



Human Animal Support Services Getting Started: *Pet Supply and Demand - Open Adoptions*

What is Open Adoption?

The open adoption approach involves removing barriers and creating a welcoming, non-judgmental culture that encourages people to adopt. Open adoption is an approach rooted in respect, inclusion, trust, and working to get to “yes” with every adopter. Research has proven that lengthy pass/fail applications including practices such as home checks, reference checks, landlord calls, income requests, and more have no positive impacts on how animals will be cared for by their adopters or return rates. Open adoption rejects discriminatory practices, and relies on conversation, providing resources, building relationships with adopters, and adoption follow-up.

Sample process for an open adoption:

1. Potential adopter inquires about a particular animal or adoption in general
2. An adoption counselor collects primary contact information but does not request additional personal information. Resources may be provided in multiple languages based on the most common languages spoken in your community. They begin a conversation with the potential adopter to learn about their wants and needs in a pet with the goal of finding them an appropriate match and identifying opportunities for **education and support**.
 - a. Education and support could include clarifying preconceived notions from the potential adopter’s point of view about specific animals that are not factually correct and providing additional resources.
3. The adoption is finalized and post-adoption support is offered to ensure success.

This sample process excludes some of the previous practices that are not needed in an open adoption approach such as:

1. Collecting many applications for a single pet to find the “perfect” match
 - a. “Perfect” matchmaking takes time away from a pet having a loving home and instead keeps a pet housed in a shelter long term, taking that space away from others who may need it
2. Home inspections
 - a. This eliminates the bias towards individuals with yards or individuals that rent vs. own their homes and/or apartments
3. Employer, personal, or landlord references
 - a. This eliminates any potential bias towards higher economic status, individuals who work from home, or other subjective reasoning



Common misconceptions about open adoptions:

- **Myth:** *Open Adoptions means there is no adoption counseling or effort to find the right fit.*
Fact: The opposite is true. 'Open Adoptions' means getting to know each potential adopter as an individual. Open adoption means engaging adopters without judgment, removing barriers to adoption which may otherwise keep animals in the shelter instead of homes. While traditional adoption programs rely on rigid applications requiring "yes/no" answers designed to disqualify adopters, 'Open Adoptions' uses conversations with potential adopters to create a non-judgemental, relationship-based approach to help them find an appropriate pet that fits their lifestyle and situation.
- **Myth:** *Open Adoption Counselors can't deny or say "no" to potential adopters.*
Fact: 'Open Adoptions' is based on the knowledge that most human-animal relationships can be successful, and a belief that potential adopters are there for the right reasons. However, there will be times when an adoption isn't in the best interest of the pet or the potential adopter. In these cases, the conversation-based approach can be very effective in helping the potential adopters come to this realization themselves. Because the adopter hasn't been exposed to judgment, the potential adopter may wait to adopt a pet until they are ready, or be open to the best potential fit for them. Even if the adopter isn't the one to realize that adoption is not the right choice, if the conversation has been based in honesty and respect. Counselors will be in a better place to say "no" or "what can we do instead," or "not at this time".
- **Myth:** *An Open Adoptions program does not provide post-adoption support.*
Fact: The goal of any adoption program should be to place as many animals as possible into homes to provide long-term care for the animals' physical, emotional, and social well-being. 'Open Adoptions' is no exception, and post-adoption support to new pet owners is essential to successful placements. Taking the resources that were used to administer restrictive adoption policies, like home visits or landlord calls, and reinvesting the resources in support during and after the adoption process is a major benefit to embracing an 'Open Adoptions' program. Putting support in place when animals go to their new homes will support community connection, and the best interest of the animals in your care.
- **Myth:** *There is only one way to conduct Open Adoptions.*
Fact: 'Open Adoption' is an approach that focuses on removing barriers to adoption, but how an organization implements that approach is entirely up to them. There is no 'Open Adoption Police.' Some organizations use a questionnaire to start conversations, while others use minimal paperwork. Each organization is unique in their needs, values,



communities, and the number of animals in their care. Open adoption approaches can, and should, reflect each organization's uniqueness.

What challenges is Open Adoptions trying to solve?

In animal welfare, potential adopters are often overlooked based on bias, stereotyping, discrimination. Unrealistic obstacles created for adoption often drives adopters away from adopting animals at shelters or rescues. The recent understanding of the adoption demand and imbalance in supply creates unique opportunities for positive change. Open adoptions eliminate unnecessary barriers to adoption and create equal opportunities for the animals available for adoption to find loving homes, creating more space for other animals in need.

How organizations can begin

Staff and volunteer buy-in and support is critical to having a successful open adoptions program and should be your first step. Informative and engaging training is imperative. Allow plenty of time to provide examples of success stories and address any questions or concerns from your team. Schedule meetings and/or town halls with staff, volunteers, and fosters to discuss the changes and why.

