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Creating an Effective Shelter Intake Form to Reduce Owner Surrender

Sandra Nichole Tongg

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## **Introduction**

### **History of Animal Sheltering in the U.S.**

Animal shelters in the United States have evolved from basic bare bones facilities with inhumane culling practices, to today's more socially complex, organized and compassionate sheltering system. Over time improvements have focused on decreasing the suffering of companion animals as well as trying to solve the root of the overpopulation problem. Henry Bergh established the first U.S. animal protection agency in New York. In the spring of 1866, Henry Bergh founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals also known as the ASPCA ("Regarding Henry", n.d.). The original goals of the ASPCA were to help cull the suffering of "beast of burden" animals that helped mankind with their workloads. This focus of protection stayed the course but quickly embraced other animals such as dogs used in dog fighting, animals being mistreated in slaughterhouses and eventually companion animals that were strays or housed in shelters ("Regarding Henry", n.d.). The ASPCA was the first of its kind in the United States to establish an animal protection force that worked to improve the quality of life for animals of all species. Showing that there was a need for such an establishment, many other states followed Henry Bergh's lead and established their own SPCA's and Humane Society's ("Regarding Henry", n.d.).

In 1887, New York's Brooklyn animal shelter was being run poorly, and the animals were being treated badly. The bad reputation of this animal shelter marked the beginning of much needed change for companion animals ("Regarding Henry", n.d.). The ASPCA was given the task to make changes and take over the responsibility of overseeing the shelters and animal control services. Not only did their efforts help

improve the care of animals, but also the efforts of the ASPCA improved the image of shelters in the community. Prior to the intervention of the ASPCA, stray dogs were rounded up daily in Manhattan and drowned in the East River (“Regarding Henry”, n.d.). This was how the overpopulation of unwanted dogs was handled at the time. By 1895, a more humane way to control the overpopulation of dogs was to use a gas chamber to euthanize them (“Regarding Henry”, n.d.). Unfortunately, the end result was the same, but the manner in which it was done was more humane.

Present day, there is a strong shift toward not killing any adoptable companion animals in shelters as well as stopping the use of gas chambers to euthanize animals. In the cases when euthanasia is used:

“The Humane Society of the United States, the Association of Shelter Veterinarians, the National Animal Control Association, and all other national animal welfare organizations agree that direct injection of approved euthanasia drugs (referred to as Euthanasia by Injection, or EBI), by which the animal quickly loses consciousness without experiencing pain or distress, is the most humane method of euthanasia currently available. Lesser alternatives like carbon monoxide or carbon dioxide gas chambers (gas chambers), which can virtually never provide a stress and pain free death, must therefore never be used in shelter settings” (“HSUS Condemns the Use of Gas Chambers for Euthanasia in Animal Shelters,” 2015). (In this statement, HSUS does not offer evidence for their claim that all other national animal welfare organizations condemn the use of gas chambers for euthanasia)

This is an example of a more humane shift in the animal sheltering community by choosing the most humane option available for euthanasia when it is necessary.

The image of animal shelters has changed over time. As stated above, the ASPCA was able to begin to increase the welfare of companion animals in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. At that time the use of a gas chamber for euthanasia was more humane than culling by drowning in the East River, but it still was not ideal. Fast forward to 2014 when the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) was lobbying to ban the use of gas chambers in animal shelters all across the United States because a more humane option is now available (Pacelle, 2014a). The HSUS has successfully helped many shelters across the country transition their methods of euthanasia from gas chambers to a more humane one by injection. They have also helped to pass laws across the country to ban the use of gas chambers in animal shelters. North Carolina is the latest and 25<sup>th</sup> state to ban the use of gas chambers in animal shelters. As of December 2014, there are “carbon monoxide gas chambers still operating in 10 other states” (Pacelle, 2014b). Just as in 1887, animal shelters still need to better perform their duties to the community and its animals. When these humane changes are made in the shelters their image is improved in their communities. Kim Alboum, who is the HSUS state director in North Carolina, has helped to close many gas chambers in her state (Johnson, 2014). Alboum states, “When you have a shelter that’s gassing, the community doesn’t want to go there. Once it’s gone, there’s a higher level of trust” (Johnson, 2014). One county in North Carolina has even experienced exponential volunteer growth since their shelter got rid of their gas chamber (Johnson, 2014). The community needs to trust their local animal shelter and to know that animals are treated humanely when there.

### **The Overpopulation Problem**

The overpopulation of unwanted companion animals has been a problem since the first ASPCA opened in 1866. This problem has been tackled from different angles over time, but no single solution has been established. Promoting adoption of shelter animals has been a major focus since the beginning. “In 1896, 654 dogs and 163 cats were adopted from ASPCA shelters; now that number is annually in the thousands” (“Regarding Henry, n.d.). In 1960’s the ASPCA started to promote and push for sterilization of pets to keep the number of litters and unwanted pets down. There were low cost and even free spay and neuter services provided to encourage people to sterilize their pets (“Regarding Henry”, n.d.). Currently, intervention programs are the newest approach used to tackle the overpopulation problem of unwanted pets. This approach is on the rise and focuses on the owner/animal relationship and how to keep the animal in their home instead of ending up in the shelter (Weiss, Slater, Garrison, Drain, Dolan, Scarlett, & Zawistowski, 2014, p. 411).

Euthanasia rates of shelter animals in the U.S. have shown that focusing on the pet owner/pet bond can help to decrease the number of shelter pets being euthanized. In the 1970’s a Los Angeles animal shelter was the first of its kind to open a low-cost spay/neuter clinic, and it sparked a national debate about spay and neutering your pets (Rowan, 2009). People started opting for their pets to be sterilized, and, during this decade, the number of animals through the animal shelters did decline (Rowan, 2009). In the 1980’s shelter numbers leveled off, and there was no new major strategy. By the 1990’s, “sterilization becomes routine” (Rowan, 2009). At this time the practice of spay and neuter was mainstream and the practice changed from having to ask for the service to

needing to “opt out” instead (Rowan, 2009). This decade did show a decline in the number of dogs entering animal shelters. Prior to the 1970’s, “shelter populations and euthanasia rates peak: 100 cats and dogs killed per 1,000 people.” By the end of the 1990’s, “the rate of euthanasia of dogs and cats in shelters has dropped to around 12.5 dogs and cats per 1,000 people—or about 10 percent of what it was in 1970” (Rowan, 2009).

The problem that needs attention is why pet owners relinquish their pets to the shelter in the first place. Some major reasons are: unrealistic expectations of the owner, owners moving and not able to take pets with them, financial hardships, behavioral issues, and owners who think surrendering their pet is their only option left (DiGiacomo, Arluke, & Patronek, 1998). Since the 1980’s these reasons for surrender as well as the “break” in the human/animal bond have been investigated (Arkow & Dow, 1984). It is believed that an understanding of the process of the owner who ends up relinquishing their pet, one can then formulate a plan to fix that problem. A study by DiGiacomo et al. (1998), found that the majority of people surrendering their pet to the shelter didn’t make the decision on a whim. On the contrary, owners tried to fix whatever the problem was themselves but were unsuccessful. Some owners put off surrendering their pets to a shelter for a week, months or even years. Another study in two large shelters, one in D.C. and the other in the Bronx, found that the majority of owners would have kept their pet if their problem could have been solved (Weiss et al., 2014). These data prompt a serious need to look to intervention models to assist owners in solving whatever problems they are having before they reach that “last straw” and end up relinquishing their pet to the shelter. For example, meeting the financial obligations of owning a pet (e.g. spay/neuter

surgeries, routine veterinary care and pet food), finding pet friendly housing, and dealing with inappropriate dog behaviors can make owning a pet difficult for some owners. If a shelter is aware that members of their community have some of these problems then they can create targeted solutions such as: providing a voucher for free or low-cost spay and neutering, assisting with veterinary bills and food costs, providing assistance with finding a pet-friendly rental, or providing behavioral training advice. These simple services and programs could help keep animals in their homes and out of the shelter. Maintaining the bond between a person and his/her pet by way of these interventions seems like a better approach than trying to find these same animals a new home after they are relinquished to the shelter. This intervention approach, in conjunction with the already popular spay and neuter campaigns nationwide and the practice of heavily promoting adoption from local shelters, could help reduce the overpopulation problem.

