



Training Playbook:

Intake Diversion in the Field

Introduction

In the media, animal control officers are often depicted as mean or incompetent “dog catchers”, with one goal: catch the pet and bring them to the “pound”. Historically, this depiction is not too far from the truth, but across the nation animal control officers are working to change that narrative.

After decades of enforcement-based field operations, agencies have begun to implement more proactive, community-focused approaches and the results are all-encompassing. The goal of modern-day animal control is to support the community, keep pets in homes, ensure public safety, and find the best solution for each animal they encounter.

By limiting intake to the animals that truly need help, your organization can better serve the animals in care and offer more effective, lasting solutions to the community. This playbook is designed to help field service officers better serve their communities by effectively utilizing resources, building meaningful relationships and prioritizing positive outcomes for the animals they encounter.

Program Overview

Field-based intake diversion programs can:

- Increase positive relationships and trust within the community you are serving
- Increase officer safety as officers become a positive presence in the community
- Decrease the number of animals entering the shelter
- Decrease the chances of disease outbreak
- Increase employee morale and retention
- Help bridge the gap between the shelter staff and field services
- Decrease the number of cruelty and abandonment cases through proactive field operations

Program Composition

Intake diversion techniques vary, but a few core principles are applicable for municipalities nationwide. One of the most effective diversion techniques is community engagement. If a community-oriented philosophy is fully embraced by field service officers, you will see all-encompassing benefits for your organization.

Other techniques, such as implementing a thorough field return-to-owner (F-RTO) program, lessen the flow of animals into the shelter and also improve public perception of your organization. Additional strategies include targeted vaccination and microchipping events, nuisance complaint mitigation, and implementation of standard protocols to prevent owner surrender in the field.

Lifesaving strategies not only help save animals' lives, but could potentially save an officer's life. They can decrease the number of roaming animals, which limits the number of dangerous officer-animal interactions. Officers who engage the same neighborhoods on a regular basis can develop authentic and meaningful relationships within their community. This type of engagement inevitably improves officer safety in the field since it decreases friction between community members and officers. Some of the elements of intake diversion in the field are described in more detail below.

Community Engagement: The importance of a community-minded philosophy for field services cannot be overstated. As mentioned above, community engagement includes developing positive relationships with community members, but there are many other ways to apply this philosophy in the field. For example, instead of citing pet owners for ordinance infractions, officers can collaborate with the pet owner to produce an outcome that solves the underlying issue, without placing additional burden on the shelter.

Empowering officers to provide helpful resources to pet owners (pet food, runner lines, coloring books to engage children, doghouses, etc.) is another “tried and true” lifesaving strategy. If resources are limited, officers should allocate them according to need. To increase the amount of resources available, try reaching out to local pet supply stores, posting a wish list on social media platforms and placing donation bins in visible locations at your shelter.

Field Return-to-Owner: Equipping officers with microchip scanners and contact information for microchip registries is a priority for running a successful F-RTO program. In addition to scanning an animal for a microchip, officers can canvass the area and ask neighbors for assistance in locating the animal's owner. This is one of many situations in which having relationships with community members can contribute to lifesaving. People are more likely to help officers in their RTO efforts if they are familiar with the officers' goals and intent.

Other strategies for successful F-RTO include:

- Become familiar with local delivery drivers, mail carriers and emergency services personnel.
- Utilize social media platforms that are commonly used to report lost or missing pets (for example, NextDoor.com).
- Provide officers with “found signs” to post on location whenever they find a pet
- Reach out to the shelter to see if anybody has reported a missing pet matching the animal's description.
- Consider including [field RTO protocols](#) in SOPs to develop a culture centered around lifesaving.

Assistance with fencing and fence repair: Allowing officers to help owners of loose dogs repair their fences is a cheap, effective way to decrease the number of roaming animals. Some zip ties, broken wire crates and a decently stocked toolbox are often all that's needed to repair a fence effectively. At the very least, one stocked toolbox and

some fence repair equipment that officers have access to should be kept at the shelter. Officers can also use fence repair projects as an opportunity to build a genuine relationship with pet owners.

No owner surrenders in lieu of citations: The practice of accepting owner-surrendered pets in lieu of issuing a citation should not be acceptable to any animal control agency. When officers accept owner surrenders in lieu of citations, not only are they contributing to an increase in the shelter's population, it's likely that the owner will get another dog and commit the same infraction, which doesn't resolve the problem.

If an officer is issuing a citation for cruelty, however, it could be beneficial to try to get the owner to surrender the animal. Having custody of the animal in this situation would allow the shelter staff to adopt out the animal or transfer him to rescue. This would also prevent the animal from waiting through his entire court hold in a stressful environment, causing behavioral issues and leading to a negative outcome. This is one of the few situations in which obtaining an owner surrender in the field is acceptable.

No owner surrender pickups: Officers should not provide pickup service for owner surrenders for several reasons. This practice not only increases the number of animals entering the shelter, it perpetuates the mentality that animals are disposable. Field service officers should not make it easy for community members to get rid of their pets. Instead, they should have an open conversation with the pet owner regarding the circumstances surrounding the potential surrender. The officer and the pet owner can work together to find a solution that will keep the pet at home.

Making it easy to surrender a pet decreases the likelihood that pet owners will seek an alternative to surrendering their pets. Additionally, allowing owner surrender pickups takes up valuable time that officers could be spending on responding to priority calls. One exception to this policy is when the pet owner is disabled or elderly, and the pickup should be cleared by a supervisor to ensure all options outside of surrender have been explored.

Nuisance mitigation: Resolving nuisance complaints with long-term effective solutions rather than shelter impound will support lifesaving and community engagement. For example, working with a complainant to keep outdoor cats out of their yard using deterrents or other techniques will offer a permanent solution, rather than removing cats from the property indefinitely. It is crucial that all officers receive comprehensive complaint mitigation training to effectively resolve these types of issues in the community.

Sample Procedure and Program Information Documents

Now that you have a general understanding of intake diversion in the field, the following resources may act as templates and/or guidelines as you implement or scale up this program at your organization. Keep in mind that there is no perfect form of implementation. Using the considerations and program composition notes above, you

should use the following resources only as building blocks when creating your own standard operating procedures or documents (both internal and public).

If you need further assistance or clarification, please do not hesitate to reach out to your [regional strategist](#), [regional director](#), or the Best Friends national shelter support team at team2025@bestfriends.org.

- [Best Friends *Humane Animal Control* manual, chapter on intake diversion in the field](#)
- [ASPCApr: “Involving the Community Through Proactive Animal Control”](#)
- [Best Friends Field Return-to-Owner Operational Playbook](#)
- [Sample SOP for Field RTO](#)
- [Best Friends Lifesaving Dispatch Playbook](#)
- [Community Cats: Mitigating Feline Nuisance \(webinar\)](#)