

2016

Best Friends National Conference

Playbook



No-Kill Community:
What Worked, What Didn't,
What's Next

Kansas City, Missouri



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This playbook is one in a series meant to be used as guides as you explore how you can save more lives in your community. Getting to no-kill isn't a one-size-fits-all proposition. Each community is unique, with its own challenges and resources, so the playbooks highlight a variety of communities and detail the various ways that leaders in those communities progressed to no-kill or have their communities firmly on that path. Of course, there are some common denominators: Collaboration, commitment, hard work and data-driven approaches to problem-solving are some of the factors that have taken these communities to lifesaving levels once believed to be unreachable. We hope that you will find the information in the playbooks helpful and inspirational as your community works to **Save Them All®**.

Key participant in helping the community to become no-kill:

Kansas City Pet Project

Some keys to Kansas City Pet Project's success:

- Removing standard requirements for adoption
- Operating off-site adoption centers and running adoption specials
- Privatizing the municipal shelter
- Growing the volunteer and foster programs
- Seeking out low-cost marketing and fundraising opportunities
- Fighting regressive animal laws



Introduction

Brent Toellner is the president of the Kansas City Pet Project (KCPP), which oversees operations at the recently privatized city animal shelter in Kansas City, Missouri. KCPP facilitates placement of homeless animals into suitable homes and maintains associated procedures that support the following objectives: safeguarding shelter animals' health and welfare, preventing unplanned litters, overseeing pet retention and pet/owner reunification, and improving public safety by educating people about irresponsible pet owners and dangerous animals.

Dedicated to surpassing conventional lifesaving efforts by creating a no-kill community in Kansas City, KCPP strives to bring an end to euthanizing healthy and treatable animals by employing the most innovative and effective sheltering and animal control policies available.

In 2012, when first approached to share his strategies for success, Brent didn't think the previous eight months of progress was enough to render him an expert on the subject. While he was really proud of what KCPP had accomplished in that amount of time, he felt that a lot of programs still needed to be implemented. In truth, KCPP's tremendous success in turning around a rundown, poorly managed, 40-year-old high-kill city shelter in under a year was nothing short of amazing.

Brent credits much of this quick transformation to entering into a contract with the city whereby all aspects of daily operations are managed by KCPP, a private organization. This shift has been instrumental in KCPP's ability to increase the live release rate from 65 percent in 2011, before KCPP took over daily operations, to 92.2 percent in 2013. KCPP celebrated its first full year of being a no-kill shelter on July 1, 2013.

In 2015, the live release rate climbed to 93.6 percent, up from 92.9 percent the previous year. Brent attributes the increase in lifesaving to successful adoption programs, high-profile marketing, a hard-working staff and dedicated volunteers. In 2013, KCPP had 4,516 adoptions — a 50 percent increase from 2012. KCPP finished 2014 with nearly 6,000 adoptions, double the number of adoptions in 2012, Brent says. And in 2015, KCPP had 5,863 adoptions.

Before KCPP privatized the city-run shelter on January 1, 2012, it was a dismal, unwelcoming place for people to go to adopt an animal. Brent felt that the only way for this shelter — which had an annual population of 7,500, most of them dogs — to become a positive community player was to remove it from government control. He believes shelters should be operated with the mind-set of a retail venture, using such business strategies as excellent customer service, inventory control and extensive marketing. KCPP took in almost 10,000 animals in 2014 and still had a nearly 93 percent live release rate. In 2015, KCPP took in 8,928 animals and had an impressive 93.6 percent live release rate. Brent says KCPP is really proud the organization has been able to sustain its success in spite of such large intake numbers.



Kansas City, Missouri

2011 live release rate:	65%
2015 live release rate:	93.6%

What worked

No blanket adoption requirements

One of the first changes implemented by KCPP was removing standard requirements for adoption. “Having blanket guidelines leads to unnecessarily denying good homes,” says Brent. For instance, KCPP does not mandate that dog adopters have fenced yards. Brent says, “Those who live in urban environments can be great owners [even if] they don’t have a yard. We get insight into each adopter’s lifestyle to make the right match of activity level.”

In addition, KCPP does not do home checks before finalizing adoptions. Brent believes that the act of visiting the shelter with the intent of adopting a homeless pet is a significant indication of someone’s capacity to be a good pet parent. “We engage potential adopters in lengthy conversation,” Brent explains, to draw out specific information. Knowing the right questions to ask elicits answers that can be very telling, which then gives trained staff the opportunity to gently educate potential adopters who may be turned away by other organizations. If there are lingering concerns after a placement, staff follow up to make sure the dynamic is right, and to take advantage of another opportunity to educate the adopters.

