

## **2015 SAWA – Placing Medium and Large Breed Shelter Dogs with Behavioral Challenges in Foster Homes: Results and Outcomes**

### **Background:**

The Fairfax County Animal Shelter is an open-access, municipal animal shelter that falls under the County's police department. The annual intake of animals is around 4,500. Fairfax County covers more than 400 square miles, with approximately 1.2 million people. In 2013, Fairfax County became the largest jurisdiction in the United States with a live release rate above 90%.

*'Pit Bull' Dogs:* Prior to 2014, Fairfax County had adoption restrictions on pit bull type dogs, making it very difficult to adopt dogs visually identified as pit bulls. In January of 2014, those restrictions were overturned and the County implemented a policy of having the same adoption requirements for all animals. In 2012, the shelter placed only 20 'pit bull' dogs. In 2014, almost 200 'pit bull' dogs were adopted from the shelter and the shelter is estimated to adopt out 300 or more 'pit bull' dogs in 2015.

*Transfer-in Program:* The shelter started a transfer-in program in 2013 and in 2014, transferred in almost 500 animals from other shelters, including many 'pit bull' dogs. Today, the shelter pulls 'pit bull' dogs from Washington Humane Society, Prince Georges County Animal Services, Prince William County Animal Services, and other jurisdictions where there is overcrowding or breed bans that make adopting 'pit bull' dogs illegal.

*Behavior Tool Kit:* The Fairfax County Animal Shelter has no behaviorist on staff and no behavior modification program. Shelter dogs participate in Playgroups, take part in volunteer-led training classes and are walked by volunteers 4 – 5 times per day. Dogs receive in-kennel enrichment activities daily, including stuffed Kong toys and Nylabones.

*Foster Program:* The foster program includes weekend and overnight fostering, 'Power Hour' field trip outings, and behavioral evaluation fostering, which lasts anywhere from one day to until the dog is adopted. These programs were all started in 2013. Prior to this, fostering was limited to puppies, kittens and animals recovering from illness or injury. Fosters receive ongoing training in safe dog handling, basic obedience and guidelines for taking shelter dogs in public.

*Evaluations:* Dogs are evaluated using a modified SAFER evaluation and are further evaluated in playgroups and on short-term foster outings. Dogs that display behavioral challenges are often sent to a trained foster home for further evaluation to assess whether the behavior is related to being housed in the shelter.

*Summary:* Beginning in early 2013, the Fairfax County Animal Shelter took a number of steps to increase the live release rate, with a particular focus on medium and large-breed dogs, many of them visually identified as 'pit bull' dogs. With no in-house behavior modification staff or program, we used foster homes as a primary means of increasing live outcomes. Because the shelter falls under a police department, public safety is a primary concern. This study was designed to assess the risks and outcomes of placing dogs which would have formerly faced euthanasia, in foster homes as a means to finding them permanent placements.

### **Methods:**

Between May of 2013 and May of 2015, 51 medium and large breed shelter dogs with behavioral issues identified in the shelter were sent to one of eight foster homes for varying lengths of time. These dogs were all identified as unadoptable or without placement options based on in-shelter behavior and/or behavioral evaluation results. Behaviors ranged from jumpy/mouthy behavior to fear-based aggression to resource-guarding and food related aggression to barrier reactivity. All dogs were considered possible candidates for euthanasia based on their behavior in the shelter and/or reported history. None of the dogs were considered to be severely aggressive or offensively aggressive towards people or other animals.

Foster families agreed to be part of the rehoming process and to meet with and counsel potential adopters and to report on the behavior of the dogs while in their care. The following information was gathered: The description of the dog and why it was assessed as having behavioral issues that may render it unadoptable; Whether the foster family had other pets in the home and how the dog interacted with those pets; whether behavior modification was used and by whom; the duration of the stay in the foster home; whether the animal was returned to the shelter and adopted from a kennel or whether it was adopted directly from the foster home; the final disposition of the animal; whether the behaviors observed in the shelter were observed in the foster home and whether or not those behaviors ceased or disappeared; whether the animal was retained by the adopter and whether the fosters were self-described trainers or behaviorists or not and the impact this had on outcomes.

### **The Study:**

*The foster families:* 16 families fostered the dogs in this study. Not all of them had special training or skills

The five foster families who fostered the majority of the dogs in the study met the following criteria:

- They received training in handling challenging dogs and were approved to handle more challenging dogs in the shelter.
- They volunteered in the shelter.
- They expressed an understanding that the dogs they fostered could be euthanized if their behavior in the foster home indicated they could not be safely placed.
- They agreed to fully disclose any behavioral issues witnessed and to complete an evaluation at the end of the foster period.
- They agreed not to use dominance-based behavior modification with foster dogs.

Two of the fosters were self-described ‘dog trainers,’ with one having a formal behavior background and one having no formal education in dog training or behavior.

One of the fosters offered boarding and training at his farm to private clients. The shelter raised funds to compensate him at the rate of \$500 per week for boarding and behavior evaluation. He fostered four of the dogs in this study.

