

COMMUNITY AFFECT ON PITT COUNTY ANIMAL SERVICES

HOW THE COMMUNITY OUTLOOK AFFECTS PITT COUNTY ANIMAL SERVICES

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### **Abstract**

While there has been a considerable drop in the number of homeless animals in the United States over the past decade, the problem has not yet been fixed. Unfortunately, out of fifty states, North Carolina has the fifth-highest euthanasia rate. While spaying and neutering is the best course of action, not everyone adheres. In Pitt County, all animals adopted from the Pitt County Animal Shelter (PCAS) are spayed or neutered before they go to their new homes which have dramatically cut down on the homeless pet population. While a great number of people adopt from open admission shelters, some do not because of the beliefs, or lack thereof, about the animals, people, procedures, and practices at these shelters. Currently, PCAS has several programs aimed at educating the public, yet these programs are not well known nor are they assessed for efficacy. Likewise, programs are in place to provide the animals with enrichment, yet they do not know if the public is aware of these programs. The purpose of this research project is to assess what members of Pitt County know about PCAS, how they find out about available animals, why they adopt from shelters, and what they would like to see PCAS focus on in the future.

Research question 1: How are shelter patrons learning of the animals available for adoption?

Research question 2: What are the experiences of shelter patrons?

Research question 3: What does the community know about Pitt County Animal Services?

Targeting two populations, shelter patrons and community members, data will be collected using surveys at the shelter via face-to-face interactions and online using Qualtrics, respectively. Both surveys will include Likert-type questions and open-ended questions and the data will be analyzed using SPSS and hand-coding. PCAS will use this information for two purposes, both

of which will aid them in their daily operations. First, they will use the adoption information to better focus marketing efforts. Second, they will use the community information to address shortcomings and build better relationships with the surrounding community members.

*Keywords:* animal shelters, open-admission shelters, community, involvement, survey

### **How the Community Outlook Affects Pitt County Animal Services**

Animal shelters focus on providing the animals they house with five freedoms including freedom from hunger or thirst, freedom from discomfort, freedom from pain, injury or disease, freedom to express (most) normal behavior, and freedom from fear and distress (North, 2017). An open admission shelter is not in exclusion when it comes to offering these five freedoms to their animals, they will not turn away any animal that encounters their facility. However, an open admission shelter will practice humane euthanasia in different cases because an open admission shelter is more commonly known as a “kill-shelter”. Because of this, there is a stigma surrounding open admission shelters due to the ignorance concerning the factors affecting the shelters. Shelters, including Pitt County Animal Services, focus on implementing programs to help battle the stereotypes they face. These events offer benefits to both the community and the shelter by providing ways for the community to stay active. An animal shelter engaging themselves with the public’s opinion of the opportunities and services can spark a change in the existing stigma and allow for a better connection between shelters and communities while tackling the negative connotation that is attached to their name. Through this paper, resources and research will be provided as a helpful tool for both Pitt County Animal Services and other animal shelters looking to increase their community involvement.

With the implementation of varying tactics, data regarding shelter animals has changed rapidly. These tactics included “...the implementation of shelter sterilization policies, changes in sterilization practices by private veterinarians and the passage of local ordinances implementing differential licensing fees for intact and sterilized pets...” in the beginning and eventually expanded into raising adoption rates and the cultural shift in the US where many families consider their pet dogs as “family members” (Rowan & Kartal, 2018, p. 1). With sterilization

practices put into place, the expanding population of roaming dogs was put to a halt. Trap neuter return (TNR) programs are also benefiting local dog populations. In India, neighborhood dogs were captured humanely and sterilized which resulted in a population decrease of 28% and a significant decrease in cases of rabies (Reece & Chawla, 2006). Another factor affecting the change in shelter data is the cultural shift around shelter animals. According to Rowan and Kartal (2018), “the percentage of owned dogs that were adopted from shelters and rescues has increased from 15% to over 35% in just ten years while the percentage of pet dogs bred at home has dropped from 5% to under 1% over the same period.” (p. 14). With these percentages changing, shelters are becoming a more and more popular place to look into when considering adopting a new pet.

These varying tactics can in place have provided many benefits to the shelters who have adopted them into their practice. However, most of the programs do not have an evaluation component for the tools being implemented. According to White, Jefferson, and Levy (2010), it is imperative to have a division of the programs to evaluate these tactics in order to assess their effectiveness and compare them across programs. By providing analyses, shelters can focus their efforts on what will benefit their facility the most and what will be the most cost-efficient plan of action.