There is a progressive model for a successful shelter intervention program that has been established in southern Los Angeles. This shelter intervention group is Downtown Dog Rescue. They have established a positive presence in their community and have helped owners keep pets in their homes and out of the shelter. They focus on keeping one pet out of the shelter at a time. From April 2013 through December 2014, Downtown Dog Rescue has kept 4,021 animals from being surrendered by their owners to the South Los Angeles shelter (L. Weise, personal communication, January 18, 2015). They work with each person on an individual case-to-case basis and try to find ways to solve the problem that drove them to the shelter that day. For example, they might assist with payment for veterinary services, or with the funds necessary to pay a pet deposit on their rental, or with building a fence, or providing a dog house (Downtown Dog Rescue,



2015). Downtown Dog Rescue's most used service is help with spaying and neutering pets (L. Weise, personal communication, January 18, 2015). It can be useful just for an owner to become aware of all the resources available to them and their pet. In 2014, one-hundred percent of owners who spoke with someone from Downtown Dog Rescues shelter intervention program chose to sign up for their services (L. Weise, personal communication, February 10, 2015). Other shelters in California are already using Downtown Dog Rescue's model. "The ASPCA is running a program based on our model at the Downey and Baldwin Park shelters" (L. Weise, personal communication, January 27, 2015). There is also another shelter intervention program based in Northern Los Angeles that followed in the steps of Downtown Dog Rescue and its founder, Lori Weise (Falconer, 2015).

A possible "bridge" to an intervention program similar to the one Downtown Dog Rescue might be to rework shelter intake forms. The first step in any modifications would be to evaluate the experience of an owner surrendering their pet to the shelter. The second step would be to modify the current process to ask the "right" questions that could assist with intervention rather than owner relinquishment. It is possible that more compassionate and less matter-of-fact wording on the shelter intake form could prompt questions that lead the owner to explain their individual circumstances that might be solvable with the help of the shelter and the right community resources. Another important role in the evaluation process would be to see if there is sufficient shelter staff training for interacting with the public. Shelter staff need to be sensitive to people entering the shelter with their pets, and they should have the tools to try to help the owner if possible. The entire intake process should be set up to work with each individual, their

pet/s and their unique circumstance. Evaluating the current shelter intake process of different shelters to see how it can be improved is important. Once the evaluation is done changes could be implemented to prompt friendly and non-judgmental conversations with people entering the shelter to surrender their pets. Having these one-on-one conversations during the shelter intake process is the first step toward establishing shelter intervention programs or partnerships within the shelter.

To set up a successful program the needs of the specific community must be known. What works in one community might not work in another. By establishing a positive presence in the community, the shelter can become a place for pet owners to reach out for assistance rather than a last resort for owner surrender. For example, a rural community might have an overwhelming need for assistance with affordable vet services such as spay and neutering. An urban community might need help with finding pet friendly housing rentals or assistance with pet deposits on their homes. It is important to start asking detailed questions about the reason for the potential surrender during the shelter intake process and then creating a program that addresses these issues. This is why the shelter intake process and the wording of the shelter intake form are so crucial.

### **Literature Review**

The Humane Society University (HSU) online library databases were used for this literature review. Specifically, the databases that were searched were: Academic Search Complete and E-Journals. The following key words were searched: animal owner surrender, animal owner relinquishment, animal shelter intervention, and owner surrender animal shelter.

The following articles were discovered via the Academic Search Complete database:

- New, John C. Jr., Salman, Mo D., Scarlett, Janet M., Kass, Philip H., Vaughn, Jayne A., Scherr, Stacy, & Kelch, William J. (1999). Moving: Characteristics of Dog and Cats and Those Relinquishing Them to 12 U.S. Animal Shelters. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 2(2), 83-96
- Salman, Mo D., New, John C. Jr., Scarlett, Janet M., Kass, Philip H., Ruch-Gallie, Rebecca., & Hetts, Suzanne. (1998). Human and Animal Factors Related to the Relinquishment of Dogs and Cats in 12 Selected Animal Shelters in the United States. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 1(3), 207-226
- Scarlett, Janet M., Salman, Mo D., New, John C Jr., & Kass, Philip H. (1999). Reasons for Relinquishment of Companion Animals in U.S. Animal Shelters: Selected Health Personal Issues. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 2(1), 41-57
- Shore, Elise R., Petersen, Connie L., & Douglas, Deanna K. (2003). Moving As a Reason for Pet Relinquishment: A Closer Look. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 6(1), 39-52
- Weiss, Emily., Slater, Margaret., Garrison, Laurie., Drain, Natasha., Dolan, Emily., Scarlett, Janet M., & Zawistowski, Stephen L. (2014). Large Dog

Relinquishment to Two Municipal Facilities in New York City and Washington, D.C.: Identifying Targets for Intervention. *Animals* 2014, 4, 409-33

A search of the e-journals held by the HSU library revealed these articles:

DiGiacomo, Natalie., Arluke, Arnold., & Patronek, Gary. (1998). Surrendering Pets to Shelters: The Relinquisher's Perspective. *Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interactions of People & Animals, Volume 11, Number 1*, 41-51(11)

Finally, the following articles were discovered while reading the above-mentioned articles:

- Arkow, P., & Dow, S. (1984). The ties that do not bind: A study of the human-animal bonds that fail. In *The Pet Connection: Its influence on our health and quality of life* (R.K. Anderson, B. L Hart, L. L. Hart, editors). University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, pp. 348-354.
- Miller, Deborah D., Staats, Sara R., Partlo, Christie., Rada, Kelly. (1996). Factors associated with the decision to surrender a pet to an animal shelter. *JAVMA. Vol 209. No. 4*, August 15, 1996, 738-742

- Patronek, Gary J., Glickman, Lawrence T., Beck, Alan M., McCabe, George P., & Ecker, Carol. (1996). Risk Factors for relinquishment of dogs to an animal shelter. *JAVMA, Vol 209, No. 3, August 1, 572-581*
- Patronek, Gary J., Glickman, Lawrence T., Beck, Alan M., McCabe, George P., & Ecker, Carol. (1996). Risk factors for relinquishment of cats to an animal shelter. *JAVMA, Vol 209, No. 3, August 1, 1996, 582-588*

The American Humane Organization's website explains, "It is estimated that approximately 3.7 million animals were euthanized in the nation's shelters in 2008. This number represents a generally accepted statistic that is widely used by many animal welfare organizations, including the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA)" ("Animal Shelter Euthanasia," n.d.). Some of these animals end up in the shelter because their owners surrender them. There are a variety of reasons that the bond between owner and animal is broken. These reasons will be reviewed in this paper. In addition this paper will review the common reasons why owners end up relinquishing their pets to the shelter. Finally, a review of a new shelter intervention model program that has had success with keeping pets with their owners and out of the shelter will be described.

In 1984, Arkow and Dow published their study, *The Ties That Do Not Bind: A Study of the Human-Animal Bonds that fail*. Their goal was to find what reasons a person might be bringing their pet to the shelter and if there was consistency in the type of person surrendering their pet in a specific area. Why did the bond break between owner

and dog, and/or why did the bond never develop in the first place? Did the length of time with the dog or the amount of money spent to acquire the dog have any effect on their decision to surrender the pet? Their study surveyed thirteen shelters (municipal, privately funded and SPCA's) in eight different states for the entire month of March 1981. They received 918 surveys back from owners surrendering their dogs to the shelter.

Arkow's study found that "the two predominant reasons cited why people no longer wanted their dogs are: lifestyle changes, such as moving or divorce; and behavioral problems" (1984, p. 351). Almost half of the dogs surrendered were obtained from a neighbor or friend. Of these dogs just under half of them were adopted before the puppy was twelve weeks of age and over 83% were obtained by their owner at no cost (Arkow & Dow, 1984, p. 350). "The survey found that the price paid for a dog may relate to the length of time the owner keeps it" (Arkow & Dow, 1984, p. 350). Of these dogs that were originally obtained from a friend or neighbor, nearly "two-thirds of them (63.6%) were disposed of within a year" (Arkow & Dow, 1984, p. 350). The study showed that "three-fourths of the dogs had been acquired for humane reasons: to give to the children, to provide a home, or companionship" (Arkow & Dow, 1984, p. 350). They also found that because the original reason to obtain the dog was emotional, "the owners had some regrets or guilt about relinquishing them: 58.8% said they would keep their dog if the problem at hand could be resolved, but 30.6% said they would not" (Arkow & Dow, 1984, p. 352).

