APPENDIX E

Managed Intake

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Before 2013, Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department’s Animal Care and Control Division (CMPD-ACC) accepted owner-surrendered animals “in the field.” Pet owners would call animal control and request that an officer come to their house to pick up their pet for surrender. This service was provided free of charge and offered 20 hours a day. During the 2012 calendar year, CMPD-ACC took in 4,356 owner-surrendered animals.

As the agency began to progress, owner surrenders became a logical place to start. In January 2013, CMPD-ACC went from accepting owner-surrendered animals in the field to accepting them only at the shelter during business hours. Owners were required to bring their pets to the shelter if they wanted to surrender them. (Exceptions were made for the elderly or infirm, if approved by a supervisor.)

During the calendar year of 2013, however, CMPD-ACC took in 4,373 owner-surrendered animals, more than the year before. Obviously, simply stopping surrender pickup in the field didn’t have the impact we had been hoping for. Instead of decreasing, the number had risen. And the department was still dealing with “surrender remorse”: Because of the convenience of the surrender policy, owners were making hasty decisions. The shelter staff were spending a lot of time responding to next-day phone calls from owners who had changed their minds about surrendering their pets. And in too many cases, it was too late.

It was time to take the concept a step further. How could we effectively reduce the number of owner-surrendered animals but still provide a legally required service to citizens of the county? 2014 was a year full of sharing ideas, brainstorming and getting approval from the chain of command. The result was that we made some progress in 2014 (during which 3,134 animals were surrendered) by just slowing down and talking to owners about the reality of surrendering a pet. Our chain of command was very forward-thinking about this concept and fully engaged in making positive changes.
Reducing owner-surrender hours

In January 2015, CMPD-ACC went from accepting owner-surrendered animals during all operating business hours to accepting them only on Wednesdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Sundays from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. (Emergencies and strays are still accepted as needed.) This reduced owner surrender hours from 54 hours per week to only five. Having owners wait until the designated surrender hours gives them time to think about the decision they are about to make — and they often come up with other suitable arrangements.

The change in number of hours meant that the agency could plan for maximum staffing on surrender days, allowing staff to give more individualized attention to both the animals and the people surrendering them, as well as allowing rescue partner organizations more time to prepare and provide support for incoming animals.

In addition, reducing the hours for intake allows staff to be more efficient. Before we implemented managed intake, staff were constantly pulled in different directions as animals came in from animal control and the public while staff were concurrently helping animals already at the shelter. Consolidating intake time helps the staff to be more efficient in how they manage their day, which saves shelter resources.

A lot of discussion went into how to make this change. Do we advertise it? Do we have a grace period? What are people going to say? In the end, the shelter went with the “less is more” approach, understanding that average citizens do not know the policy surrounding owner surrender until they decide to do so. The shelter picked a start date and went live with the program. There was an adjustment period of a few weeks, when more animals were taken in because people hadn’t checked the website or called to find out the hours for owner surrender.

Reducing owner-surrender hours made the biggest difference in the numbers. In 2015, the shelter took in 840 fewer owner-surrendered animals. The total number of surrendered pets for that year was 2,294. And 2016 was even better; the owner-surrender number for that year was down to 2,112.

Having an owner-surrender hotline

The decreased intake could also partially be attributed to a new owner-surrender hotline that allows staff to speak to pet owners before they come to the shelter, providing them with all the options for alternatives to surrender (which, in many cases, means keeping pets with the people who love them). Reaching pet owners before they come through the door became a top priority, based on the concept that if you can reach people before they have detached themselves from their emotions toward their animals, you have a chance of keeping them together.
Making resource guides available

Another way to help pets stay with their families is to make sure pet owners know about all the available resources. Many people in the Charlotte community weren’t aware of the plentiful resources that were available to them as pet owners, so CMPD-ACC developed resource guides that are provided to customer service staff through collaboration with local rescue groups, veterinary hospitals and boarding facilities.

Providing a safety net program

During 2015–2016, the shelter began receiving grant funds to implement a safety net program. The staff could provide medical vouchers to local veterinary partners for pet owners who needed a helping hand with vet bills. Since many animals are surrendered by their owners because of minor medical issues, this program quickly became a success.

