

Shelter Messaging and Policies

Ethical Dog Replacement Options for Communities

Shelters and rescues in most areas of the country have experienced, over time, a significant decrease in the number of puppies and adult dogs entering their care. This trend is expected to continue. Some organizations seek to change their language, policies, and programming around how dogs are acquired by their community.

Why should your shelter or rescue be involved in where puppies come from?

- People in your community will be getting new dogs. The number of households in the USA grows annually by around 1 to 1.5 million. 38-40% of these “new” households will acquire a dog. so the overall number of pet dogs will grow as the number of households increases.
- With an average lifespan of about 11 years, a community with a constant rate of dogs will replace about 9% of their dogs annually. In addition, there’s concurrent recirculation of dogs from one home to another in any community, some of whom pass through shelters and rescues.
- That means there is a significant opportunity for early intervention to help people make good choices about the dogs they acquire, and for better welfare of puppies to help set those dogs up for success in their new home.
- Puppy mills are often the most economically sustainable and easiest way to provide a community’s need for replacement dogs, and for people in most communities to get a new puppy, of the type they desire. Without an active effort to encourage and provide other sources for family pets, puppy mills will continue to provide replacement dogs.
- Puppies are already being produced in your community. Many organizations are seeing problems such as puppies sold far too young — who may later end up at your organization with significant behavior issues; or unvaccinated puppies getting preventable diseases. You can help local puppy seekers find, or sellers do a better job at producing, healthy family pets that will be successful in your community - ones who won’t need your help when they’re sick, or behaviorally challenged.
- If it’s important to you that your community’s replacement pets come from humane sources, then you should be involved in where they come from.

You may not yet be ready for this if your organization, or other animal welfare organizations in your community, struggle to find homes for the following:

- Puppies of many different types, including small breeds and small & furry types.
- Adult dogs of all breeds, including purebreds of the AKC top 30, and small and furry types.
- Family friendly dogs who can live with kids, other dogs, cats, and first-time companion animal owners.

If your community does NOT struggle to place the above pets, but instead often doesn't have the dogs your community members are looking for, it's time to look at changing.

Indicators that your community is shifting - or has already shifted - away from a state of true dog overpopulation:

- People have a hard time finding the dogs they are looking for, even when looking at multiple organizations in your community and overtime.
- While in general, dogs may be available for adoption, many of them may not be appropriate for people who prefer a particular kind of dog (i.e., small & fluffy; first-time pet owners; or adopters with small kids or other pets in the household).
- Transports are not meeting your community's need for behaviorally sound, healthy, friendly family dogs.

If you don't think this is happening in your community, or aren't sure (maybe your kennels are full, but not of the types of dogs above), here is [more information](#) about how to tell if your area is still experiencing true overpopulation. It's normal to feel like you are experiencing true overpopulation even when it is no longer happening!

Other considerations:

- Make sure you've checked in with all organizations in your area to see how they're doing, and offer help if needed, before starting on this path.
- Organizations capable of receiving transports should continue that work - with shelters needing help, whether locally or further afield – while participating at any level.
- Organizations can – and should – continue focusing on the needs of the animals and people already in their communities, working to keep pets happy and healthy in their homes.
- Summer is always difficult. If your community's organizations struggle with population during the summer but not the rest of the year, your community is most likely past overpopulation
- The shift away from overpopulation usually happens first for dogs/puppies; it commonly takes several more years for cats/kittens. You can change your messaging and policies for dogs/puppies now, and hold off on those changes for cats/kittens until you see changes in their population

We recognize that communities around the US experience different levels of overpopulation. On the following pages, we have outlined a series of questions to examine in your own community, along with recommendations for messaging and programmatic changes around ethical dog replacement options. Your organization can use any of this information from any stage, at any time! These stages are just suggestions.

Stage One

Shift From The Old Ways

Things to Consider: Work through these questions with your internal stakeholders; staff, volunteers, and board members.

- How many new dogs does your community need each year, for population replacement? [Here's how to figure that out.](#)
- Beyond adopting, what does your organization consider good/ethical ways to acquire a dog?

[Here are some guides](#) about what to look for in a responsible breeder, from The Functional Dog Collaborative.
- How close is your organization to meeting the need for replacement dogs in your community each year? How close is your community to meeting that need, with all the ethical sources you've defined?
- What is your organization recommending to people who are looking for a dog/puppy when they can't find one at your organization?
 - How easy is it to get ethically sourced dogs/pups in your community - if the family wants or needs a small and fluffy type dog, or a first-time pet, or a family pet good with kids/other animals?
 - Are people able to get those pets at an affordable cost, or with financing? How many people are not able to afford the cost of ethically sourced puppies/dogs in your community?
 - Are people able to find those pets in a reasonable time frame? Most people are not able/willing to wait 6-24 months for a puppy to be born (current wait time for many responsible breeders).

