



Richmond SPCA: Behavior Helpline & Behavior Classes



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Behavior Helpline and Behavior Classes



In 2001, recognizing behavior issues as the number one cause of pet relinquishment, the Richmond SPCA began developing programs designed to encourage owners to resolve their pets' behavior problems and keep them in their homes.

Today, owners struggling with barking, lunging, clawing, litter box training, housebreaking, and a whole host of other behaviors that threaten the human/animal relationship can call a Behavior Helpline, receive one-on-one consultations or enroll in any of a rich agenda of programs that teach manners and provide bonding activities for people and their pets.

Stats

In 2006, the Richmond SPCA Behavior Helpline web page was consulted 22,591 times. In addition, the Helpline phone fields an average of 10 calls per day.

How Cool is That?

We're impressed with the way the Richmond SPCA took a proactive approach, identifying the major cause of pet relinquishment and developing programs designed to address it.

Adopt or Adapt

A Behavior Helpline is easy and inexpensive to start and there are many on-line resources, mentioned in this profile, to help you get started. As for the training classes, you could start in rented or donated space using outside trainers.

Behavior Helpline and Behavior Classes: The Whole Story

In 2001, the Richmond SPCA began working actively to eliminate euthanasia of healthy cats and dogs in their facility and throughout the city. Recognizing that it would first be essential to reduce the number of animals coming into shelters and knowing that behavior issues were the number one cause of owner relinquishment, the Richmond SPCA leadership instituted programs designed to help pet owners solve basic behavior problems and keep their animals.



What's Behind the Program

Today, the Richmond SPCA operates a free phone and e-mail based Behavior Helpline to assist pet owners with a variety of the most common behavior issues. Calls and e-mails are returned during business hours, Monday through Friday. When needed, the Helpline staff invite people to bring their dogs to the facility for one to three hour consultations. A \$20 donation is requested but not required for this service.

The Richmond SPCA also offers a rich agenda of behavior classes for dogs and dog owners. These classes, ranging from basic manners classes to fly ball and agility, are designed to teach dogs basic skills and repair damaged dog/owner relationships through activities in which they have fun together. Classes are taught in the Richmond SPCA Training Center. They meet one hour a week for seven weeks and cost \$90. Richmond SPCA adopters get a special \$80 rate.

Finally, when individualized training is needed inside the home and/or on a regular basis, the staff refers owners to reward-based trainers in the area with whom they have had experience and in whom they have a high level of confidence.

The Behavior Helpline and Behavior classes are key components of Project Safety Net, a sweeping program agenda, adapted from programs at Monadnock Humane Society (West Swanzey, NH) and Maricopa Animal Care & Control (Phoenix, AZ) to address the most frequent causes of relinquishment.

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Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

According to Sarah Babcock, the Richmond SPCA's Chief Director of Education and Training, all you really need to start a Helpline is an e-mail address or phone number with an answering device and a trained person to return the calls. Answering the calls can be a part-time function, assuming call volumes are not too high. The answering device or Voice Mail system is very important so the Helpline person isn't dealing with multiple calls at once. In addition, a callback system (as opposed to a "live" hotline) allows the Helpline person to gather resources and collect her thoughts before speaking with a caller about a specific problem. The Richmond SPCA Helpline started with a part time person. Marie Tripton who was hired in 2003 to manage the Helpline fulltime, recommends testing the market to see what level of staffing will be required. "Publish the number and see what kind of response you get." she advises.

Although it is preferable to have a dedicated space for Behavior Classes, Babcock recalls that the Richmond SPCA's first classes were held in a small 12' x 12' conference room in the old facility. "We just pushed back the tables and chairs. You have to be creative. PetSmart offers classes in the aisles. If they can do it, so can you." Rented or donated space is always an option. If there is no-one on staff

to teach the classes, it is possible to contract with an area trainer. According to Babcock, the important thing is to make resources available to help people become better caregivers and maintain the bond between people and their pets.

