

## APPENDIX D

# Return-to-Owner Strategies

*By Lauren Bluestone, manager of Metro Animal Care and Control, Nashville, Tennessee*

**One of the most important yet least talked about aspects of animal care and control is how to return as many pets as possible to their owners.** This holds true even as the “old school” mentality (losing a pet means you are a bad owner) shifts to the more enlightened attitude that things happen and, in many cases, are beyond pet owners’ control.

When I first started working at Metro Animal Care and Control (MACC) in Nashville, the return-to-owner rate (RTO) needed to be increased — and quickly. In fact, the first community meeting I hosted was with the lost-and-found pets groups of the community. Judging by the negative Facebook posts that had been circulating, I was prepared for a stormy meeting. My initial reaction upon reading the posts had been to get defensive, but then I decided to research the current processes, the progressive programs available and the changes that needed to be made, including the suggestions of the lost-and-found groups.

After a brief introduction to the group, I empathized with their feelings and recognized the need for change by listing everything that I found deficient in current practices, ranging from careless mistakes to lack of proactive initiatives to barriers that the organization placed on the general public. Taking this approach accomplished a few things: It showed them that I agreed that change needed to happen and gave them trust that change would happen, while at the same time opening the door for me to solicit community assistance and involvement in getting animals safely home.

We then implemented very simple changes and easy procedures (described below) that have had an amazing impact on increasing the number of animals returned to their owners. I am not saying that all these steps will work for your organization, but you don’t know unless you try.

## Best practices in the field

When it comes to RTO, animal control officers serve on the front lines. Here are some best practices for field officers:

- Officers shouldn't bring animals back to the shelter unless they absolutely have to. If the animal has any I.D., officers should trace it in the field and return the animal to his or her home, even if they have to drive the animal there.
- If there's no I.D., officers can ask people in the area if they know the animal.
- With the permission of the property owner where an animal was found, officers can post a sign containing the animal's photo and description.
- Officers must document the same information and ask the same questions as shelter intake staff. MACC assigns each officer a mobile phone that allows photos to be uploaded from the field, so the public has quick access to information about the animal.

## Engaging the community

If your agency is anything like MACC, you are probably understaffed and have limited resources. MACC has a staff of 36, and that number of people cannot resolve the issues of a population that numbers more than 800,000. So, we encourage the public to get involved and be the extra eyes, ears and hands that we desperately need. We need help, we always will, and we're not afraid to admit it.

Here are some ways that we've involved the community in RTO efforts:

- **Work with lost-and-found pets groups:** We promote and actively engage with community groups that specialize in lost and found pets. MACC uses a system that automatically sends a report to each community lost-and-found group. The reports contain all of the lost and found animals' information broken down by the zip codes where the animals were found. These groups monitor various lost-pet listings on the websites of similar groups and rescue groups, Craigslist, Facebook, and newspapers.
- **Use social media and the internet:** All animals in the shelter (unless they're involved in a court case) have online profiles for viewing by the public. MACC uses social media to spotlight a "stray of the day" in hopes that the pet's owner will be found. MACC's online reporting system is accessible 24 hours a day to employees and the public to make reuniting efforts more efficient and effective. Our system uploads the information about lost or found animals from public reports and shelter intake within an hour of the data entry.
- **Offer tools and accessibility:** MACC has a program in which we provide large lost or found signs that the owners or finders can place in their yards with animal-specific information to further get the word out that they have either lost or found an animal. Our organization is now open seven days a week for owners to reclaim their pets, which has had a positive impact on overall shelter population reduction. Another idea is to make a bulletin board for posting lost-pet flyers as well as information about any animals who are in the shelter system but are not in a kennel, such as those in medical or foster care. Also, depending on the need, offer bilingual resources and materials.