With perceptions of animal shelters changing they need to take advantage of the public's interest. In a research study conducted by Mornement, Coleman, Toukhsati, and Bennett (2012), there was a focus on how much information the survey participant knew about the care shelter animals received and the different assessments used to initially evaluate the dogs. They also discovered that “implementing rigorous assessment protocols and volunteer-run basic training and rehabilitation programs in-house, shelters can remove dogs unsuitable as pets from the

adoptive pool, provide dogs with the skills necessary to be good companions, and price them accordingly, to improve the public's perception of the dogs shelters supply." (Mornement et al., 2012, p. 16). It was also concluded that "effective advertising, education, and marketing strategies that inform the public about such screening procedures and training programs could increase interest in, and enhance perceptions of, shelter dogs to make them more desirable and successful companions." (Mornement et al., 2012, p. 17). Open admission shelters should focus on providing opportunities that not only educate but also directly involve the public so the negative connotation surrounding them decreases. Part of involving the public is paying attention to the volunteers involved at the shelters. Volunteer retention is a big issue many shelters face and in order to combat that it is important to incorporate effective management of unpaid volunteers. According to Shin and Kleiner (2003), the effective management of unpaid volunteers is "crucial in instilling and maintain the spirit of volunteerism among individuals" and the management includes "planning, developing, recruiting, training, information management and volunteer recognition or appreciation" (p. 1). Volunteers desire to be valued and their recognition is key in retention rates (Davis, 2013). Having happy volunteers allows for a positive image of a shelter to be portrayed to the community as a volunteer will not only support but advocate for their volunteering site.

There are two different kinds of opportunities that a shelter can participate in with the surrounding public, outreach or engagement. An outreach program can "...connect a segment of the community to services, resources or information that those residents may already want, but do not know how to find." (Best Friends Animal Society, 2018, p. 46). The other option is an engagement strategy that works towards "...creating a dialogue around an issue and building relationships." (Best Friends Animal Society, 2018, p. 46). In a research study done by Weiss,

Patronek, Slater, Garrison, and Medicus (2013), they looked at the effects of a variety of programming that was implemented in many different shelter settings. These included “high-volume, high-quality spay/neuter services, adoption promotion, new fund-raising strategies, community engagement, and support for free-roaming cats” and the main connection in each program was the focus on community partnership and a shared goal to improve live release rates (Weiss, Patronek, Slater, Garrison, & Medicus, 2013, p. 234).

One program example is the use of a gala to raise awareness of the shelter and possibly raise funds in the process. According to Latham (2016), The Evanston Animal Shelter located in Evanston, Illinois held a gala, “The Tails in Bloom Gala”, which expected more than 100 people to attend and included a silent a live auction, local musicians, and speakers. They also looked to partner with local businesses and local college students to raise money (Latham, 2016). The goal of the gala overall was to highlight community engagement and get the public involved and educated on their shelter’s growth. Another program example includes partnering with local public schools to benefit each group. In Chagrin Falls, Mary Mantz worked with her students on a project entitled *Designing for Animal Welfare in Our Community* and the goal of this project was to create a service-learning project for children in third and fourth-grade classes (Zande, 2007). By incorporating curriculum lesson plans and a community need, both groups were able to benefit, the children were able to participate in a real-life service project while the shelter received many donations.

Pitt County Animal Services is working to gauge the community involved with their shelter. By surveying shelter patrons in a study titled “How the Community Outlook Affects Pitt County Animal Services”, the PCAS can understand where and to whom they should focus their

programs. This allows the shelter to begin to implement an evaluation component so they can continue to target the correct demographic that will impact their shelter the best.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Through the study “How the Community Outlook Affects Pitt County Animal Services”, Pitt County Animal Services (PCAS) will learn how their programs are reaching the public in Greenville, North Carolina. By receiving feedback from shelter visitors, they can begin to observe the benefit of the services they provide. Through the feedback, they can also learn ways to improve and revise their current strategies to continue supporting the community. Since no previous research has been conducted to compile this information, Pitt County Animal Services will collect a baseline of their current performance. This will not only benefit the shelter, but it will benefit the surrounding public, as well as the shelter’s information that will improve to tailor to its guests.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

This study was focused on shelter patrons' experience. Shelter patrons included anyone who visited Pitt County Animal Shelter during the hours the shelter is open to the public. This study was conducted voluntarily; each patron had the option to not participate, as well as end their participation at any time during the study. In total, 196 participants were picked through random selection. For participating in the study, each shelter patron received a five-dollar gift card.

