



The Price

Intake Info: Class / In **Owner Surrender** Cost of Pet
 5/3/2017 5:29:16 PM **Owner Surrender** Adoption Notes:
 Profile Info:
 Unknown
 Unknown(9, Ages:)
 Unknown
 Unknown



of Leaving

(+)(-)

THEM BEHIND

The pros and cons of surrender fees and appointment systems

BY KATHERINE MCGOWAN

When a pet owner decides to bring an animal to the shelter, has he truly run out of options? Would he reverse his decision if armed with more knowledge about behavior training techniques, pet-friendly rental housing, or low-cost spay/neuter arrangements? If the shelter sets up a time for him to discuss these issues with an expert, would he at least be more likely to share the history of his animal and explain the problems that have led to his choice to surrender?

What if the relinquisher shows up unannounced and expects the shelter to immediately take on the obligation of feeding, housing, and socializing his furry former family member? Is it the shelter's responsibility to do so—and to fund that care as well? What is best for the community, the shelter, and the animals themselves?

For decades, most animal shelters have served as agents of unconditional love, opening their doors to any animal in need. But in recent years, many organizations have begun requiring relinquishers to pay a fee or make an appointment—making it just slightly more difficult to drop off an animal and walk away. These new intake policies are designed to help shift responsibility back to pet owners and involve the community in solving the problems that lead to pet relinquishment.

But the questions remain: Are these strategies effective? And do they have the potential to backfire, encouraging pet owners to abandon their animals in lieu of turning them over to a responsible shelter? In the following profiles, we explore how individual organizations have grappled with these questions and examine the results of their efforts so far.

PHOTOS: MICHELLE RILEY/HSUS

Appointments Requested, Walk-Ins Welcome, and Fees Required

■ **Organization:** Tri-County Humane Society, St. Cloud, Minnesota ■ **Annual intake:** 4,000 animals, including those taken in through housing contracts with surrounding rural municipalities ■ **Human population served:** 100,000 residents in three counties ■ **Relinquishment fee status:** The shelter has charged a relinquishment fee of \$6 to \$18 for as long as anyone can remember—"with the stipulation that if it is a hardship, it's waived," says the organization's executive director. ■ **Appointment system status:** Starting about seven years ago, the shelter took a cautious approach to appointments, scheduling them every half hour on a trial basis. When no one protested, the humane society implemented the system permanently. Staff members still accommodate walk-ins but believe the appointments have improved efficiency.

Rather than complaining about the relinquishment fees at the Tri-County Humane Society, most people are downright generous. In fact, they often double the payment requested or round up to the next \$5 amount, says Executive Director Vicki Davis.

The \$6 to \$18 fee range is based on the costs the shelter will incur to care for the animal being relinquished; kittens cost the least, and adult dogs cost the most. While some shelters call the fee a "donation," Davis chooses the phrase "surrender fee" so people won't think they can deduct it from their taxes.



Although the shelter houses animals for other municipalities, the majority of those taken in are surrendered by owners. To help manage traffic flow in the small space near the front desk, staff schedule appointments with relinquishers—a practice suggested by an employee who'd been struggling to navigate crowds of clients, pets, and colleagues.

"The public seems to think it is normal," says Davis. "We offer them an appointment when we have openings, and they usually pick a time. If you have someone who is already on their way to work and can't wait for an hour, the good thing about having half-hour appointments is that you can slip someone in. It helps you prepare for the day and what to expect." Since the majority of appointments are scheduled, employees can easily accommodate the occasional unexpected arrival.

Davis is glad she listened to her employee's recommendation: "I feel we are more efficient, and things flow a little smoother. If we were having pile-ups of animals by the surrender counter, people wouldn't think we do a very good job. This way, we're more organized and professional."

"This concept might be impossible if you had a revolving door of people coming in, but it seems to work well for us. As long as you can convince your staff to remain accommodating and stick to the rules, then you're fine," Davis says.

Davis cautions that shelters with relinquishment fees or appointment systems should still emphasize customer service. "Be flexible and accommodating, or you will have negative feedback," she says. "But if you can streamline a lot of your traffic flow and ask for a small fee, I think it benefits you both ways."

