

2013

# No More Homeless Pets<sup>®</sup> National Conference Playbook



## **No-Kill Community:**

What Worked, What Didn't,  
What's Next

## **Kansas City, Missouri**



**SAVE  
THEM  
ALL™**

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Brent Toellner

## Community: Kansas City, Missouri

Key participant in helping the community to become no-kill:  
Kansas City Pet Project

### 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.”

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's really proud of what KCPP has accomplished so far, he feels that a lot of programs still need 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 has been 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 save rate from 65 percent in 2011 to 83 percent (and climbing) in the third quarter of 2012. Brent attributes the increase in lifesaving to successful adoption programs, high-profile marketing and dedicated volunteers.

Before KCPP privatized the city-run shelter in December 2011, Brent says it was a dismal, unwelcome place for people to go to adopt an animal. Brent felt that the only way for this shelter — with 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.



## 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.

- **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.”

- **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.”
- **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.

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.

- **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 to address adjustment issues rather than return pets to the shelter for behavioral reasons.

- **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.



## 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."



## What's next

- **Maintain good relationships with rescue groups:** The uncooperative attitude some shelters have toward local rescue organizations is puzzling to Brent, who praises the positive impact of these groups. Not only does KCPP have a working relationship with several breed-specific and all-breed rescues, but these groups are directly responsible for 30 to 35 percent of the shelter's growing save rate.
- **Conduct off-site adoption events:** KCPP is a new organization, so community awareness of what they are doing needs to be increased. Off-site adoption events will not only allow KCPP to market its adoptable pets, but also provide the opportunity to meet people in the community, explain who they are and what they're doing, and gain supporters, volunteers and adopters.
- **Create an adoption boutique:** Because the shelter is old and in a remote location, KCPP continues to raise funds for a new, larger facility; however, this process may take several years. In the meantime, KCPP is seeking donated empty retail space to use as an off-site adoption boutique, which will make it easier for potential adopters to access the animals.
- **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 their mission and goals so that every city resident knows how to offer support — and ultimately share credit — for saving lives

# 2013 Update

Just six months after taking over the animal shelter contract for Kansas City, Missouri, on January 1, 2012, Kansas City Pet Project had already achieved a 90 percent live release rate for that city. The organization has continued to meet or exceed that number ever since, completing its first full year of no-kill on July 1, 2013.

Overall, 2013 was a good year for KCPP. In the summer of 2013, KCPP celebrated its 1,000th adoption at its off-site adoption boutique. They also hired a community outreach person to attend events and spread the word about the good work KCPP is doing. KCPP still faces some challenges, however. They continue to work with other shelter groups to get rid of the archaic fear-based animal laws on the books, which are bringing more animals into shelters, and replace them with laws that will keep animals out of shelters and in homes.

**OFF-SITE ADOPTION BOUTIQUE:** In November 2012, Kansas City Pet Project opened a permanent off-site adoption center in some empty retail space at an upscale, outdoor shopping center called Zona Rosa. Because it had just expanded and the economy is 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 houses about 40 animals — roughly 30 cats and 10 dogs. The adoption center opened in mid-November, and in the summer of 2013, KCPP celebrated its 1,000th adoption at that location.

**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. 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.

**OFF-SITE ADOPTION EVENTS:** Though many animal welfare organizations have had great success with off-site adoption events, KCPP president Brent Toellner says that KCPP hasn't moved as many animals that way as they would like, considering the time commitment that these events take. 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 them to some degree.

**WORKING WITH RESCUE GROUPS:** Until recently, many of the community's local shelters had high kill rates so area rescue groups began pulling small, highly adoptable animals from the shelters. But Brent says this isn't what is most needed anymore. He says many rescue groups don't seem to want to work with larger or more challenging dogs, and thus KCPP is actually transferring fewer animals out to rescue groups than it was a year ago (down about 35 percent in 2013 from the year before).

KCPP has built some relationships with groups outside the community that are looking for larger dogs because 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.

**OTHER ISSUES AND CHALLENGES:** KCPP has faced some new challenges in the past year. As the organization has increased public awareness and become more successful, its animal intake has increased. Other area shelters are also trying to save lives, which has caused increased “competition” for adopters. For example, one area shelter that used to only be open from noon to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday has extended its hours later on weekdays and on weekends, making it easier for potential adopters to see available animals.

Another challenge for KCPP is the importation of more animals from outside the community; local rescue groups are bringing in smaller dogs from other communities.

KCPP is also struggling with 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.