Competitive Pet Placement (CPP) Project Case Study
Riverside County Department of Animal Services

Overview

Across the four shelter locations operated by Riverside County Department of Animal Services (RCDAS), intake rose in 2023 by 15% over 2022 while adoption rates fell by 3%. With an especially large pet population, the Riverside shelter participating in the Competitive Pet Placement (CPP) project was in need of more efficient customer service to improve adoption rates for the county. The HASS implementation support team found the bones for these improvements already available at Riverside* in a visitor check-in system, created the previous summer for people arriving to seek support for keeping their pets; in a process for potential adopters to submit interest forms online; and in a field trip program for dogs that could be transformed into a trial adoption program.

*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					
	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 itself does not hold a contract for holding strays, but does place strays transferred to them past their holds.*

Riverside County and HASS in Brief

RCDAS is a government shelter headquartered in Riverside's Jurupa Valley, California, and serves a county population of nearly 2.5 million. By far the largest organization participating in the CPP project, RCDAS's 4 shelter locations together took in over 45,000 pets in 2023.* The location participating in the CPP project, the Western Riverside Shelter, took in over 26,000 alone.

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

Since 2020, RCDAS has been one of 22 HASS 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 and 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 Riverside, that are bringing the HASS model to their communities.

Preparing to Launch the CPP Project in Riverside County

With a thirst for new ideas to combat decreasing adoption rates, leadership at RCDAS was thrilled to be selected as a participant in the CPP project and excited to hear what the HASS implementation support team had to offer.

RCDAS was a fit for the Competitive Pet Placement project for a number of reasons:

- Leadership was fully invested in improving a situation that was causing overcrowding as intake outpaced adoptions
- Riverside had previously demonstrated their commitment to improving adoptions by participating in an earlier phase of the CPP project focused on the easier fixes to adoption barriers
- The participating shelter facility would not have to start entirely new initiatives but could build from some existing processes

The HASS and RCDAS teams agreed to work on customizing three initiatives to improve adoptions:* All three address and improve communication at various points of contact with potential adopters.

- Foot Traffic Data Tracking
- Reviving Online Adoption Interest Forms
- Foster-to-Adopt Improvements

*We had seen that a smaller organization than Riverside would have better success in implementing new activities by keeping a focus on no more than two simultaneous changes.

An initial virtual CPP kickoff meeting was held in mid-November, and HASS and RCDAS teams met weekly to plan and troubleshoot, up until the HASS support team traveled to Riverside in

December. An advantage in the Riverside case was the participation of some key personnel, two Animal Services Chiefs, two Counselor Supervisors and a Chameleon database subject matter expert. Together, these represent decades of experience in animal welfare at Riverside and a deep understanding of the programs and processes being addressed.

Onsite Implementation: Foot Traffic Data Tracking

The onsite project began immediately with the HASS implementation support team's arrival, and started with the CPP project's most complex initiative, foot traffic tracking, which not only collects data, but helps staff more efficiently manage customer flow and improves their experience. Customer-facing staff were set up with digital devices and links to a check-in form to collect visitor data. This was followed by training staff on how to use the form and manage the queue of visitors.*

*Investing time in staff training was a key to the success of this new process. This allows the staff time to truly understand both the how and why of changes and for some hands-on practice.

At Riverside, this new customer management process would be layered onto a process launched the previous summer, in which people arriving at the shelter for any variety of reasons are met at a table placed in front of the main entrance. Some visitors come to surrender a pet of their own, some to turn in a lost pet or to find a lost family member, others to foster or adopt. The primary objective was to catch and prioritize those seeking help in keeping their pets, through offered resources and counseling, and while the staff had been tracking how many pets they are able to help and divert from intake, they recorded only a number helped and diverted, and did so on paper. This was a lost opportunity for understanding more broadly why people come to the shelter and how best to help them.

With the introduction of the foot traffic project, visitors stating that they had come for reasons other than pet support are sent to a kiosk at the lobby's front desk where they can fill in the QR-code enabled check-in form. The check-in form feeds to a Google spreadsheet and to a dashboard also created by the HASS team that shows on the screens of staff a customer queue. The dashboard also shows the reason each visitor is coming to the shelter, what individual pet or type of pet they may be interested in adopting, a visitor name, zip code and contact information (phone and email), and it later captures if a potential adopter actually left with a pet—all data points that can revolutionize customer experience if collected consistently and used effectively.*

*Data powers the effectiveness of initiatives like this, and staff tasked with collecting it may not fully appreciate this. To ensure it is collected consistently, leadership may think about setting goals, finding a way to motivate staff, or explicitly drawing the connection between data collection and adoption outcomes.