By Appointment Only: Determining Who Gains Entry

■ **Organization:** Second Chance for Animals Center, Flagstaff, Arizona ■ **Annual intake:** 532 animals in 2006. If its facility is not full, the organization takes in animals who pass a temperament test. ■ **Human population:** 60,000 ■ **Relinquishment fee status:** The shelter charges a surrender fee of \$95 but sometimes takes animals from owners who can't pay the fee. ■ **Appointment system status:** Would-be relinquishers must make appointments so the shelter can evaluate their animals for admission.

At the Second Chance for Animals Center, appointments are designed not so much to regulate traffic flow as to help the shelter decide which animals will get the green light to even enter the facility.

"If we don't have space or the animal doesn't pass our temperament test, we refer them to another rescue group or other shelters," says office manager Lyn

Pierce. “However, if they don’t meet [our] behavior expectations, they probably won’t with other groups.” If Second Chance doesn’t have room for an animal who has passed an evaluation, staff ask the owner to hold onto the pet until space is available.

Many people instead opt to bring their animals to the county shelter, the only other one in the community, Pierce says.

If an animal is accepted at Second Chance, the surrender fee requirement is flexible—staff members sometimes waive the \$95 charge when people can’t afford to pay. And since the money collected from surrender fees is allocated to the organization’s clinic, unpaid relinquishments are often offset by the arrival of sterilized and vaccinated animals who don’t require basic medical services.

Sometimes pet owners are frustrated by the intake policy, says Pierce. “People will get mad because they want us to fix their problem, and they will get upset with us if we can’t take the animal,” she says. “But most of the time people are understanding and realize there is only so much we can do.”

The policy enables the organization to better fulfill its mission, says Pierce. “It allows us to take in animals that we know we can adopt out,” she says. “I think it is important for us to have adoptable animals in here so we can move them out. In a month’s time, we can move four animals—otherwise they sit in the cage, and if they aren’t adoptable, we can’t move them out [when] other animals could have had a chance.”

Second Chance does not euthanize for space or at the end of a certain time period, says Pierce. In addition to taking in some owner-surrendered pets, the organization rescues animals from the nearby Native American reservation. “We go once a month to Window Rock and get dogs, sometimes between 10 to 30 puppies at a time,” says Pierce. “We also take off animals from the euthanasia lists at other area animal shelters, as long as we have space and they pass behavior tests.”

Same-Day Reservations and Decisions

■ **Organization:** SPCA of Texas, Dallas, Texas ■ **Annual intake:** 24,000 dogs and cats in 2006, but some of those animals came in through animal control service contracts that have since been dropped. The SPCA also took in nearly 400 wild animals and almost 850 other creatures, including farm animals. ■ **Human population served:** 5.3 million ■ **Relinquishment fee:** No fee is required, but employees solicit donations at the time of relinquishment. ■ **Appointment system status:** Through the organization’s “Reservations Required” program, pet owners must call ahead before bringing in animals, who are evaluated on the spot for behavior and health status.



No one leaving an animal behind at the SPCA of Texas has to walk away wondering whether her former pet will be put up for adoption: Staff members give owners the news at the time of relinquishment.

Reservations are required to begin the surrender process; employees schedule appointments for the same day the pet owner calls the shelter. Animals undergo behavior and health assessments, after which staff members tell clients whether or not their pets qualify for adoption. If an animal is deemed unadoptable, the owner has a tough decision to make: whether to surrender the animal anyway, bring him to another organization, or commit to a more permanent relationship with the pet.

The new process is part of a five-year plan to eliminate the need for euthanasia based on lack of space, initiated when the SPCA of Texas dropped its animal control contracts last year. Retaining the owner’s option to surrender her animal was important to designing a plan that still provides a safe haven for animals in need, says SPCA of Texas President James Bias.

“We did not want to be confused with no-kill,” says Bias. “There is the traditional way [and] the no-kill way, and this is a hybrid of both—because if an animal isn’t considered adoptable, the owner can still leave it but will sign a waiver saying they understand the animal will be euthanized.”

