



Competitive Pet Placement (CPP) Project Case Study Wisconsin Humane Society

Overview

While the [Wisconsin Humane Society's \(WHS\)](#) adoption rates consistently remain relatively high, they have experienced an increased median length of stay* in the population of pets across their six locations, making the organization a good candidate for a project to improve adoptions.** WHS has an especially progressive leadership team, dedicated to data-driven decision-making. Motivated to understand the change in length of stay, reverse a trend contributing to bottlenecks in the shelter, and expedite adoptions, WHS partnered with Human Animal Support Services (HASS) in the Competitive Pet Placement (CPP) project. The shelter's greatest needs included streamlining the adoption matchmaking process and garnering greater insights into why people who showed interest in their available pets were leaving without adopting.

*In comparing complete data from 2022 to 2023.

**Even organizations with high adoption rates can benefit from assessing and optimizing their existing processes.



CPP Project's Participating Shelters at a Glance					
	Riverside County Department of Animal Services (Western Riverside Shelter)	Charlotte-Mecklenburg Animal Care and Control	Cincinnati Animal CARE Shelter & Resource Center	LifeLine Animal Project: DeKalb County Animal Services	Wisconsin Humane Society (Milwaukee Campus)
Organization Type	Government/Municipal Shelter	Government/Municipal Shelter	Non-Profit With Government Contract	Non-Profit With Government Contract	Non-Profit
Location	California	North Carolina	Ohio	Georgia	Wisconsin
2022 Intake*	22,899	9,969	7,268	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, adoption field trips, streamlined interest forms	Foot traffic data tracking, volunteer adoption matchmaker role	Foot traffic data tracking, strategic in-person adoption events, virtual adoption meet and greets	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 does not hold a contract for holding strays, but does place strays transferred to them after their holds.

WHS and HASS in Brief

The Wisconsin Humane Society (WHS) is the largest animal welfare organization in Wisconsin. The campus in Milwaukee, the CPP project location, is the largest of the organization's six shelter locations. The campus has no government contract, unlike all other WHS locations, and operates as a nonprofit shelter. In 2023, it had an intake of 5,843.* Milwaukee County, Wisconsin has a population of 939,489.

***The characteristics of both the shelter and community can influence success in adoption outcomes.**

WHS is the only organization participating in CPP that is not one of the 22 organizations piloting the HASS model. Their participation in this project offers new insight into how these initiatives can

develop at a shelter HASS has not previously collaborated with or provided direct implementation support.

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 pathways of the HASS model, called Intake-to-Placement. This pathway comes into play for animals who have no other option but shelter care and is designed to move them as quickly as possible to foster or adoptive homes. HASS project staff provide expertise in education and training, data, policy, and communications to support 22 pilot organizations that are implementing the HASS model for their communities.

Preparing to Launch the CPP Project in Milwaukee

The first step in launching the CPP project at WHS's Milwaukee location was to understand their shelter data and current operations, to identify strengths that the project could build on to improve adoption rates. The HASS team collaborated with WHS leadership to identify areas of interest through data analysis, structured and conversational interviews, and a review of existing operations manuals and pet profiles.

The primary challenge for WHS was adoption process wait times: a very lengthy adoption process that could take several hours from check-in through finalizing the adoption. WHS needed to collect additional data at check-in to know how many people were visiting the adoption center and why people who were interested in pets were not adopting that day. The WHS leadership team also expressed interest in improving their matchmaking process, which was already very thorough, but time-consuming for both staff and potential adopters, leading to bottlenecks and long wait times for the public. The challenge was to find the balance of properly informing potential adopters, while not losing out on potential adoptions. Lastly, the HASS team also knew that WHS foot traffic data would likely differ from other shelters because of an integrated check-in process through [Waitwhile](#) and limiting foot traffic data collection to their adoption center only.

WHS's Milwaukee Campus was a good fit for the CPP project for several reasons:

- WHS leadership's commitment to innovation and data-driven decision-making
- The campus has a high volume of visitors interested in taking pets home and could focus on reducing length of stay
- Opportunities to leverage existing tools and processes, such as WHS's use of Waitwhile software to manage a queue for potential adopters and the use of extensive pet records in adoption counseling

The HASS support team and leadership at WHS's Milwaukee Campus selected two initiatives aimed at improving adoption rates:



- Adoption Center Foot Traffic Data Tracking
- Adoption Matchmaking Process Improvements

Onsite Implementation: Foot Traffic Data Tracking

This initiative implemented a process to collect adoption center foot traffic data* and gather feedback from visitors on their experience at the shelter. Collecting this information would allow WHS to identify why people are coming to the Milwaukee shelter, why potential adopters are leaving without pets, and the busiest times for visitors.

*Foot traffic data can inform marketing efforts, staffing levels, community needs, all helpful in improving adoption rates.

