fosters felt unclear about how to finalize an adoption in the absence of a standardized process, proposed suggestions to improve communications with staff, and requested more documentation on the entire adoption process to reference, along with resources for handling issues like a shy animal. They were expected to conduct meet and greets with potential adopters, but also revealed they felt that the set-up for this was too onerous.

Their feedback, along with perspectives from CAC staff, informed the development of the initiative to improve adoptions from foster homes, an approach designed to also win buy-in from fosters.* The HASS and CAC staff created supportive materials to guide foster caregivers through a new adoption process that included virtual meet and greets for fosters. Using Zoom, Facetime or Google Meets, adopters could meet potential new pets on video and have discussions with fosters on the pets' characteristics.

*A key lesson learned from the CPPP rollout that we can't emphasize enough: Collaboration drives problem-solving as you draw in the people who are experiencing an issue and can point you to solutions.

By the end of the week, the HASS and CAC teams had built a process with a nearly completed SOP, a foster caregiver recruitment plan, and foster caregivers resources, including a Virtual Meet tip sheet and FAQ. Also included was a new volunteer role to support the program's administration. As it was time for the HASS team to leave,* it was decided to announce the initiative to foster caregivers the following week through a virtual meeting, offering an FAQ session, and to repeat this in several weeks. CAC's fosters have now begun the virtual meet and greet process.

*We learned that without the in-person support that busy shelter staff slowed down in making finishing touches and would recommend that managers anticipate the need to make time for this.

Onsite Implementation: Strategic Offsite Adoption Events

CAC leadership sensed that the shelter was not connecting with all parts of their community and missing out on potential adopters. To address this, the HASS support team and CAC worked

closely together on a multifaceted solution, beginning with data and a visualization of CAC's current reach. This was accomplished through the creation of heat maps that showed where adopters were located in Cincinnati and the county in 2020-2023, as well as fosters and donors, looking for geographic gaps in the shelter's reach. The HASS data team overlaid these maps with demographic information, showing income level, home ownership status, age, and primary languages spoken in each area of the city. The resulting map was used by the HASS team to identify opportune sites for adoption events. Conversations with the CAC staff would further inform these decisions. The heatmap showed adoptions low among residents in some affluent areas.* Staff hypothesized that factors like the difficulty in traveling to the shelter were a likely cause, or that well-off residents might prefer a more "boutique" adoption experience, and could make plans accordingly.

*The use of a heatmap as a decision-making tool is a great example of how important data can be in driving more effective actions. At CAC, without the heatmap we might have made recommendations based on incorrect assumptions.

Once meetings began with leadership related to the strategic adoption event initiative, the HASS team found that there were more extensive barriers to offsite adoption events, such as some staff being risk averse around having animals with certain behaviors at offsite events, and lacking clarity around who would be responsible for handling dogs. The CAC leadership had conflicting opinions about this, causing a need for more extensive conversations and resources around best practices for animals going to offsite events. An additional need was for support for event and marketing planning practices since the success of adoption events depends on these.

Through collaboration and education with the HASS marketing team, an event tier system process with set up has been utilized by the Cincinnati animal care event coordinator. This has resulted in a more successful, impactful and adoption driven event strategy for 2024. Overall, the most successful part of the CPP implementation on-site was the collaborative nature of the rollout between the HASS and CAC teams. Documents, training materials, and SOP's were created together and the teams worked hand-in-hand to problem-solve as challenges arose. Appropriate CAC staff was available to the HASS team throughout the entire week and their focus was solely the implementation of these initiatives.