

APPENDIX N

Volunteer Programs

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Background

Arlington is the seventh largest city in Texas; it's a community of more than 370,000 citizens located in the heart of the Dallas–Fort Worth metropolitan area. In 2009, Arlington Animal Services moved to a new state-of-the-art facility, which resulted in expansion of its volunteer base by 510 percent. This growth in volunteerism made it possible for Arlington Animal Services to offer many new opportunities in educational programming and services.

In 2008, prior to the move, there were 10 extremely active volunteers at Arlington Animal Services. Each of these volunteers was focused singularly on specific areas, including pet socialization, shelter fundraising, staff assistance and pet photography for approved rescue partners. One thing learned from a stable volunteer base is that when a volunteer is focused on one or two areas, the quality of performance is much higher than when volunteers work generally throughout the shelter. A secure group of volunteers helps encourage dedication and ownership to a specific area of involvement.

Volunteers are a huge contributing factor to the success of Arlington's new shelter. They are an important component of animal welfare in shelter programs, services, promotions and fundraising. For example, trained volunteers assist paid staff with shelter operations to smoothly meet grant expectations, and volunteers contribute to low-cost vaccination clinics by performing necessary administrative duties, communicating with customers, educating pet owners and assisting in supervising large crowds of people with pets.

The benefits of a volunteer program are more than the additional staffing they provide. There is a monetary value that can be placed on volunteer programs that can be crucial when working with budget limitations. According to IndependentSector.Org, the value of volunteer time was estimated at \$24.14 per hour in the year 2016. In fiscal year 2017, Arlington Animal Services volunteers logged 14,024 hours, which equated to a monetary value of \$338,539.

People who decide to volunteer at animal shelters are passionate about working with the animals and ensuring a great outcome while assisting with rehoming pets. However, another one of volunteers' primary roles is to free up staff time so staff can do the things they were hired to do. Working in an animal shelter environment is rewarding, but it can also be emotional and/or stressful for the employees. Volunteers can help to alleviate some of these stressors while allowing expansion of community outreach and other programs.

The following is a brief five-step overview of how to start and run a volunteer program.

Step 1: Determine and define volunteer jobs

A great place to start is to complete needs assessments in all areas of the shelter. What is your vision for the future for the animals in the shelter and the residents of your community? What resources are required to sustain a program, what resources are available and what is your budget? Brainstorm with your entire shelter team to create a complete list of possible programs and services allowing volunteers to be beneficial to the organization. Your staff's participation is critical to ensure their buy-in of the volunteer program and to promote their continued engagement with volunteers.

For each area that you've identified as needing volunteers, create full volunteer job descriptions and protocols to use as training tools. Begin with the one area with the most need to ensure that all challenges are addressed quickly. Volunteer opportunities can be separated by age, skill levels and training achievements. These volunteer opportunities can be managed by one person or a group, to help place the right individual in the right position. The Arlington shelter offers volunteer opportunities in the adoption mall, the kennels, field operations, the animal wellness clinic and off-site programs. There are also many opportunities that do not include animal handling; for example, our administrative volunteers concentrate on customer service, phone surveys and filing.

The volunteer job description is a critical factor in the assurance of volunteer alliance with shelter expectations and the success of daily operations. When designing your volunteer descriptions, refer to existing employee job descriptions used in hiring practices to modify and assign the volunteer positions. It is important that you consider the possible liabilities surrounding each job. If available, a risk management advisor is a great resource for input during this process. Because shelter staff and volunteers operate under constant contact with the public and animals, there will be liability concerns.

Step 2: Create program procedures, documents and forms

Once you have done needs assessments and identified areas in which volunteers can contribute time for your organization, the next step is to work with the shelter's management

team, human resources department and legal department to develop procedures, documents and forms for your volunteer program.

Necessary documents and forms include a volunteer application, volunteer interest form, liability waiver and volunteer handbook. The volunteer application will include the same information as an application for employment, with the stipulation that it's not an application for employment and, if approved, will be on a voluntary basis. A volunteer interest form lists all the areas for volunteer opportunities and helps determine the individual volunteer's strengths and special interests.