The process of capturing only adoption center visitor foot traffic data differs from all other shelters in the CPP project, where *all* foot traffic/visitor types were tracked. In the original WHS's check-in process, clients who were ready to meet with an adoption counselor and felt confident about completing an adoption that day were asked to register on the waitlist generated by Waitwhile software. Clients check-in online through WHS's website, by scanning a QR code, or speaking with a client services representative in-person. The average service time for WHS Milwaukee Campus in January 2024, the month prior to project launch, was 79 minutes on average per adoption counseling session, with wait times averaging 59 minutes, and some wait times (outliers) as long as several hours. Due to these possible wait times, the shelter encouraged clients to register on the waitlist in advance from home/remotely.

Through the CPP project, check-in data collection process improvements included:

- Process update to include all adoption center visitors in the check-in process (*more on this later*)
- A check-in form question* asking if clients were interested in a specific pet and what they were looking for in a pet:
 - "Please describe what you are looking for in a pet, or if you're open to suggestions from your Adoption Counselor: (Please list a pet's name/A# if you are interested in a specific pet.)"
- Internal data tracking process to identify if a client adopted a pet that day
- Internal data tracking process to identify *why* clients did not adopt, if so
- Automatic distribution of a client experience survey to gain a deeper understanding of the client experience

*The addition of a question like this in the check-in process can start framing the counseling session for the client and elevate the adoption counselor's expertise at the start of the interaction.



The waitlist registration form collects information including a client's name, contact information (phone, email address), zip code of residence, species they're interested in, and free text space for the client to record what they are looking for in a pet and/or if they are not sure and are very open to suggestions from their adoption counselor. The online form then generates a person record in the queue in the Waitwhile software. If a client has visited previously, that history is also preserved and connected to their profile.

While working with WHS staff, the HASS team offered training sessions, one-on-one meetings, and on-the-job support to ensure shelter staff understood why foot traffic data is important and had time to absorb how to collect it.*

**In any change-making process, investing enough time in helping all involved understand the why and how of the change is a prerequisite. We knew it would be necessary to get both the insight and the buy-in of staff and volunteers carrying out new processes, as they can make or break the desired change.*

From the data collected in the check-in and follow-up survey process, the HASS team built dashboards to visualize the data* allowing shelter management to review the adoption conversion rate,** the breakdown of why adoption visitors did not leave with a pet, and the visitors' rating of their service. Consistent use of the waitlist registration process for data collection and review of that data for operational improvements is key.

**During the rollout of the CPP project across 5 shelters, we realized that visual tools like dashboards really help shelter teams understand how collecting more information can help them. In some of the CPP shelters the HASS team saw team members motivated to see their adoption conversion rate tick upward or their star rating for client services change with client feedback.*

***Adoption conversion rate = (# of completed adoptions) divided by (# of waitlist registrants visiting the adoption center - canceled registrants)*

One of the most significant updates to the existing WHS waitlist registration process was to capture visitors who commented that they may be "just browsing" when asked by a team member if they were interested in adopting today. The HASS team collaborated with WHS to incorporate the addition of tracking these clients in the waitlist registration process, with a goal of having *all* clients slotted to speak with an adoption counselor. This effort was motivated by emerging anecdotal evidence from HASS pilot shelters that participated in the CPP project and WHS that visitors who may be "just browsing" can be successfully converted into adopters during their shelter visit.



Tracking these visitors in the waitlist registration process is particularly valuable for WHS for several reasons:

- Increased visibility of available pets who are not in areas accessible to the public
- Increased matchmaking opportunities and elevation of shelter team expertise in guiding the matchmaking process
- Understanding of the client experience with more complete data collection
- Identification of staffing needs with more complete data collection
- Efficient management of adoption waitlist in Waitwhile
- Ensures all clients visiting Adoptions receive the Client Experience Survey connected to Waitwhile automatic messaging
- Ensures all clients receive critical adoption process information
- Reduced wait times for clients who ultimately decided to pursue adoption during their visit

Additionally, this new process aimed to support a fresh, client-centered perspective: **all clients walking through the adoption center should be considered a potential adopter.*** Even those truly interested in only visiting the shelter to look around and not adopt were still able to receive help from shelter team members. These clients also have the benefit of participating in the client experience survey.

***The shift to considering everyone walking through the adoption floor as a potential adopter opens the opportunity for an enhanced client experience, more visibility for available pets housed in areas that are not open to the public, and, ultimately, the opportunity to increase adoption outcomes.**

Transitioning to include “just browsing” visitors was initially a challenge due to concerns around the current adoption counseling sessions already lasting 1-2 hours on average. To enable gaining the benefits of including this new audience, leadership devoted time to rallying the staff to embrace suggested changes, and the staff were provided with supportive resources such as training on sample scripts for client conversation. Leadership also assisted by reviewing data tracking to ensure complete data entry. Additionally, the process included completing visit records for clients who received a touch point from staff or volunteers and confirmed that they did not want to meet with anyone any further. In applying this process, concerns about “just browsing” clients are addressed by maintaining an accurate waitlist queue while preserving valuable client services.