This study focused on the length of time an owner kept their dog; how they originally obtained their dog as well as how much they paid for their dog. By looking at these questions Arkow and Dow (1984) were able to find a connection between these

factors and the probability of owner surrender after a certain amount of time. Arkow & Dow (1984) found that:

“A free dog may be more likely to be given to the shelter. More than two-thirds (68.3%) of all the dogs received under the survey had been obtained without monetary exchange, and these animals were kept an average of only 17 months before being relinquished. The length of ownership generally increased in direct proportion with the cost, with dogs costing more than \$100 being kept an average of 36 months” (Arkow & Dow, 1984, p. 350).

They were also able to find out the most common reasons for owner surrender at these thirteen shelters. “The two predominant reasons cited why people no longer wanted their dogs are: lifestyle changes, such as moving and divorce; and behavioral problems” (Arkow & Dow, 1984, p. 351). This information is helpful in building on future research models related to owner surrender. It also gives shelters useful data so that they can focus on their communities needs and possibly create an intervention program to accommodate those needs, such as behavioral training assistance. The study only focused on dogs being relinquished by their owners so it would be useful to add cat owner surrenders to future studies as well.

From October 1993 to January 1994 Miller, Staats, Partlo, and Rada (1996) performed a study titled, *Factors associated with the decision to surrender a pet to an animal shelter*. A total of 130 questionnaires were collected for cats and dogs being relinquished during that time to the local humane society shelter. This study found similar results to Arkow & Dow (1984) in that the majority of pets were originally obtained from a private owner and for the reason of companionship. Another comparison is that “more

than half of the animals in this study were a year or younger at surrender” (Miller et al., 1996, p. 738-740). The most common problem listed for dog relinquishment was behavior. Some of the most common complaints for behavioral problems with dogs were: hyperactivity, housebreaking problems, biting and destructive chewing (Miller et al., 1996, p. 740). Top listed reasons for relinquishment of cats were: moving followed by owner illness, and then behavior problems (Miller et al., 1996, p. 740). Common reasons listed for cat behavior problems were: “fearfulness, followed by scratching the furniture, not using the litter box and objecting to being held” (Miller et al., 1996, p. 740). Miller et al. (1996) concluded that because many of the animals relinquished are young and under that age of one (most by the age of two), then “many of the behavior problems mentioned previously may attribute to normal feline and canine development, rather than to behavioral disorders” (p., 741). This study highlighted the importance of pet owner knowledge and expectations of normal pet behavior and being responsible with how to manage it (Miller et al., 1996, p. 741-742). They also focused on the important role that veterinarians play with pet owners, as veterinarians could be the only professionals who have an opportunity to give advice on normal pet behaviors and helpful ways to manage them.

*Risk factors for relinquishment of dogs to an animal shelter* was a study performed by Patronek, Lawrence, Glickman, Beck, McCabe, and Ecker from June 1, 1994 and February 1, 1995 (1996, p. 572). The study was conducted in St Joseph County, Indiana (Patronek et al., 1996, p. 572). Interviews were done with 285 owners who had relinquished their dogs. An additional 1,272 interviews were completed from a controlled sample survey of current pet owners (Patronek et al., 1996, p. 572-573). Important risk



factors found in this study were “failure to participate in a dog obedience class after acquisition, lack of frequent veterinary care, inappropriate care expectations, owning a sexually intact dog, and daily or weekly inappropriate elimination” (Patronek et al., 1996, p. 579). They also found that dogs kept in crates or yards for the majority of the day were at increased risk of owner relinquishment (Patronek et al., 1996, p. 579). Important data showed that “dogs of owners who reported receiving helpful behavioral advice were at a 94% lower risk for relinquishment than were those of owners who received advice that was not helpful” (Patronek et al., 1996, p. 579). Findings by Patronek et al. (1996) suggest that veterinarians are in a great position to provide helpful behavioral advice to pet owners who come to see them. Unfortunately in this study, “only 25% of owners reported that their veterinarian routinely offered behavioral advice” (p. 580).

In addition to the study on dog relinquishment, Patronek et al. (1996) also gathered data about cats being surrendered by their owners. Their study, *Risk factors for relinquishment of cats to an animal shelter*, was performed in the same method as mentioned above in their dog study. Interviews were completed with 218 people who had surrendered their cat to the local humane society. There were an additional 459 interviews completed with a control sample of cat owners as well (Patronek et al., 1996, p. 585). Cats kept solely indoors were at decreased risk of relinquishment compared to those that were allowed outside. “Nearly a third of relinquishments were attributed to the cat being sexually intact” (Patronek et al., 1996, p. 586). However, 39% of owners interviewed after relinquishing their cat cited “cost as a reason for failure to sterilize cats” (Patronek et al., 1996, p. 583). In this study cats acquired as strays were actually at a decreased risk of relinquishment (Patronek et al., 1996, p. 587). The most important risk

factors found in this study were: “having specific expectations about the cat’s role in the family, allowing the cat outdoors, owning a sexually intact cat, never having read a book about feline behavior, daily or weekly inappropriate elimination, and inappropriate care expectations” (Patronek et al., 1996, p. 586). The authors pointed out that making sure owners have realistic expectations for their cat’s behavior and appropriate ways to modify unwanted behavior is something that a veterinarian can help with. As with the dog study, a veterinarian and their advice can be a great resource for cat owners and their pets (Patronek et al., 1996, p. 587).

DiGiacomo, Arluke and Patronek designed their 1997 study, *Surrendering Pets To Shelters: The Relinquisher’s Perspective* (1998), to dig deeper into the process behind an owner deciding to give up their pet. Data were collected for three months and consisted of 38 interviews with owners who had just relinquished their pet/s to a private shelter in Boston, Massachusetts. The interviews were open-ended and encouraged conversation that would reveal each owner’s individual circumstances. Interviews focused on “the history of the surrendered pet, problems leading to the surrender, owners’ feelings regarding bringing their pet to the shelter, expectations of the pet’s future, and the possibility of euthanasia” (DiGiacomo et al., 1998, p. 3). They found that the majority of owners did not make the decision on a whim, but, on the contrary, they had struggled with the decision for “weeks, months, and years before finally giving up their pets” (DiGiacomo et al., 1998, p. 3). Many owners (45%) tried finding homes for their pets “through friends and relatives or advertisements” prior to bringing them to the shelter (DiGiacomo et al., 1998, p.5). They also found that “most respondents looked at the shelter as both a last resort and another chance” (DiGiacomo et al., 1998, p.5).

The authors explored the question: What drove these owners to their “breaking point”? Top reasons listed in the study were the animals’ behavior followed by allergies and moving (DiGiacomo et al., 1998, p. 6). In addition to these three top reasons, “many respondents described other factors that contributed to relinquishment that fell into three broad categories: acquisition problems, internal pressures, and external pressures” (DiGiacomo et al., 1998, p. 6). There were pet owners who never intentionally wanted a pet (34%), as well as adult family members who did not share consent to bring a pet into the home (21%) (DiGiacomo et al., 1998, p. 7). Pets that did not fit into the family’s lifestyle (i.e. too hyperactive) made up 13% of those surrendered. The most common internal pressures related to owner surrender were financial constraints, time constraints, health problems (most common allergies), and family dynamics that didn’t work (DiGiacomo et al., 1998, p. 7-8). External pressures such as neighbors complaining and landlords changing their policies also affected some of the respondents. All of these secondary pressures coupled with the main reasons listed that these pets were surrendered show that the decision was not made hastily. The authors pointed out that the process of surrendering a pet is complex and deserves more attention. This study dug deeper into the “breaking point” for owners deciding to relinquish their pets and shows multiple layers of circumstances that affected that decision. It could have been useful for the researchers in this study to ask all participants whether or not they would have accepted assistance if the problem they were facing could have been solved and the pet could remain out of the shelter. Unfortunately, this question was not asked.

