

Op



Opening Up

Inspired by a collection of essays in *Animal Sheltering*, a shelter staffer shares her organization's evolving perspective on adoptions

BY KARLA HARTLEP, C.P.D.T.

I was very pleased to see the essays dealing with changing perspectives on shelter adoptions in *Animal Sheltering* ("Judgment Calls," Sept-Oct 2007). In response, I wanted to share some of my own history, and the history of our organization's adoption policies. The adoption issue is one that our agency has become very passionate and proactive about, and we have seen positive results in both the culture of our agency and in our numbers of adoptions with the changes we have made.

In 1995, I was a full-time child behavior specialist, working with developmentally delayed children during the day, and as a part-time pet dog trainer in the evenings. My own pet dogs were certified as therapy dogs, and they accompanied me in my work with children and as a trainer.

I was also in the market for a puppy. I quickly cast aside the notion of visiting the Kansas Humane Society in Wichita to adopt: I had been exposed to this organization via contacts in the dog training world, and had found its customer service to be sorely lacking. I feared that my husband and I would not be able to behave in a manner sufficient to pass the intense scrutiny of the humane society's staff—and as a result, we purchased a puppy from a commercial breeder.

Flash forward to 2003, when I made a dramatic career change. In pursuit of my growing passion for animals, I accepted the position of director of shelter operations for the Kansas Humane Society—the very

organization I had once avoided as the source for a pet. In my new role, I came face to face with the stringent adoption requirements I'd once feared.

At that time, our adopter requirements included landlord approval and a valid driver's license, and we would not send a terrier to a household with a small child. These policies served to place immediate barriers between our shelter and potential adopters, starting the relationship between the organization and its clients off on a judgmental note.

Generally, adults know the rules and are well aware of the pet policies within their housing—but we were adamant about getting verbal approval from a landlord. I am not exactly certain how a driver's license proves an individual's ability to be a good pet owner, but we were firm about this requirement as well. And no terriers with children? I am pleased that Maggie, Patches, and Rufus, the terriers of my own very safe and dog-friendly childhood, were not aware of this stipulation.

Our policies made it challenging for an adopter—and challenging for our shelter, which already found it nearly impossible to compete with the steady flow of unaltered "free" puppies in the newspaper.

As an agency, we began to examine our adoption policies and research alternatives to these strict rules. During this process, we utilized the Adoption Forum of 1999, sponsored by American Humane, and the Adoption Forum of 2003, sponsored by PetSmart Charities, as guidelines for the development of open



Karla Hartlep says that the Kansas Humane Society has improved its relationship with adopters by making counseling and adoption processes less strict.

THE KANSAS HUMANE SOCIETY

adoption procedures that would allow us to move away from rigid policies toward more flexible guidelines.

The Kansas Humane Society implemented an open adoption policy in May 2004, and this has encouraged us to embrace the following ideals and approaches:

- Every potential adopter is also a potential donor.
- Loving and responsible pet owners are not born that way. Given the right information in the right way, most people can become good pet owners.
- Every interaction with a potential adopter is an educational opportunity. People are willing to learn when treated as intelligent, competent, and well-intentioned.
- Be flexible with potential adopters, and always strive for a positive outcome by treating adopters with dignity and respect and hearing their story.

As a result of this shift, our agency has been able to more fully utilize our pre-adoption assessment tools, which include the research-based SAFER and Meet

Your Match programs available through the ASPCA. These tools not only assist in determining which animals should be made available for adoption, but also empower adoption counselors to discuss assessment results openly with potential adopters. This encourages very natural conversation about how a pet may or may not be a good match for a specific household.

The potential adopter has also become an active participant in the adoption process, rather than a passive victim of what we believe to be true about the pet and about their abilities to care for an animal. Most of the time, our process is more about gaining a potential adopter's trust and steering them in the appropriate direction than declining an adoption. We feel that if we put up barriers and appear judgmental or confrontational out of the starting gate, it will be impossible to develop a relationship that facilitates a good match between a pet and an adopter.

How does the Kansas Humane Society strike a balance between protecting animals and trusting our adopters? This is a challenge we face daily; the reality is that it is difficult to trust people when they continue to bring us over 14,500 animals a year. On the other hand, the fact that the public brings us over 14,500 animals yearly can be seen as a good thing—it means that we are seen as a resource by our community. If we fail to trust our community members, we will be less likely to send pets home with them. If our adoptable animals are not given every opportunity to leave the shelter alive, euthanasia is the likely alternative.

