

PAWS for Action – Value Added
To run 1/17/2016

PAWS Humane is a limited admissions shelter. This means we get to be choosy about what animals we bring in. It also means that we can keep animals as long as it takes for them to be adopted.

To any open admissions shelter employee this sounds like a dream come true. Unfortunately, a limited admissions intake policy has a dark side. When animals are contained in an institutional setting for too long many will succumb to emotional distress. Some will develop issues such as spinning and barrier aggression. Other dogs or cats will become depressed and begin to shut down.

Another aspect of long shelter stays boils down to simple math. When a single cat takes up a cage for a year this will dramatically reduce the number of animals we can pull from animal control. When it comes to saving lives the name of the game is to bring them in and get them out as quick as we can.

PAWS Humane is one of the nicest shelters you will ever see, yet this isn't exactly summer camp. No shelter compares to life in a home with a loving family. To mitigate the stress we provide a number of enrichments to daily life.

During 2014 our average length of stay was 35 days. That may not seem too terrible but our longest length of stay at that time was 472 days. Some large breed and high energy dogs had been here well over 100 and even 200 days.

We became very intentional in our efforts to get these animals adopted, understanding that each one is an individual. The results have been gratifying. We ended 2015 with an average length of stay of 23 days with the longest stay at 176 days. Since June our average length of stay has declined to 19 days.

Karlene Turkington, a Certified Professional Dog Trainer living in Opelika, has been working with the dogs of PAWS Humane for several months now. She helps us evaluate our more energetic dogs and has helped us learn strategies to eliminate negative behavior traits and improve basic manners. She has taught our animal care staff how to interact with the dogs to maintain and strengthen the training she provides.

Last weekend we went a step further by implementing a volunteer dog training program. Karlene spent the day in formal training with 19 of PAWS Humane's most trusted volunteers. Each one of them passed the test and literally got the t-shirt. Every one of them raved about the class and have signed up for a minimum of once each week to work with our dogs.

Dogs are often returned for what we call "dog-like" behavior. Everything we do to help them become better citizens will increase the odds of a successful adoption.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.

When I first came to PAWS Humane, several employees expressed concern about the length of stay for many of our animals. At that time we had two FIV+ cats who had been with us for well over a year. Because of their FIV status they were kept in kitty condos rather than the large cat room. This is no kind of life and one of the first things we did was to move these cats to the first room you see when you walk into the lobby.

It still took quite a while for these two kitties to get adopted but our PAWS Humane adoption counselors worked very hard to educate potential adopters about FIV and to pitch the idea that these two great cats deserved to be loved just like anyone else. Special needs animals have their own appeal and eventually the right person is going to come along and adopt them. It is up to us to create an environment that supports these matches made in Heaven.