Guidelines for the medical vouchers are simple: Each voucher is worth $300; the vouchers are valid for 30 days; and the owners have to express that they would surrender their pets if they didn’t receive assistance (to weed out people trying to bluff the system to get free vet care). Portions of the grant also covered free spay/neuter services, supplying of doghouses and other minor resources that can help people keep their pets.

Field enforcement officers began picking up on the concept and started referring cases to the customer service staff. The safety net program remains successful to this day, but it is a work in progress, since shelter staff are always looking for new ideas and, most important, new funding sources to keep the program alive.

Community response

Overall, the community has embraced managed intake. Of course, there are still emergency situations or occasions when people become upset because they want to get rid of their animal immediately, but the total number of those is minimal.

Shelter staff have found that people are often willing to consider other options instead of surrendering an animal. When they are considering surrender, pet owners have simply reached the limits of what they themselves know to do to remedy the problem. Pet owners appreciate the extra time that staff spend with them sharing information and safety net resources available through the organization, including pet food, free spay/neuter surgeries, doghouses and rescue group resources.

When this shift toward managed intake began, staff and volunteers expressed concern that stray intake numbers would rise — that owners would dump their pets to roam free or lie about them, saying they were strays. The data (see the table below) shows that this didn’t
happen. The shelter’s stray population has continued to decrease each year, thanks to the emphasis on rehoming, education and assistance to owners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of animals turned in as stray (no known owner)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>8,336 (4,209 cats and 4,127 dogs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>7,111 (3,209 cats and 3,902 dogs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>6,612 (2,819 cats and 3,793 dogs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>6,481 (2,782 cats and 3,699 dogs)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This program has made a huge difference to CMPD-ACC and the Charlotte community as a whole. The shelter switched from simply being a repository for animals to being a true community resource, a place where people can get help and guidance. The staff are now able to take the time to dig into the roots of a surrender situation and really make a difference. This has not only improved employee morale regarding owner surrenders, it has improved the shelter’s reputation and rapport with the community. More animals are alive today in our community thanks to managed intake, and the shelter looks forward to continuing to grow this program into an even more successful model.
Delayed or diverted intake programs use a number of strategies to help pet owners keep their pets rather than surrendering them to a shelter, and they ultimately play a key role in addressing the root cause of the potential surrender to avoid future relinquishments. These programs benefit shelters by giving them the opportunity to have the time to plan a positive outcome for the animal if intake cannot be diverted. Morale of intake staff is drastically improved because they are able to empower citizens and play an integral role in keeping families together and reducing deaths in shelters. Programs like these go a long way toward improving a shelter’s reputation in the community, as the shelter’s image shifts to that of a resource center where people can get assistance.

The diversion program for Animal Care Services (ACS) of San Antonio was implemented in November 2015. The shelter had been steadily working toward the 90 percent live release threshold and finally achieved that percentage at the end of December 2015, after the program had been operating for one full month. Before implementing such a program, it’s crucial to do some process mapping to understand how the various aspects will affect each division.

The goals of the program will fluctuate across organizations, but ACS of San Antonio maintains an over-the-counter diversion rate of around 30 percent. The wait times in the lobby went from 2-3 hours on a busy day to under 30 minutes even at peak times, with many people completing the process online. In two years, we processed about 6,000 pets through the program. Those pets either spent no days in the shelter before going to placement or a reduced number of days. The number of days in the shelter is two days shorter for diversion pets than for the average pet, saving 12,000 shelter days over the span of two years.

As mentioned above, the morale of intake coordinators is very different when diversion strategies are available to them. Working in intake can be dreary if all that staff are doing is impounding animals. By understanding and using the available resources, the intake coordinators at ACS of San Antonio feel like they have more to offer citizens, especially on days when they are closed for intake.
Components of diverted intake

Diverted intake programs give intake teams one or more options that they can offer pet owners:

- Counseling and access to free or low-cost training to prevent intake altogether for behavioral problems
- Access to free or low-cost medical care for people who are faced with surrendering their pets because they can’t afford medical care
- Access to financial assistance for people who are faced with high pet deposits for housing rentals
- Access to housing, legal humane tethering and/or fencing repair for people who are facing citations because they don’t have adequate housing or containment for their pets
- Access to temporary housing or kenneling for people who are temporarily unable to care for their pets due to a move, hospitalization, military service or other short-term issues
- Asking or requiring people to hold onto their pet for a period of time to allow the shelter to advertise the pet for placement or make arrangements to return the pet to the original rescue group (if applicable)
- Providing resources to pet owners so they can find a new home for their pet themselves
- Asking citizens who find strays to hold onto the pet in their homes to allow the shelter time to find the owners or secure placement