Does this mean that the Kansas Humane Society will not decline an adoption? Of course not! There are certain policies we've stuck with. An adoption will be declined for obvious reasons. We will not place an animal with an adopter who doesn't meet our minimum age requirement—adopters must be at least 18 years old. We will not place an animal with someone who plans to use the animal as a direct food source (though we would approve a laying hen). We would decline the adopter who intends to keep a declawed cat as an outdoor cat, or a small breed, short coated dog as an outdoor dog.

There are more subtle circumstances as well, of course. In those instances when an adoption counselor just doesn't feel right about sending the pet home, they are instructed to tell the potential adopter that they're sorry, but they don't have the authority to approve the adoption. The potential adopter then must speak to the director of shelter operations. This way, we hear both sides of the story, and can make an informed decision based upon the best interests of the animal.

The rewards associated with moving towards more open adoptions are plentiful. The first, of course, is the increase in our live release rate, as shown:

Year	Live Release Rate
2003	24 percent
2004	31 percent
2005	32 percent
2006	36 percent
2007	44 percent

These figures reflect the number of animals who entered the facility and those who exited alive. They include both the adoptable and unadoptable populations. These numbers also show the slow, gradual progress that supports lasting change.

Another major benefit is that our staff members no longer need to become confrontational with our customers. We no longer risk ostracizing our adopters by telling them, “Oh, you rent. We will need to get approval from your landlord before you can adopt.” Instead, we choose to trust that our adopters know their own rental agreements. And for those who “forget” and end up returning the animal, we can forgive. (I know I’ve made some silly mistakes because of a pair of sappy brown eyes. Our adopters should be given the same opportunity.)

We no longer require a driver’s license, except for the purpose of age verification. We believe that if an adopter can get to the facility to adopt, they will also likely have transportation to buy food and get to veterinary appointments. We are also happy to see terriers and other breeds go home with children. The adopter is well-informed, and a more trusting relationship has been fostered.

There are certainly risks associated with moving toward open adoption guidelines. The first hurdle is gaining staff acceptance. This challenge can be overcome by involving staff in the process of developing new guidelines. Presenting the changes on a trial basis allows staff to maintain a sense of control. Like most adopters, shelter staffers are reasonable people with the best interests of the pet at heart; and if potential changes are presented in a manner that outlines the benefits to both the animal and the agency, then the change is generally well-accepted.

And some changes soar because employees’ jobs become easier. For example, we discontinued our landlord approval requirement for a 90-day trial period. This meant our staff no longer had to make that awkward phone call—often to an answering machine—which usually resulted in an adopter leaving the facility without a pet. The pet they might have brought home, of course, continued to occupy a kennel or cage that could have been filled by another adoptable animal. When we implemented our changes, animals began to leave our shelter more quickly, and interactions with customers became more positive.

If you are considering embracing open adoptions at your facility, fasten your seatbelt: Another “risk” is increased adoptions. That’s a good thing, of course, but it may create a need for additional staff resources. In 2007, the Kansas Humane Society added two adoption counselors (one full-time and one part-time), a kennel staffer, and one admissions staff member. We also added a part-time weekend veterinarian so that spay/neuter surgery can be performed on adoptable animals seven days a week.

In summary, the cover of the September-October issue of *Animal Sheltering* shows a photograph of a rottweiler and a family. “Would you adopt to this family?” the headline asks. Our answer: If this dog is an ambassador for the breed, if he appeared to fit in well with the lifestyle of the family, if all the members of the family had been educated about the issues of the breed and of the individual animal, then absolutely yes! We would be happy to allow the family to adopt this dog, and let them experience the joy of saving the life of a shelter pet. **AS**

Karla Hartlep is the director of shelter operations at the Kansas Humane Society in Wichita. She lives in Hesston, Kan., with her understanding and supportive artist husband and 11 terriers, nine of whom are from shelters. She is a past member of the board of directors of Caring Hands Humane Society in Newton, Kan., and a current member of the Kansas Governor’s Pet Animal Act advisory board.

Karla Hartlep with Brinkley, an adoptable dog at the shelter.

THE KANSAS
HUMANE SOCIETY

