

HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE U.S. “PETS FOR LIFE” TOOLKIT

EMPOWERING PET OWNERS IN UNDER-SERVED AREAS & CREATING HUMANE COMMUNITIES

All of us who love dogs – whether we live with them, raise them, provide professional services for them, or use them to perform specific tasks – recognize the value they hold in our society. Yet the human-canine bond may be weakened by a lack of resources and support available to human beings in under-served communities throughout the United States.

The “Pets for Life” (PFL) community outreach toolkit¹ from the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), made possible by support from PetSmart Charities®, provides a comprehensive road map designed to help animal welfare organizations and animal care and social welfare advocates build humane communities. This is done by extending the reach of animal services, resources, and information to under-served areas, thereby improving the well-being and saving the lives of dogs throughout the United States.

Based on the fundamental understanding that where there is human suffering, there is animal suffering, the PFL toolkit breaks from the traditional animal welfare model and extends compassion and resources to people who need help caring for their animals. The first of its kind, this step-by-step guide is designed specifically to empower communities that—because of economic, social, linguistic, or cultural factors—do not have access to pet-care information, resources, or veterinary and related services.

The toolkit makes PFL’s community-centered approach easy to replicate in cities around the United States, with minimal need to reinvent the process and maximum support for best practices.

It is comprised of 14 chapters – including “Community Assessment,” “How to Approach and Talk to People,” and “Effective Spay/Neuter Outreach,” – to prepare for, execute, and track outreach efforts. The toolkit also includes tips and ideas from cities where HSUS has already implemented the PFL program, as well as templates to use in your own community.

WHY FOCUS ON COMMUNITY PROGRAMS WHEN SHELTERS ARE FULL OF HOMELESS DOGS?

In its snapshot of the U.S. in the 21st century, the toolkit reminds us that the human half of the human-canine bond is struggling and/or is not being reached through traditional outreach efforts: 6 out of 10 U.S. households include at least one pet², but 1 in 6 Americans lives in poverty³. As our cultural landscape changes, so must our approaches to addressing animal welfare in our communities. It is important for animal welfare and wellness providers to gain understanding of the culture of poverty experienced by the human caregivers of millions of pets. As the toolkit explains, “Animal welfare issues do not exist in a vacuum — they are part of a complex social structure. Restricting our decisions about who we provide services to based only on income shows a lack of understanding that can limit our reach and impact.”

The PFL toolkit also challenges the traditional assumption that owners of unaltered pets or those whose pets are living in less-than-ideal conditions are irresponsible, uncaring, or perhaps even malevolent. HSUS's hands-on experiences in cities where PFL has been implemented, as well as their experience in the Gulf region after Hurricane Katrina illustrated what progressive animal welfare advocates have long suspected: the overwhelming majority of pet owners want what is best for their animals, but some lack the resources and information to provide for them.

Take, for example, the number of unaltered pets living in under-served communities. Research conducted by HSUS found that cost was the number-one reason why owners of unaltered pets do not sterilize their pets.⁴ With that in mind, consider the following:

- According to the 2015-2016 American Pet Products Association National Pet Owners Survey, 86% of the respondents who owned dogs and 90% of those who owned cats reported that their pets were spayed or neutered.⁵
- In the under-served communities where PFL is active, however, only a small minority of owned cats and dogs (on average 13%) have been altered prior to PFL services.⁶ (It should be noted that 74% of PFL clients agree to spay/neuter when afforded the resources to do so),⁷

Humans make decisions for their dogs based upon their understanding of their dog's needs and their ability to provide for them. After all, it is humans that enable dogs to thrive, and they usually want them to do so. It is critical that the animal advocacy community engage with all owners in an effective and genuine manner, in order to create lasting change for animals.

PFL community outreach preserves treasured human-canine bonds where they already exist. Such an approach breaks with animal welfare tradition, as upwards of 95% of all resources are allocated to 'reactive' programs: those delivered to animals after they enter into the custody of a shelter or rescue. Because PFL yields better-resourced pet owners, it also provides an opportunity to divert potential owner surrenders to animal shelters due to lack of resources (e.g., providing a crate, or flea/tick medication). PFL asserts that it is the responsibility of animal advocates to be proactive in helping to maintain and nurture established human-canine bonds so that they flourish regardless of the owner's socio-economic status.

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The HSUS "Pets for Life" Toolkit is available for free download in PDF format:

http://gateway.hsus.org/files/pfl_toolkit/toolkit.pdf

Hard copies can be purchased as well: <http://marketplace.animalsheltering.org/product/pets-for-life-outreach-toolkit>

SOURCES and NOTES:

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4. Humane Society of the United States. (2009). *Messaging Spay/Neuter. Lessons from the Gulf Coast Spay/Neuter Campaign*. Retrieved from: <http://www.animalsheltering.org/how-we-help/work-for-change/spay-neuter-campaign-materials/messaging-spayneuter.pdf>
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