Another study by Salman, New, Scarlett, and Kass (1998) explored the factors that lead to pet relinquishment by their owners. During a one year span from 1995-1996,

data were collected for the study, *Human and Animal Factors Related to the Relinquishment of Dogs and Cats in 12 Selected Animal Shelters in the United States*.

This study explored the main reasons for relinquishment as well as the characteristics of the person surrendering their pet to the shelter (Salman et al., 1998, p. 209). Twelve shelters in six states were represented in the study with a mix of urban, suburban, and rural shelters. “Questionnaires were recorded for 6,929 animals” (Salman et al., 1998, p. 211) over a span of a year. Of these questionnaires there were a total of 3,772 interviews completed with owners surrendering their pets (Salman et al., 1998, p. 212). Salman et al. (1998) found that:

“Among the top 10 reasons for relinquishment common to both species were: moving, landlord not allowing pet, too many animals in household, cost of pet maintenance, owner having personal problems, inadequate facilities, and no homes available for litter mates. For cats, allergies in family, house soiling, and incompatibility with other pets were among the top 10 reason stated. For dogs, owners having no time for pet, pet illness(es), and biting were among the top 10” (p. 212).

Findings compatible with Arkow’s (1984) study showed that “animals previously owned by friends were relinquished in higher numbers than animals from any other source” (Salman et al., 1998, p. 215). Dogs and cats were on average obtained at lower costs: under \$50 for dogs and under \$10 for cats. Fewer than half of the dogs and cats surrendered were owned for less than a year (Salman et al., 1998, p. 215). Of those who reported behavioral issues with their pets, “fifty-three percent of people surrendering dogs and 58% of people surrendering cats believed that animals will misbehave out of

spite” (Salman et al., 1998, p. 215). These data should prompt further study about the realistic expectations that owners have of their pets and their natural behavior. Two additional papers reporting on these same data from this same study were published in 1999. The first was, *Reasons for Relinquishment of Companion Animals in U.S. Animal Shelters: Selected Health and Personal Issues* (1999). The second was, *Moving: Characteristics of Dogs and Cats and Those Relinquishing Them to 12 U.S. Animal Shelters* (1999).

Another study was performed in the Midwest (U.S.) in 2002. Shore, Petersen, and Douglas conducted the study titled, *Moving As a Reason for Pet Relinquishment: A Closer Look* (2003). The study interviewed 57 people who had relinquished their pets to the shelter during a three-month period and had listed “moving” as the reason for relinquishment on the shelter intake form (Shore et al., 2003, p. 40-41). In addition to the interview, the 57 owners who had surrendered their pet were asked to complete a human-animal bonding scale (Shore et al., 2003, p. 41). In this study, 42% of respondents cited “landlord conditions” as the main reason for relinquishment of their pet (Shore et al., 2003, p. 42). Some landlord conditions mentioned by respondents were: animals were not allowed in the home, animals were too large to be allowed in the home, and some could not afford the pet deposit required by the landlord (Shore et al., 2003, p. 42). Thirty percent of respondents were moving because of work (Shore et al., 2003, p. 43). “Owner life transitions were involved in 30% of the relinquishments” (Shore et al., 2003, p. 43). Some examples given for “life transitions” were divorce and health issues (Shore et al., 2003, p. 43). The majority of respondents (83.9%) had tried finding a new home for their pet prior to coming to the shelter (Shore et al., 2003, p. 44). This high percentage is not

surprising since “scores on the bonding scale indicated that the majority of relinquisher’s in this sample were quite involved with the animal they gave up” (Shore et al., 2003, p. 50). Forty owners said moving was the only reason for surrendering their pet. The majority of the remaining 17 owners did mention some behavioral issues coupled with moving that drove them to relinquish their pets (Shore et al., 2004, p. 45). Landlord conditions and the “combination of relatively low annual household income (48.1% < \$30,000) and status as renters (66.7%) suggests that the pet owners may have had relatively few options other than to relinquish the animal” (Shore et al., 2003, p. 50).

Weiss et al. (2014) conducted the study, *Large Dog Relinquishment to Two Municipal Facilities in New York City and Washington D.C.: Identifying Targets for Intervention*. Their study set out to discover the reasons for owner relinquishment of large dogs (40 pounds and over) and to explore possible intervention strategies based on the data. The study included a total of “157 respondents, 74 in NYC, 83 in DC” (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 414). Ethnic backgrounds varied between respondents in the different cities. “People from DC were significantly more likely to be African-American, while those in NYC were more likely to be Hispanic/Latino” (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 414). Housing for each city varied as well. New York respondents mostly lived in apartment type housing and DC respondents lived in apartments and single family homes (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 414). The majority of all households had at least one child and an average of three people living in the household (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 414). More dogs in NYC had been neutered than with respondents from DC (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 416). The majority of respondents in both cities paid nothing for their dog and “obtained their dog from a friend, family member or acquaintance” (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 417).

Weiss et al. (2014) found that changes in the household that contributed to relinquishment of the dog were common in both cities. Sixty-eight percent of NYC respondents said changes in the household contributed to the relinquishment compared to 98% of DC owner surrenders (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 420). “People-related issues (e.g., financial, child related)” were higher in NYC at 66% than in DC at 36% (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 420). Over half of the respondents in both cities weighed surrendering their dog for more than a week, and half of all the respondents considered the decision for a month or more before relinquishing their dog (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 420). Before finally relinquishing their dog, more people in NYC (85%) looked for alternatives other than the shelter (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 421). The most common alternatives were: “family or friends; contacting a help line, shelter (other than the one used) or rescue; social media or ads/flyers; and giving away or trying to sell the dog” (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 421). Only 69% of DC owners had explored other options outside of the shelter and of those 90% had tried asking family or friends (Weiss et al., 2014 p. 421). “More than half of respondents in both communities (57% NYC, 58% DC) reported that some assistance may have helped them retain their dog” (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 421). Assistance cited that would have been most helpful in both cities (48% in NYC, and 58% in DC) was “some form of low-cost or free dog support, such as training, veterinarian care, day care, boarding or pet food” (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 421). The author suggests that “providing programs and services to help people keep their dogs could be effective was shown by the fact that the majority of people said something could have helped them keep their dog” (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 424). Weiss et al. looked closely at each cities demographics and what needs were pertinent to each community. The author’s data suggest that, “when

thinking of creating targeted programs and services designed to reduce intake, our results indicate there is no “one size fits all” solution” (Weiss et al., 2014, p. 424).

As stated in the introduction, Downtown Dog Rescue is a shelter intervention program that is located in Southern Los Angeles, California. This program focuses on keeping one pet out of the shelter at a time. From April 2013 through December 2014, Downtown Dog Rescue has kept 4,021 animals (dogs, cats and rabbits) from being surrendered by their owners to the South Los Angeles shelter (L. Weise, personal communication, January 18, 2015). They work with each person on a personal case-to-case basis and try to find ways to solve the problem that drove them to the shelter that day. To date, Downtown Dog Rescue’s most used service at 52% has been to help with spaying and neutering peoples pets (L. Weise, personal communication, January 18, 2015). The expense of pet care was cited as the second highest service needed by owner surrenders through Downtown Dog Rescue at 23% (L. Weise, personal communication, January 18, 2015). Some examples of pet owner costs are food and veterinarian bills. It can be useful just for an owner to become aware of all the resources available to them and their pet. In 2014 one-hundred percent of owners who spoke with the Downtown Dog Rescues shelter intervention program chose to sign up for their services (L. Weise, personal communication, February 10, 2015). Downtown Dog Rescue founder, Lori Weise, had this to say about changing and improving the way the program was run, “In the beginning we were approaching everyone who was surrendering but it didn't work and we had too many complaints. Now we accept our cases from staff who refer the pet owner to us so we get a person who is motivated and wants the help, works much better” (L. Weise, personal communication, February 10, 2015). There are other shelters in



California that are now using Downtown Dog Rescue's shelter intervention model (L. Weise, personal communication, January 27, 2015).