The options listed above require different amounts of time and money to implement. Some of the costs are:

- Staffing (these programs are labor-intensive)
- Medical (either on-site or off-site)
- Housing deposits
- Computer equipment, scanners, cameras
- Doghouses, fencing repairs, pens
- Trainer to help with behavioral issues

You can determine which of these strategies are immediately feasible for your organization and work to re-allocate resources to incorporate others. Grants can also be used to fund all or a part of these programs.

Don’t forget to reach out to the community for help. Resources can often be found outside the shelter setting, including listings of boarding facilities (which might work for pet owners in transition), food pantries, and pet-friendly apartments and houses for rent. Divert-
ing intake may sometimes be as simple as connecting pet owners to resources that they didn’t know existed.

**Staff responsibilities**

Proper staffing, supervision and training are crucial for intake counselor positions. Staff should be able to listen without judgment, show empathy, relate to a variety of types of pet owners, and be patient with people who may be demanding or frustrating to deal with. Here are some criteria to consider when determining which individuals are suited to this position:

- Representative of the community they are serving
- Preferably speak the language of any large non-English-speaking group in the area
- Able to speak to pet owners without judgment or condemnation
- Able to embrace different kinds of pet owners, including those who may not have their own values about pet ownership
- Able to give instructions or state requirements clearly
- Willing to view diversion as an opportunity to educate people about pet ownership

Intake counselors and any other staff members who come into contact with the diversion program should understand how it works and what it’s all about. They should know how intake diversion benefits shelter animals, shelter staff, pet owners and the community at large. They should be aware that the diversion program not only improves the image of the shelter in the community, but also provides a valuable service to constituents, which is important for municipal government.

**Behavioral and training diversions**

Providing pet owners with counseling and access to free or low-cost training to prevent intake for behavioral problems is one of the quickest and easiest diversion strategies to set up and operate. It can be a challenge, though, to get pet owners to admit that the true issue is lack of training, socialization and/or exercise. People are generally reluctant to give a complete picture of their pet’s home life and to reveal how little time they’ve devoted to training their pet. Here are some strategies for coaxing out all the necessary information:

- Set up an interview or questionnaire that allows the pet owners to give accurate and complete information without being judged.
- Speak with the kids in the family; they will generally give you more information.
- Have a trainer available to speak with the owners right away. This shows them that training is available and immediate, and some people are more comfortable speaking
directly with a trainer. (The trainer, of course, must be a good fit for this role — able to interact in a nonjudgmental way with various types of people.)

- Have both classroom training and one-on-one training available. Some pet owners are more comfortable in a group and some prefer one-on-one interaction.

Here are some other ways to provide help with behavior issues:

- Have crates available to give out, even if just on loan, to help with behavior adjustment and potty training issues.
- Have tethering systems available to help with getting a dog off a chain and providing more exercise, if walks aren’t an option.
- If the pet in question was recently adopted from your shelter (or even another shelter), collaborate with your adoption team to “swap out” the pet for one better suited for the family. Because we ask people to adopt pets after a limited interaction in an artificial environment, the match doesn’t always work out. We must remove barriers that discourage returns; we don’t want families to feel forced to keep an animal who isn’t right for them.

**Medical care diversions**

Offering medical care for pets whose owners can’t afford it is another form of diversion. Medical diversions do not need to be for complicated medical issues only. For some pet owners, a simple vet visit for mange or ringworm is not financially possible. It is just these kinds of cases that often fill up shelters. These people should not be judged as being irresponsible for not being able to care for their animals. Many times, they are doing the best they can and they do love their pets. They simply need a little assistance in keeping them. A medical diversion program can also provide hospice care for elderly pets, and then humane euthanasia at the end of the pet’s life.

Providing medical services for owned pets can be controversial, especially if your organization is the municipal shelter and local veterinarians view this as taking business away from them. In fact, this type of help for pet owners may violate a local ordinance; you should know and understand local and state laws (and if necessary, talk to a lawyer) before proceeding to offer medical services to pet owners.

