

APPENDIX E

Managed Intake

By Josh Fisher, director, and Shannon Harkey, customer service and community outreach manager, Animal Care and Control Division, Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department, Charlotte, North Carolina

Before 2013, Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department’s Animal Care and Control Division (CMPD-ACC) accepted owner-surrendered animals “in the field.” Pet owners would call animal control and request that an officer come to their house to pick up their pet for surrender. This service was provided free of charge and offered 20 hours a day. During the 2012 calendar year, CMPD-ACC took in 4,356 owner-surrendered animals.

As the agency began to progress, owner surrenders became a logical place to start. In January 2013, CMPD-ACC went from accepting owner-surrendered animals in the field to accepting them only at the shelter during business hours. Owners were required to bring their pets to the shelter if they wanted to surrender them. (Exceptions were made for the elderly or infirm, if approved by a supervisor.)

During the calendar year of 2013, however, CMPD-ACC took in 4,373 owner-surrendered animals, more than the year before. Obviously, simply stopping surrender pickup in the field didn’t have the impact we had been hoping for. Instead of decreasing, the number had risen. And the department was still dealing with “surrender remorse”: Because of the convenience of the surrender policy, owners were making hasty decisions. The shelter staff were spending a lot of time responding to next-day phone calls from owners who had changed their minds about surrendering their pets. And in too many cases, it was too late.

It was time to take the concept a step further. How could we effectively reduce the number of owner-surrendered animals but still provide a legally required service to citizens of the county? 2014 was a year full of sharing ideas, brainstorming and getting approval from the chain of command. The result was that we made some progress in 2014 (during which 3,134 animals were surrendered) by just slowing down and talking to owners about the reality of surrendering a pet. Our chain of command was very forward-thinking about this concept and fully engaged in making positive changes.

Reducing owner-surrender hours

In January 2015, CMPD-ACC went from accepting owner-surrendered animals during all operating business hours to accepting them only on Wednesdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Sundays from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. (Emergencies and strays are still accepted as needed.) This reduced owner surrender hours from 54 hours per week to only five. Having owners wait until the designated surrender hours gives them time to think about the decision they are about to make — and they often come up with other suitable arrangements.

The change in number of hours meant that the agency could plan for maximum staffing on surrender days, allowing staff to give more individualized attention to both the animals and the people surrendering them, as well as allowing rescue partner organizations more time to prepare and provide support for incoming animals.

In addition, reducing the hours for intake allows staff to be more efficient. Before we implemented managed intake, staff were constantly pulled in different directions as animals came in from animal control and the public while staff were concurrently helping animals already at the shelter. Consolidating intake time helps the staff to be more efficient in how they manage their day, which saves shelter resources.

A lot of discussion went into how to make this change. Do we advertise it? Do we have a grace period? What are people going to say? In the end, the shelter went with the “less is more” approach, understanding that average citizens do not know the policy surrounding owner surrender until they decide to do so. The shelter picked a start date and went live with the program. There was an adjustment period of a few weeks, when more animals were taken in because people hadn’t checked the website or called to find out the hours for owner surrender.

Reducing owner-surrender hours made the biggest difference in the numbers. In 2015, the shelter took in 840 fewer owner-surrendered animals. The total number of surrendered pets for that year was 2,294. And 2016 was even better; the owner-surrender number for that year was down to 2,112.

Having an owner-surrender hotline

The decreased intake could also partially be attributed to a new owner-surrender hotline that allows staff to speak to pet owners before they come to the shelter, providing them with all the options for alternatives to surrender (which, in many cases, means keeping pets with the people who love them). Reaching pet owners before they come through the door became a top priority, based on the concept that if you can reach people before they have detached themselves from their emotions toward their animals, you have a chance of keeping them together.

Making resource guides available

Another way to help pets stay with their families is to make sure pet owners know about all the available resources. Many people in the Charlotte community weren't aware of the plentiful resources that were available to them as pet owners, so CMPD-ACC developed resource guides that are provided to customer service staff through collaboration with local rescue groups, veterinary hospitals and boarding facilities.

Providing a safety net program

During 2015–2016, the shelter began receiving grant funds to implement a safety net program. The staff could provide medical vouchers to local veterinary partners for pet owners who needed a helping hand with vet bills. Since many animals are surrendered by their owners because of minor medical issues, this program quickly became a success.

Guidelines for the medical vouchers are simple: Each voucher is worth \$300; the vouchers are valid for 30 days; and the owners have to express that they would surrender their pets if they didn't receive assistance (to weed out people trying to bluff the system to get free vet care). Portions of the grant also covered free spay/neuter services, supplying of doghouses and other minor resources that can help people keep their pets.

Field enforcement officers began picking up on the concept and started referring cases to the customer service staff. The safety net program remains successful to this day, but it is a work in progress, since shelter staff are always looking for new ideas and, most important, new funding sources to keep the program alive.

Community response

Overall, the community has embraced managed intake. Of course, there are still emergency situations or occasions when people become upset because they want to get rid of their animal immediately, but the total number of those is minimal.

Shelter staff have found that people are often willing to consider other options instead of surrendering an animal. When they are considering surrender, pet owners have simply reached the limits of what they themselves know to do to remedy the problem. Pet owners appreciate the extra time that staff spend with them sharing information and safety net resources available through the organization, including pet food, free spay/neuter surgeries, doghouses and rescue group resources.

When this shift toward managed intake began, staff and volunteers expressed concern that stray intake numbers would rise — that owners would dump their pets to roam free or lie about them, saying they were strays. The data (see the table below) shows that this didn't

happen. The shelter's stray population has continued to decrease each year, thanks to the emphasis on rehoming, education and assistance to owners.

Year	Total number of animals turned in as stray (no known owner)
2013	8,336 (4,209 cats and 4,127 dogs)
2014	7,111 (3,209 cats and 3,902 dogs)
2015	6,612 (2,819 cats and 3,793 dogs)
2016	6,481 (2,782 cats and 3,699 dogs)

This program has made a huge difference to CMPD-ACC and the Charlotte community as a whole. The shelter switched from simply being a repository for animals to being a true community resource, a place where people can get help and guidance. The staff are now able to take the time to dig into the roots of a surrender situation and really make a difference. This has not only improved employee morale regarding owner surrenders, it has improved the shelter's reputation and rapport with the community. More animals are alive today in our community thanks to managed intake, and the shelter looks forward to continuing to grow this program into an even more successful model.