The new procedure allows the pet owner to witness the behavior assessment and become involved in the process of re-homing a pet, says Bias. For owners of

The SPCA has not yet tracked what happens when people decide against relinquishing a pet who's been deemed unadoptable. Bias recognizes that the lack of such information may invite criticism of the process. "There are folks out there who will say it's just moving the problem from one side to the other," he says. "We want to provide full disclosure to our community and compare stats with the city shelter so we have a balanced view and not a filtered view."

animals who don't pass health and behavior evaluations, employees provide printed resources or referrals to other organizations. "If you have a dog that is food-aggressive, I would say about 25 percent of the people elect to take the animal back with them, which, for the most part, was probably going to be put down," says Bias. Owners can sign a euthanasia request, but the SPCA of Texas reserves the right to place the animal for adoption.

The SPCA has not yet tracked what happens when people decide against relinquishing a pet who's been deemed unadoptable. Bias recognizes that the lack of such information may invite criticism of the process. "My response back is that each organization, based on its own governance and mission, should decide what direction it takes—whether it takes care of cats only or dogs with floppy ears or is limited-admission," he says. "There are folks out there who will say it's just moving the problem from one side to the other. We want to provide full disclosure to our community and compare stats with the city shelter so we have a balanced view and not a filtered view."

Initially, officials at Dallas's municipal shelter feared a spike in the number of incoming animals as a result of the SPCA's appointment system. To help measure the

effects, Bias supplied the SPCA's monthly intake statistics and asked Dallas Animal Services to reciprocate. By the end of last year, the counts were in: The city had handled only about 400 more animals than it had the year before. Relative to its 34,000-animal total, the increase was not significant—something Bias points to as evidence that the burden hasn't shifted.

Paul Curington, operations manager for Dallas Animal Services, concurs. "We have not seen an influx, but we originally thought we would," he says. "Either the animal is acceptable to the SPCA, or [the pet owner has] found elsewhere to take it."

Curington points out that clients call his facility and inquire about whether or not his shelter euthanizes animals. "Once they learn we do, they choose to go to the SPCA, where they think the pet won't be euthanized. The SPCA has a little bit more control over what they are taking into the shelter because they're not in the impoundment business," he says. "We just don't have that luxury of picking and choosing the clients we want."

While the numbers remained fairly neutral for the city of Dallas, the SPCA experienced clear benefits in terms of intake, taking in about 10,000 fewer animals than it had the year before, says Bias. "The program has changed the demeanor of how we operate because we're having time to focus on the individual animal," he says. "The staff isn't feeling the stress of simply moving the animals through the system."

Shelters like the SPCA of Texas have overburdened themselves for years, says Bias. Under the organization's old system, relinquishers were essentially told by shelter staff: "Trust us; we'll do our best." Both sides were often insulated from the outcome. "Somewhere along the way, the mainstream animal shelter tried to be everything to everybody and make it convenient for animals to be dropped off," Bias says. "When a shelter tries to be everything to everybody, we aren't doing the animals, community, or volunteers a favor."

Programs like the SPCA's "allow the community to take ownership" of the overpopulation problem, he says, and give the shelter more time to focus on education. While the outcome of the Reservations Required program has been favorable to the SPCA's numbers, Bias does not plan to fundraise based on those results—and he steers clear of suggesting that other shelters euthanize more animals.

Still, donors have been expecting the change, he says, and the board of directors unanimously approved the new system. Though some staff members were initially resistant to the appointments process, fearing it would lead to abandonment or increase the burden on other shelters, training and media outreach helped both employees and members of the public make a smooth transition.

No Appointments Necessary: A Place of Last Resort

■ **Organization:** New Hampshire SPCA, Stratham, New Hampshire ■ **Annual intake:** 3,700 to 4,200 animals. The shelter has 14 contracts to house animals for municipalities in three regions. ■ **Human population served:** The SPCA serves parts of three states, including southern Maine, northeastern Massachusetts, and southeastern New Hampshire. ■ **Relinquishment fee status:** The shelter does not require a fee but asks for donations. ■ **Appointment system status:** Staff members allow people to bring in animals at any time, but they schedule appointments for those who happen to call ahead.

To the staff of the New Hampshire SPCA, there's a fine line between charging a relinquishment fee and increasing the likelihood of pet abandonment.

