



Peer to Peer Mentorship

Partnering for success



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

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Partnering for Success

Creating Successful Shelter Ally Partnerships

This is a remarkable time for our field— euthanasia of adoptable, homeless pets is down to its lowest point in history and continues to drop each year, there are thousands of animal welfare organizations working together to save animals and keep families together, adoption by the public is at an all-time high, and proven programs to humanely manage community cats are on the rise. However, even as we celebrate this success, there are shelters that have **struggled to reach these milestones due to a lack of funding, availability of affordable veterinary medicine and systemic poverty in underserved communities**. These shelters need the help and support of their peers that have been more fortunate. Thankfully, the hearts of many groups around the country are big enough to embrace them and create better equity between communities with

more sustainable resources and those that are struggling.

Why become a Shelter Ally?

Creating a relationship with a group struggling to provide care for their animals is one of the best ways to increase lifesaving beyond your own facility. The collaboration between mentor and mentee groups allows for opportunities to share knowledge and information and provide other types of support. It is unique in that it is a hands-on cooperative venture between animal welfare organizations designed not only to help individual animals but also to weave a stronger safety net for the community at large.

But taking on a mentee shelter is a decision that should not be made lightly. It means an ongoing, long-term

commitment to another organization, sometimes many miles away, that has fewer resources, less lifesaving infrastructure and novel obstacles. It **may also require helping your organization's supporters and community understand the importance of equity in animal welfare**; diverting some staff time and resources to elevating another group. In the end, however, it is a unique opportunity for groups that are leading the way in humane care and lifesaving to share their expertise outside their backyard, and truly help create a more humane nation.

What is the goal of a Shelter Ally partnership?

Shelter Ally partnerships are not simply transport partnerships with a little extra advice thrown in here and there. While transport can be an important part of helping to reduce animal populations for mentee groups in the short term, the true goal of any Shelter Ally partnership must be long-term transformation of the mentee group, from intake to population management, adoption policies to community outreach.

Ideally, with the support and guidance of their mentor group, mentees should, at a minimum, achieve:

- Commitment to ensuring all [Five Freedoms](#) for every animal every day;
- Stability in their shelter population, maintaining their humane capacity for care through intake management and diversion practices and enhanced live release options;
- Trap/Neuter/Return and Return-to-Field programs for community cats;
- Conversation-based, [Adopters Welcome](#) adoption policies;
- Accurate data collection and routine, transparent data reporting through [Shelter Animals Count](#);
- Comfort in appropriately navigating and [implementing positive policy changes](#) to help more animals at the organizational and local ordinance levels.

Mentor groups should strive to support and elevate their mentees to the point at which they are able to

manage their own animal populations effectively and achieve best practices in animal sheltering. As a shining example of humane animal caretaking and model shelter operation, the former mentee group will then be able to pay it forward, helping to elevate other groups in their region. In sum, the goal of the Shelter Ally Project is to support and build leaders who were once struggling and turn them into local influencers for positive change.

Is mentorship right for my organization?

The keys to a successful partnership are thorough planning, allocation of resources, clear agreements and long-term commitment to the project. The goal of a Shelter Ally partnership is transformational change on



the part of the mentee group. Before signing up to serve as a mentor, groups should ask themselves:

- Do we have full commitment from leadership? Mentorship can't be only the work of one or two individuals; it must be a program with full support and dedication from leadership, factored into strategic planning, budgeting, staffing, etc. Support from the mentor group must continue even if individual staff members leave the organization.
- Do we have staff buy-in? After all, shelter work is difficult enough; asking staff to take on mentorship of another organization, experiencing their challenges and heartbreaks, can be overwhelming and may lead to burnout. Supporting staff to help save lives in another community can be rewarding when done well.
- Do we have the financial resources required? Mentors certainly cannot be expected to fund their mentee shelter (although income realized from adoption of transferred animals can be reinvested in the mentee shelter), but the mentorship process unquestionably involves devoting staff time and expertise, travel and other resources to another group, rather than applying them locally.
- Do we have support from our donors and community? It can be difficult for those not in our field to see the critical importance of spreading lifesaving efforts even beyond their backyard; communicating the message that their local support is being magnified globally is essential.
- Do we have the expertise? Mentor groups should be realistic about their strengths and abilities and look for a mentee that generally aligns well with their areas of expertise.
- Do we have our own house in order? Every group has unique operating needs and philosophies, but there are well-accepted industry best practices that mentor groups must have in place themselves before they can help others. Before taking on a mentee, it is vital to perform a comprehensive self-assessment. There are several useful tools for this purpose, including those listed at humanepro.org/assess. At a minimum, every mentor group needs to be

