

Why Free Pet Adoptions Are a Good Thing

A huge pet adoption event involving 58 animal rescue groups and shelters across Nevada was put recently, when more than 1,500 animals were adopted out to people for free.



By Mark Robison

This last word – “free” – causes concern for some. I understand those concerns – I used to have them myself, as did many people in the animal sheltering and rescue world. But just as fears were revealed to be unfounded regarding the adoption of black cats during October because some thought they would be mistreated in Halloween rituals, so have worries about free and low-cost adoptions turned out to be unsupported.

A TV reporter in Las Vegas asked me why these free adoptions are considered a good thing. (I'm co-executive director of the campaign that organized this particular twice-yearly event called Maddie's Pet Adoption Days.) I didn't have to think long. Shelters – no matter how well-constructed and well-run – are stressful places for animals whose physical and mental health tends to suffer the longer they stay there. The sooner they get into a good home, the better. Adoption promotions like this one can help make such an outcome happen faster for many animals who might not otherwise get seen if not for the publicity surrounding such events.

The Wisconsin Humane Society was one of the first to test out free adoptions after noticing that adult cats were staying much longer than is optimal in the shelter. In 1998, it decided to waive adoption fees for adult cats. As [Jim Baker reported in Animal Sheltering magazine](#), “Five years of follow-up studies showed no difference between the post-adoption experience of these ‘free’ cats and any other animals adopted from WHS. As a result, the shelter made the policy permanent.”

Other high-profile shelters have followed this example, with cats as well as dogs, including Nevada Humane Society in Reno.

One worry some people had was that adopters wouldn't care about animals they acquired for free, or at least not care as much as an animal adopted for a fee, because they wouldn't have any skin in the game.

Two researchers for the ASPCA decided to examine this question. They were Emily Weiss, senior director of shelter behavior programs, and Shannon Gramann, manager of shelter research and development. Their findings were [published in the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science](#).

They found attachment to cats adopted from the study facility was not decreased when fees were eliminated, and that eliminating adoption fees did not devalue the animals in the eyes of adopters.



[Another study](#) was done by the University of Florida's veterinary school for a major adoption event in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2011 where about 2,000 pets were adopted without adoption fees. It contacted adopters six to 12 months later and found that only 2% of cats and 2% of dogs were returned to the shelter. This rate is very low and in keeping with return rates associated with higher adoption fees. Although the percentage of successful adoptions is extremely high, the perception of more animals being returned may arise simply because the sheer number of animals being adopted is higher when fees are waived.

An added benefit of adoption events is that they can allow groups to make space for other animals who need shelter. One rural group told me last week that they had just received four calls from people planning to surrender multiple cats each, and now they could breathe easier because their place wouldn't be so crowded thanks to the free adoption event.

In the end, those who worry about fee-waived adoptions and those who embrace such occasional promotions want pets in shelters to find a home where people love and take good care of them. Trying different approaches and analyzing their effectiveness will light the way toward even more positive outcomes for the pets in our communities.

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