BEST PRACTICES: ADOPTION POLICIES & PROCEDURES

ANIMAL FARM FOUNDATION
We believe that all dogs are individuals and every dog deserves a chance to shine.

All dogs are individuals who deserve a chance to shine. As animal welfare professionals, it is important to view every dog as an individual and communicate this message to the public by removing policies influenced by stereotypes or fear. Rather than relying on ineffective blanket policies and restrictions, learn how to create successful adoptions that recognize that all dogs and adopters are individuals. Increase adoptions and send more dogs home with the help of our resources for shelters and rescues.

For more information, please visit our website: www.animalfarmfoundation.org or contact us at: info@animalfarmfoundation.org
CREATING SUCCESSFUL ADOPTIONS BEGINS BEFORE THE ADOPTERS WALK THROUGH YOUR DOORS!

Want to increase the volume and the quality of “pit bull” dog adoptions? Then you’ll need to get things started off on the right foot. Before adopters even step through your doors, commit to sending clear, positive messages to your community about the “pit bull” dogs in your care.

Does your organization currently have restrictions, procedures, or policies in place that only apply to “pit bull” dogs? If so, you’re sending a message to the public that “pit bull” dogs are different than the other dogs in your shelter.

When the public is told that “pit bull” dogs are different, their fears and misconceptions are reinforced. This contributes to longer stays and fewer adoptions for the “pit bull” dogs in your care. As animal welfare professionals, it’s vital that we view every dog as an individual and communicate this message to the public by removing policies influenced by stereotypes or fear.

TIPS FOR CREATING SUCCESSFUL ADOPTION POLICIES:
Avoid blanket policies and restrictions for your “pit bull” dogs. They do a disservice to the dogs in two ways:

• Blanket policies send a message to the public that “pit bull” dogs are different and need specialized care. This scares away potential adopters.
• Blanket policies fail to recognize dog’s individual needs. We cannot make assumptions about how a dog will behave in the future, based on how they look or how they’ve been labeled.

Instead of relying on blanket restrictions based on breed labels, get to know your dogs and their individual personalities through observations, their histories, and evaluations. Try to determine what they need to succeed in their new homes.

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Some dogs will need more structured adoptions, while others will need no restrictions at all. The key is to make these determinations for each individual dog.

Avoid blanket restrictions, such as:
• No First Time Dog Owners
• Breed Experience Required
• Fenced Yard Required
• No Renters
• No Adopters Under 25

Breed Experience Required:
Steer clear of requirements like “breed experience necessary” for adopters of your pit bull dogs. “Pit bull” no longer refers to an actual breed and we know that the way a dog is labeled or how a dog looks, tells us little about their behavior.

To make the best matches, observe the dogs in your care. Some dogs will need adopters with previous dog experience, while others will do great as a first time pet.

First Time Dog Owners:
Don’t deny an adoption just because an adopter hasn’t owned a dog in the past. Work with them to find the right first “pit bull” dog for them – remember we were all first time dog owners at one time!

Avoid blanket restrictions, such as:
• No cats
• No dogs
• No kids
• No kids under 10

Rather than saddling “pit bull” dogs with restrictions that may not apply to them, get to know the dogs in your care. Observe and evaluate them interacting with other animals.

Housemates:
The majority of adopters will have dogs, cats, or kids (sometimes all three) in their homes. Increase the number of potential homes available to your “pit bull” dogs by determining what an individual dog needs to succeed. Like all dogs, some “pit bull” dogs will enjoy living with other dogs or cats, while others would prefer to be an only pet.

Kids are Individuals:
Just like dogs, children are individuals. Let parents decide what’s right for their children and what challenges they are comfortable taking on as a family.

Set dogs up for success in their new homes by providing the tools that new families need to properly manage them around their children and/or other pets.

Avoid blanket adoption policies, such as:
• Extra applications
• Mandatory dog training classes
• Background Checks

This extra layer of screening sends the message that “pit bull” dogs are different from other shelter dogs and it stigmatizes families interested in adopting them. Don’t put the public on the defensive by requiring background checks or other policies that presume suspicion.

