

Notes from Dog Walking/Volunteer Concerns Working Group

AAC Conference Room, 1.25.15 2-4 pm

Chair of Working Group: Meghan Wells, Animal Advisory Commissioner

Attendees: Lindsay Marsh, Larry Tucker, Pat Vals-Trelles, Ron Dischert, Bobbie Sullivan, Gina Hush, Kara Stoner, Amy Fitzsimmons, Dawn Morehouse, Andrea Schwartz, Marnie Reeder, Kelli Patrick, Amie Tacka, Jae Trost, Andy Loomis, Alicia Benoit, Lisa van Dam-Bates, Brandon Wirtz, Melissa Wyatt, Philip Goen

The group held discussion, focused on clarifying issues at hand, identifying challenges, listing questions for staff, and proposing ideas and solutions. Those points follow:

Issue:

- Large/medium dogs not getting out of kennels on regular/daily basis
- Orange tags = Not getting out that day (sometimes double-tagged = 48 hours)
- Staff overburdened with workload and only getting care and feeding done
- AAC not fully staffed (need 33% more staff to operate fully)
- Animal Care especially understaffed (also doing laundry and washing dishes)
- Falling short of ASPCA standards = getting out of kennels at least once per day
- Average of 50 dogs per day not getting out
- Staff disconnected from need because of other responsibilities and duties
- Volunteers are also overwhelmed
- Lack of expedient volunteer application, registration and training system (no online application, takes 3 months to start volunteering, background checks, etc.)
- Behavioral Program now dealing with dogs exhibiting problems due to kennel craziness
- No-Kill Plan not fully funded
- No Behaviorist on staff
- Resources allocation doesn't seem to include enough for more temps, Animal Control staff
- Volunteers express lack of feeling of camaraderie
- Temps not paid a living wage, hard to recruit and retain

Questions:

- Is there enough room/appropriate space for playgroups?
- What volunteer recruitment is being done right now? What can be done to support/enhance?
- How can volunteer retention be supported/enhanced?
- Can AAC pay vet techs overtime to help out at AAC, as is reportedly being done at TLAC?
- How is the Behavioral Program from the No-Kill Implementation Plan being supported?
- Can day-long/field trips be considered short-time fosters (no background checks)?
- Can volunteers do jobs such as laundry and dishwashing to relieve staff?
- Is there a way to expedite volunteer application/registration/training?

- Can Rufftail Runners be reconsidered for operation at AAC?
- Can media be alerted immediately about dog walking need?
- Is TLAC currently an option for housing AAC dogs? Unclear.

Challenges:

- Paid staff positions for dog walkers do not exist and current staff do not have enough resources to fit into their workload, so volunteers have to shoulder a tremendous burden.
- Dog walkers should also help with customer education and act as liaison between shelter and customers, as well as manage dog interactions for safety (i.e., some training is involved), and requires more than just “person off the street.”
- Monitoring and reporting stats on dogs needing walks or being walked to make sure public, staff, and policymakers are aware of the issue requires more resources than currently exist.
- Temps and volunteers doing work that permanent staff should be doing leads to frequent turnover and burnout.
- Using volunteers who need community service hours is a liability issue for the City, because of access to sensitive or secure info or procedures.
- The Volunteer Coordinator is managing so much paperwork and spending so much time processing and training volunteers that the program cannot grow, achieve its goals, and the Coordinator does not have time to get to know the needs of individual volunteers.
- Playgroups might be an option, but not at the expense of scuffles or incidents jeopardizing a dog’s chance for adoption.

Ideas/Solutions:

- Council should tour AAC with staff and volunteers to hear first-hand the needs and conditions.
- Consider (or re-consider) playgroups (Mike Kaviani from APA could assist; Subaru could sponsor)
- Bring Rufftail Runners to AAC (Lindsay Marsh and Rob Hill)
- Social media and conventional media to help share message/need for dog walkers
- Adopt ASPCA standard of dogs getting out minimum of once a day
- Expanding City employee (PE) program of dog walking and encourage Public Safety employees to participate
- Consider housing big dogs at TLAC again
- Pay overtime to walk dogs at AAC, not just TLAC
- Market positions and promote to try to fill vacancies
- Ideal to have 3-4 full-time employees to do dog walking and behavioral work
- Examine staff structure (including executive positions) in light of need for more animal care positions
- Encourage a culture of cooperation between staff and volunteers (more volunteer appreciation and joint “fun” gatherings)
- Select a volunteer “leader” or “spokesperson” to meet regularly with staff/Volunteer Coordinator to discuss status, share info, and try new ideas/initiatives