enrolled in [Shelter Animals Count](#) and practice open, conversation-based adoptions (ideally implementing [Adopters Welcome](#)). And every prospective mentor group should utilize the ASPCA's [Shelter Care Checklists: Putting ASV Guidelines into Action](#) to ensure they themselves are meeting the highest standards of animal care in their day-to-day operations.

Mentor groups cannot be expected to provide for their mentees at the expense of animals in their own facilities and/or communities. However, they will be expected to devote time and resources to supporting and elevating their Shelter Ally over a long period of time. What that investment looks like will vary greatly, depending on the needs of the mentee shelter. Some groups may simply need advice, guidance and a shoulder to lean on, while others may need more tangible resources like vaccines, handling equipment and animal care items. Some will already be well-versed in humane sheltering and best practices, while others will need help with basics like



sanitation and intake practices. Mentor groups will need to be flexible, work to understand the needs and abilities of their mentee shelter and establish and execute a plan for moving forward.

Which groups are good candidates for mentorship?

While most groups are happy to accept offers of resources, transport support, etc., not every organization is a good candidate for mentorship. To truly embrace a mentorship relationship, groups must be willing to accept the recommendations for change and implement mentor group suggestions. Honest and forthright initial conversations must be had in order to determine the prospective mentee's openness to change.

This is not to say that every group must be 100% ready to change every existing policy before becoming a mentee. After all, even the most progressive groups had a journey by which they embraced change, and even current best practices were likely initially resisted. The

key in selecting a mentee group is their openness to potential change, and their willingness to have dialogue and conversation around ideas that currently seem foreign to them. For example, a group that insists its transfer partners use strict adoption screening and provide them the opportunity to reject placements may be evidence that a group is unlikely to recognize the value of open and conservation-based adoptions any time soon. By contrast, a group that currently uses strict adopter screening but is willing to dialog about why their transfer partner uses conversation-based adoptions is potentially open to change once they see the benefits of that approach.

In a nutshell, **the most important ingredient for success as a mentee group is leadership that is committed to change.** There is no animal welfare group that has unlimited resources—even groups with the largest operating budgets, newest facilities and most robust fundraising teams still work hard for every dollar and must spend their resources wisely. Being selected as a mentee by another group should be valued, as the



mentoring group has chosen to voluntarily share their valuable resources—including their time and professional expertise—with the mentee. As such, it is important that mentees enter this relationship with a commitment to being open to change and accepting advice even when it seems contrary to current practices or experience. A mentee must be open to hearing their mentor group’s experience, trusting their recommendations and adjusting policies accordingly. If a group’s desire is to simply continue doing what they have always done but have someone temporarily relieve some of the burden, they don’t need a mentor—they need a transport partner.

To ensure success, it is vital that, before entering into an official Shelter Ally relationship, both groups are clear as to the goals and expectations of the partnership. The mentee should know—and agree—that their mentor’s goal is to support them beyond simply providing transport, and that to achieve that goal they will be asked to provide data, participate in trainings, consider operational and policy changes and more. By the same token, mentor groups must be transparent about the types of assistance they will and won’t provide; for example, mentor groups should be clear about whether they will supplement staffing, underwrite structural improvements or provide equipment or other assistance. While an informal discussion may be easiest, groups should consider entering into a formal agreement to ensure that unmet expectations do not derail the sister shelter relationship.

We often say, “change is hard” and use that as an excuse to drag our feet and resist. But as Chip and Dan Heath, authors of the book *Switch*, point out, some change is actually easy. Marriage, for example, or welcoming a new baby. When the change is something we want, we can embrace it! It’s about our attitude and approach. Change in our approach to animal sheltering/rescue is no different.