#### **Materials**

The study utilized a Qualtrics survey that included 16 questions (see appendix for a copy of the survey questions). The surveyors used a tablet to record the survey responses.

### **Procedure**

The research study received an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Shelter patrons were approached after they had time to experience the shelter environment. After an introduction to the surveyor, the patrons were then asked if they would like to participate in a survey about their experience at the shelter that day. If they showed interest, they were informed they would receive a five-dollar gift card in exchange for their participation. The participant was handed a tablet to read over the guidelines for the survey if requested. With the Qualtrics survey preloaded, a surveyor then asked the questions aloud and filled out the survey. The patrons were encouraged to ask questions, if necessary, as the survey was completed. After submitting the survey, the patron received the gift card for their cooperation and feedback. If the shelter patron declined participation, they were thanked for their consideration and time.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

After the survey was concluded and the data collection was completed, the responses were tallied. Overall, each shelter patron was visiting the shelter to see the animals in general or they were looking to see a specific animal, both totaling to 150 response selections. The most used resource for Pitt County Animal Services included both the county website and Facebook (67 responses), the PCAS Petfinder page (66 selections), and the PCAS Petango page (64 selections). As for the overall impression of Pitt County Animal Services, 113 shelter patrons had an excellent experience and 62 patrons who had a good experience.

Each survey responder rated their impressions of different areas on the shelter grounds and the areas that had excellent as the most chosen answer were clean facilities, availability of pets, reclaim fees, helpful office staff, helpful kennel staff, helpful volunteers, helpful field services staff, friendly office staff, friendly kennel staff, friendly volunteers, knowledgeable office staff, knowledgeable kennel staff, knowledgeable volunteers, and knowledgeable field services staff. The remaining areas that were ranked more commonly selected as good were public hours and adoption fees.

In regard to the shelter's response time to assist a shelter patron, each area including at the front desk, in the animal areas, on the phone, through email, and in the field, all took less than 30 minutes to respond in most cases. However, both on the phone and in the field had patrons who selected that it took three or more hours to respond to them.

When asked how easy it was to find a volunteer or staff member to help the patron in the kennel area, the majority of the responses (117) said they strongly agree, meaning it was very easy to find help. Concerning navigating the shelter on their own and finding what they needed, most patrons (111) chose they strongly agree. Lastly, when asked if the shelter staff and volunteers were helpful and knowledgeable in finding an animal that would best fit their home, 89 shelter patrons selected strongly agree, 43 selected agree, 3 selected somewhat agree, 41 selected neither agree nor disagree, 1 selected somewhat disagree, 2 selected disagree, and 4 selected strongly disagree.

When attending the shelter most shelter patrons reasoning for not adopting a new pet when they were in search of one was either they were browsing and none of the pets caught their eye (172 responses) or the animal was already adopted (112 responses).

It was also found that the majority of the survey responders would recommend PCAS to friends and family who are interested in adopting a pet, with 151 selecting definitely yes. 32 selected probably yes, and 1 selected probably not. The responses might or might not and definitely no did not receive selections.

The survey included two open-ended response questions asking what the shelter could do to improve the public's opinion of the shelter and if there was anything else the shelter patron would like to add. After compiling the responses, this is what was recommended. Seventeen responses included changing the shelter's public hours to accommodate families. There were 13 responses in the advertising and marketing area. These responses included events in public (2), flyers in campus apartment mailboxes/campus events, more exposure/social media presence (6), improving the webspace, market walking adoptable pets more and more dog outings, and increasing the awareness of the pets available, possibly by including more flattering pictures of the pets. Many recommended increased sanitation practices, such as fixing the smell, cleaning up lingering urine puddles, adding a sink, and removing the bugs, specifically gnats. The sanitation category included eight responses. The next group consisted of issues involving the location. The suggestions included making the shelter easier to get to/more accessibility, the location next to a trash dump not being ideal, new kennels should face away from the road, improve the parking lot, more play areas for less wait time, adding an overhead awning for rainy days, increase the ventilation in the building possibly by adding windows, and removing the cages. 20 patrons recommended commented on something related to the location. In regard to the staff, patrons requested increased staff in the kennel areas, more friendly office staff, making sure the pick-up days are correct and paying the staff for travel time. There was a suggestion to lower the volunteer age and to educate the community about the Pitbull breed specifically, what a kill

shelter entails, and to encourage the “adopt, don’t shop” initiative. Better signage for the shelter was also suggested by seven different participants. Three participants suggested changing the practice to a no-kill facility.