## RTO and shelter operations

Shelter staff play a huge part in reuniting animals with their owners, since they have the advantage of knowing the animals who are in the facility. Here are some ways to make RTO efforts more effective and efficient within the shelter:

- When a stray enters the facility, the very first item of business should be to check for identification (microchip, ID tag, rabies tag, tattoo) and, if it's available, to trace the information. At MACC, we check at acceptance, during intake, during testing, and prior to final disposition.
- When tracing identification, exhaust every option, including calling every number listed and sending a letter to the address, both by regular mail and certified mail.
- As accurately as possible, the staff must document the exact location where a stray animal was found; all of the finder's contact information, including the person's name, address, driver's license number and phone number; the animal's behavior when in the finder's possession; the length of time that the finder had the animal; and the circumstances surrounding finding the animal.
- The staff should write a detailed description of the animal, take an initial photo of the animal, and post the description and photo online immediately. At MACC, staff cross-reference any lost-and-found reports with two daily shelter walk-throughs (in the morning and the afternoon) to match animals to reports.
- If the initial photo of the animal is not good quality, get a better photo once the animal is in the system. It's important to capture any distinctive markings and get that photo out to the public as soon as possible. If staff don't have time for this, you can enlist the help of volunteers who have photography skills.

## The role of management

Shelters have an obligation to reunite pets with their owners, just as pet owners have an obligation to be responsible. The administrative and time-consuming activities involved in returning pets to their owners are nothing compared to the burden it places on all aspects of the organization to house the animal. There are a number of things that management and administrative staff can do to improve the RTO rate. Here are some ideas:

- Get your staff and the public excited by sharing happy endings and promoting all aspects of the RTO program on media outlets. Acknowledge the hard work of the local lost-and-found pets groups. Motivate your employees by giving small prizes monthly to the shelter staff and field officers with the most RTO cases.
- Provide oversight and accountability for your RTO program. Write clear directives and descriptions of standard operating procedures to ensure that everyone understands the process and that no steps of the process are missed.

- Establish hours that work for the public to reclaim their animals. MACC is currently open for redemption seven days a week and one late night.
- Establish mandatory pet identification, such as tags or microchips. MACC mandates that any animal who enters the shelter be microchipped before leaving. This type of identification should also be made affordable and accessible to the public. MACC charges \$10 per microchip and holds clinics every Thursday.
- Encourage and empower the staff to reduce or waive redemption fees. MACC will automatically waive fees if owners agree to have their animals spayed or neutered at our expense. Negotiate the fees while keeping in mind that the goal is to get these animals home.
- Create a compassionate culture. To bring every aspect of a progressive RTO program together, the focus should be on customer service and a non-judgmental atmosphere. That means that all employees — clerical, kennel, medical, field and management staff — must be on the same page. Your facility needs to be seen as open and inviting, not a place that holds animals hostage.

All of the above changes were implemented over time, to ease the staff and public into new methods, and to improve the RTO rate without adding more staff or increasing the budget. So what has implementing all these changes done for MACC's return-to-owner rates? (The following are rates for dogs, since we have a TNVR program for cats.) The RTO rate in 2015 was around 21 percent, and we increased it to around 44 percent for 2017. We are constantly looking for innovative ways to make that number climb and are constantly re-evaluating the program.

### **USING THE WEB FOR RTO**

Shelters can use the internet in several ways to help return pets to their owners. On Nextdoor.com, government shelters can post information about found pets and target the post to the neighborhood (and surrounding neighborhoods) where the pet was found. All the shelter has to do is sign up for an account. (Currently, only government shelters are allowed to sign up.)

Other websites and apps focus particularly on lost and found pets. Finding Rover is a lost-and-found app that uses the latest facial recognition technology to match a picture of an animal posted as lost with animals posted as found. The facial recognition technology works for both dogs and cats. Other lost-and-found pet sites and apps are Pet Harbor, HelpingLostPets.com and VetsPlusMore. Another useful website is Lost Dogs of America (lostdogsofamerica.org), which includes an article titled "How to Trace Dead End Microchips and Tag Information on Found Pets."

These sites are only effective, though, if shelters share their data with them. Because we cannot predict which site or app pet owners will choose to help them find their pet, shelters need to share their data with all of the reputable ones. It generally doesn't cost the shelter anything to share stray hold data via their shelter management system (e.g., Shelterluv, Chamelon and Shelter Buddy).