Pet Support Services
Pet Support Through Field Services

Overview

Field Service Officers frequently act as the first point of contact for a community member seeking help with a pet. This provides officers a unique opportunity to evaluate a situation holistically, through in-person interactions, to determine if pet support is needed or if another action should be taken (i.e. addressing instances of cruelty). Officers can provide recommendations or direct support to help keep more pets and people together. Providing pet support to community members through field services interactions achieves these primary functions:

- Prevents the unnecessary surrender of a pet who has a willing caretaker
- May provide cost-savings if fewer pets are admitted to the shelter
- Identifies community needs trends that may be used for more comprehensive program implementation in the future
- Improves community relationships and builds trust with animal services
- Intervenes in potential cruelty/neglect cases

From Punitive to Supportive Measures

Evaluate the field services department's internal policies, success metrics, and culture to ensure they are focused on keeping pets with their families over general impoundment. For example:

- Provide support in place of citations when possible, especially in situations where financial challenges are present.
- Provide free or low-cost medical care options for owned pets (directly or through referrals) without requiring surrender of the pet.
- Prioritize conversations with community members to identify the root cause of an issue and provide support that may benefit the person and the pet.
- Suggest supported self-rehoming options instead of surrender when possible.

Getting Started

Providing pet support through field services may look different for each situation. Consider integrating a mix of the following options into protocols to accommodate different needs.

1. **Provide information on organizations and programs**, including ways to contact them, that provide free or low-cost pet support services such as low-cost vaccination clinics, spay/neuter programs, food banks, and supplies donations. You may use pets.findhelp.com or create a local ecosystem map to find these options.
2. **Have disaster preparedness resources available** before a disaster strikes. Be aware of existing protocols, such as your jurisdiction's existing Emergency Operations Plan and established partnerships (i.e. Red Cross). Have a plan to manage disaster response for pets if one does occur.
3. **Carry common pet support items in field services vehicles** that can be handed out such as printed copies of basic care instructions or how to manage basic pet behaviors, extra food, leashes, collars, ID tags, litter, simple fence repair tools (wires, screws, etc), flea prevention, gentle leaders, enrichment toys, indoor crates, and more. *Tip: Increase accessibility of printed materials by offering them in multiple languages.*
4. **Partner with local organizations** and establish a process by which referrals or coupons may be provided to the community. Examples include local veterinary clinics, animal shelter/rescue organizations, food pantries, and boarding facilities.
5. **Establish a service to transport supplies or pets**. Officers may be able to respond to calls from pet owners needing assistance such as transportation of pets to veterinary appointments or delivering food/supplies to households that are unable to travel or are otherwise facing hardships.
6. **Attend or organize pet wellness events or educational workshops** in the community. Provide support options and best practice information for locating support at these events. Invite local partners (#4) to attend the event as well!
7. **Create a volunteer group that can assist with pet support efforts**. This may include managing responses to community requests on social media, delivering food or supplies, transporting pets, collecting donations, and more!
8. **Utilize third-party training services** such as the NACA Professional Development Training and Certification Series and AAWA DEI Training Opportunities.
9. Share support offered through human service agencies (i.e. Health Department, Department on Aging) that may assist with human-centric needs discovered during pet support conversations.

Tip: You may be asked for support—say, temporary boarding suggestions in an emergency—that you can provide. Sounds straight-forward! But make sure you aren't leaving other important human-service-oriented support options on the table that will address a current situation or even root causes. The HASS Pet Support Guide and Worksheet can help get you started with this type of problem-solving and help you efficiently triage needs in the field! This worksheet works best if you fill one out in advance so you can pre-identify programs and services.

Additional Considerations

As pet support is integrated into field operations, consider launching a [community needs or values survey](#), tracking [pet support request data](#) or collecting feedback surveys to improve understanding of the complex needs of your community. Analyzing responses can help identify opportunities for better support such as:

- Specific zip codes that are lacking in services that should receive more direct outreach or mobile services
- Common trends in the type of support needed that can be prioritized at future community events, partnership building, or fundraising requests
- The effectiveness of your current support offerings

Supporting Research and Resources

- [Animal Control and Field Services Officers' Perspectives on Community Engagement: A Qualitative Phenomenology Study](#) (Moss et al., 2023)
  - "The definitions of community engagement varied greatly across this sample of U.S. officers. However, most officers agreed that strategies such as **relationship-building, providing assistance or information, and allowing time for compliance** were among the most effective community engagement strategies."
  - "To empower communities to prevent and respond to animal cruelty and neglect, animal control and field services organizations **must employ effective and culturally responsive community engagement strategies** [6]. These strategies include efforts to address systemic and sociocultural barriers to accessing pet support services (e.g., veterinary care, behavior care, and basic supplies) [7,8]."
  - "When we return an animal that was running at large instead of taking it to the shelter, I think that's building trust (Participant 9). **Many officers described return-to-field (RTF) practices in the field as community engagement.** Rather than impounding the animal, citing the owner, or charging fees, officers simply returned the animal to the owner while in the field. Officers expressed that trying to figure out where a lost dog belongs in a neighborhood before bringing it to the shelter, such as walking door to door or checking for a microchip, positively impacts trust with the community. **Similarly, many officers shared that the community can help get lost pets home and believed this leads to effective community engagement.** Officers explained that when community members find dogs, it is an opportunity for the animal control and field services officer to develop a relationship. Situations such as this allow officers to build upon existing community strengths."

- [Punishment to Support: The Need to Align Animal Control Enforcement with the Human Social Justice Movement](#) (Hawes et al., 2020)
  - *This paper finds that supporting pet owners is more cost-effective than taking animals into shelter custody.*
  - "**Reallocating the resources that have historically gone towards enforcement** in communities to efforts that provide support in addressing the root causes of animal

welfare concerns is needed to **improve outcomes for pets** in historically underserved communities."

- ○ "**This approach can also be more cost-effective than a punitive approach**. For example, Rochester Animal Services (Rochester, NY, USA) spends an average of $160 per animal served through Pets for Life, compared to an average cost of $300 per cat and $375 per dog if that animal were to be taken into the custody of the shelter [40]. Salt Lake County Animal Services (Salt Lake City, UT, USA) spends an average of $400 per animal to implement an enforcement approach that includes officer response, veterinary needs, in-shelter care, overhead, supplies, and pet placement. In contrast, the average cost per pet served through the Pets for Life model in Salt Lake County is $116 [36]."

- The Impact of Incorporating Multiple Best Practices on Live Outcomes for a Municipal Animal Shelter in Memphis, TN (Kreisler et al., 2022)
  - ○ "In 2017, the municipal animal shelter in Memphis, TN (Memphis Animal Services) implemented five new strategies and analyzed their resultant life-saving data. The interventions included managed strategic shelter intake, pet owner safety net, community cat return to field, **transition of field services from punitive to assistive,** and streamlined adoption and transfer protocols."
  - ○ "Implementation of these best practices accelerated Memphis Animal Services' progress toward a live release rate of at least 90%, particularly for cats, dramatically decreased kitten euthanasia, increased the RTO rate for dogs and severed the historical correlation between euthanasia and intake."