Creating an action plan

So, you’ve established your Shelter Ally partnership and you’re ready to jump in—where do you start? Transport is the obvious first step; after all, it’s a proven way to relieve the burden of overcrowding. But a true partnership is designed to provide more than temporary relief to the mentee shelters; it is intended to give them strategies for reducing their population to the point that transport is unnecessary because they are operating within their humane capacity for care and meeting the pressing needs of their community.

To dive deeper into the roots of their challenges, a visit to the mentee shelter may be necessary, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the facility, the community and the challenges before them. It’s possible that there are just a handful of tweaks that would put the mentee on the road to success, in which case your action plan is clear. But what if it feels like they need help with everything?

The San Francisco SPCA was confronted with just that challenge when they took on their first mentee. To determine where to begin, they created a model approach other mentor groups would be wise to follow.



Using a modified traditional decision matrix model (see above), they examined each need and potential solution and categorized them according to their potential level of impact and effort required for success. For example, they determined that their mentee group could better combat disease simply by implementing better vaccination and sanitation practices—that fit into the “high impact, low effort” corner of the matrix, so it became one of the first priorities for assistance. But things like implementing a Return-to-Field program for community cats, which would certainly have high lifesaving impact but required modification of a local ordinance (extremely high effort), fit into the “plan for it, but don’t tackle immediately” category.

Using this matrix to organize your mentee group’s needs will allow you to segment and prioritize your to-do list, allowing you to concentrate your efforts first on those items that will achieve quick wins, helping to generate enthusiasm for the partnership and cement your relationship for the more difficult challenges ahead.

When things go wrong

Having in-depth conversations with a mentee group is essential to determining whether they are truly eager to accept the opportunity to make organization-wide transformational change, or whether they are simply looking for a partner focused on a single point of assistance, like transport. But even with the best intentions, relationships can go awry—groups can hit a wall of resistance, or management can change and undo the progress that had been made. In such cases, mentor groups must decide whether to continue advocating for improvements or accept that they have reached their current ability to help and consider moving on to

another group that is in a better place to accept support.



Courtesy SFSPCA



Changing hearts and minds

Embarking on becoming a Shelter Ally is working toward finding homes for all adoptable pets nationwide while supporting pets and their families in the community. This is no small task. Every mentor/mentee relationship is unique with its own set of victories and challenges. The key is to provide support and a structured plan for creating sustainable programs for communities and pets. With the incredible advancements being made in our field, it is hard to imagine that any animal shelter could be completely left behind, but that is exactly what has happened in many locations. The Shelter Ally Project aims to address the pets and the staff and volunteers caring for them in these pockets of population disparity with a nonjudgmental approach.

It is important to keep in mind that solutions will likely require a multi-prong approach. While staff training and improved protocols may seem like obvious solutions to many sheltering issues, lack of community support—and therefore, resources—can prohibit forward movement. We must work together to change hearts and minds on the value that animal shelters provide for all animals in the community.

Resources

Animal Care Expo

The world's largest international training conference and trade show for animal welfare professionals and volunteers takes place annually each spring. Visit humanepro.org/expo to learn more, submit a workshop proposal (early summer) and register (fall through spring) to attend!

Animal Sheltering online magazine

Animal Sheltering is the only magazine that exclusively covers the people and organizations making a difference for pets and their families in the U.S. This award-winning publication is designed especially for shelters, rescues, animal care and control agencies and everyone involved in community animal welfare. Learn more at humanepro.org/magazine.

Humanepro.org

Humanepro.org is your online resource for news, training, jobs and more! Read articles, check out blogs from experts in the field and access a host of tools and strategies for your lifesaving work, including implementing best practices, managing cat populations, reaching underserved communities and saving more lives.

Stay up-to-date with the latest happenings in our field and receive special discounts by signing up to receive our [bimonthly e-newsletter](#).

Additional resources

For resources listed by topic area from the Humane Society of the United States and other expert sources, please visit humanepro.org/resource-list.



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