Demographically, the majority of the patrons were in the 18-24 category (100 responses). 5 responders were under 18, 19 were between the ages 25-34, 13 were between the ages 35-44, 16 were between the ages of 45-54, 19 were between the ages of 55-64, eight were between the ages of 65-74, three were between the ages of 75-84, and one was 85 or older. 135 of the shelter patrons were female and 46 were male, 3 responses preferred not to answer. Most did not have children under the age of 18 in their household, with 136 participants selecting this choice. 20 participants had one child, 15 had two, 11 had three, one had four, one had five, and zero had five or more children in their household. The majority had an income of less than \$15,000 with 100 responses. 63 participants preferred not to say and each scale had from 11-18 responses. The level of education of the shelter patrons varied with most being high school graduates (26 responses), completing some college (87 responses), and having a college degree (45 responses). When asked to best describe where they live, the responses were as follows: 14 responses for a mobile home, 71 for a one-family house detached from any other house, 26 responses for a one-family house attached to one or more houses, 11 responses for a building with six or fewer apartments, and 62 responses for a building with more than six apartments.

Taking these responses into account, Pitt County Animal Services can work to enhance the experience of the shelter patrons. Gearing their efforts toward the college-age community will be beneficial seeing that most of the attendees of the shelter are within the college-age range. Also, with the shelter being in close proximity to the East Carolina University campus, putting advertisements and pushing their tactics to engage the college community will be

beneficial by finding new advocates for the shelter. With college campuses housing sorority and fraternities, Pitt County Animal Services can look to this demographic to find new volunteers and participants for their programs already offered. With the social media presence of PCAS only reaching a limited amount of shelter patrons, with a more active posting and bringing awareness to the existence of their social media pages, Pitt County Animal Services can begin to reach younger communities. By including the community demographics that are actively involved and advocating through them, PCAS can effectively begin to reach new patrons.

### **Discussion**

As animal shelters continue to collaborate and incorporate new ideas, more impacts can be made by giving the public opportunities to partake in both outreach and engagement programs. Through these events, it is important to continue to document these findings (the impact each program provides) to prove them to be beneficial to any shelter looking to make an influential change. By improving the community's perception of animal shelters, especially open admission shelters, a new understanding of the shelter's goals can be portrayed by educating and bringing awareness to the public.

A multitude of activities and events can be put into place at animal shelters. As mentioned previously, galas can be held to help raise money and awareness for the shelter (Latham, 2016). Shelters can partner with local schools to benefit both the students and shelter animals by incorporating fundraising and awareness into a multi-grade school project (Zande, 2007). Promoting trap neuter return programs also directly benefits the surrounding animal population that has not been admitted into the shelter and this indirectly affects the shelters by inhibiting the breeding of any roaming animals (Rowan & Kartal, 2018). These examples provide evidence that shelters are becoming more creative in the events they host to advocate for

the shelter animals as well as the shelter itself. Educating the public of a shelter's opportunities, such as the screening procedures and training programs, is also crucial in advocating for the shelter animals and can make them more desirable for adoption (Mornement, et al., 2012).

The programs implemented, however, are only as helpful as the data that is collected regarding how well the event performed. By incorporating a section of a shelter to evaluate the tactics, a shelter can focus its efforts on implementing the programs that perform well by looking at a report of each programs' effectiveness. (White, Jefferson, & Levy, 2010). These analyses can help guide a shelter to a cost-efficient and most beneficial program to continue promoting.

When the community becomes involved with a shelter, a large area falls under the work of volunteers. However, volunteer retention can be a big issue that shelters face. One way to tackle this issue is through the effective management of unpaid volunteers (Shin & Kleiner, 2003). Volunteers desire to be valued and recognizing their efforts at a shelter is another tactic for retaining their efforts to help (Davis, 2013). Volunteers carry their image of the shelter with them through their daily lives so maintaining happy volunteers is essential for a positive image of the shelter in the community. A happy volunteer can serve as a positive advocate for the shelter environment and can recommend volunteering at the animal shelter to any community member they come into contact with.

### **Conclusion**

As Pitt County Animal Services and other shelters look to expand their shelter resources and engagement in the surrounding community, it is important to understand how the current tactics being implemented are performing. Without this knowledge, it is hard to address the issue at hand. Once the shelters understand their impact on the public and how their events/programs

are affecting the community, they can then begin to implement new ideas to reach the areas that are being overlooked.