*Age of dogs:* The dogs in the study ranged in age from less than one year to eight years old, with most dogs falling in the two – three year age range.

*Perceived breed:* Of the dogs in the study, 36 were visually identified as ‘pit bull’ type dogs. Other breeds visually identified included three mastiff mixes, two lab mixes, two hound mixes, an Australian cattle dog, beagle, boxer, chow chow, Doberman pincher, goldendoodle, Rottweiler and Samoyed. None of the dogs in the study were surrendered with documentation to confirm breed.

*Primary behavioral issues:* Seven areas of behavioral issues were identified. These are barrier reactivity, Fear-based aggression, resource guarding, kennel stress, drive, bite history and dog selective behaviors. Barrier reactivity included dogs that displayed reactivity on-leash or in kennels. Fear-based aggression included growling, staring, cowering in the back of the kennel, and fearful behavior combined with attempting to bite when forced into contact. Resource guarding included guarding of food, toys, treats, humans or other dogs and kennel stress included jumpy/mouthy behaviors and difficulty handling in and out of the kennel by staff and volunteers. A number of the dogs were quarantined for biting during their time in the custody of the shelter, but this factor was not considered significant, as the majority of the bites were unintentional skin breaks associated with high-energy dogs under kennel stress.

*Secondary behavioral issues:* Not all dogs had a secondary behavioral issue identified. Of those that did, 10 were described as having extremely high energy, four were identified as possibly dog aggressive, two were dog selective, two were afraid of men, two were undersocialized, two displayed separation anxiety and one was reactive.

*Duration of stay in foster home:* The duration of stay in a foster home ranged from one day to 10 months, with most dogs spending one to two weeks in a foster home.

***Outcome:* 49 of the 52 dogs were adopted into permanent homes. Two of the dogs were returned following adoption and were euthanized. Three of the dogs were euthanized prior to being adopted. The save rate of the dogs in this study is 90.4%.**

*Adopted from shelter or from foster home directly:* 33 of the dogs were adopted directly from the foster home and 16 returned to the shelter and were adopted from the adoption floor.

*Reasons for euthanasia:* Of the three dogs euthanized prior to adoption, one was euthanized for unpredictable aggression, one for dog aggression witnessed in playgroups following foster placement, and one for inflicting a bite on the foster mom when she attempted to remove food from him. Of the two dogs adopted and later euthanized, one inflicted a bite on the owner and one attacked the other dog in the home.

### ***Follow-up interview question results:***

*Where is dog now?*

*Did you experience special challenges? (sampling of answers)*

“Barks a lot, digs and pulls too much.”

“Needs training and will run away if off leash but so loving”

“Afraid of cars. Wants to chase them but scared.”

“Sometimes he’s a bit naughty. Chewing on things”

“None. She fits right into the family and bonded with our other dog.”

“Mindy is a handful and she’s great with our family but experiences anxiety and is fearful around some men. She is on Prozac now, which has helped. Early on, she had potty accidents. She also ate through two crates and had torn up carpeting trying to dig out of

confinement. We love her very much and don't plan to give her up, but her occasional misbehavior does still create tension in the home."

"Bella has severe anxiety. She hasn't left the house since the day she came home."

"No behavioral issues, but she has skin allergies."

*Would you re-adopt this dog?*

"Yes. Dogs are dogs."

"No. not knowing what we know now. But we love Mindy and have no intention of giving her up."

"Yes, in a heartbeat."

"No. We love her very much but we wouldn't adopt a young dog again because of the need for exercise and training."

"Oh yeah. Absolutely. He's perfect."

"I love him now but in the beginning I would have opted for another dog if I had known about his skin allergies."

*Is there anything we could have done to offer additional support?* The majority of respondents mentioned they would like to have had some sort of basic training or training support in the period immediately following their adoption. Several said they appreciated the shelter's honesty and full disclosure regarding the dog's issues and one said she would have appreciated having her dog identified as 'special needs' prior to the adoption. Adopters also said they would have liked to have someone to call to help them 'troubleshoot' behavior issues.

## **Observations and Conclusions**

- Six of the 50 dogs were adopted by their foster families.
- The majority of the foster families socialized the foster dogs with other dogs and felt being with other dogs had a positive impact on the foster dog.
- The majority of dogs in the study participated in play groups and all were evaluated with other dogs off leash.
- The number one word foster families used to describe their foster dogs was 'smart' and many called their foster dogs 'highly intelligent'.
- The majority of the dogs in the study were identified in the shelter, in foster or following adoption to be social and friendly towards some or most other dogs.
- The behaviors observed in the shelter decreased or disappeared when the dog left the shelter.

- In most cases, the foster families met with potential adopters, provided counseling and selected who they believed to be the best fit for the dog.
- Adoption follow-up and support is key and most adopters said they would have liked to have had the option to attend training classes at the shelter.
- The problems experienced by adopters were not significantly different than problems faced by adopters of dogs not placed in behavioral foster homes.