The adoption center foot traffic data tracking initiative was successfully launched on Wednesday, February 21, 2024. Preliminary data indicates that WHS Milwaukee Campus is off to a great start capturing data on why visitors are leaving without a pet so that they can address the primary



reasons why this occurs. WHS is also capturing valuable client experience feedback that can help the shelter know where the experience of visitors could be better.

Onsite Implementation: Adoption Matchmaking Process Improvements

Together with the HASS team, leadership at the Milwaukee Campus analyzed the existing process for matching pets with potential adopters and identified an opportunity to improve matchmaking opportunities by focusing on recording positive pet observations and restructuring the adoption session flow.

Prior to their site visit at WHS, HASS team members hosted a virtual roundtable for staff and volunteer team members to discuss matchmaking strategies, goals, and support needs. The virtual roundtable* was also accompanied by a survey for those who were unable to attend to ensure all had the opportunity to contribute.

**Roundtable discussions between staff, volunteers, and the HASS team fostered an open line of communication and collaboration critical to the success of the initiatives.*

Onsite training,* “Matchmaking Strategies: Enhancing the Adopter Experience,” was provided to 25 staff and volunteer team members. A pre-training survey was distributed at the start of the training session and a post-training survey was later distributed to better understand the team member experience while matchmaking for pets and to evaluate changes following the implementation of the project discussed here.

**Shelter leadership also expressed value in the cross-departmental conversations facilitated through the onsite training workshops led by HASS. These conversations worked to break down barriers between “siloes” teams.*

Some key elements in WHS’s matchmaking process were identified as potential barriers to adoptions. The first was its focus on extensive communications about pets’ medical and behavioral considerations and discussing these even before a potential adopter had time to get to know the pet in a meet and greet. WHS is dedicated to helping pets with medical and behavioral needs, and the organization actively documents extensive information on their pets in the form of medical and behavioral disclosures (waivers). Adopters are taken through a lengthy process of reviewing these disclosures to ensure they understand the needs of pets they have chosen for adoption. This was daunting for adopters, and was contributing to long adoption wait and service times. There was a need to make sure the information provided was not limiting pets from finding placement. The shelter needed to communicate necessary information and allow for a more effective and efficient adoption process.



To support navigating the shelter's medical and behavioral disclosures, HASS conducted an audit of all WHS's disclosure templates and collaborated with WHS senior leadership, behavior department leadership, behavior team members, and client service representatives to develop an Adoption Counseling Tip Sheet customized for the organization's terminology and disclosure types. The tip sheet lists each disclosure type by name and offers key talking points to be used to start a conversation about a pet. A primary goal of the tip sheet is to reduce overwhelm in navigating multi-page disclosures and to support a more positive description of a pet's needs, while still maintaining transparency about a pet's history.

The second challenge in the matchmaking process was the relative lack of focus on pets' positive qualities. While the shelter had developed extensive practices around collecting and documenting medical and behavioral needs, a process did not exist to capture more general and informal observations that would convey the endearing, and most importantly—positive!—characteristics of an animal. Counselors were limited to looking up pets individually in the software to try and make a match, which was quite cumbersome and largely ineffective. HASS collaborated with WHS IT Administration to develop a new memo type and comprehensive custom report* in Petpoint which is emailed to department leads daily.

As of March 2024, WHS plans to host a raffle to incentivize team members to enter Positive Observations memos regularly, with a data entry goal of one memo per person, per shift.

**If looking to develop a similar tool, shelters may consider using base reports available in their software, such as the "Animal Inventory Memo Report" in Petpoint, and forego some of the customization implemented in this project. This is also valuable for organizations who may not have access to the technical support needed to create custom reports in some software.*

With more effective ways to communicate both positive observations and medical and behavioral needs of pets in place, the final piece of the matchmaking process relied on the flow of how that information was delivered to the client. This updated adoption process flow* differed from the shelter's former process where it was challenging to make pet recommendations, clients were heavily relied on to have a specific pet in mind, and full disclosures were reviewed word-for-word earlier in the process, before clients had the opportunity to see adoptable pets shine.

HASS provided training to support the following adoption session process flow:

- Greet the client
- Get to know the client by asking open-ended questions
- Make pet recommendations using the Positive Observations Report, client waitlist registration form, and Adopter Profile questionnaire
- Share pet highlights, guided by the Adoption Counseling Tip Sheet



- Introduce client to the pet(s)
- Review full disclosures
- End session (process adoption, if applicable)
- Record visit result of whether or not the client adopted a pet and if not, why not (see *Foot Traffic Data Tracking* section)

*The new process emphasized matchmaking based on considering each pet as an individual and created space to highlight positive qualities alongside care needs.

The matchmaking process improvement initiative was successfully launched on Tuesday, February 20, 2024. Preliminary data indicates that WHS Milwaukee Campus team has been empowered to improve their matchmaking strategies and client-facing services in adoption counseling through use of positive pet observations, effective communication, and adoption process flow updates.

Overall, implementation of foot traffic data tracking and matchmaking training at WHS Milwaukee was very successful. Both initiatives are now in use and we expect to report outcomes later in 2024, once sufficient time has passed for the team to settle into the new process.