And it's a line they'd rather not cross. Though employees have tossed around the idea in the past, the shelter has retained its system of simply asking for a donation.

"You can't make people value their pet enough to give you money," says adoption center manager Jen Corbin. "If they don't, they will simply dump their pet somewhere."

As a safe haven for unwanted animals, the New Hampshire SPCA is more comfortable avoiding any potential hurdles—including both surrender fees and appointment systems—that might impede the process of taking in an animal in need.

While the shelter pencils in appointments for those who have the foresight to call first, most people walk in—and that's just fine with staff, says Corbin. "The people who have the luxury to plan are going to call you before coming in," she says. "When someone simply walks in with their pet, you are their last resort. The last thing you want to do is turn away a cat or dog who has just walked in your front door."

Nobody wants to call an animal shelter when faced with moving away and finding a new home for their animals, says Corbin. Most people start out thinking a family member will take their kitty, but when it comes down to the wire, they become "stuck and desperate." "That is when we need to be there for them," says Corbin. "You can't put the pet in the position of having to take the consequences for that."

Corbin has heard the arguments in favor of shifting responsibility to the pet owner, but she prefers to leave room for human error and poor judgment. "We're all human beings. Sometimes we're responsible and sometimes we aren't. When humans are put in a bind, they sometimes don't make a good choice," Corbin says. "We want to be here as the safety net for the pets and

not contribute to that pet being dumped. I've seen situations where people have moved and abandoned their pets in their old house because a shelter told them, 'We don't have space right now,' and offered them an appointment three weeks out."

Organizations considering relinquishment fees or appointments need to remain flexible, Corbin advises, especially because "pets don't carry credit cards." "Don't take a hard line on anything, because you want to make sure you still have an open-door policy for the animals that need you," she says. "Even though a lot of facilities say they take appointments only, remember, you're in the animal sheltering business. You aren't going to turn away an animal in need."

Turning Back: Dropping Fees in Favor of Education

■ **Organization:** Animal Lovers League, Glen Cove, New York ■ **Annual intake:** More than 1,000 animals ■ **Human population served:** 27,000 residents on the northwestern tip of Long Island ■ **Relinquishment fee status:** The shelter used to charge a fee but now requests donations. ■ **Appointment system status:** Appointments are encouraged but not required.

Once seen as a way to make some gains on the financial front, relinquishment fees at the Animal Lovers League were eventually dropped because of what staff feared was being lost: the chance to educate.



Relinquishment

The fee system originated with the takeover of the municipal facility by a volunteer group in 1996. Hoping to recoup expenses through the extra income, the group's members also thought that requiring a surrender fee "might make people think twice about relinquishing their animals," says shelter director Joan Phillips. "But we were wrong."

To ensure her shelter's operations reflect industry standards, Phillips often attends Animal Care Expo, the annual training conference for animal care and control agencies and shelters organized by The Humane Society of the United States. When the subject of relinquishment fees came under discussion one year, some of Phillips' colleagues described relinquishers who'd brought their own pets in as "strays" to try to avoid paying a fee—a situation that makes it difficult for shelter staff to engage in honest, informed conversations with owners.

Asking for a donation instead makes the process less formidable—and makes people more amenable to the shelter's attempts to educate them about responsible pet care, says Phillips. "Sometimes they'll even bring in food as a donation, and we accept it gratefully," she says. "The more open and friendly and not

forbidding you seem, the better your chances are that you're doing well for that person relinquishing their pet. If you're charging a fee, when they walk out, they don't owe you anything in their minds because they've paid you—so they are done. This way, if we do our job, those same people leave with a good feeling about us and think a little differently."

Now that she's been managing a shelter for more than a decade, Phillips believes the fee she once thought of as a deterrent to would-be relinquishers sometimes just agitates them more. By the time pet owners make it to the shelter, their minds are usually made up, she says. Trying to interfere with their decisions can heighten their hostility and ruin the chances for obtaining good background information about their animals.

Because of the shelter's appointment system, which Phillips implemented after discussing the pros and cons with colleagues at conferences and online, staff can evaluate animals at intake and work more effectively with pet owners. "We say to them, 'We will take your dog—we'd like to evaluate it and tell you what the chances are of re-homing.' We make it a very friendly process instead of giving them the attitude of 'you're dumping your dog,'" says Phillips.

