

ALL PAWS ON DECK!:

HOW TO DRASTICALLY IMPROVE ANIMAL CARE SERVICES IN LESS THAN A YEAR

CITY OF SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

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CATEGORY: **PARTNERSHIPS**

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SYNOPSIS

In 2011, the City of San Antonio was mired in animal control problems, and citizen complaints were coming from two different directions. On one hand, an estimated 153,000 stray animals roamed city streets, and residents complained bitterly about health and safety concerns. On the other hand, the City was in the fourth year of a failed five-year initiative to reach a Live Release Rate of 70%, and concerned residents worried about the euthanizing of so many animals. Like many other entities, the City of San Antonio found itself generally alone in the seeming contradictory position of needing to reduce the stray population and reducing the number of animals euthanized.

With significant negative media publicity and public perception on both issues, staff morale and performance had dropped below acceptable levels. Additionally, partnerships with local non-profit animal agencies had become strained to the point that some agencies refused to accept adoptable animals from the City due to perceived and real concerns about disease.

In June of 2011, the Innovation Group (Innovation) from the Office of Management & Budget was tasked with developing a strategy to accomplish the following: 1) increase the Live Release Rate from a current level of 31% to the community goal of 70%, and 2) decrease the stray animal population, particularly the dangerous packs of dogs. By applying a balanced approach to strays and enforcement, implementing LEAN process improvement and performance management, and re-forging community partnerships, the Animal Care Services Department was able to increase its Live Release Rate from 31% to nearly 70%, revitalize staff morale and performance, and generate significant positive media publicity—all in just a few months.



BACKGROUND

In 2007, the City of San Antonio had embarked on an effort to improve animal care services and developed an Animal Care Strategic Plan. The plan was developed in conjunction between the City's Animal Care Advisory Board as well as a consortium of local non-profit partners. Looking back on the 2007 initiative, Innovation identified three main deficiencies that contributed to inaction:

1. Lack of specific goals and metrics needed to measure success.

Although the plan identified seven strategic goals, they were at high-level and lacked detailed strategies on how the goals could be achieved. Furthermore, the plan used terms such as “increase” or “promote” and provided neither baseline figures nor desired outcomes for each of the strategic goals. This lack of metrics prevented the City from establishing levels of service and measuring incremental improvements.

2. Lack of responsibility and accountability required to implement the plan.

Additionally, the plan was vague regarding who would implement the recommendations and be responsible for the initiative's ultimate success or failure. Some tasks were given to the City and others to community partners, but the organization that monitored implementation (a non-profit) did not have the authority to keep all stakeholders accountable.

3. Lack of tying resources to strategic priorities.

San Antonio's Animal Care Services department saw an increase in its budget allocation after 2007, but these new resources were not tied to strategic priorities. Consequently, the department began doing “more”, but the additional output did not lead to improved performance.

Four years after the initial plan was developed, San Antonio realized it needed to revisit Animal Care strategic priorities and give the department the direction, accountability, and resources needed to meet both internal and external stakeholder expectations.

METHODOLOGY

WHAT IS IT WE DO AND IS IT WHAT WE SHOULD BE DOING?

When Innovation started to work with Animal Care, employees identified themselves with their division, not the organization. Individuals were either animal control officers or kennel attendants or veterinary technicians or adoption agents – they did what they did well, but were not working towards a common goal. Animal control officers would not communicate with shelter staff to manage the volume of animals coming in which would lead to either crowded or empty kennels, depending on the situation. The clinic would not communicate health examination outcomes, and unhealthy animals would be mixed with the general animal population spreading disease. Shelter staff would not adequately track animals in the system preventing adoption agents from promoting animals on campus to prospective families.