The previous body of research suggests that owner surrender is a complex decision with a variety of contributing factors. Many owners try to fix whatever problem they are having or try to re-home their pets themselves. The majority of owner surrenders do not make the choice on a whim, so it seems that it would be beneficial if shelter staff had an intake form that opened up discussion with owners about their individual situation. A shelter intake form asking the right questions could be the best segue into the programs and services available through the shelter for their local community pet owners. Shelters need to focus on intervention programs in their community that could help pet owners keep their pets during crisis or a transitional period. A large percentage of pet owners would like to keep their pets if the problem they were facing could be resolved. When designing these intervention programs, each shelter must know the needs of their community so they can design and implement the most useful programs and services. Additional focus should be placed on implementing strong behavioral advice protocols for all veterinarians as well as all shelter staff adopting out pets. Many pet owners have unrealistic expectations of their pet's natural behavior and advice from a veterinarian can help.

### **Methods**

The purpose of the study was to create an effective model intake form with the eventual goal of reducing owner surrenders. The form was created by gathering and

analyzing expert opinions from the shelter staff as stated below. The goal is for a follow-up study to test the effectiveness of this intake form in the future.

Grounded theory was the theoretical framework for this exploratory research. This framework allowed for the use of the constant comparative method as described by Glaser (1967). A memoing strategy was employed as the author gathered the data from the interviews described below. This strategy enabled the author to explore the usefulness of the hybrid form as described by the interviewees and develop hypotheses about possible modifications that should be made to the form.

The researcher has had previous interactions with thirteen animal shelters across the United States. These shelters were chosen at random and represented both open and limited admission shelters. The researcher contacted shelter personnel at each of these shelters via e-mail and requested a copy of the “owner surrender intake form” from each of these thirteen shelters. Responses were received from all thirteen of the shelters, and all thirteen shelters emailed a copy of their current intake form. Specifically, the respondents included:

- 2 customer service supervisors
- 3 admission managers
- 1 safety net supervisor
- 1 executive director
- 1 education partnerships manager
- 1 placement manager
- 1 front counter care corporation
- 1 volunteer & outreach coordinator

- 1 transport coordinator
- 1 surrender counselor

The researcher conducted a detailed content analysis of the forms that were received from these thirteen shelters. After a detailed review, the researcher created a hybrid shelter intake form by choosing the best elements from the thirteen forms (see appendix A). This hybrid form was used during the interview process.

In order to recruit participants for this study, the researcher contacted these same thirteen shelters via email for further assistance. Specifically, the researcher contacted each person who responded to the previous requests for the shelter intake forms. Each person was asked to participate in an interview about the shelter intake process. All thirteen shelters were contacted.

The researcher emailed her hybrid shelter intake form to each participant. Each participant was asked to review the hybrid intake form prior to his or her interview with the researcher. The following script was used to reach out to all thirteen shelters via email:

**Dear Sir or Madam:**

**I want to thank you again for sending me a copy of your shelter's intake form. It has been quite helpful to me as I work on my research project. I actually gathered and reviewed a total of 13 shelter intake forms, and from those forms, I created a hybrid form. The next step in my research project is to gather expert feedback on the hybrid form I have created.**

**In order to gather this feedback on the potential usefulness of this hybrid form (attached), I would like to interview someone at your shelter who is very familiar with the intake process. The interviews shouldn't take more than 30 minutes and will be conducted via phone. It would be so helpful if I could talk to you, or someone you designate, about the potential usefulness of this form.**

**My ultimate goal is to modify this hybrid form based on the expertise I gather from shelter workers familiar with the intake process. My goal is to then share this modified form with the shelter community.**

**Please let me know if you would be available to assist me with this next step in my university research project. Thank you again for all of your support.**

**Best,**

**Nikki Tongg**

The researcher was looking to gather data on the usefulness of her shelter intake form from these professionals. Interviews were conducted via phone. The general interview questions below were used to begin the discussion on the potential usefulness of the hybrid shelter intake form. The following list of questions were used to guide the interview. Not all of the questions were asked to all of the participants. Some of the questions were answered naturally during the conversation before they could be asked by the interviewer.

### General Questions

- Tell me about your current shelter intake process?
- What parts do you think are successful and what parts concern you about your current process? Would you change anything?
- What did you like about this form?
- What did you dislike about this form?
- What would you change and why?
- How practical is this form?
- Would shelter staff be willing to use a model form created by a consensus of experts?
- How many animals enter your shelter every year?
- What are the most common reasons that owners surrender their pet/s?
- I would like to get your feedback on the use of the question below. Do you think it is helpful? Why or why not?

*\*If we could help you with the reason you are surrendering your pet today, would you keep your pet?*

These ten questions logically flowed into other questions that came up based on the interviewee's answers.

The initial review of the thirteen shelter intake forms revealed the following question or a close derivation thereof: *If we could help you with the reason you are surrendering your pet today, would you keep your pet?* This question or a close derivation was included on five of the thirteen forms. Of those five shelters who used this question on their form, only two, Walter and Lisa, participated in the interviews. In order

to determine the actual usefulness of this question, the researcher asked follow up questions of Walter and Lisa whose form included a question about helping the owner keep his/her pet. The following questions were used to gather insight about the usefulness of this specific question on the form. Some of the questions were answered organically during the conversation before the question could be asked by the interviewer.

#### **Follow Up Questions For Walter And Lisa**

- Approximately what percentage of people who answer “yes” is your shelter able to assist? (i.e. do you have a 100% success rate if someone asks for help that you have always been able to provide it?)
- Does your shelter have the appropriate resources to provide assistance for the most common needs?

The researcher collected and analyzed data by using the constant comparative method as well as taking notes by memoing. Notes were taken as themes emerged from the interviews. These themes were then compared to one another to form a hypothesis related to the usefulness of the hybrid form.

### **Results**

The five following people were used in the study: Walter, Nancy, Ally, Lisa and Mary. The names of these people have been changed to protect the anonymity of these five individuals and the shelters where they work.

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Type of Shelter</u>	<u>Region of the Country</u>	<u># of Animals Entering Shelter/yr</u>	<u>Job Title</u>	<u>Funding</u>
Walter	Open	Southeast	13,000+	Volunteer & Outreach Coordinator	County
Nancy	Open	Northeast	36,000	Admissions Supervisor	Private w/County Contract
Ally	Limited	Southeast	8,895	Transport Coordinator	Private
Lisa	Open	Southeast	6,800	Client Care Supervisor	Private w/County Contract
Mary	Open	Pacific	8,000	Customer Service Supervisor	Private w/County Contract

The researcher contacted thirteen shelters in the United States, and five of them agreed to be interviewed by telephone. Of those five shelters, four were open admission shelters (they have to accept all animals that show up at their shelter), and one was a limited admission shelter (they can deny accepting certain animals into their shelter). One of the shelters is privately funded, one is funded by the county, and three are privately funded shelters that have a contract with the county for certain services. The researcher sent all of the study participants the hybrid shelter intake form that was created by the researcher (see Appendix A). All of the study participants reviewed the hybrid form prior

to being interviewed. All of the participants provided their expert opinion on the usefulness of the hybrid form in a shelter environment.

The hybrid form was a total of four pages in length. All of the study participants agreed that the form was successful in gathering a lot of useful and detailed information about the pet being surrendered to the shelter. Three of the participants: Walter, Lisa and Mary thought that the detailed information gathered from the form would be helpful for the future adopter of the animal to know. Although all of the shelters valued the detailed information gathered by the form; Lisa, Mary and Ally expressed concern about the form being too long. Lisa and Ally suggested cutting it down to two pages. Walter and Nancy thought the length of the form was ok. Walter stated, "I personally do not think the form is too long. I think that if someone is surrendering their pet that they should fill out as much information as the shelter asks." Mary and Ally had suggested shortening the length of the form by trying to streamline some of the questions and/or combining some of the options to answer on the form. Lisa suggested one way to get around having to cut any of the questions would be to train staff members to ask specific questions that were important even if they didn't appear on the actual form. That way all of the questions would still be asked, but the actual form they fill out could be shorter in length. Walter and Nancy agreed they liked the format of the hybrid form and thought it was laid out well and easy to navigate. Walter stated, "I really do wish this was our form, honestly." All of the participants except for Walter explained that when an owner surrender comes in, the shelter staff does start a conversation with them to find out what situation brings them in that day to surrender their pet.