Stage One

Shift From The Old Ways continued

- Are there any sheltering organizations in, or near, your community that need help who you haven't reached out to yet?
- What breeding is happening in your community now? How well is that working? For example, in many communities, private homes are selling puppies at well under 8 weeks of age, and those pups often grow up into dogs who have a hard time succeeding as family pets.
- How is your organization interacting with people who want their dog to have a litter so their friends/family can get puppies from their loved pet?

What information or support are you providing to help them be successful in ensuring puppies get off to the best possible start? Or are people on their own to figure that out?

Messaging, Policy & Programming Considerations:

Messaging

- Ensure you are actively referring potential adopters to all other rescues & shelters in your area, if your organization doesn't have a dog that they feel is a good match.
- Stop using language that implies -or explicitly states- that adoption is the only acceptable option for acquiring pets, such as "Adopt, don't shop".
- Ensure that your organization is not using generalized language such as "when you buy, shelter pets die". Puppy mills are absolutely not okay! But most breeders are not puppy mills.
- Stop advocating for universal spay/neuter for every animal, without exception.
- Stop messaging that intact animals and litters are inherently irresponsible.

Policies

Evaluate internal policies, and modify or eliminate those that are no longer relevant now that your area has passed the time of overpopulation. Examples can include:

- Not allowing intact animals access to services such as vaccine clinics, temporary crisis housing assistance, pet food aid, or pet training classes.
- Not allowing people who have intact animals at home to adopt a neutered pet from your organization
- Requiring early age spay/neuter of behaviorally and medically healthy large breed dogs, except where required by state and/or local ordinances.

Stage One continued

Spay/neuter Programming

- Prioritize animals whose intact status puts them at risk (eg due to housing rules, or hormone induced behavior).
- Focus your surgery efforts on animals who are still at high risk in your community, and are still experiencing true overpopulation. This often includes feral/community cats, and specific types of dogs that make up a high percentage of shelter intake.
- Stop advocating for spay/neuter for pediatric animals for the public (unless they are in a category at high risk of overpopulation).
- If you have the ability to foster (or transfer) pregnant moms, and place the puppies, stop spaying healthy pregnant dogs in your care.



Stage Two

Support What is Already Happening

Questions to Consider:

How does your organization interact with different segments of your community about acquiring dogs, such as: social media, donors, adopters, participants of public S/N, vaccine clinics, or other assistance programs, etc.? *How should new efforts and messaging be applied to these different segments of your community?*

Breeding is happening in your community. Either animal welfare participates in creating the solution, or the free market will do it alone. The market will create solutions we don't consider humane; puppy mills are a very effective, and profitable, way to fill the desire to have dogs. Our choice is whether animal welfare participates in the solution, or if we're willing to accept the alternative. You've likely identified issues you're seeing with the results of that community breeding.

How does your organization feel about the following issues:

- How can your organization provide resources to people who are already breeding dogs locally, to prevent or reduce the negative impact of puppy mill resurgence?
- How can your organization provide resources to people who are seeking puppies and dogs to provide humane alternatives?
- How can you support the breeding and buying already happening, to create better outcomes?
- How can your organization be supportive and inclusive to different segments of your community?

If your organization decides that the best ethical source for family dogs in the future is “humane breeders” – do the math:

- How many humane breeders will it take to produce population replacement for your community? (see the [Stage 1 exercise here](#) for population replacement)
- How many humane breeders currently exist in your community? How many dogs are they producing currently? How big is the gap for what is needed?
- If the current level of humane breeders can't produce enough to meet the population replacement, how many more would be needed? How will that be solved? Who will solve it? What timeframe is needed to do that?
- If your organization's approved humane sources aren't able to fill the need for population replacement, the community will need to expand options.

Will your strategy be to try to decrease demand?
 Many organizations feel that if the need for sheltering is no longer there, we should “put ourselves out of business”. What would that look like?
 Promote or launch a dog sharing program?
 Message about patience or abstinence (of dog owning)?