The human resources department for the City of Arlington offers an online application process through its volunteer management software. The city requires that all interested volunteers complete a basic background check (which is also handled through human resources) because volunteers may have contact with sensitive information or valuable resources, such as cash, credit cards, equipment and, most important, controlled substances. Once a volunteer completes the background check and the required orientation for new volunteers, he or she is approved for service.

Because of the liabilities involved in working with animals, volunteers are also required to sign waivers for themselves and any minor children who will be participating. The legal and human resources departments can be a valuable resource in assisting with the creation of these waivers.

The volunteer handbook is distributed after volunteers have completed the mandatory orientation. An acknowledgment page is included in the handbook to ensure that each volunteer has read and understands the contents. The signed acknowledgment page is then kept in the volunteer's file. The handbook should be kept in a format that can be easily revised as needed.

Possible topics to include in the handbook are a code of conduct or ethics, a volunteer pledge, relationships with staff and contact information, an organizational chart, the volunteer application and screening process, volunteer qualifications, rules and regulations, and the roles of volunteers. Other important topics to include are the dress code and standards of personal appearance, restricted areas, emergencies, and a description of what constitutes unacceptable conduct and how that behavior is addressed.

Step 3: Recruit volunteers

The first thing that animal lovers who visit a shelter want to know is this: "What must I do to become a volunteer at your facility?" Many of our volunteers joined the program after asking staff or current volunteers about it, either at the shelter or during off-site events. However, each organization has its own specific wants and needs for volunteerism. Sometimes, targeted recruitment may be required because specific skill sets are needed for those volun-

teering in a particular area. For example, Arlington Animal Services recruited volunteers with specific skills for our new photography studio.

A “How to Become a Volunteer” information card, containing frequently asked questions and answers along with contact information, can be a helpful tool in recruiting volunteers both on location and off-site. Distributing the information cards to interested customers allows staff to immediately capture them as potential volunteers.

Volunteers may also come in groups, such as high school or college students or workers from local businesses. Groups can assist with special projects designed to be completed within a specific time frame, or the shelter may have simple duties assigned to these volunteers, such as cleaning, greeting guests and washing dishes. These types of volunteer opportunities are usually short-term (e.g., one day) and require a special short-term project waiver rather than the regular volunteer approval process.

Your volunteer pool can, and should, include all ages, from children to mature adults. Specific tasks will require age restrictions, of course, so these concerns should be addressed during the design of protocols for each area of volunteer opportunity (described in Step 1). Younger volunteers can attend educational programs and assist with limited-duty projects such as sanitizing doorknobs, cleaning windows, or sweeping and mopping. Many times, their youthful enthusiasm leads to them becoming adult volunteers or employees with hopes and dreams of helping animals. Volunteers 18 years or older can receive specialized training within your organization that could possibly lead to a career within the animal welfare field.

Step 4: Provide volunteer orientation

Many people interested in volunteering have not been around animals other than their personal pets or animals belonging to friends or relatives. So, orientation should function as an “open house” for prospective volunteers, demonstrating how rewarding it can be to work with pets in shelters and help them find homes. Potential volunteers will have already filled out an application and the orientation can help them determine if volunteering at an animal shelter is indeed a good fit for them.

During orientation, interested individuals tour the facility and acquire a general overview of volunteering there. The orientation should include an introduction of key players within the shelter environment, important protocols and realistic expectations for volunteers. Be sure to include information on whether your shelter is open-intake or limited-intake (and how the shelter handles euthanasia), and explain the difference to potential volunteers, as it may affect their decision to volunteer. Most people see and expect all the warm and fuzzy feelings without considering the stress of working in an open-intake shelter.

Step 5: Administer the program

Volunteer identification. A potential volunteer has completed and passed the background check, the new volunteer orientation has been completed and the newly approved volunteer is ready to begin service. The volunteer should be issued a badge and/or T-shirt to be worn when volunteering, to identify the person as a volunteer at a glance.