Walter, Lisa and Ally have owner surrenders fill out intake paperwork when they arrive at the shelter, while Mary and Nancy gather the information from the owner verbally in live time at the shelter. Nancy noted that,

“the most important thing I think that we changed when admissions started is that we ask it, we ask them all the questions. We don’t let them fill it out, because a lot of people, like, don’t understand the questions the way that we do. So, they would totally fill it out completely differently than we would. Like a lot people think that like, for example, um, they might misinterpret something as aggression, like just the dog being excited or something like that. Um, so we find that it’s extremely helpful to like, verbally discuss all of the questions rather than just giving them the form.”

All of the participants said that there wasn’t a specific person on staff that dealt with owner surrenders, but rather all staff were trained to help with owner surrenders coming into the shelter. All of the participants except for Walter mentioned that their shelters receive a high volume of animals. Mary and Lisa mentioned often being short staffed. Lisa is working to have her shelter transition to an appointment-based owner surrender system. Her reasoning for this was, “we’re trying to juggle multiple things at one time, and it kind of takes our focus and our care away from those owners who are genuinely distraught and are really trying to look for answers and feel like they’re at the end of their rope.” Lisa, Nancy and Ally all saw the value of being able to sit down one-on-one and take the time to talk with an owner surrender about what they are going through.

Four of the participants expressed limitations that they have noticed with their current shelter environment. Walter mentioned that being a county run shelter, “the way

the money works and stuff, and all the logistics behind it, it takes a lot to, it takes a lot of calling, emails, phone calls to get even the smallest thing done”. Walter also mentioned, “if we were privately owned and privately funded, uh, we could do so much more”.

Nancy’s shelter has multiple locations and a limitation noted was that at certain locations there is a lack of privacy for people surrendering their pets. Nancy said,

“I think they are at a disadvantage because it’s all one big lobby, and when people are in front of other people they’re more tense. And they’re more reserved and the conversation isn’t as open, and um, and it’s harder to prevent the animals from coming in. Because we can’t get as far with them and then when they’re sharing their info too, I think they’re less, um, they’re just less descriptive. They don’t want to talk as long...I think it’s always good to have private rooms when possible.”

Lisa explained that being an open admission shelter means it can get very busy at anytime and when it’s busy the shelter doesn’t have the extra time to spend with owners coming in to surrender their pets. Mary also shared that being an open admission shelter means it can get busy where the shelter staff doesn’t have the time to get more detailed information from owner surrenders. Ally, Lisa and Nancy all mentioned that owner surrenders are often emotional when they come in to surrender their animal. Mary shared that owners can be embarrassed, sad and/or frustrated when they are at the shelter surrendering their animal. Mary explained that her shelter intake form also has an option for owners to choose if they would like to be contacted if the time comes where the shelter is not able to find their surrendered pet a home and they may be euthanized. Mary

said anywhere from thirty to forty percent of owner surrenders choose that option for a small fee.

All of the participants were asked to provide the most common reasons that people came in to surrender their pet. The chart below shows what those reasons are. All of the participants listed landlord conflict, four participants listed behavior issues, three listed not being able to afford general care of the pet, two listed moving, two listed allergies and two listed medical/health issues.

### **Common Reasons for Owner Surrender**

<b><u>Participant</u></b>	<b><u>Moving</u></b>	<b><u>Landlord Conflict (pet deposit, no pet friendly housing)</u></b>	<b><u>Allergies</u></b>	<b><u>Behavior</u></b>	<b><u>Can't Afford General Care (vet, food, etc.)</u></b>	<b><u>Medical/ Health Issues</u></b>
Walter	X	X	X	X	X	
Nancy		X	X	X	X	
Lisa		X			X	
Ally	X	X		X		X
Mary		X		X		X

Three of the participants mentioned that their shelter uses a computer software program to input all of the owner and pet data. Lisa and Mary said they use software called PetPoint, and Nancy said her shelter uses software called Chameleon. Mary explained that the recent software upgrade at her shelter has been very successful and has helped with the accuracy of the records they keep. Nancy said her shelter shifted from a

really basic template to one that would gather more information about the pet. Nancy explained, “instead of how you would describe your pet... it was like circle among these two, but there just wasn’t that many questions or options, so like, you wouldn’t actually know that much about a dogs behavior or personality.” Now Nancy’s shelter uses a blank template to write down notes about the pet rather than just circling an answer. Ally and Walter did not volunteer any information regarding software and the researcher did not ask them about it. Lisa, Walter and Nancy all thought that the hybrid form was practical. Nancy thought the only thing that wasn’t practical about the form was the question about the reason for surrendering your pet. This is because Nancy’s shelter uses a software program that already has a list of options listed that the shelter picks from, and it isn’t set up to enter your own reason. Ally mentioned that the form is great for a smaller scale organization but isn’t really practical for a shelter as large as hers. Ally explains,

“For a larger organization, like we’re dealing with between 8-9,000 animals a year and it’s pretty fast paced...um, really really high volume, you know, it would be really difficult for a large organization like us to utilize something like this where it’s just so much information. Because that will also get lost in transition.”

Mary didn’t answer the question with a yes or no but did say she liked the form overall and that they would be borrowing some of the ideas from the form. Mary did not give any specific examples of which parts they might be borrowing. Nancy had also mentioned that she liked the hybrid form and that,

“it gave us good ideas, I mean I would think of adding small things. I like that you asked if the pets have allergies cuz ours asks about health problems but um, when

we ask about food sometimes we ask about allergies, but we don't have it explicitly on the form. Like if they are taking medication I think that those um, might be good to have on the form, like, like have them on there concretely so it doesn't get missed."

Nancy also mentioned that she liked the researchers question, *is your dog frightened of anything? (Check all that apply)*. Nancy said, "I actually loved your section. I was telling my boss that we should think of adding one like that on the section that asks what things they are afraid of...I mean I wrote notes about all of it, but I really loved that section. I thought that was smart." Nancy also liked "the behavior and tricks section, like, um, being trained to walk nicely or not to jump on people. We didn't think of adding that, but that's a really good idea about, um, like with commands that they know. Cuz those are things they're trained to do too." Nancy did make a suggestion about the importance of finding out the specifics of the pets behavior for any descriptive words such as aggression or destructive. She suggests, "I would just ask like what do they destroy? Or who are they aggressive with and what are they doing?" She explained that it is more valuable to know the actually behavior than to just use a word. All of the participants except Nancy said they think their shelter would be open to using a model form created by a consensus of experts. Mary followed up by suggesting, "it is helpful to have it customizable to your community, but if there was one that was like a general consensus, yeah, I think we would be open to it as long as there was an option to add or edit things as we could see fit." Nancy explained that, "as such a large shelter, I feel that we have enough specialized departments to use/work on our own form that we tailor to our clients and to our shelter procedures with the goal of best informing their pet's placement."

All of the participants except Walter said they liked having this particular question on the form, “if we could help you with the reason you are surrendering your pet today, would you keep our pet?” Walter’s shelter has a question very similar to this on their form, and he passionately explained why he dislikes it, “the one thing that makes me the most upset about that question is the fact that if somebody puts yes, we’re not equipped with the resources to actually help them.” Lisa answered that her “forms have that question and we use it as a way to get insight into possible programs to develop in the future. However, it is one you have to usually ask people directly because they tend to leave it blank, thinking they have no options and that surrendering is the only thing they can do.” Mary suggested: “part B of that question would be training the staff and having a frequently asked question response list or something...I would just want them to have something that would be like a prepared response that they could be trained on for various, um, reasons why people might surrender.” Ally said, “ultimately, we want an animal to stay with their owner, as long as that owner’s home is a, you know, a good environment for the animal.” Ally also noted that she thought that the specific question was already on her shelter’s form and was thankful for the researcher pointing out that it wasn’t. She followed up with saying that she was going to talk to the admissions department about adding this particular question to the shelter intake form. Nancy says, “I think it’s important to include it so they’re thinking about it, but some people will answer one way or the other no matter what. So like some people might want to keep their pet, and they really can’t, but they’ll put yes anyway because they want to.” She further explained,

“some people have no idea what resources you have so they’ll just say no because they think there’s no way they can, no my landlord won’t let me, it doesn’t matter what you can do. But they don’t know that we can help with their landlord. Their pet could be their emotional support animal, or that there’s a clause that prevents them from asking them to remove their pet in the first place.”

