



Training Playbook: Lifesaving Field Services

Introduction

Field service staff should be seen as the front line of animal services. Often, the first and only interaction that community members have with their animal services agency is with dispatchers on the phone and with the officers who are out in the communities they serve.

Animal control programs based on community engagement increase public safety and animal welfare while pursuing alternatives to the traditional enforcement approach. Community engagement from both field services and shelter staff emphasizes that saving lives is a community collaboration, not a shelter initiative. Implementing an engagement-based animal control model reduces intake and call volume and saves more lives while improving public perception of animal control.

Program Overview

The difference between outreach and engagement: Before delving into what's involved in community engagement from the perspective of field services, let's talk about the difference between outreach and engagement.

Outreach efforts do have value, although they create mostly one-way communication (i.e., similar to the relationship between teacher and student) and do not promote authentic relationships. Outreach can be effective in connecting community members to resources and information that they need but are unable to locate.

Engagement strategies, on the other hand, create conversations around community issues, build relationships and foster trust. That's why engagement is so important if the goal is to get the community to invest in and support your agency.

Maximizing resources: When looking for ways to align your field services department with the animal shelter, and ways to maximize limited resources, focus on what's most important to your community and department (e.g., lifesaving and public safety). Are you maximizing the use of your resources, whether it's time, funding or the workforce?

Prioritize what is important to your department and community and be clear on what your department is contractually obligated to respond to. Go further and clarify the definition of what a response is — physical presence or phone call. For example, consider low-priority stray roam calls that take officers a long time to drive to. Could those calls be cleared over the phone via dispatch to see if the animal is still present?

Meaningful measures of success: Measures of success need to directly correlate to and support the mission of your department. Traditional enforcement success measures, such as the number of animals impounded or citations issued, do not measure the effectiveness of an animal control department.

There are alternatives to issuing citations when attempting to gain compliance with local ordinances, such as engaging with the offender, figuring out the cause of the issue, and resolving it from there. Citations do not change behavior (nor do they improve the animal's situation), and they often cause the community to view your department negatively, lowering public support. Here are examples of effective measures of success:

- **Shelter intake diversion:** Animal control officers should be actively trying to avoid bringing healthy animals to the shelter. Through return-to-owner, nuisance complaint mitigation and similar efforts, officers work to find the best solution for animals in the community, which often does not involve shelter impoundment.
- **Engagement time spent in the community:** Downtime between priority calls can be spent engaging with community members (e.g., talking with local business owners, postal carriers and people at the dog park). However, engagement should not stop there. True community engagement is a philosophy that should be at the forefront of every interaction.
- **Successful resolution of repetitive complaints:** When faced with repetitive complaints, such as animal neglect and habitually straying animals, officers should engage with the animal's owner to discern the cause of the problem and find a way to resolve it. (For example, why is the dog habitually getting out? Do the owners need spay/neuter information? Do they need help repairing a fence?) Similarly, complaints around outdoor cats will be better resolved through complaint mitigation and the use of deterrents than through shelter impoundment.

Program Composition

The following describes workforce needs, internal and/or external resources, and any other additional steps that should be taken into consideration for successful program implementation.

- **Ordinances:** There should be knowledge of and clarity about the local ordinances or laws across the department. Animal ordinances are often interpreted differently from officer to officer, and are written or amended in a manner that renders them unenforceable.
- **Full transparency:** The community should be informed about where your department is in terms of lifesaving so that residents can help you get where you need to be. Community members cannot help if they are unaware of the challenges that your department faces daily.

- **Return-to-owner in the field:** Officers should have resources and equipment to be able to avoid intake of animals and to return animals to their owners in the field. Resources include microchip scanners and remote access to shelter software via tablet or computer to access owner details or dedicated dispatch to help with this process. Officers should go door-to-door and make every effort to get pets back to their homes.
- **Community engagement resources:** Field services staff must have the necessary resources to provide engagement-based services, such as tools and materials to repair animal enclosures, pet food, leashes and collars, and printed materials listing community resources for pet owners.
- **Presence in the community:** Field services staff need support and encouragement from leadership to attend community events and meetings while on duty. They can talk to residents about animal issues, offer resources and hand out pet treats, leashes and collars. The idea is to interact with community members in a non-enforcement capacity. To have even more presence in the community, field officers should make an effort to get to know a wide variety of community members, such as law enforcement officers, politicians, animal welfare advocates, community center staff, business owners and postal carriers.
- **Clear and consistent messaging:** The entire animal services staff must understand and be on board with a community engagement-based approach and be equipped with clear and consistent messaging. Inter-departmental collaboration with the same consistent messaging is critical. This includes the city manager's office, city council (or relevant elected officials), dispatchers, law enforcement, partner organizations and community stakeholders.
- **Call response times:** Do not focus on call response times because it puts a psychological burden on the officer to clear calls quickly rather than find solutions to problems.
- **Social media:** The community can also be engaged via social media. Social media posts and photos can show the positive work that dispatch and field officers are doing.
- **Mitigating nuisance complaints:** Nuisance complaints can be lessened using these strategies:
 - Providing information about or giving out community cat deterrents
 - Helping to repair broken fences
 - Providing leashes, collars, or runners
 - Providing printed resources on a variety of topics (e.g., spay/neuter, behavior and training, community cat programs, pet food banks)
- **Mediation skills:** Field staff can be provided with training to develop communication and conflict de-escalation skills. They should also have the ability

to differentiate between a legitimate animal control complaint and a neighbor dispute.

Sample Procedure and Program Information Documents

Now that you have a general understanding of what's involved in community engagement-based field services, the following documents may act as templates to help you implement this program in your community. Keep in mind that there is no exact or perfect form of implementation. The documents below should serve as guidelines or building blocks when creating your program. If you need further assistance or clarification, please reach out to your regional specialist, regional director or the Best Friends national shelter support team at team2025@bestfriends.org.

- Best Friends [*Humane Animal Control Manual*](#)
- Best Friends [*Community Cat Programs Handbook*](#)
- HSUS [*Pets for Life Community Outreach Toolkit*](#)

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