With a customer service model in mind, be respectful of potential adopters and aim for an open dialogue.

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When there are concerns about a particular adopter, it should be handled as a unique incident.

Treating potential adopters and available dogs as individuals allows for the greatest possibility of success because it takes the needs and preferences of each dog and each family into account.

**SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS:**

**Longmont Humane Society**

Longmont Humane Society is an open admissions facility that has achieved a 95% live release rate. Located only about 35 miles outside of Denver, CO, where “pit bull” dogs are banned and killed en masse, Longmont has a non-discriminatory policy and does not have special requirements for their “pit bull” dog adoptions, which has allowed them to adopt out The following excerpt is from an article in Best Friends Magazine:

"We need to identify the right home for each dog and counsel interested adopters on the dogs' behavior. We want our dogs to be as successful as they can be in a new home," says Sarah [Clusman, Training and Behavior Coordinator].

"There is no discrimination at LHS, regardless of breed, age, or size. All of our dogs go through the same assessment system," she says.

Sarah explains that the staff and volunteers are well aware of breed discrimination, and they hope to educate the public that dogs should not be judged by their breed, but rather by their individual personality.
ADOPTION COUNSELING

Organizations that view dogs and adopters as individuals, rather than relying on blanket policies or generalizations, have more successful adoptions. But how do you determine if adopters are the right match for the “pit bull” dogs in your care?

HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE ADOPTION COUNSELING:

Start by approaching potential adopters with respect and an open mind. Put adopters at ease by giving them your full attention and treating them with dignity, so that they feel comfortable sharing with you. Avoid making assumptions about an adopter’s suitability before you get to know the adopter.

Get to know them through open ended questions and friendly conversation. Avoid asking closed questions that have a “right” answer. This makes adopters feel like they’re taking a test and they may give you the answer they think you want to hear, rather than the truth. Instead, try asking open ended questions, such as, “What are you looking forward to doing with your new dog?” There’s no correct answer here. The goal is to open up a respectful dialogue where you can learn more and they can reflect on their lifestyle and needs without fear of judgment.

Remember that the “perfect” adopter rarely exists! A good adoption counselor tries to determine if the “not so perfect” adopter is the right match.

One way to do this is by using Firm/Flexible Guidelines.
BEFORE MEETING WITH POTENTIAL ADOPTERS DECIDE:

What do I need to be firm on?
What is non-negotiable? If a dog has a history of hurting cats, then you can decide to be firm and make “no cats” non-negotiable with adopters. If the adopter has a history of animal abuse or neglect, you can decide to be firm that you will not adopt an animal to them.

What can I be flexible on?
What is a suggestion but can be changed, depending on the individuals involved? If a dog is very energetic and has no manners, you may be tempted to assign the label: no kids or no kids under a particular age. Determine if that is realistic or helpful, and then decide if you can be flexible. Do you know for sure that a dog savvy 8 year old isn’t a good fit? What if the parents feel they can handle the challenges presented to them and are willing to work with the dog? Consider being flexible and opening up the pool of potential adopters.

Show more, Tell less.
Don’t list all the potential negatives before the family even meets the dog. Allow them to meet the dog they are interested in and then let the dog’s behavior speak for itself. With the dog’s behavior think: More SHOW, less TELL.

Check your own fears or prejudices.
If watching a large dog play with a small dog during a meet and greet scares you, be aware that your personal fears might be influencing your ability to make a match based on this individual dog and its ability to socialize with smaller friends. Call in another counselor if needed.

Educate adopters about caring for dogs and dog behavior, rather than focusing on “breed challenges” that may be inaccurate. Instead of warning adopters about worse case scenarios and perpetuating myths, describe what was observed about each individual dog. Set each dog up for success by arming new adopters with accurate, helpful information about dog care and management, so they are prepared to be responsible dog guardians.

Determine if you can help the “not ideal” adopter become a good match through education and support. With the right tools, will they be the right home? If so, say “yes” and send your dogs to their new homes!