"If the pet is not adoptable, we will tell the people up front that we will not be able to re-home this dog," she says. "Then we give them the information such as referring them to Cornell [University's] behavior science program, and they have the opportunity to make the decision themselves about whether or not they want to leave their dog with us."

"I do believe a reason why a lot of people bring their animals to us is because we do work with the dogs," says Phillips. "We have behavior programs with a lot of environmental enrichment at our shelter. I feel the community looks at us much more as friends than as dogcatchers."

Occasionally, people make appointments to relinquish animals and never show up—but not very often, says Phillips. Because her organization runs an animal control facility, straddling a middle ground is important—and that means that animals of owners who haven't made appointments are still welcome.

No Appointment, No Fee, No Donation, No Risk?

- **Organization:** Danville Area Humane Society, Danville, Virginia
- **Annual intake:** 5,500 (the local municipal shelter takes in about 2,000 dogs a year but does not take in cats).
- **Human population served:** 100,000
- **Relinquishment fee status:** The shelter does not request a fee and has no plans to in the future.
- **Appointment system status:** Appointments are not



part of the picture; staff fear that any obstacles to the relinquishment process could result in more misery for animals already suffering from neglect.

For Paulette Dean, appointment systems and relinquishment fees are out of the question. “We are lucky if we get people to sign a release form,” says the executive director of the Danville Area Humane Society. “People would not bring animals to us if we charged a fee.”

“In this area, most people place very low value on animals,” says Dean. “We cannot take the chance that any little inconvenience will prompt people to dump the animals on the street or allow the animal to live their life in a bad situation.”

To illustrate her point, Dean describes the “dog lots” that are common in Pittsylvania County. Small, enclosed pens usually situated far from owners’ houses, the lots banish animals to lifelong confinement without enough food, water, shelter, or socialization. Veterinary care is rarely associated with the “dog lot” lifestyle.

“Having appointments or a fee has come up and quickly been considered not a good option for us. We have to make it as convenient and as low-cost for the people as possible—to the point of driving and picking up the animal from them,” says Dean. “To be an unwanted animal in this area is a very dangerous thing, especially since we have a huge problem with dogfighting.”

Shelter staff already ask people as much as possible about animal histories and suggest alternatives to relinquishment, says Dean. Education is sometimes effective in making a difference in the lives of animals—but not always, she says. Even when the shelter pays for a sterilization surgery through its aggressive spay/neuter program, some owners end up returning a couple of weeks later to surrender their pets anyway.

Just miles from the North Carolina border, Dean’s animal shelter is located in an economically depressed region of Virginia. The textile and tobacco industries that used to employ the area’s citizens have sent manufacturing jobs overseas, leaving the community to reinvent itself. Dean thinks animals are paying the price.

For many, compassion toward animals is secondary to struggles with the area’s high murder rate, high incidence of sexually transmitted disease, and other socioeconomic problems, says Dean. “We cannot even press people for a donation” when they surrender animals, she says.

Dean first became director of the facility in 1992, when the shelter admitted about 2,500 animals each year. Since then, annual intake has doubled. As the court-appointed humane investigator for the city of Danville and Pittsylvania County, Dean has witnessed

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a decline in responsible pet ownership over the past 15 years, she says. The proportion of neglect and cruelty cases has steadily increased alongside the number of unwanted animals brought to the shelter. At the organization’s drop-off area for pets relinquished during non-business hours, Dean lists her home phone number and encourages people to call her in the middle of the night. “Sadly, for most of the animals we receive, our shelter is the best place they’ve ever been,” she says.

A neighboring shelter’s recent decision to limit intake has placed an additional burden on the Danville facility, Dean says. “Now they refer people to us and tell them, ‘We don’t kill animals anymore; take them to Danville,’ ” she says. “So our numbers have gone up, while their numbers have gone down. I understand the philosophy to keep an animal out of a shelter, but when you live in an area where no value is placed on an animal, you have to keep the shelter doors open.” AS

Katherine McGowan, an animal sheltering issues consultant for the Companion Animals section of The Humane Society of the United States, lives in St. Louis, Mo., with three cats and a dog.