Off-site adoption locations

In November 2012, KCPP opened a permanent off-site Adoption Boutique in some empty retail space at an upscale outdoor shopping center called Zona Rosa. Because it had just expanded and the economy was somewhat weak, the shopping center had several open retail spaces so it gave KCPP a discounted rate on a 2,000-square-foot space. The space housed about 40 animals — roughly 30 cats and 10 dogs.

In 2014, KCPP expanded into the neighboring space and now has 4,000 square feet that can house about 40 cats and 15 dogs. The expanded space also includes a free-roaming cat room and meet-and-greet rooms. “We do about 1,500 adoptions per year out of that space and have done about 5,500 adoptions there since it opened in late 2012,” Brent says.

Also in 2014, KCPP opened a second permanent satellite adoption location inside a Petco store. And in 2015, KCPP started staffing cat habitats in five Petco stores. “Between the six permanent Petco adoption centers and our other permanent satellite adoption center, we are doing approximately 40 percent of our adoptions in adoption centers vs. the main shelter,” Brent

says. “More than 50 percent of our cat adoptions are in off-site facilities. Most of these are likely brand new adopters that we would not be getting if we only had the main shelter locations. It has been a game-changer for us to increase adoptions to make up for shelter limitations.”

Adoption specials

KCPP recognizes the need for out-of-the-box thinking to increase adoptions. In keeping with Brent’s retail marketing approach, he considers adoption specials a way to move the “inventory” so new models can fill the shelves. KCPP believes that adoption specials — inventory clearances, if you will — encourage potential adopters to act now rather than later. Sometimes all it takes is a little incentive to push people in the direction they’re already heading.

No matter what the adoption fee is, though, KCPP uses the same screening process and spares no time or emotional expense to pair pets with the right people, thereby upholding the shelter’s integrity and commitment to its mission. This level of customer service and commitment to the “product” (the animals) helps KCPP stand apart from its competition. In addition, to help keep adopted pets in their homes, KCPP has a pet retention program that helps adopters find resources, including a training helpline, to address adjustment issues rather than return pets to the shelter for behavioral reasons.

Longer shelter hours

KCPP has increased its hours of operation, adding evening hours a few nights a week to make it easier for working people to adopt.

Privatization

KCPP pays the city one dollar a year in rent per their contractual agreement, which gives the organization its timeworn shelter building and a \$1 million operating budget. Some city policies remain in place but overall operations are conducted by KCPP. This level of autonomy allows KCPP to gather a staff of responsible, experienced people whose primary focus is to create a shelter that serves as an example to others.

No longer is it necessary to wait for other people to fix the problem, a reality that speeds up the completion of both short- and long-term goals. “What the city deems important and what we deem important is sometimes different. For us, lifesaving is at the forefront of our goals,” Brent says. He acknowledges that while the path to privatization can be scary and full of red tape, it is definitely doable. He invites those interested in learning more about the process to contact KCPP. “What we are doing in Kansas City,” he says, “can be done in Anytown, USA.”

Intake appointments for owner surrenders

In 2014, KCPP began requiring intake appointments for owners surrendering pets. This allows KCPP to spend more time talking to owners about available resources that might help them keep their pets. Brent says KCPP has seen an 18 percent decrease in owner-surrendered pets with the new appointment-based pet surrender policy.

Pets Playing for Life program

This program consists of daily play groups that help the shelter dogs burn off some extra energy and increases their sociability, Brent says. The KCPP training program also includes scent work for those dogs motivated by that type of training. Treats are hidden in boxes and the dogs must solve the puzzles to get the treats. Nose work helps stimulate the dogs mentally, engaging a different part of their brains than the play groups.

Canine Learning and Social Skills program

In 2015, KCPP started its own version of the Canine Good Citizen program, called the Canine Learning and Social Skills (CLASS) program. The program especially benefits “long-

timer” dogs, giving them extra training time to teach them social skills to improve their adoptability. KCPP is also working more closely with adopters who see unexpected behaviors in their adopted dogs to help them overcome these behaviors in a home environment and help prevent the return of the dogs.