- Make a firm commitment at an organizational level to embrace and trust your community, and to create a welcoming, non-judgemental, inclusive environment for adoption.
 - Many organizations root this approach in their core values, or you can create a position statement of your organization's commitment.
 - Examples:
 - [APA Adoptions Protocol](#)
 - [APA Dog Program Adoption Philosophy](#)
 - [APA Cat Program Adoption Philosophy](#)
- Hold organization-wide meetings or "town halls" to discuss this commitment.
 - Share research, relevant national resources, and successful adoption stories with your stakeholders.
 - Hold conversations with your team to identify and remove preconceived notions of an "ideal home."
- Recognize and discuss that people within your organization wouldn't qualify with the current requirements and barriers in place.
 - Organize a meeting with your team to run through this [Open Adoptions Interactive Exercise](#).
 - This exercise will help your organization view your adoption process from the eyes of a prospective adopter.



- Companions and Animals for Reform and Equity ([CARE](#)) has produced a powerful video that demonstrates this exercise in action: [Are we looking for reasons not to adopt?](#)

Self-Assessment and Promoting Change:

- Consider changing the name of your adoption “application” to an adoption “questionnaire” or “survey.” This will create a more welcoming environment.
- Review all current adoption questionnaires/surveys with your team.
 - Identify existing barriers to adoption and any exclusionary verbiage within the paperwork.
 - [Here are 27 common barriers to adoption.](#)
 - Compare this list with your current adoption process. What can be changed?
 - Examples: Fenced-in yard required, reference checks, indoor cats only, etc.
- Identify any restrictions locally or regionally that you cannot change. As you move through the process, consider any and all creative solutions.
- Re-frame questionnaires to support open-ended questions that lead to conversations with adopters.
 - Remember, the questionnaire should be short and viewed as a jumping-off point to a bigger conversation.
 - If your adoption questionnaire is more than one page, that is a good indication that there are unnecessary questions that can be omitted.
- Provide staff with the appropriate verbiage to have open and honest conversations with adopters. Great customer service can be the deciding factor on whether an adopter takes home a pet that day or not! Here are some helpful training guides:
 - [Conversational Adoption Counseling](#)
 - [ASPCA Conversational Adoptions Slides](#)
 - [Maddie's Fund Adoption Manual](#)
 - [Best Friends Animal Society Adoption Training](#)
 - [Best Friends Adoption Training](#)
- Don't forget about the restrictions that may be labeled on the animals in your care! This can also lead to restrictive practices.
 - Examples: Large dogs can't live in apartments, yards are required, “no men” blanket policy if an animal previously showed disinterest or other behaviors towards one man.
 - Once adopted, provide follow-up services to help adopters post-adoption through handouts, alumni social media pages, behavior helplines, or other options your organization can accommodate.
 - Example: [Options For Help to Keep Your Pet](#)



- Share the necessary changes to the organization's adoption policies with your community. Invite your community to adopt, and remember, a welcoming environment is cultivated even before the adopter gets to your door.
 - [Sample press release](#) - Share the great news with your community!

What is needed to implement Open Adoptions?

Technology:

- Your shelter's website and all social media platforms should be up to date. Information on the adoption process should be current, clear, concise, and easy to find.
 - Example: Dallas Animal Services: [DAS Adoption Page](#)
 - Ask volunteers if anyone would be willing to provide translation support for public-facing items such as adoption documents, signage, and websites for members of your community whose primary language is not English.
- Utilize technology to conduct virtual adoptions via computer, tablet, or phone.
 - Keep in mind that some potential adopters may not have access to ANY technology.
 - Staff and volunteers should be trained and prepared to use paper forms with in-person conversations and animal visitation when needed.

People:

- Staff and volunteers should reflect the diversity in your community.
- Focus on building partnerships with community centers, local businesses, churches, and other community-based organizations to spread the word and welcome everyone to adopt.
- Run a zipcode analysis of where most of your adopters are coming from.
 - There are most likely areas of your community that you're not reaching with adoption! [Host adoption events in these areas.](#)
 - For your organization to remain inclusive, it is important to evaluate these gaps and create an action plan on how to improve.
- By embracing a conversational-based adoption model, organizations have the opportunity to reallocate staff and volunteer time.
 - You will see significant time savings when staff are not doing home, landlord, vet, and reference checks, and adopters are not having to answer multiple questions and fill out lengthy adoption applications.
 - Staff resources should be reallocated to having meaningful conversations with adopters and providing them with the best support.
 - This shift will also provide your organization the opportunity to create exciting new volunteer roles such as greeters, matchmakers, and adoption support specialists, just to name a few!



What does success look like?

When 'Open Adoption' is implemented, your organization will improve the quality of life of animals in your care and support your overall community to create equal opportunities for adoption and pet support.