- Rufftail Runners can share info with their members (Call to Action)
- City should continue to promote volunteer need, especially for dog walking through media channels
- Expedite Rufftail Runners' volunteer registration/training through Dogs Out Loud
- Explore dual registration/training for volunteers who are able to work at either TLAC or AAC
- Try a "day foster" program for Rufftail Runners for off-campus field trips
- Utilize neighborhood listservs and post Dogs Out Loud's tips/info on how easy to volunteer/walk dogs
- APA and AAC staff should regularly share ideas to improve both TLAC and AAC
- Pat V-T suggested: Install fenced running track as future CIP project, focus on new FTE during budget time or contracting with company to provide dog-walking, consider Donations Fund to incentivize dog walkers

Immediate Next Steps:

- Communicate unified message to Council regarding need and for more support to ASO
- Communicate social media message to public for dogwalking need and general volunteers
- Find a way for Rufftail Runners to operate at AAC
- Volunteers (or volunteer rep) to work more closely with Volunteer Coordinator and Behavioral Program Coordinator to better communicate, share info and ideas, and support each other
- Reconsider playgroups as a way for dogs to get out of kennels more frequently

Longer-Term Next Steps:

- Implement on-line volunteer application
- Expedite volunteer registration and training process
- Identify and cultivate more volunteer retention strategies

Update: Information from staff 2.5.15 (Meeting with Amanda, Chris, Aaron, Chery, and Amber)

- Volunteer Coordinators are open to ideas that might restructure the way volunteers check in/out and find out which dogs need attention (or more attention) on a daily basis
- Staff is being more attentive to hanging time tags when they take dogs out of kennels for walks/exercise/breaks during the course of their work.
- Staff is currently developing a system for indicating manageability directly on the kennel card from the time of intake so that volunteers and the public of different skill/experience levels can make more informed decisions about which dogs they choose to try to handle. These manageability ratings will be flexible to account for changes in the dogs' behavior over time, and volunteers will have input on the ratings after stray time is complete.
- Staff is working to develop a communication method that will help volunteers readily identify and prioritize long-stay dogs for extra attention and enrichment
- AAC is continuing to house some dogs at TLAC for the time being

- Volunteer meetings are now scheduled for every other month, to maintain open communication between volunteers and staff
- On average, it takes one month for a volunteer to apply, have a background check, and obtain required training to be a fully-functioning dog volunteer with the ability to take dogs off shelter grounds.
- Volunteer retention is increasing, but remains a challenge/goal for shelter to continue to serve needs of more animals. The key is understanding expectations and sharing info to address the needs of the animals, so that shelter needs are met AND volunteers feel good about their contributions.
- Staff has created a new report from database that tells how many & which dogs are actually available to be walked on a given day. This report can potentially make orange-tag reporting more accurate and can help determine which dogs are longer-stays who need prioritized or longer interactions.
- Playgroups have been tried in the past, but there were not (and still are not) enough staff/volunteer resources or adequate yard-spaces to sustain them. Staff is exploring options for additional fenced play yards on campus, and play-buddies or play-groups may be more possible once better systems are in place for accurately categorizing dogs' behavioral traits.
- Rufftail Runners: City Legal will not allow non-volunteers to access the property outside of business hours nor take dogs off of shelter property for liability reasons. Shelter volunteers can take dogs off of the shelter campus and off of City property. Approved fosters (background check not required, application available on-line, 10-15 mins with Foster staff) can work with Customer Service staff to arrange to take dogs for overnight (or longer) visits off campus but cannot access the shelter before or after public hours. If enough Rufftail Runners wanted to become volunteers, AAC staff could potentially work with the group to arrange a special day to conduct an Orientation and training specifically for their group. Right now, orientation happens twice a month, and the two options for Behavior classes (either "Behavior Basics" or "Training Basics") each happen twice a month.