**Resources Available at the Shelter for Owners.**

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Tenant Advocate</u>	<u>Pet Food Pantry</u>	<u>Low Cost Vet Care</u>	<u>Referral to Partner Organizations</u>	<u>Donated Items</u>	<u>Behavior Counselor</u>	<u>Pet Friendly Housing List</u>	<u>Free Spay/Neuter Clinic</u>
Walter		X		X				
Nancy	X	X		X	X	X		
Lisa		X		X	X		X	
Ally		X	X			X		
Mary		X						X

All of the participants described the resources that are available at their shelter to help owners keep their pet. All of the participants have a pet food pantry, three participants offer referrals to partner organizations, two offer behavior counseling, two sometimes have donated items they can give out, one shelter has a tenant advocate, one offers low cost vet care, one shelter has a free spay/neuter clinic once a month and one shelter has a list of pet friendly housing available. Two shelters noted that they were

successfully able to help some owner surrenders without many tangible things to offer them. Nancy explained, “right now it’s mostly just connecting them with partner organizations that we work with...it’s not even that we have anything to give them, but we can suggest it.” Lisa said her shelter typically takes in about seventy owner surrenders a month. They have been tracking data since last May (2015), and the shelter is “intervening in about, I would say maybe, between five to fifteen a month...I mean if we can keep five animals in a home every month that would otherwise have been surrendered to the shelter, I feel like that is successful.” Lisa went on to say,

“and again that’s with, with really nothing to offer them...it’s really just pointing them in the right direction. And not being able to offer them either tangible or intangible things, but the things we find people really need to be able to keep their animals in home. Um, so you know, with really nothing we have been relatively successful. And again I feel like a lot of that has to do with the knowledge level of our counselors and also just their commitment to really sit down with someone and listen to them. And sometimes it takes an hour but they will sit there and listen and really work through these issues that owners have and give them encouragement, give them advice and a combination of that plus maybe a referral to our community clinic that’s relatively low cost. Or going in the back and seeing if we have an old crate that we can donate to them, um, if it means that dog gets to stay in that home. Um, I think a lot of these programs; I think you will find, um, a lot of their success does have to do with the commitment level of their counselors.”



Lisa offered a suggestion based on the success of her shelter and their focus on gathering and tracking data trends. Lisa suggested that “sometimes putting in questions that will help them, um, look at trends of why their animals are being surrendered, more than just, um, housing issues, or um, moving, or things like that. Um, things that would give them more insight to programs that they could possibly develop. Um, may be beneficial to the shelters that use this type of hybrid form.” The three questions on Lisa’s shelter intake form that track data are:

- How long have you been thinking about surrendering your animal?
- What other alternatives have you explored before coming to the shelter?
- If we could offer you any assistance, would you be willing to keep your animal today?

Three participants mentioned that their shelter has shifted in some capacity to focus on prevention and intervention to try to keep pets with their owners. Ally stated, “we’re starting to focus more on the preventative side, so increase spay/neuter, you know, which prevents unwanted litters... education, you know, humane education... but also, you know, how to keep animals in homes.” Nancy explained that the admissions department at her shelter was started to “help pets stay in their homes, so there’s less of them in the shelter, and more pets can stay with their families.” Nancy went on to say, “our main goal with every intake, it’s to, for it to not be an intake.” Nancy commented about the focus on prevention, “I think that’s an area that’s not focused on as much to reduce euthanasia. But it’s mostly just focused on placement. But this is even better cuz there’s less animals in the shelter.” Lisa said her first assignment as supervisor was, “to

create a more in-depth owner surrender program, that focused more on intervention. And trying to offer assistance before the animal was actually surrendered to the shelter.”

### **Conclusion**

#### Discussion

The findings suggest that the owner surrender process can be improved with a shift to focusing on prevention and intervention. The participants in the study expressed time constraints, limited staff and a lack of resources as common obstacles limiting their ability to offer assistance to owners surrendering their pet. What was agreed on was that including the question, “If we could help you with the reason you are surrendering your pet today, would you keep your pet?” on the shelter intake form, guarantees the opportunity that a conversation can be started between owner and shelter staff about possibilities that can help them keep their pet. Walter was the only participant who didn’t like the question for the sole reason that his shelter was not equipped with the proper resources to actually offer assistance to any owner that answered yes to the question. All participants agreed that using the hybrid form would gather valuable detailed information about the pet that could be used by the staff and the future adopter if the end result were owner surrender.

#### Conclusion

The current shelter intake process can be very emotional for owners surrendering their pet. There are a variety of reasons that could bring an owner to the decision of surrendering their pet. Some of these reasons are solvable, but many owners don’t know

about the resources available in their community to assist them. By the time an owner has made the difficult decision to surrender their pet, it may be too late for intervention. In some cases, shelters have had success in offering advice and resources to the owner that can help them keep their pet. This type of successful intervention can happen when a conversation is started between shelter staff and the person surrendering their pet. By taking the time to ask them, “what’s going on that brings them in to the shelter” and “if there were something that we could do to help you keep their pet”, shelter staff are able to learn more about the pet as well as the owner’s particular situation. By gaining this knowledge shelter staff are able to have a personal conversation and try to work through any solvable issues if the owner is interested in keeping their pet.

Some shelters are short staffed and receive a high volume of animals on a daily basis. Finding the quality time to spend with every owner who is coming in to surrender their pet may be difficult, but in the long run the more animals kept out of the shelter the more space is available for any other animals that may come in. A great solution to making sure that shelter staff does have the time to sit down one-on-one with owners to really listen to what they are going through and what they may need is to schedule owner surrenders by appointment. This way they are guaranteed to have the time to spend with each owner. Another suggestion is to have a separate private area to conduct all owner surrenders. When owners are in a private area and don’t feel rushed or like they are being listened to by other people, they are more eager to talk about what is going on with their pet and the help they might be looking for. Limited space might be an obstacle for some existing shelters, but if there was a way to have a private space, it could help improve the owner surrender process.

Some owners may feel embarrassed, sad or even frustrated during the surrender process, so keeping the intake form to about two pages seems to be a suggested reasonable length. As the experts here suggested, if it is longer than that it might take too long to complete or cause the owner to lose interest. Staff that are competent and experienced in dealing with owners surrendering their pet are key for shelters that need to keep their intake form short. Getting the conversation going and asking the right questions with empathy and compassion can build trust and a good rapport between the shelter staff and owner. The conversation could reveal useful information about the pet's behavior, personality, health etc. and be helpful for the staff in finding a future adopter for the animal. Their training in how to approach, talk to, listen to and provide assistance is crucial to the success. Getting the conversation going with owner surrenders is important, and one way to guarantee that the conversation does get started in each situation is to include a particular question towards the top of the shelter intake form. This question or a close variation of it would be, "If we could help you with the reason you are surrendering your pet today, would you keep your pet? Including this question on all shelter intake forms helps to guarantee that the question will be asked and that the opportunity for a conversation to start between shelter staff and owner is possible. Having it located toward the beginning of the form is good so that the conversation and possible intervention process can start before filling out the entire form. It is noted that having staff verbally ask the particular question is key since some people may not answer because they may believe that there is nothing that the shelter could possibly do to help them in their particular situation. The key is to get the question asked and the conversation going.

Some shelters may have concerns with including this question as their shelter may lack the resources to actually assist people with their needs to keep their pet. The researcher would still recommend including this question but with an additional sentence prior to asking it and that is:

“Our shelter is collecting data to find out the most common reasons people in our community surrender their pets. To better understand our communities needs, it would help us if you could share what is bringing you in today and what assistance could have helped you to keep your pet if you were interested in doing that. This information is valuable so that we may work to develop programs and provide resources in the future to assist our community.”

Some shelters in this study did say that even with limited resources they were able to help owner surrenders by just taking the time to talk to them and offer advice and refer them to other resources in the community that could assist them.

