Pet Support Services Toolkit

What are HASS Pet Support Services?

Pet support services provide help for caregivers facing hardships with the goal of keeping families together, even in tough times. Support may include, but is not limited to: telephone response and advice, medical support for owned pets, food and supplies, fence building and pet shelter provision, behavior support, vaccines and microchips, free and low-cost spay and neuter, crisis and emergency boarding, owned pet fostering, and pet deposits and advocacy for apartment dwellers.

What problem does Pet Support solve?

Some of the most common reasons animals are surrendered to shelters include issues with housing, lack of access to affordable veterinary care, and the need for behavioral support. Other reasons include financial strain making it difficult to access pet food and supplies, fencing demands, and a variety of human-related factors such as allergies, divorce, and illness. By providing as many resources and services as possible, animal welfare organizations can work toward reducing the barriers to keeping pets and people together.

Get Started

1. **Identify the top reasons for owner surrender and the most common needs expressed by pet owners in your community.**

   This can better prepare your organization to prioritize and focus on building and shifting programming and services that will best support your community members' needs. Use the Community Partnership FUN! Brainstorming Worksheet to outline these needs and who/if anyone can help in the community.

2. **Catalog the support services that are currently available in your community.**
Examples of this include free or low cost veterinary care, pet food pantry, safe haven care for pet guardians in short term crisis, rental pet fee assistance, fencing or containment assistance, grooming, etc.

Use the Ideal Animal Welfare Ecosystem as a guide. This is a list of resources that ideally exist in your community for pet caretakers to access.

3. **Share the pet support resources on your website and social media, create marketing materials, share programmatic information with crisis and community services.**

   See VCAS Alternatives to Surrender. You may choose to add an online pet support survey to your resource list.

4. **Gather donated items to distribute to pet caretakers, including but not limited to pet food, crates, dog houses, leashes, beds, collars, and more as needed.**

5. **Complete the HASS Pet Support Guide and Worksheet to outline resources you have in-house and externally to support the staff and volunteers working with the families needing help.**

6. **Cross-train all intake and field services staff on pet support resources and schedule a minimum of one person to answer phone calls during operating hours.**

   Ensure they all have access to your community resource list and basic medical and behavior information sheets.

7. **Make all materials available and accessible to non-English speakers and readers.**

8. **Form partnerships with organizations that will help provide resources and solutions to community needs.**

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**What’s Needed to Implement Pet Support Services**

**Technology**
Choose a database or data tracking tool that allows your team to document all the resources and services provided to each individual and/or family, this includes outcome tracking.

**People**
Train staff and volunteers to work with families to provide resources and answer calls.

- Ensure anyone working with the public understands Trauma Informed Care.
- Create job descriptions for Pet Support Services programming
  - KCPP Pet Support Specialist Position Description
  - My Pit Bull is Family Volunteer Pet Resource Advocate
  - Gateway Pet Guardians Pet Support Counselor Job Description
- Discuss the importance of setting biases aside and remaining open-minded to different lived-experiences.
- Focus on the needs of each individual case and provide the resources and services that could be the most effective for that specific human-animal family to stay together for the long-term.
- Utilize and learn from your volunteers. If you have volunteers that are from the community, they may have helpful insight on how to better engage with more community members. Know that your organization does not have to tackle pet support programming alone. On the contrary, it should be a large collaborative effort.

Shift intake staff into pet support roles. Intake will still take place, but with more pet support services being provided, less animals will need to enter the system.

Assessment and Evaluation

Self-Assessment
The Community Partnership Worksheet can be used to assess which animal services resources the community needs and who provides them in your community. It can be used to compare against what your agency/organization offers and how you can pivot to fill gaps.

Evaluation
Evaluate your shelter’s ability to provide solutions for every family that needs help. Evaluate how often the family leaves with their pet and resources versus how often intake is the solution.

Success can be seen in different ways!

One of the biggest challenges in increasing accessibility to pet support services is making sure community members are aware of all the resources they have access to in their communities. A successful pet support services program would see an increase in connecting families to local social service agencies.
Another challenge is tracking outcomes after the human-animal family has left the shelter, but with proper documentation and follow up phone calls, a successful pet support services program can see an increase in families staying together long-term.

Since many families may just need temporary support, such as housing, veterinary care, and supplies, a successful pet support services program can see an increase in intake diversion and less animals surrendered into the shelter system.