Success includes, but is not limited to:

- Better customer service
- Shortened length of stay for animals in your care
- Increase in number of adoptions
- More staff time for adoption follow up and support
- A network of community support post-adoption
- An inclusive and equitable adoption process
- 100% response rate to adoption inquiries
- Better adoption matches
- Community perception that shelter pet adoption is the easiest, best option for adoption
- Awareness and ease of adopting through shelters and rescue organizations.
- Volunteers support with all aspects of adoptions, including marketing and post-adoption support.
- Increased adoption representation across all demographics in your community
- Staff and volunteer reflection of your community members
- Accessible adoption for everyone no matter what resources they do or do not have, such as technology, transportation, etc.
- A culture of yes

Benefits of Open Adoptions

- **Support of diversity, equity, and inclusion:** It's important for all organizations to do a self-assessment and to look through their adoption processes and requirements through a DEI lens.
 - Open adoptions create equal opportunity for individuals in the community as well as ensure there are options available to everyone that is looking for support, without barriers.
- **Improved customer satisfaction:** Conversations should start from a place of mutual respect and trust.
 - These interactions build a relationship between staff and adopters, creating a positive adoption experience shared throughout the surrounding community.
- **Saved money:** Open adoptions increase the number of animals adopted.



- Increased adoptions will decrease the length of stay and, subsequently, decrease the overall cost of care. This will allow for more money to be used on additional support services instead.
- **Increased impact of staff time:** The time spent enforcing adoption barriers can now be used to provide the support adopters need to transition pets into a new home successfully.
 - You make more of an impact with an hour of adoption support than with an hour spent confirming previous veterinary status!
- **More community engagement:** By fostering open adoptions and having those relationship-building conversations, you increase customer satisfaction, enhance public perception and reputation, reach more people in the community, grow volunteer support, and increase public support.
- **Improved morale within shelter:** Increased adoptions and decreased length of stay create a sense of accomplishment for staff.
 - Staff witness fewer euthanasias due to time and space, have fewer animals to care for in the shelter, and more positive interactions inside and outside the organization.
- **Increased marketing and media engagement:** The process of open adoptions will result in more adoptions overall, leading to more success stories and positive narratives to share.
- **Increased fundraising and grants:** Positive public perception in the community generates more financial support.
 - Following data-driven best practices qualifies organizations for more grant opportunities.
- **Keeping more people and animals together and reducing intake:** Providing post-adoption support keeps families together and directly reduces unnecessary intake.
 - Increased adopter satisfaction will create a stronger bond between shelter/rescue staff and adopters and build trust to continue seeking support when needed.
- **Increased live release rate:** Through open-adoption policies, organizations increase their live release rate by adopting animals out faster than animals are being relinquished.
- **Improved humane care in shelter:** Through open-adoption policies, organizations reallocate staff time from unnecessary practices and instead toward improved care of the animals in the shelter by providing enrichment that may not have been feasible previously.
 - Additionally, more staff time means more time to provide individualized, quality care for each animal, therefore getting to know each animal's personality traits and providing more perspective to potential adopters.
- **Promotion of responsible pet ownership and increased public safety:** Conversations with adopters create a more fruitful relationship built out of respect, and a better foundation to provide resources and education at the time of adoption.
- **Enhanced reputation of pet adoption in general:** Positive interactions with the community create great word-of-mouth!



- A positive community reputation will continue to build your organization's reputation as a place of quality character and support.

Success Story:

Brittany and her family participated in the field trip program at **Humane Society of Western Michigan** and quickly fell in love with a dog named Anna. Feeling that their home setup (Four dogs) may prevent them from getting approved for adoption, they kept taking Anna out on day trips to give her a break from the shelter. One day Brittany received an email that Anna was discovered to have advanced kidney disease and was considered a hospice case. With this news, Brittany felt even more compelled to bring Anna home. From Brittany:

"I almost talked myself out of contacting the Humane Society. I thought there was no way they would let us bring her home since we had other dogs. It would require them to really trust that we had Anna's best interest at heart. I thought they might think I was crazy for wanting to add a fifth dog to the family. Maybe if we just had one dog at home they would consider it... but four?! No way they'll let us adopt Anna. I reached out anyway and to my surprise they considered it! They had questions about our plan, of course. They wanted to make sure we were the right fit for Anna. And soon, Anna was ours! Anna came home just in time for the holidays. She finally had a family to call her own. She was warm, comfortable, and SO SO loved. She got all the butt scratches her heart could desire. She got up with us on Christmas morning and opened presents with us.... A memory close to my heart. Not everyday was easy. Watching Anna get sicker was extremely hard. But I felt so blessed that the Humane Society trusted us to take care of her during this phase of her life. We had no prior hospice experience but they could see how much we loved Anna and they were always there for me to ask questions and give me any support I needed".

Additional Resources

Adoption:

- [Adopters Welcome HSUS](#)
- [Adopters Welcome Research Cited- HSUS](#)
- [BFAS Adoptions Training Playbook](#)
- [Maddie's Fund Open Arms Adoptions](#)
- [ASPCA Pro: Conversational Based Adoption Counseling](#)
- [Million Cat Challenge: removing barriers to adoption](#)

Sample Adoption Questionnaires:

- [Harbor Humane Society Cat Adoption](#)
- [Harbor Humane: Dog Adoption](#)



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Keeping People and Pets Together

- [Monadnock Humane Society Adoption](#)
- [PACC Dog Adoption](#)
- [PACC Cat Adoption](#)

[Example Job Description Folder](#) (Click the link!)