Owners who do decide to surrender their pet often see going to the shelter as a last resort when they could not find another home for their animal themselves or were not able to solve whatever problem they were having involving their pet. A focus should be made on changing that image of the animal shelter in the community from a “last resort” to a resource center for pet owners. People may not know all of the resources available in the community, for example: a pet food pantry, where to find pet friendly housing or affordable veterinarian care. Because funding can be limited in shelters, it would be great to tap into all available free advertising to let the community know what resources the shelter has to offer. This free advertising could include information on the shelter website with details about all of the resources the shelter has available to pet owners in the

community and how to contact the shelter. In addition, a section on their website that lists frequently asked question with possible solutions the shelter could assist with regarding someone thinking about surrendering their pet. Social media should be used to share any special low cost or free clinics and other affordable pet services happening in the community. For example, there may be a veterinarian that offers low cost or free spay/neuter once a month, a rescue group in the community may offer free micro chipping several times a year or the shelter may have an active pet food pantry for anyone who might be struggling financially. All other free advertising opportunities in the community should be considered as another asset to getting the word out about the shelter and their services for the community. These could be working with the local newspapers, television stations and local businesses.

A question that would have been useful to include in the shelter interviews for this project would have been to ask, “in your opinion do you think there would be a future impact on the number of owner surrenders if the hybrid form was used at your shelter?” The participants did find value in the hybrid form: they all agreed that the form gathered useful detailed information about the animal for the shelter staff and the future adopter. By gathering detailed information, the shelter staff and owner can start a conversation about the animal that could lead to solvable solutions that allow the pet to stay with their owner and out of the shelter. The researcher suggests that in an effort to reduce the number of owner surrenders and in turn reduce the number of animals euthanized in shelters, there needs to be focus on intervention and prevention. This can be done by: advertising all of the available resources the shelter has for pets in the community, having an intake form that asks the right questions, having an experienced staff that starts a non

judgmental and private conversation with the owner to talk about what they are going through and what they may need, and lastly taking the time to try and find the resources to help keep the pet with their owner and in their original home if possible. By the time most owners end up at the shelter, they have reached their breaking point in whatever situation they are going through. By sharing information about the resources that the shelter has available, the shelter makes it easier for people in the community to tap those resources before they reach that breaking point. All efforts should be made to prevent an animal from being surrendered to the shelter if the animal does have a good home, if the owner would like to keep their pet, and if the problem the owner is having is solvable. Fewer animals entering the shelter system means there is more room for other animals that may come in as well as fewer animals that the shelter will, in turn, need to find another home for. Imagine you are heart broken and about to do the unthinkable-- surrendering your family member to a shelter where there is a chance that they could be euthanized. Imagine you thought you had no other choice, until someone asks, "Is there anything we can do to help you keep your pet?" With that question alone a conversation is started, and suddenly the door to better outcomes for you and your pet is opened.

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**Appendix A:** Shelter Intake Form

**General Information**

Owner's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Dog's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Sex:  Male  Female

Spayed/Neutered:  Yes  No Breed or mix of dog: \_\_\_\_\_

Does your dog have a microchip?  Yes  No

Does your dog have any allergies, health problems or injuries?  Yes  No

*If yes, please describe:* \_\_\_\_\_

Is your dog on any medications?  Yes  No

*If yes, please describe:* \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you had your dog? \_\_\_\_\_

Where did you acquire your dog? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you obligated to return your dog to the person/organization you got him/her from?  Yes  No

What human family members has your dog lived with (check all that apply):

Adult Men  Adult Women  Senior Citizens  Teenagers  Children (what ages): \_\_\_\_\_

**Reason for Surrender**

Reason for wanting to Surrender your dog today:

Behavior (jumping, barking, not housetrained, destructive etc.)

Can't Afford (food, veterinary care, training, boarding etc.)

Pet illness

Health of Owner

Housing

Moving

Allergies

Change in Family (divorce, new baby, homeless etc)

Euthanasia Request (Please explain): \_\_\_\_\_

**If we could help you with the reason you are surrendering your pet today, would you keep your pet?**  Yes  No

\*If we could help you re-home your dog would you consider housing the dog until a new home is found?  Yes  No

*If yes, what is the maximum time limit you can house your dog during the search?* \_\_\_\_\_

**Family Environment**

Describe your dog’s behavior around children (check all that apply):

- Gentle                       Ignores or Indifferent                       Watches over children
- Friendly/Playful                       Roughhouses                       Too Active
- Nervous/Scared                       Too rough for children                       Avoids Children
- Unpredictable                       Snappy at times                       Has never been around children

Please check all the animals your dog has lived with (check all that apply):

- Male dogs     Female dogs     Cats     Birds     Rabbits     Reptiles
- Small Animals (what kind): \_\_\_\_\_  Farm Animals (what kind) \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your dog’s behavior around other dogs (check all that apply):

- Never been around other dogs                       Scared                       Friendly/Playful
- Ignores                       Bossy                       Aggressive when on leash
- Roughhouses                       Submissive                       Aggressive with dogs
- Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your dog’s behavior around cats (check all that apply):

- Never been around cats                       Respectful                       Aggressive
- Friendly/Playful                       Roughhouses                       Submissive
- Ignores     Scared     Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_

**Home Environment & Behavior**

Where was your dog kept when no human members of your family were home (check all that apply):

- Free run of home     Crated     Yard     Confined to one room     Tied outside on chain or runner
- Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Is your dog crate trained?  Yes  No

*If yes, how long each day?* \_\_\_\_\_

Is your dog house trained?  Yes  No

What method of housetraining does your dog know? (check all that apply):

Paper trained/wee wee pads       Doggy door       Crate trained       Bells on door

Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Does your dog have accidents in the house often?  Yes  No  Sometimes

If yes, how long is your dog left alone? \_\_\_\_\_

Has your dog ever bitten anyone?  Yes  No

If yes, please explain the circumstances: \_\_\_\_\_

Has your dog ever bitten another animal?  Yes  No

If yes, please explain the circumstances: \_\_\_\_\_

**How does your dog react when someone does all of the following? (check all that apply):**

	Friendly	Isn't Bothered	Afraid	Barks	Growls	Bites	Unknown
Touches food bowl while eating							
Takes bone, rawhide, or treat away							
Takes toy or other object away							
Pushes/pulls dog off furniture							
Gives dog a bath							
Trims dogs' nails or touches dogs' paws							
Brushes dogs' coat							
Holds or restrains dog							
Unfamiliar approaches your house or yard							
Unfamiliar approaches you or a family member							
Disturbs while sleeping or resting							
When you pick up the dog							

Is your dog frightened of anything? (check all that apply):

Men       Teenagers       Vets/Groomers       Women       Kids       Strangers       Cars  
 Fireworks       Thunder/Lightening       Bikes/Skateboards       Yelling/Loud voices       Vacuum

Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_



Has your dog had any behavior training?  Yes  No

*If yes, what type of training has your dog had? (check all that apply):*

Puppy Class     Home training     Obedience classes     Private trainer

What behavior or tricks does your dog know? (check all that apply):

Walks well on leash     Doesn't jump on people     Comes when called  
 Sit     Down     Shake/Paw     Fetch     Rollover     Stay  
 Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

**Dog Personality Profile**

What is your dog's personality like? (check all that apply)

Likes to cuddle     Couch Potato     Active     Hyper     Shy  
 Affectionate     Destructive     Barks a lot     Loves to play  
 Independent     Fearful     Friendly     Aggressive

What type of exercise does your dog get on a regular basis? (check all that apply):

Leash walks     Hiking     Running/Jogging     Plays fetch  
 Dog Park     Play in yard     Plays with other dogs     No exercise  
 Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

What is your dog's favorite toy? (check all that apply):

Ball     Frisbee     Stuffed     Squeaky     None  
 Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

Where does your dog sleep? \_\_\_\_\_

What does your dog eat? (check all that apply):

Canned food     Dry food     Homemade diet     Raw diet     Prescription diet  
 Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_

What are your dog's favorite treats? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you like most about your dog? \_\_\_\_\_

**Would you like us to help you keep your pet today?  Yes  No**