More volunteers

On the heels of such progressive change, KCPP experienced an upsurge in volunteer interest. The shelter metamorphosed into a place where people feel welcome and appreciated, not judged. Visitors were no longer afraid of encountering misery (in both humans and animals) behind closed doors, which led to a jump from 30-40 volunteers to more than 250 in eight months.

Approximately 80 of the new volunteers are active and see the day-to-day progress right alongside long-term folks who gave of their time before the transition. Brent notes that expectations were high when plans for a no-kill facility were put in place; many anticipated seeing the shelter become no-kill overnight, while others have been thrilled with the small but steady steps. “We’ve definitely had to battle criticism,” Brent says, but the bottom line is how much people want to help with the change.

Lots of fostering

Getting animals out of the shelter and into a temporary home environment is a big step toward permanent adoption. While KCPP provides the basics at the shelter to keep all residents happy and healthy, it is no comparison, either physically or psychologically, to living in a home with a family. Brent encourages people to consider becoming foster parents to help give animals the practice they need to be good pets. The KCPP foster program goes beyond fostering healthy, adoptable dogs and cats, however, by seeking temporary homes for young, abandoned, sick, abused or stressed animals who enter the shelter. “A foster parent has one of the most important jobs at the shelter,” says Brent, “allowing our animals to receive the proper care and attention they deserve as they wait for adoption.”

Working with rescue groups

Until recently, many of the other shelters in the Kansas City metropolitan area had high kill rates, so area rescue groups began pulling small, highly adoptable animals from those shelters. Many rescue groups didn’t seem to want to work with larger or more challenging dogs, Brent says. So KCPP began building some relationships with groups outside the community and outside the state that are looking for larger dogs. (There seems to be a higher demand for them in rural areas and communities with colder climates.) KCPP still maintains good relationships with many local dog and cat rescue groups that are focused on helping KCPP with the animals it most needs help with. In 2013, KCPP actually did fewer transfers than it did the previous year because it had a lot more adoptions and didn’t need as much transfer support, Brent says.

Favorable media coverage

Ever since the media got wind of KCPP’s efforts to create change at the city shelter, their collective efforts have breathed new life into community involvement. “[They] get the word out to people who would otherwise not know that KCPP exists,” says Brent. Media coverage has not only been a tremendous boon for promoting the shelter’s new direction and need for donations for shelter improvements, but also for broadcasting feel-good stories that come from the community. As an example, Brent mentions a story about a dog who KCPP helped reunite with his owner after a long separation. This type of positive attention delivers an upbeat, optimistic message about the shelter to the community.

Low-cost marketing

Advertising and marketing don't always require money, especially in today's technological society. Brent explains that social media, for example, has been a valuable tool for making immediate impact in the community, with Facebook providing the biggest outreach opportunities for disseminating photos, news and adoption stories, and donation requests. But because of the changes in social media performance, Brent says, "We're having to move more toward paid advertising and increasing the number of partnerships we have with businesses in our community that feature us as part of their advertising schedules."

Volunteers often have talents, expertise or skills that can be very useful when it comes to low-cost marketing efforts. For example, at KCPP professional photographers volunteer their time to snap photos of pets for adoption profiles. Some volunteers are computer-savvy enough to create banners and brochures, while others have a particular talent for chatting with potential pet parents at adoption events.

Increased public outreach

In 2013, KCPP hired a community outreach person whose sole job is to attend events and spread the word about the wonderful things KCPP is doing to save animals. Brent says the organization simply didn't have the time to attend all of the potential tabling and exposure opportunities that are out there without bringing someone new on board.

Fundraising opportunities

KCPP is taking advantage of fundraising opportunities via local businesses and organizations. Boulevard Brewing Company (the largest brewery in town) is donating 10 percent of all proceeds from its KC Pils product to charity and KCPP was one of the first charities to become part of the program. Also, the Zona Rosa Community Foundation has made KCPP a featured charity. KCPP is definitely becoming a bigger part of the community, which is very important because it must compete with other organizations with deeper pockets that are already well-established in the city.

Free Ride Home program

Even when tagged with a current license, lost pets still sit in shelters waiting for their owners to retrieve them, which can add exponentially to the number of dogs and cats taking up valuable space. To help reduce the number of unclaimed pets, KCPP started the Free Ride Home program. Rather than being brought to the shelter, a tagged pet picked up by animal control is returned home immediately at no charge. If the owner isn't home to receive the pet, the animal is impounded, but the owner is charged only 50 percent of the regular release fee when he or she picks up the pet. The program helps to keep pets with their families, saving shelter space for those who truly need it.

