

One Welfare article

Animal Relinquishment

Relinquishment of animals is a costly issue in this country. We live in a “microwave” and “throw away” society and unfortunately, animals become part of that mentality for some people. While most pet owners cherish their pets and would do anything for them, others will kick a pet out of the house with the first accident on the kitchen floor. Turning them over to municipal shelters and private rescues cost tax dollars and takes large amounts of private donations, which are used to care for, neuter, treat and move these animals to new homes.

Daily, veterinarians are confronted with the issue of animal relinquishment. Animal owners will frequently ask for advice on many topics related to giving up a puppy, turning in an older dog, dealing with a chronic health-issue dog or getting rid of an exotic animal. Animal shelters and rescues will be taking calls from people who are overwhelmed with a pet either because of personal circumstances, financial situations or poor selection on the part of themselves or the organization that placed the animal with them. Working to identify the issues and looking for solutions can be a challenge to both the veterinary and shelter communities.

Trying to get to the prospective animal's owner before they acquire the pet is the best way to prevent the wrong selection that may lead to relinquishment. This can be difficult because of “impulse” buying of pets, especially puppies and sometimes exotic species. Pet stores and advertisements for cute puppies are very tempting, especially for young children who are attracted to “those cute little puppies”. This is where education by veterinarians and shelters is critical to informing prospective animal owners about the process for choosing the “right” pet.

Behavior is the primary reason that animals are relinquished to shelters. Valiant efforts can be made to retrain and rehome these animals, but it can ultimately lead to euthanasia in some cases. Early training for owners, puppies, new pets and the community can assist in keeping these pets from being relinquished. If they are given up for other reasons, training early can lead to an easier selection for a second home. Veterinarians frequently offer puppy classes and many shelters encourage new adoptees to attend obedience and training classes. Continued emphasis on proper socialization and obedience training can keep more pets in original homes for the long term.

Spaying and neutering is a key to reducing the number of dogs and cats that land in shelters. While the appearance of low-cost clinics has created challenges for the relationships between veterinarians and animal welfare groups, access to these services has helped ease the euthanasia rate in shelters. Educating the low income client about the need for neutering can be challenging. Cultural issues and family practices may interfere with their decision.

Exotic pets can be a true issue. How many times have we gotten a call from a client where they ask what to do with the skunk they just purchased or the snake their child just acquired or the rabbit their child brought home from school? These are frequently impulse purchases where there was no consideration for the kind of special care needed for these unique animals. Shelters are frequently

unprepared to handle these unusual creatures. Rescues and rehabilitators are available sometimes for these animals, but owners may release them into the backyard which is never a good idea. Making sure that animal owners not “acquire” these exotic species without careful consideration is critical. Children will tire easily of tedious care and it becomes a parental task to feed the snake!

Veterinarians all have encounters with shelters humane societies rescues and rehabilitators that are challenging to our practices. Some rescues groups are great, others are difficult, some have questionable placement practices; many may refuse to euthanize any animal for any reason. Identifying groups and organizations in your community can be a huge asset in the proper placement of these relinquished pets.

Finally, we all have clients who HAVE to give up their pets for various reasons...elderly, moving to smaller quarters, financial challenges, etc. Most practitioners will work to find homes for these beloved pets. Referring these clients to those rescues who have best practices or those exotic animals to species rescues that will give them a proper environment is important not only in helping the animal but educating the client about the need for careful consideration of the next pet. There are food pantries for clients in financial straits and we may be able to point them to helpful resources, until the client gets back on their feet.

Relinquishment is not an easy or painless process. Identifying issues, working in our practices to educate our clients and working with the community can help decrease the number of relinquished pets (and euthanasias). These collective strategies can assist in finding homes for those that need new homes.