In the past, shelters have focused on trap neuter return (TNR) programs and implementing small fundraisers to benefit the shelter. As workers and volunteers continue to create new programs, different and exciting tactics can be put into practice such as a gala to raise money and educate the community on the work the shelter does. It is important to collaborate with both the public involved with the shelter as well as other shelters to learn what can best help the shelter thrive. Through outreach and engagement programs, the shelters can enhance their interaction with the people to gain advocates and to educate the people on any misunderstandings or misbeliefs. Forming a connection is not only important in that it benefits the shelter, but it affects every animal that comes through the shelter's doors. People have a way of communicating outside of the shelter and by raising awareness and bringing more people into the shelter environment, the animals can be advocated for in the hope that they can find a forever home.

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### Appendix

1. Why were you visiting the shelter today?
  - a. Answer choices include: “I was visiting the see the animals in general, I wanted to see a specific animal or animals, I was surrendering and animal, I dropped off donations, I was looking for my lost pet, I was volunteering at the shelter, I was there because I had a notice from an animal control officer, Other”
2. Have you ever used any of the following resources?
  - a. Answer choices include: “PCAS Petango page, PCAS Petfinder page, County website, Facebook, Instagram, Heard from a friend/family/neighbor, Public event/fundraiser, TV/Newspaper/Radio, Other”
3. What is your overall impression of Pitt County Animal Services based on this visit?
  - a. Answer choices include: “Excellent, Good, Average, Poor, Terrible”
4. Please tell us your overall impression of us in each of the following areas. (Each area allows for choices including “excellent, good, average, poor, terrible, or N/A”)
  - a. Clean facilities
  - b. Availability of pets
  - c. Public hours
  - d. Adoption fees
  - e. Reclaim fees
  - f. Helpful office staff
  - g. Helpful kennel staff
  - h. Helpful volunteers
  - i. Helpful field services staff

- j. Friendly office staff
  - k. Friendly kennel staff
  - l. Friendly volunteers
  - m. Knowledgeable office staff
  - n. Knowledgeable kennel staff
  - o. Knowledgeable volunteers
  - p. Knowledgeable field services staff
5. How long did it take for shelter staff or volunteers to assist you in the following areas?  
(Each area allows for choices including “Less than 30 minutes, Over 30 minutes, Over one hour, Over two hours, 3+ hours, or N/A”)
- a. At the front desk
  - b. In the animal areas
  - c. On the phone
  - d. Through email
  - e. In the field
6. Please select the most accurate answer for each question. (Each area allows for choices including “Strongly agree, Agree, Somewhat agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree”)
- a. How easy was it to find a volunteer or staff member to help you in the kennel area?
  - b. How easy was it to navigate the shelter on your own and find what you needed?
  - c. The shelter staff and volunteers were helpful and knowledgeable in finding an animal that would best fit my home.

7. If you visited the shelter in search of a new pet but decided not to adopt one, what was the reason?
  - a. Answer choices include: “I was just browsing and none of the pets caught my eye, The shelter did not have the specific breed or type of cat or dog I wanted, The shelter did not have the species I wanted, The adoption fee was too much, The paperwork was too lengthy, I do not want my new pet to be spayed or neutered, I do not like the facility, I did not get enough assistance from the staff and/or volunteers, I had an unpleasant experience with the staff and/or volunteers, Animal was already adopted, Does not apply to me”
8. Would you recommend PCAS to friends and family who are interested in adopting a pet?
  - a. Answer choices include: “Definitely yes, Probably yes, Might or might not, Probably not, Definitely not”
9. What can we do to improve the public’s opinion of our shelter?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add?
11. Age
  - a. Answer choices include: “Under 18, 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-74, 75-84, 85 or older”
12. How do you identify?
  - a. Answer choices include: “Male, Female, Prefer not to answer”
13. How many children under the age of 18 do you have living in your household?
  - a. Answer choices include: “None, One, Two, Three, Four, Five, More than five”
14. What is your approximate annual household income?

- a. Answer choices include: “Less than \$15,000, \$15,000 - \$24,999, \$25,000 - \$34,999, \$35,000 - \$49,999, \$50,000 - \$74,999, \$75,000 - \$99,999, \$100,000 - \$124,999, \$125,000 - \$149,999, \$150,000 or more, Prefer not to say”
15. What level of education have you completed?
- a. Answer choices include: “Complete some high school, High school graduate, Completed some college, College degree, Completed some postgraduate work, Master’s degree, Doctorate, law, or professional, Prefer not to say”
16. Which of the following best describes where you live?
- a. Answer choices include: “A mobile home, A one-family house detached from any other house, A one-family house attached to one or more houses, A building with six or fewer apartments, A building with more than six apartments”