But don’t overwhelm them with verbal information.
It can be tempting to try to tell the adopters everything you want them to know, but there are limits to how much information humans can process in a short period of time. Try to give them information in various forms in addition to talking with them, such as: written handouts that explain training techniques or solutions to common behavior problems (like housetraining or cat introductions) and show them how to do things, such as putting on an Easy Walk Harness. Have them put the harness on the dog themselves as practice.

Reward their choice to rescue.
There are many options for acquiring a pet, such as: breeders, pet stores, and “free to a good home” ads. Acknowledge that your potential adopters made a good decision in choosing to come to your shelter to adopt. Reward them by treating them politely and looking for ways to make adoptions work, rather than turning them away to acquire a pet from another source.
INCREASING ADOPTIONS

You’ve done the work: the dogs in your care are evaluated as individuals, as are potential adopters. But how do you get the public to take notice of all the wonderful “pit bull” dogs on the adoption floor?

**TIPS TO INCREASE “PIT BULL” DOG ADOPTIONS:**

**Mix it up:**

Instead of grouping all of your “pit bull” dogs in one isolated area, spread “pit bull” dogs throughout the adoption floor. When they’re segregated from the other dogs, it sends the public the message that “pit bull” dogs are different, which can make adopters fearful or suspicious. Mix your “pit bull” dogs in among all of the available dogs. If you have puppies or small, fluffy dogs that tend to draw a lot of attention, consider placing a “pit bull” dog in the next kennel. They’ll benefit from the extra exposure and get a chance to dazzle adopters who pass by.

**Welcome Committee:**

Recruit your most outgoing, well-behaved “pit bull” dog to act as the ‘greeter’ in the lobby. By meeting a terrific “pit bull” dog as they enter, visitors will immediately engage in a positive experience with a dog they may have feared in the past. Ask a trusted volunteer to work the crowd with your greeter dog or place your greeter behind a desk, gate, or in a crate, so the public can see them right away. This first impression, before they make their way into the kennels, is a great chance to introduce your visitors to “pit bull” dogs and help open their hearts and minds to other dogs in the shelter.

**Good First Impressions:**

If dogs are bored or anxious in kennels, make Busy Buckets or frozen Kongs for them to work on while the public visits. This positive activity will give the dogs

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something to do besides jumping, barking and pacing, and helps them present better to the public. A happy, quiet dog is more likely to be adopted. Keep kennels clean, especially during adoption hours.

**Support Dogs in Need:**

If a dog is highly aroused or reactive in his kennel, hang a sheet or other barrier on his kennel door (high enough to block his view, but low enough for adopters to see in). Hang a cheerful sign on the cage that says “I’m friendly, just enjoying some privacy. Can you toss me a treat?” Or consider placing him in a different part of the shelter where he is relaxed, like an office or break area, then hang his photo on the empty kennel to let adopters know he’s available for adoption and looking forward to meeting visitors in his favorite spot!

**Keep it Simple:**

Instead of overloading the front of kennels with lengthy paperwork that adopter may find confusing, pick one or two smaller signs that highlight the important information adopters need to know about each dog. Rather than focus on why a dog wound up at the shelter, their medical history, or what behaviors they need to work on, keep the information upbeat and focused on what the dogs enjoy doing with people. Are they excellent cuddlers or the perfect jogging buddy? Let adopters know right on the front of kennel. It will encourage them to meet the dog and learn more.

**A Vision of Family Life:**

Create a bulletin board where staff and volunteers can share comments about the dogs (“Lily loves having her ears scratched!“” or “Petey is a perfect gentleman on leash!”). Decorate the board with photos of the dogs doing things outside of their kennels, such as: napping on a couch, taking a walk, or hanging out with kids or other dogs. These images and comments will help adopters visualize the shelter dogs in their own homes.

For more ideas on how to relieve the stress of kenneling and improve the way dogs are shown to the public, see our Best Practices: Kennel Enrichment.

**SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS:**

**Nevada Humane Society**

Nevada Humane Society is a private shelter in Reno, NV with a 94% save rate. Their goal is to create a no-kill community in Washoe County, Nevada and they work closely with Washoe County Animal Control and many other rescue groups and organizations.