Volunteer coordinator. If the budget allows, your organization should hire a volunteer coordinator to manage the volunteer program and help it to grow. If your budget will not allow for a coordinator position, you may consider designating a staff member to handle the day-to-day administration of the program with a volunteer assistant. This person will be responsible for training and scheduling volunteers, keeping the volunteer database current, ensuring that volunteer hours are logged, tracking performance measures, and communicating with staff and volunteers. If you don't have a dedicated budget for volunteers, it's important to have line items in your operational budget dedicated to volunteer resources.

Scheduling. Create a weekly or monthly schedule grid showing the shelter's needs, listing the days, times and tasks that must be accomplished. At Arlington Animal Services, this information is online, allowing volunteers to create their own requests for scheduling during shelter hours. There are various volunteer management software programs available for this purpose. No matter which one you use, a database will help to support the organization of volunteers. Manual paper records, such as a sign-in and sign-out form, can be used to keep track of volunteers' time and attendance. Volunteers may require official documents showing hours served for school, organizational programs and special projects.

Animal sheltering is a very fast-paced environment and no two days are the same. The shelter staff may not always have the time to provide volunteers with detailed explanations regarding shelter pets, volunteer responsibilities and animal issues. It is important to make sure that volunteers focus on their specific duties and allow staff to do their jobs, since they have the same overall goal of providing good care for the animals. With that said, volunteers can become overwhelmed without proper training, causing even dedicated volunteers to burn out and exit the volunteer program. Providing written instructions and visual aids to volunteers can help set them up for success.

Volunteer training and lead volunteers. New volunteers must be trained properly by staff or existing lead volunteers. Training must include a recap of the contents of the volunteer handbook and all protocols and duties specific to the area of training. A long-term

program grows with proper training provided by hardworking, loyal volunteers who have shown leadership qualities and skill competencies.

Arlington Animal Services designed a lead volunteer coordinator program to assist with each specific area of volunteering within the shelter and the off-site programs. The lead volunteer coordinators mentor new volunteers and teach them to perform job duties such as laundry, dog socialization and transport of trap-neuter-release cats back into the field. These volunteers are identified by a different color of shirt or a different badge identifying them as a lead volunteer coordinator.

Communication, acknowledgement, discipline. It is important to communicate with volunteers and keep them updated through email. A small volunteer program may only require communications posted on a volunteer board with updated information available when volunteers come into the shelter.

Staff must keep in mind that volunteers are not paid employees, so they should not be overwhelmed with responsibilities. To help sustain your volunteer program, provide volunteers with appreciation and acknowledgment for serving. Arlington Animal Services is grateful to the city, the community and staff for helping to give volunteers an annual appreciation event. The event allows staff to highlight the volunteer of the year, acknowledge those with the most service hours, and recognize the volunteer coordinators who help to lead programs. Informal gestures such as verbal acknowledgment, a smile and a “thank you,” or handwritten notes also go a long way toward demonstrating appreciation of volunteers.

Feedback from staff to volunteers is as important as feedback from volunteers to staff. As the liaison between staff and volunteers, the volunteer coordinators should receive input from both groups daily. Face-to-face communication, quarterly surveys and emails work well. Regarding any issues that come up with volunteers, documentation is critical. A volunteer may not be a good fit from the start or may eventually find the work too stressful. The removal of a volunteer or discipline of a volunteer should be addressed in the written protocols and handled appropriately.

Conclusion

As the animal welfare field continues to grow and change, volunteer programs are also evolving. The needs of the animals housed in a shelter environment as well as the needs of the animal community will change. Don't be afraid to consider new opportunities for your volunteers. One example of Arlington Animal Services relying on volunteers in a new way is the anti-bullying program. This program, coordinated with Turtle the Painting Pit Bull of Respect a Bull, Inc., involves visiting local elementary schools to enlighten students about the effects of bullying and animal abuse.

Sustainability of a volunteer program can be difficult, but opportunities to learn and grow within your organization will keep current volunteers interested. Volunteers contribute to and make a tremendous difference in programs, education and operations, so be sure to communicate frequently about the positive impact they're having. A successful volunteer program can bring an endless amount of valuable resources to your animal welfare organization. Good luck with your program!

For more information, you might want to check out “Recruiting Volunteers for Nonprofits: Getting Ready for Them, Finding Them, Keeping Them” at bestfriends.org/resources.