Timeline

A Helpline and Behavior Classes can be established almost immediately provided you have the right people and can make time for them to do the work.

Step by Step

Here are the steps the Richmond SPCA followed to establish the Behavior Helpline and Behavior Classes.

1. They hired a knowledgeable person to get the behavior programs going.

According to Richmond SPCA CEO Robin Starr, Babcock was one of the first people hired to move the organization to No Kill. "Getting the pet retention programs in place was essential," Starr recalls. "We had to have a well qualified person to lead that effort." Babcock, who was working toward her Master's degree in animal psychology at the time, came to the Richmond SPCA with strong credentials, having studied with Jean Donaldson at the San Francisco SPCA and graduated valedictorian from the SFSPCA Academy for Dog Trainers. In addition to handling the training of dogs up for adoption in the shelter, Babcock formalized the Helpline and began developing the Richmond SPCA's extensive agenda of classes for the public.

When it became evident that Babcock could no longer handle both the training and the Helpline, Starr hired Tripton to take over the helpline. According to Tripton, who had handled a helpline for Bank of America, knowing how to talk with people is every bit as important as having accurate and useful information about animal behavior. "You have to be completely non-judgmental and able to make the caller feel good about reaching out," she says. "Listening skills are essential. You have to be able to get beyond the emotions and help the owner identify the actual problem – Is the dog really aggressive or just a normal puppy? Are we talking about a nerd or a Cujo?" To learn more about operating a humane society helpline, Babcock and Tripton referred to Pet Behavior Protocols by Suzanne Hetts, founder of the Dumb Friends League (Denver, CO) behavior department. According to Babcock, Hetts gives detailed information about how to handle various kinds of calls, including when to refer to a professional behaviorist.

2. They gathered resources and developed forms to track Helpline calls.

The Richmond SPCA gathered behavior information from a number of reliable sources, including the Dumb Friends League, which makes behavior sheets on an exhaustive list of issues available for download on their website (www.ddfl.org). Staff members use these sheets themselves and hand them to people who come into the facility.

At first, helpline calls were written on little slips of paper that invariably got lost. Babcock created a system to track calls, including the nature of the problem, the information given, and any follow-up that takes place. Callers are always encouraged to call back if they think of additional questions or have additional problems. All calls are logged in a large spreadsheet for follow-up, statistics and reporting purposes. Data collected includes species (dog or cat or other), breed (or approximate breed if animal is a mix), age of the pet, spay/neuter status, how long owned, Richmond SPCA alum or not, owner's contact information, description of the problem, what has been tried and any other relevant information (medical conditions, changes in pet's environment, other pets, etc). Notes on the discussion and any recommendations made are noted. According to Babcock, it is always better to ask lots of questions and get more data than you think you might need, than to fail to ask about something important.

3. They added consultations.

In 2005, Tripton noted that more and more Helpline complaints were going beyond the basics like barking, litterbox training, and housebreaking. People were calling about issues like resource

guarding, separation anxiety, and dog aggression that were harder to diagnose without seeing the animal. Tripton added one to two hour consultations to give the behavior staff the chance to observe the problem first hand and work with the owner to address it. For example, if an owner calls about a dog that is aggressive toward other dogs on leash, the behavior staff will set up a safe, controlled situation in which one of their own dogs is walked passed the offending dog so its behavior can be observed. The owner is then given tips for addressing the behavior on the spot (i.e., teaching the dog to sit and watch the owner instead of barking or lunging — and then rewarding this new “better” behavior) and has the chance to practice the new skill, over and over again, in front of the staff.

4. They created a 15,000 sq. ft. Training Center in their new building.

In 2003, the Richmond SPCA opened the Robins-Starr Humane Center, a new facility created from a renovated tobacco warehouse. Because behavior classes for shelter dogs and public behavior programs to increase pet retention were key components of the plan to eliminate the killing of healthy homeless animals, the new building included a state-of-the-art Track & Training Center. The bright open space can be divided to accommodate two classes at once. Babcock acknowledges that the well equipped facility has made it possible for her to develop an extensive program agenda. She advises, however, that a lot can be done in much more modest space or even in rented or donated facilities.

