



Training Playbook: Lifesaving Dispatch

Introduction

The world of animal sheltering has changed dramatically over the last decade. Agencies across the nation are moving away from the old models of sheltering and field services that, frankly, are not serving the public or the animals. Shelters are shifting their focus toward resource sharing, lifesaving programs and engagement with the community to provide more positive outcomes for animals. Field service departments are moving away from outdated and ineffective enforcement-based models and working toward proactive, community-focused operations. With these important ideological shifts occurring in more and more agencies across the country, it is important that dispatch does not get left behind.

The call-takers or dispatch of the animal welfare industry are often the first point of contact between the community and the shelter. It is vitally important that these staff members are well-versed in the mission and policies of your organization before they begin answering calls. Ensuring that community members receive a consistent response — whether they speak to dispatch, a shelter employee or an animal control officer — will secure the community's trust in your organization and the success of your lifesaving programs.

Dispatch should be thought of as the “gatekeepers” to the shelter. Their day-to-day practices can have a huge impact on your animal intake and lifesaving work. When an animal needs help or an animal-related problem arises in the community, the call for help will generally end up in the hands of a dispatcher or call-taker. In many cases, this staff member's response will influence the outcome of the situation, including the resulting path for the animal involved and ultimately the perception of your agency in the eyes of the public. Engaging the call-takers of your organization as key players in your lifesaving work will ensure the best possible outcomes for the animals and the people of your community.

Program Overview

Traditional dispatch programs focus on taking calls, collecting information and sending out an officer. A dispatch program focused on lifesaving and proactive problem-solving accesses the potential for increased lifesaving and community engagement that the traditional mindset leaves behind. An engaged and proactive dispatch program can benefit your organization in many ways. Here are a few examples:

- **Increased officer time and resources:** Many of the calls placed to animal control agencies could be handled easily and effectively over the phone. In many cases, dispatching an officer would not be the best use of resources. Call-takers should be fully trained in complaint mitigation techniques and feel empowered to help the community find positive outcomes for animals outside of shelter

impoundment. This will allow officers more time and resources to focus on high-priority calls and proactive efforts in the community.

- **Increased morale and decreased turnover:** The role of dispatch can be stressful and emotionally challenging. Allowing your dispatchers to become part of the solution to the community's issues and to actively engage in lifesaving will offer your employees an increased sense of purpose and satisfaction in their daily work.
- **Reduced call volume:** A dispatch program focused on proactive problem-solving will expand your ability to resolve issues effectively within your community, thereby reducing repeated calls for service. Properly trained dispatch staff will also be able to direct community members toward agencies or outside groups better suited for their issue or concern (e.g., some calls may be better handled by code enforcement, a wildlife rehabilitation group or the department of sanitation).
- **Reduced intake and more positive outcomes for animals:** While it is always easier to dispatch an officer to pick up a confined animal or tell a community member to bring in a stray animal, this is often not the best option for the animal and will often fail to properly address the underlying issue that led to the call. Call-takers should be encouraged to work together with community members to find positive outcomes for animals outside of shelter impoundment. Empower your dispatch staff to engage callers in community-based sheltering techniques, such as conducting return-to-owner in the field, becoming a foster volunteer, or (if local ordinances allow) carrying out a virtual stray hold and finding a new adoptive home.
- **Increased trust and engagement in the community:** The call-takers and dispatch of your organization are usually the first point of contact that community members have with the shelter and often may be the only staff member they speak to. That's why dispatchers should be well-versed in your agency's goals and act as advocates for your mission in their day-to-day work. The nature of their work affords them a direct line to the needs of the community and offers huge potential for effective community engagement.

Program Composition

As you can see, your organization will benefit in many ways from an active and engaged dispatch program. Every community is different, however, so make sure to tailor your programming to the goals of your organization and the needs of your

community. This section will describe the fundamentals of a lifesaving dispatch program.

Finding the right fit

It is important to find the right fit for your dispatchers and call-takers. There are certain personality factors that lend themselves to the responsibilities of the position. The day-to-day work of a dispatcher is often filled with emotionally charged situations and interactions with a wide variety of people. It is important that these positions are filled by individuals who are comfortable with having difficult conversations and who perform well in high-stress situations.

Customer service experience may be more advantageous than animal experience, as long as proper training on the latter is provided. Keep this in mind when creating your job descriptions and drafting interview questions. As with field services, it is ideal that your dispatch departments reflect the community they serve. Whenever possible, hire from within the local area and consider the demographics of your community. For example, having bilingual dispatchers can often be very beneficial.