Here are some of the types of paperwork associated with providing medical services:

- A surgical release form, approved by an attorney, releasing the shelter from liability
- A medical treatment waiver, approved by an attorney, stating that the medical care is being performed without the benefit of certain diagnostics (X-rays, blood work, etc.) and that this type of treatment is better performed at a full-service veterinary clinic
- A full owner surrender form to show that the shelter is now the owner of the pet, both for liability purposes and to demonstrate the owner’s intent to surrender
• Processing paperwork for treatment and all items to be completed so that all staff are aware of the recommended procedures and that the animal being treated is not a shelter pet available for placement
• A sheet in a database that tracks information on the pets, the owners, the medical care received and the costs

A medical diversion program comes with financial costs that can either be covered by the shelter or by a grant. You may want to start with seeking a grant to cover the expenses, either at the shelter or at a contracted clinic, setting it up as a trial program to see the results vs. costs.

If performing the medical care on-site, you will need to determine the following:
• Do you have the space to hold pets for several days or weeks if treatment requires it?
• Are the clinic and intake staff prepared to take on medical cases that will come with a pet owner who will want visitation and updates?
• Are the veterinarians and staff onboard philosophically to support this program, and are they prepared to interact with citizens who may not show appreciation for the free medical care?
• Do you have the ability to provide certain services that pet owners might expect, such as blood work, X-rays, sonograms and specific surgeries?
• Do you have the ability to outsource or contract out some needed services not available at the shelter clinic?

You will also have to establish some operating guidelines:
• When will you offer these services?
• What types of pet owners will be eligible for these services? If your organization is tax-funded, how can you make these decisions transparent to avoid claims of discrimination?
• Who will decide which pet owners are eligible, and is there someone who will offer a second opinion?
• Will you require a formal quote from a veterinarian for medical services?
• Will you require sterilization (either already done or to be performed)?
• Will you require partial payment from pet owners?

If the medical care is being done off-site by a contracted vet, you will need to consider the following:
• Cost (i.e., a pre-established list of costs)
• Ability of the vet to see patients immediately (that day, in some cases)
• Communication with the shelter on the course of action, cost limits, procedural steps and standard protocols
• Pet owner interaction with the clinic: guidelines, rules and code of conduct
• Ability to bill within government guidelines on a timely basis

**Owner-surrender diversions**

Another way to potentially divert intake is to require owners to hold onto the pet in their home for a period of time instead of allowing them to surrender the animal immediately. This strategy has numerous benefits for the pet and the shelter:

• A profile and photo of the pet can be put online to advertise the pet for adoption in advance of the pet coming to the shelter.
• It gives the shelter the time to ensure that the owners do indeed own the pet. Following up on microchips can sometimes lead to a previous owner, ex-spouse, parent or child taking the pet back because they weren’t aware that their family member was attempting to relinquish the pet to a shelter.
• Another advantage is that you can often convince owners to allow the shelter to vaccinate the pet right away, helping keep the pet healthier once he/she does come back to the shelter.
• It allows time to follow up with the original rescue group (if applicable) or even a reputable breeder to see if they are able to take the pet back as soon the pet comes in.
• It allows owners some time to reconsider their decision to surrender their pet to the shelter. Perhaps they will be able to solve the issue that’s causing the surrender. At the very least, they may decide to re-home the pet themselves. (The shelter should have resources available to help pet owners with both of these choices.)

Depending on local laws and ordinances, the shelter may or may not take ownership of the pet while the pet is still in the owner’s home. Municipalities that do not take immediate ownership of the pet should verify whether the period of time that owners keep their pets in their homes (i.e., an “online” stray waiting period) satisfies the local ordinance for holding owner surrenders for a certain amount of time before euthanasia, fostering or adoption.

For administrative efficiency, I recommend that owners complete the intake process, either in person or via email, but not pay for the surrender until the pet actually comes to the shelter. This avoids having to give refunds if the surrender doesn’t happen. Another recommendation is to do all paperwork that has to be signed and kept at the time of physical surrender, to avoid having to keep and then find the paperwork later.

**Stray pet diversions**

Asking citizens to hold onto the pets they have found as strays in their home, rather than bringing them to the shelter, is a great way to reduce the number of open kennels needed on