Stage Two continued

Support What is Already Happening

Messaging & Programming Recommendations:

- If one strategy is to try to decrease demand, consider creating support systems and messaging around responsible dog sharing programs. More information about [these here](#).
- Give prospective adopters a realistic understanding of the availability of shelter/rescue dogs in your community. If they are looking for a specific breed/type of dog (i.e., a Yorkie puppy), they will need to find a humane breeder.
- Provide information for people in your community about the difference between puppy mills and humane breeders and how to seek an ethical breeder. Consider this resource from [FDC](#) as one option.
- Begin outreach to local breeders & breed clubs, in an effort to strengthen relationships and understand their perspective. Consider creating a list of “approved” ethical breeders that your organization can use as a referral.
- Continue language that focuses spay/neuter efforts on at-risk animals, not all animals.
- Ensure that you have eliminated all messaging and storytelling that says or implies that intact animals and/or accidental litters are inherently irresponsible.
- Unless there are significant medical or behavioral concerns with a specific animal, find foster homes for all pregnant dogs, and raise the offspring for adoption placement.

Stage Three

Actively Encourage a Humane Community Dog Breeding Plan, to Meet the Need

Evaluate & understand:

- It's time to start actively supporting the humane production of dogs for your community, if you aren't already.
- For most communities, the only source that can fill the total replacement need will be for families to produce litters of proven family dogs at home. If your community finds a different way and is sustainable in the long term – please share your community evaluation and solutions with us!

Messaging, Policy & Programming Considerations:

Messaging

- Reinforce the importance of providing local dogs, locally. Change messaging to actively encourage and support “breed local/buy local”.
- Actively message your community that “good family dogs having some puppies” is how we ensure that people can have dogs from an ethical source
- Shift your messaging from “your dog having babies is irresponsible and kills other dogs” to “your successful family dog having babies is a neighborly service to ensure that your friends and family can find good dogs”.
- Include specific outreach to private practice veterinarians in your community in your messaging.
- Provide information on the difference between puppy mills and humane breeders.



Stage Three continued

Messaging, Policy & Programming Considerations: Educational Programming

- Help your community understand the ideal pet that should have a litter before being spayed or neutered (what to look for, which dogs should not be breeding due to behavior or medical issues). About 4% of community female dogs need to reproduce annually to meet the need. Help people identify which ones should and which shouldn't.
- Help your community understand how to provide great care for dogs having litters, pre-breeding; during pregnancy; and until rehoming age.
- Can your organization work with people breeding in your community (not just 'breeders', but all whose dogs are breeding) to help provide support? Some examples may be:
 - Routine vaccinations & parasite control for breeding animals & litters
 - Classes on best practices for breeding and raising litters
 - Socialization opportunities: they don't have kids at home, people in wheelchairs, men with beards: you might provide this under the expertise of your behavior department
- If you find that an owner cannot manage the care and raising of a litter, can your organization offer temporary foster care until the puppies are weaned, then mom goes back to her family?
- Offer for the shelter to place the puppies in homes or consider coaching on best practices to the mom's owner in making placements.

Spay Neuter Programming

- Encourage people with healthy, behaviorally sound dogs to have a litter or two before bringing the dog in for spay/neuter.
 - Consider, for your public (in-house or voucher) Spay/Neuter programs:
 - Not offering pediatric sterilization for large breed dogs, or for all dogs
 - Not offering pregnant spays, unless specific circumstances require it
- Actively counsel people asking about scheduling a spay or neuter with your organization about whether their dog should be passing on their great genes and having a litter or two before surgery! Where's the bar for who should be reproducing? At a minimum, animals who have been successfully living with a family, are demonstrating good behavior as a family pet, and are not experiencing known health issues. Preference is a pre-breeding exam to better evaluate.
- Create a screening process, so that dogs who are not appropriate breeders can still access spay/neuter options quickly. (Screening can be done with an online tool to save staff time, ensure consistency of responses, and address DEI concerns.)
- Continue to offer spay/neuter where the client is uninterested or unable to support breeding their dog, and where that's just not a good idea.

Stage Three continued

Messaging, Policy & Programming Considerations: More, when applicable:

- Look into Canine Care Certified, developed by Purdue University, and focused on helping kennel- based breeders meet standards for the dogs they breed, raise and place. Are there any certified breeders in your area or ones you could encourage to complete the certification?
- Consider getting involved with the Functional Dog Collaborative to seek and network with humane breeders in your area.
- Are there ways you and local breeders can mutually support each other?
- Is there an opportunity to partner with local veterinarians, 4H or other organizations, to offer continuing education and mentoring on humane breeding?



Create your own Humane Community Dog Breeding Plan

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THE
FUNCTIONAL DOG
COLLABORATIVE

Supporting the ethical breeding of healthy,
behaviorally sound dogs.

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