The rollout of the foot traffic project went smoothly for visitors and staff. Once familiar with the new process, the Riverside team even had a suggestion to help manage the flow of visitors more efficiently:* feeding information relevant to each shelter department into separate tabs of the spreadsheet. The HASS team made this change by setting up the sheet to auto-populate separate tabs based on "reason for visit" so each department could narrow their focus to entries on their specific tab.

*In change-making processes like this, be open to staff suggestions to increase buy-in of frontline staff carrying out a new program to ensure long-term success.

It was inspiring to see Riverside staff recognize the possibilities of improving workflow and ultimately the customer experience, especially because RCDAS is set up so that multiple teams have touch points with the same visitors and they needed a way to communicate quickly across the teams, a need answered by the foot traffic dashboard. This was especially important for improving adoption rates, as potential adopters at Riverside are sent from the front desk into the facility to find an animal care staff member and meet pets. Once visitors decide to take home a pet, they are sent back up to a transaction counter to complete paperwork and provide payment. Given the shelter's disbursement of the adoption process across multiple teams, the new queue system provides a user-friendly platform for streamlined communication in addition to data tracking.

Onsite Implementation: Reviving Online Adoption Interest Forms

Another CPP initiative at Riverside, geared towards streamlining communications with potential adopters, was improving the process around online interest forms submitted by the public.* Before the 2020 pandemic, all potential adopters were encouraged to visit the shelter in person. When the pandemic hit, RCDAS moved all communication online to ensure the flow of animals into new homes was minimally impacted during lockdown. Once Covid restrictions were lifted and shelter operations returned to normal, the organization switched back to encouraging in-person visits and discontinued follow-up with online adoption interest; however, the online forms are still in place and actively being used by the public without any action being taken by shelter staff.

*Operational changes don't necessarily have to start from scratch. We learned that it's easier to improve on practices that aren't working well instead.

With a process already in place for learning of interest in adoptable pets, the HASS support team aimed to reintroduce responses to submitted forms. To manage workloads, the process targeted a subset of animals most in need of increased advocacy, those with long lengths of stay. Upon review, it was determined that animals with a length of stay over 30 days would be the target animal population at two of Riverside's shelter locations (Coachella Valley and Riverside), and animals with a length of stay over 60 days at the location housing the largest volume of long stay

pets (San Jacinto). This allowed narrowing the initiative's scope from roughly 500 pets to under 75.

Now that a goal had been defined there was a need to figure out the easiest way to notify staff of incoming interest forms for long stay pets, and lucky for Riverside, the shelter has a Chameleon superstar on staff who could make automation magic happen! The shelter was able to set up automated postmaster jobs* in Chameleon to identify when interest is received for pets with specific parameters (location, days in care) and automatically send an email to the appropriate shelter location with the list of people interested. No need to hunt down applications, no need to proactively look through animal records, the task is completely automated to deliver interest to the relevant staff inbox.

*Understaffing in shelters is common, and we saw that technology can help overcome this issue by doing the work of time-consuming tasks. Technology also allows consistency that overstretched staff may not be able to provide.

The final touch was updating auto-responses received by the public when submitting interest in an animal with positive, customer-friendly language that sets the stage for cultivating a good customer experience.* It should be noted that RCDAS did attempt to update the template response that is received on the website after submitting interest in an animal for adoption; however, when RCDAS contacted Chameleon about this, they were told that the template confirmation message is applied to every Chameleon shelter and they were unable to make the changes.

*If good customer experience is to raise adoption rates successfully, remember that it does not begin when visitors arrive at the shelter. We looked for where the public may first interact with the shelter online and ensured communications are client-friendly.

Onsite Implementation: Foster-to-Adopt Improvements

The third initiative with RCDAS built from an existing program that lacked clarity around its purpose and was not reaching its full potential for enabling more adoptions. Under a program first called "Foster Field Trips," then "Adoption Field Trips," people could take a pet home prior to finalizing an adoption. Despite its name, this was a program to allow unaltered pets to go home with a person who wanted to adopt, but would remain in the shelter's custody while awaiting spay/neuter surgery. The goal with the CPP project was to switch the program's focus to increasing adoptions, by allowing on-the-fence potential adopters the opportunity to take a pet out of the shelter for an extended "get to know you" period prior to making the commitment to finalize an adoption.

First, the program needed more clarity, both around internal roles and responsibilities to run it and around its name. With the support of the HASS team, the program's details and definitions were defined and crystal clear messaging around the latest changes were crafted for Riverside staff.

Once the program was re-defined as a way to allow potential adopters to get to know a pet better prior to adopting, the program also got new SOPs to sustain it long term, and a new name, (Fur-st Date), along with a logo, pet report card for returnees (to allow for home notes to be added to the pet's record). RCDAS's marketing team planned and launched the program publicly, complete with an adoption event, on Valentine's Day 2024.