Fighting regressive animal laws

KCPP continues to fight against regressive animal laws in Kansas City and surrounding communities, many of which have bans on pit bulls that date back to the late 1980s. Kansas City itself has a law requiring all pit bulls to be spayed or neutered. Most communities also have laws that target community cat caregivers, such as restrictive pet limits, cat leash laws and abandonment laws. KCPP has teamed up with other shelter groups in the community to work with city leaders to get rid of these fear-based laws and replace them with fact-based and behavior-based legislation.



What didn't work

Old leadership

A director who isn't on board with the organization's vision or mission can be the biggest catalyst for failure. Since the previous executive director was not a believer in the no-kill movement, Brent felt that KCPP had no option but to search for a progressive leader whose guidance would move the shelter forward to no-kill.

Weeklong adoption events

The attention span of the media is akin to that of a two-year-old: There is only a small window of opportunity to hold their interest before it fades. KCPP found this out when it held week-long adoption events that called for repeated media attention to garner public response. "It was old news long before the week was up," says Brent, "so we realized media exposure was best with just a one- or two-day event."

Off-site adoption events

Though many animal welfare organizations have had great success with off-site adoption events, Brent says KCPP hasn't moved as many animals that way as they would like considering the time commitment these events require. KCPP does continue to do a few regular adoption events with retailers such as Petco and the Brookside Barkery, but the organization has scaled back on events to some degree, replacing that adoption strategy with permanent off-site adoption locations.



What's next

Continue public outreach

KCPP must build community support to be successful in the long term. Becoming no-kill isn't a responsibility that falls on just a few people, but rather takes an entire community providing support through such efforts as adopting, fostering, donating and volunteering. KCPP is focused on getting the word out to the public about its mission and goals so that every city resident knows how to offer support — and ultimately share credit — for saving lives.

Build a new, larger shelter

KCPP's current shelter has only 14,000 square feet, which is roughly one-third the size it needs now that it has an intake of 10,000 animals per year. With that in mind, KCPP is in the beginning stages of trying to build a new, modern animal shelter to replace its decades-old facility. KCPP is scouting locations, working on designs and collaborating with civic and city leaders to help secure the land and funding.

In 2015, the organization opened a new veterinary clinic in a double-wide trailer adjacent to the shelter. The new 2,000-square-foot space more than quadrupled the size of its veterinary clinic, which allows KCPP to provide better and more immediate care for its animals. KCPP also opened two other trailer spaces for sick animal quarantine and administrative use. "This allows us more space inside the shelter building to provide a separate, quiet area for new animal intakes and for public animal admissions," Brent says.

Build a sustainable organization for the long-term

In spite of KCPP's successes, it's only a four-year-old organization and is working to develop steady funding, a steady donor pool and more civic support to ensure that the organization is sustainable in the long run. Brent says, "This is a challenging process — to add many new leaders while still maintaining the same type of culture that allowed the organization to become successful. But it is necessary for the long-term success of the organization."

Continue to update and revamp marketing efforts

As social media algorithms have changed, the ability to rely on it as a primary source of marketing has diminished, Brent says. In addition, as more shelters in KCPP's area work hard to push adoptions by doing adoption specials, having more customer-friendly hours and having better marketing programs (including better photography), it has become increasingly challenging to have old marketing practices stand out. "Adjusting our marketing efforts to keep up with the changing market conditions is essential," Brent says.



Brent Toellner

Presenter

Brent Toellner is the president and co-founder of the Kansas City Pet Project (KCPP). He started working for animals by doing rescue, followed by advocacy work fighting breed-specific legislation. Previously, he was the legislative chair for Kansas City Dog Advocates, a group that focuses on pet-friendly legislation on the local level.

In July 2011, he and several others formed KCPP to bid on the contract to run the Kansas City, Missouri, pound — a place where, for decades, more animals died than were saved. Since KCPP took over in January 2012, adoptions have increased by more than 100 percent. KCPP's live release rate has exceeded 90 percent for more than two years while remaining an open-admission shelter, making KCPP the third largest open-admission, no-kill shelter in the U.S.

Brent writes a blog (KCDogBlog.com) that shares new information about the fight against breed-specific legislation and the shelter's ongoing no-kill journey.