Without a unified goal or vision, staff would continue to operate in silos. Therefore, Innovation worked with department leadership, staff, and the community to affirm that Animal Care Services three priorities are:

1. Enhanced Enforcement of existing laws and codes;
2. Controlling the Stray Animal Population; and
3. Increasing the Live Release Rate



With these priorities in place, baselines could be measured, goals established, and a culture of performance could be cultivated within the department. With written goals and priorities, each employee could see how their individual role and tasks were interconnected to each priority (which then could be reinforced and monitored by their supervisor). For example, an officer in the field who picked up a stray but took the time to talk with neighbors to see if the dog just ran away from a house nearby not only increased the live release rate by returning the animal to its owner, but also increased enforcement by educating, and possibly citing, the resident on leash and roaming laws.

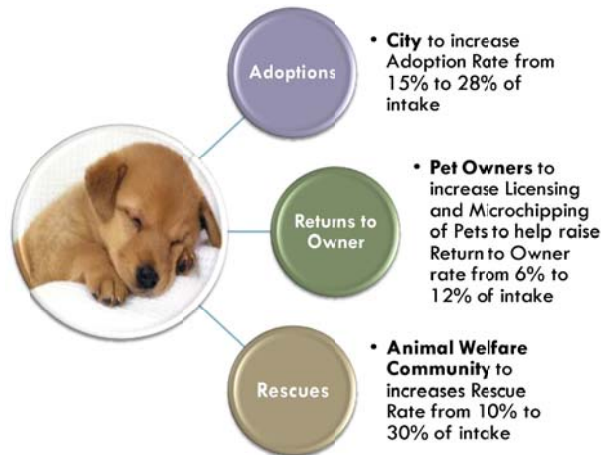
To help foster the change in culture, Innovation also identified inefficient and ineffective processes within the department. To address resident expectations regarding stray animal pick up, Innovation first focused on field operations and dispatch. The analysis identified that all types of calls, regardless of severity, were issued to officers in the field under the same priority level. Using LEAN process improvement methodology, the team created a process map of desired field operations which included a list of ten types of calls in the correct priority order and expected response times for each.

IS ANIMAL CARE JUST A CITY RESPONSIBILITY?

During the four years since the development of the previous strategic plan, the City had been going it alone trying to increase its live release rate. The public perception was that Animal Care Services—and Animal Care Services alone—could increase its live release rate from 10% in 2007 to 70% by 2012 through increasing the scale of its current processes. Although the department had developed some informal partnerships with local animal rescue groups and increased the live release rate to 30%, and the animal welfare community was putting more and more pressure on the City to achieve the 70% goal.

Innovation began to look at best practices from other communities that had had success in the area of shelter live release and identified a common trend—those cities that were successful had partnerships with agencies that would rescue a high volume of animals from the City and work within their own organization (and resources) to care for and adopt out the animals. With this knowledge in hand, Innovation and Animal Care came to the realization that municipal shelters

may have an upper limit on the amount of animals they can adopt out on their own. Municipal budgets set constraints, such as competing resources for picking up strays versus providing shelter care, which non-profit animal welfare groups do not experience. Furthermore, cities are often not good at retail—details such as the marketing of pets and outreach to potential pet owners are best left to those with more expertise in the subject matter. With this knowledge in hand, San Antonio concluded that it would likely not be able to achieve greater than a 40% live release rate from the City shelter—the additional 30% would need to come from enhanced partnerships with the local animal welfare community.



WHO CAN HELP US GET TO WHERE WE WANT TO BE?

The animal welfare community is a passionate and vocal group of constituents. Due to real and perceived issues associated with the implementation of 2007 plan, a culture of distrust had developed—both with Animal Care Services as well as between individual animal welfare organizations. Knowing that community partners were critical to the success of the strategy, Innovation hosted a facilitated session that brought together City leadership and staff, animal welfare organizations, business leaders, philanthropists, and concerned citizens. Recognizing tensions may be high among participants, Innovation directed the facilitator to interview many of the meeting participants in advance and allow their concerns to be shared. Furthermore the meeting was designed in a way to allow all participants to be heard, collaborate on solving problems, and assign ownership to identified actions and goals.



