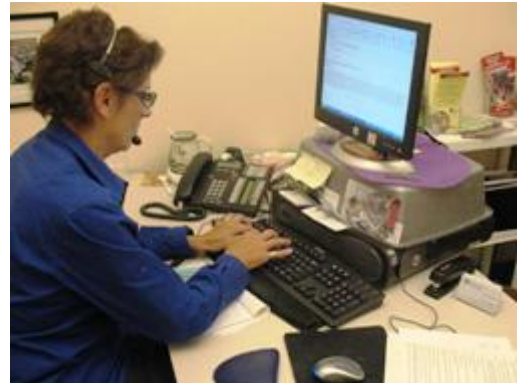


Reducing Shelter Admissions Help Desk

by Bonney Brown, Executive Director, Nevada Humane Society, March 2013

Animal shelters should be places of last resort for dogs and cats - even the best of shelters can't compare to a loving home. Therefore, we see it as part of our mission to encourage and enable people to do right by their animals by helping them keep their pets in their homes whenever possible. With this in mind, we founded our free Animal Help Desk at Nevada Humane Society in 2007.



You are probably only too familiar with the most common reasons people bring animals to shelters, but what you may not realize is that many of these situations can be resolved in a manner that will help keep the animals out of shelters. The goal of our Animal Help Desk staff is to involve the caller in solving the problem.

Most people have a limited understanding of animal behavior and when they encounter a behavior problem, it can seem daunting. What we have found, however, is that many people are willing to listen and at least explore options to help keep their pet. Our suggestions may include behavior modification, training, changes to the environment, basic health care information or - if they really cannot keep the pet - making the effort to find a new home for the pet themselves. Sometimes we provide practical assistance like veterinary services, free spay/neuter or pet food, but in many cases all the caller needs is information and moral support.

The need for these services is great. Our Animal Help Desk received 300 requests the first week it opened and handles over 23,000 calls and emails each year.

Running an Animal Help Desk does not mean that you need to provide all the services. You can function as a clearing house, gathering information on all the animal-related resources in your community - low-cost spay/neuter, TNR for feral cats, vaccination clinics, breed rescue groups, dog training, pet-friendly housing options and wildlife rehabilitation - and then providing this information to your callers.

We promote our Animal Help Desk so people know that it's available and free. We use all the standard ways to get the word out about it: news releases, flyers, posters, ads, business cards and public service announcements. We also work with our county animal services so their staff can refer people to the Animal Help Desk.

Here at Nevada Humane Society, we've been fortunate to have Beata Liebetruth as our Help Desk Manager for the past five years. Here's her advice to make your help desk as effective as possible.

Beata's Top Tips for Success in Counseling People about Pet Problems

1. Listen. Give the caller the chance to tell their whole story before you respond. If you listen to them, chances are they will be willing to listen to *you*.
2. Be non-judgmental. Often callers tell us they have been scolded by other rescue resources they reached out to for assistance. Just because a person may not be able to provide the same

amount of time and care that you provide to your own pets does not mean that the pet is unhappy in its home.

3. Be empathetic. Show compassion to the caller and try to comfort them. Instead of saying "How can you just get rid of your dog!?!," try this approach: "I am so sorry to hear about your dilemma. That sounds like a tough situation. Let's see what we can do to help you out."
4. Don't hesitate to use your powers of persuasion to get a good outcome for the animal. The goal is to buy some time and get the individual involved in finding a solution. Try getting them to take small steps at first.
5. Focus on the positive outcome. The happiness of a person who has hit upon a solution is as rewarding as knowing that we have kept a pet in their home. But even if the result is that the animal is surrendered, the caller will remember your kindness and the compassion you showed them.
6. Focus on the three E's: Educate - Encourage - Enable throughout your interactions with the public.

One of the most rewarding parts of our work is when we can turn someone on to helping animals. We have found that our Animal Help Desk is one of the ways we can create these transformative connections for people and their pets.

We are happy to share our Animal Help Desk Handbook with other organizations; it can be adapted to meet the needs of your community. To request an electronic copy, email us at info@humanenetwork.org.