Ideally, staff members should be specifically trained and singularly dedicated to the role of dispatch. These positions should be considered crucial to your lifesaving work and deserving of their own title and position within the agency whenever possible. As we all know, this is not always an option. In the perpetually understaffed and underfunded world of animal welfare, it is common for call-takers to hold multiple roles within the organization. Whether you have an existing staff of call-takers or other staff members answer calls for service, providing the right resources and supportive leadership will help them succeed in the role.

Training program

Any staff members who will be picking up the phone should complete a thorough training program before answering calls or dispatching. They should be well versed in the mission and policies of your organization, and know what resources exist within the community. De-escalation and stress management training can also be highly beneficial for staff answering the phone. A sample training program can be found [here](#), but any program you develop should include the following:

- Policies for answering calls (e.g., greetings, basic phone etiquette, answering priority, handling emergencies, dealing with upset or incapacitated callers)
- Information sharing and collection (e.g., information accuracy, privacy considerations, resource sharing, proper descriptions, including location, vehicles)

and animals)

- Radio use and dispatching officers (e.g., dispatching calls, jurisdictional zones or sections, radio codes, other radio use policies)
- Officer safety and support (e.g., proper communication, location tracking, loss of contact policies, dispatching backup)
- Inter-agency collaboration (e.g., referrals and transfers to other agencies, emergency response, reporting concerns to the appropriate agency or social service)
- Organization or local considerations (e.g., internal policies, standard operating procedures or SOPs, ordinances)

Active problem-solving and resource sharing

Traditional dispatch models are missing out on the fact that dispatchers and call-takers can be engaged and active players in lifesaving work. Simply by refocusing your dispatch program, you can increase your impact in the community and lifesaving success in the shelter without any additional resources or financial cost.

Many calls can be “worked” over the phone. Training your dispatchers in complaint mitigation, field return-to-owner and community sheltering techniques will allow your officers to focus their time on engaging the community and providing proactive field services (i.e., working to prevent public safety and animal welfare problems before they arise).

Similarly, many calls can be better addressed by an outside organization. For example, if a resident calls seeking surrender for a dog who keeps having litters of puppies, it would be more effective for the dispatcher to direct the person toward low-cost spay/neuter services rather than encouraging shelter impoundment. It can be beneficial for all call-takers to have a comprehensive list of community resources available at their desks. Consider including contact information for the following:

- Low-cost or free veterinary services (including vaccine clinics and spay/neuter)
- Wildlife rehabilitation groups or the Department of Natural Resources
- Affordable boarding facilities (include any breed restrictions)
- Grooming services (including mobile)
- Local dog training resources
- Social services (including temporary assistance programs, child protective services and elder/adult protective services)
- Trap-neuter-return (TNR) groups

- Pet food banks
- Local rescue groups
- Rehoming and lost-and-found websites
- Other agency contacts (e.g., non-emergency police department or fire department)

Collaboration and consistency

Consider providing cross-training between shelter staff, field service officers and dispatchers. The work of dispatch and field services typically involves bringing animals into the building, while shelter and kennel staff are working hard to get animals out, leading to a divide between the two. Cross-training will allow each department to experience the decisions and challenges that the other faces in their daily work.

It is important that your staff stay aware of each other's priorities and needs. Dispatch should keep informed about shelter happenings (events, kennel space and adoption promotions) in order to inform their daily work and to share with community members. Communication and collaboration across departments allows better use of resources and maintains consistency as an organization. Holding regular meetings with all staff is another effective way to address concerns and provide updates to all departments across your organization.

Strong and supportive leadership is also vital to the success of your dispatch program. Your call-takers should feel confident making decisions independently, but they must have the support of leadership when needed. You'll want to ensure that communication with residents remains consistent across dispatch, officers and leadership. Community members should expect to receive the same response regardless of who they speak to at your organization. Detailed SOPs and conversation guidelines will help ensure that consistency.

Sample Procedure and Program Information Documents

Now that you have a general understanding of what a lifesaving dispatch program looks like, the following documents can act as templates or inspiration as you implement or scale up your own program. Keep in mind that there is no exact or perfect form of implementation. Using the considerations and program composition notes above, you should use the following as guidelines or building blocks when creating your own standard operating procedures or documents (both internal and public). If you need further assistance or clarification, please reach out to your [regional specialist, regional director](#), or the Best Friends municipal and shelter support team at team2025@bestfriends.org

- *Lifesaving Dispatch: Saving lives over the phone (Online Module)*

- *Dispatcher Training Manual, Humane Rescue Alliance Animal Control*
- *Humane Wildlife Conflict Resolution Guide, HSUS*
- *Best Friends Community Cat Handbook: How to Address Various Complaints*
- *Verbal De-Escalation Techniques (Crisis Prevention Institute)*