Issues, such as working relationships between the City and partners were discussed, as well as a compensation plan for any organization rescuing large volume of animals was developed. This session allowed the City and rescue partners to discuss in a transparent fashion, what expectations were to be. Participants agreed that all partners need to abide by a code of conduct, and City funds should be used to assist groups to “stand-up” their operations, but long-term funding is the responsibility of the organization (through fundraising or grants) rather than the City.

During the meeting, existing organizations pledged their intent to step up and rescue more animals. Furthermore, the seeds for grassroots organization in San Antonio based on a successful model from Austin were planted which later became San Antonio Pets Alive! (<http://www.sanantoniopetsalive.org/>). Expectations were set that the City was prepared to incentivize these groups in the current fiscal year, but leaders of these groups were asked to work with the business leaders and philanthropists in the room to develop long-term funding strategies.

OBSTACLES

The update to the strategic plan developed by Innovation in collaboration with the department and the community was completed during the fiscal year 2012 budget planning process, and implemented beginning in October 2011. Through the implementation process, a number of obstacles were identified:

1. Implementation of Process Improvements.

Following the development of the strategic plan, Innovation worked with the department to apply LEAN principles to internal processes and procedures. Department leadership sat down over a number of Saturday afternoons to review existing documents and draw out new process maps. Although there was consensus on the new policies, coaching staff to achieve the desired results proved more difficult as employees reverted to the “old” way of doing things.

2. Employee Buy-In.

Although employees were asked to see themselves supporting all strategic priorities of the department (enforcement, control, live release), many reverted back to their silos following plan implementation. To combat this, the department is taking a balanced approach to evaluating employee performance. For example, animal control officers will be evaluated not only on the amount of animals they pick up in the field, but also by the number of citations they write as well as the number of animals returned to their owner in the field.

3. Establishing Trust.

Although the facilitated session went a long way in improving relationships between the department and amongst animal welfare organizations, a culture of distrust still exists, especially from citizens who were not involved in the planning process. The department strives to be inclusive with these individuals, but also points to success stories among the partners who have drastically improved San Antonio's live release rate.

OUTCOMES

The speed in which results have been seen is staggering. Since the plan was implemented, San Antonio Animal Care Services has seen:

- The live release rate increase from 31% during most of 2011 to 52% by the end of the year to 66% by March 2012 while increasing impoundments making City streets safer
- An influx of volunteers on campus both for Animal Care Services as well as partner organizations
- A change in the media coverage of the department from stories that focused on the positive (high number of adoptions and rescues), rather than the negative (high rates of euthanasia)
- \$750K grant from a highly competitive program sponsored by a national animal welfare organization program to focus on cat issues (trap, neuter, and release)
- \$1M+ in donations from major pet supply corporations to fund more adoptions and spay/neuter surgeries

Also, by the time of the presentation date, the City will have completed its bi-annual community survey. The department will then be able to measure the change in public perception of animal care and safety.

PRESENTATION STYLE

A key “a-ha” moment for the Innovation team working on this project was the fact that improving animal care services—like many other government problems—was not about throwing more money at the problem, but rather setting up a strategic approach that values the input of internal and external stakeholders, gets the right people at the table, improves processes, and measures outcomes.

To allow session participants to reach this “a-ha” along with the presenters, we plan to conduct an interactive presentation with an activity supported by PowerPoint slides. Session participants will be provided puzzle pieces that represent the core functions of animal care such as animal control officers, veterinarians, kennel attendants, and adoption agents. These pieces do not represent the entire puzzle – participants will then suggest ideas that are needed to complete the puzzle, but as they describe more resources that do not align with strategic goals or improved processes, they will be given more of the same pieces, representing throwing more money at the problem.

As we describe our journey and the realizations that allowed us to understand and solve the problem, participants will be given opportunities to “ask” for more pieces (representing process improvement, community involvement, etc.) and by the end of the session, have the entire puzzle.

The content of the presentation will follow a format similar to this case study document.