Just recently, Nevada Humane decided to partner with NASCAR’s TJ Bell to promote "pit bull" dog adoptions. They reduced the adoption fee to $5 for a limited time and are educating the community about the fact that "pit bull" dogs do not represent a single breed (it’s a term to describe their appearance). They are also highlighting the fact that dogs’ personalities are as diverse as their adopters. Best of all? Their adoption staff is working hard to make the best individual matches!

Running adoption incentive campaigns is a great way to promote your “pit bull” dogs and use the opportunity to educate your community. While some worry that such incentives will devalue the dogs or attract the “wrong” adopters, such a campaign is an opportunity to celebrate the dogs and should be framed as a positive and fun way to send deserving dogs into new homes.
LIABILITY ‘HYSTERIA’

Don’t let liability “hysteria” keep you from sending good dogs home.

In a misguided effort to manage liability, some agencies refuse to adopt out certain breeds of dogs, or place blanket restrictions on adoptions of certain breeds. If reduction in liability is the goal, neither of the above are viable solutions. Based on a review of cases in the United States, shelter liability for unlawful search and seizure, civil rights violations and disputed estate bequests far exceeds those for dog bite injuries.

YOU WILL FULFILL YOUR MISSION AND MANAGE RISK WHEN YOU:

Observe the dog while in your care.

Document all observations and all information provided by previous owners.

Disclose all known facts to the new owner, including information received from the previous owner, and observations made and documented while in custody of your shelter. Liability may result if you omit facts. Further, in the absence of observations or of information received from previous owners, you should not make claims regarding the interaction of the dog with children; and should never make statements such as, “not recommended for children under 10,” or anything similar. Blanket restrictions on the age ranges of children suitable for a given dog or characterizations of specific breeds of dog are unscientific, have little predictive value, yet may constitute an implied warranty on your part. Stick to facts.

Transfer ownership of the dog, fully and finally, to the new owner. Whether your state follows strict liability or the “one bite” rule, the liability for a dog bite is on the owner. There is not a single reportable appellate opinion in which an animal shelter was found liable for a bite by a dog that it did not own.

If shelters observe, document, disclose and transfer, they will greatly decrease their chances of being on the wrong side of a lawsuit, and increase their ability to adopt out more dogs to loving families.
NOTES ON THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

Words matter. As animal welfare professionals, you are the experts on animals in your community and what you say is taken as fact by the public. This is a good thing, but it also means we have a responsibility to be thoughtful about the language we choose to use.

Before speaking to the public, whether it’s in the shelter lobby or on the set of your local TV news, carefully evaluate your language and messaging.

HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT WHEN TALKING ABOUT “PIT BULL” DOGS:

The majority of shelter dogs in the United States are mixed breed dogs of unknown parentage, and visual breed identification (based only on physical appearances) has been proven inaccurate and unreliable by experts.

Unless a dog comes with pedigree papers or is the known offspring of two registered pure bred dogs, don’t make guesses about what breed he is. If you do need to guess at the breed (for shelter software purposes, etc.), be aware that the assigned label does not accurately predict behavior. What a dog looks like tells us nothing about his behavior or personality, so it is much more appropriate to speak about each dog as an individual.

Today the term “pit bull” is a generic term that describes how a dog looks. It does not describe his breed(s) and genetic makeup; nor does it describe his behavior. For more information on labeling “pit bulls”, see our FAQs on Labels and Language.

On the Animal Farm Foundation (AFF) Petfinder page, we use the following language to acknowledge the limitations of breed labels for “pit bull” dogs: “Visual breed identification in dogs is unreliable so for most of

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the dogs we are only guessing at predominant breed or breed mix. We get to know each dogs as an individual and will do our best to describe each of our dogs based on personality, not by breed label.”

When describing the dogs in your care, share what you have observed, rather than relying on stereotypes and generalizations.

Additionally, when speaking with adopters, be aware of how your word choices may offend or alienate them. Don’t put them on the defensive. If your group does use home checks, consider calling it something more friendly, such as “home-delivery” or “home-based meet and greet”. Using the term “home check” can prevent dogs from going home, particularly when the policy only applies to “pit bull” dogs. A home delivery is more customer service oriented. It gives you the opportunity to see the home environment, without alienating the adopter.