5. They trained the staff

According to Babcock, it is important to have behavior information, especially techniques for such basic challenges as housebreaking and litter box training, reside in more than one person. All Richmond SPCA staff attended regular training sessions using one Dumb Friends League sheet for each session. With this basic training, any staff person can answer basic questions in accordance with the organization’s philosophy instead of having to seek out the “experts” each time. Since the staff becomes a better resource for the organization and the public get faster answers to their questions, this is a win-win situation. Plus, training encourages all members of the staff to give out the same or very similar advice, which reduces confusion or mixed messages.

6. They made behavior resources easily accessible.

While getting the word out is essential, Babcock cautions that it is important to get the resources in place before you begin advertising. “There was a story about our Helpline in Southern Living Magazine before we had everything in place,” she recalls. “We had calls from all up and down the eastern seaboard. It was great, but we weren’t quite ready for the extra call volume and it was crazy for a few weeks.”

While owners calling the Richmond SPCA to surrender an animal for behavioral reasons are directed to the appropriate resources, the goal, according to Babcock, is to get to people long before the relationship deteriorates to that point. “It’s important to make resources available when the problem arises,” Babcock says. “By the time an owner decides to relinquish, the bond may be broken.”

It takes just one click on the well-publicized Richmond SPCA Website to get to the behavior resources. Dumb Friends League handouts on every pet problem imaginable, from barking dogs and digging dogs to cats that scratch the furniture or don’t use the litter box, are available to download. The rich class agenda is listed with detailed class descriptions and clear instructions for enrollment. For those who need more help, the Helpline phone number and e-mail address are listed.

7. They developed a list of professional trainers for those problems that require more help than they can give.

For easy reference, the Richmond SPCA lists local professional pet trainers on the back of the handout describing the Richmond programs. The listed trainers are all well known by the Richmond SPCA staff and all share the organization’s reward based training philosophy. To get to know trainers in your area, Babcock recommends the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT) as a good place to start. The APDT website is www.apdt.com.

Results

According to Babcock, there is no real way to measure the success of the Behavior Helpline and Behavior Classes.

"We do know that they are in use constantly," she reports. The Behavior Helpline receives an average of ten calls a day and the Behavior section of the website received 22,591 hits. "Of course, we don't know whether those people were at the point of giving up," Babcock says, "and we don't want to ask because we want the assumption to be that they will solve the problem and keep the animal."

Babcock is convinced that the behavior programs, which directly address the number one cause for the breakdown in the human/animal bond, are keeping animals in their homes and out of shelters.

Tripton notes that the public's level of behavior knowledge has increased considerably. "We're getting fewer and fewer of the routine calls," she says, "and more calls about the tougher issues such as aggression in dogs."

Critical Factors

- Dedicating sufficient staff time to the Helpline

Babcock cautions that every call must be returned promptly, that phone tag is a way of life, and that, once you reach the person, the call can be very time-consuming. In addition, there is no predictable pattern. Calls inevitably come in all at once. "You can have a day with two calls and a day with 20 calls," Babcock says. The effectiveness of the program will, she concludes, be directly related to the amount of staff time you can devote to it.

- Keeping control over the quality

According to Babcock, it is essential to train anyone on the staff who might be asked a behavior question so they either refer the question to the right person or give an answer that is in sync with the philosophy of the behavior department.

Babcock also cautions that even trusted sources on behavior may put out information that departs from the philosophy of your organization. "Be sure you read every word of everything you put on your website or hand out to people," she advises.

Thinking Outside the Box

In addition to promoting pet retention, the Behavior Classes raise awareness about the Richmond SPCA and its mission. According to Babcock, people who have had no other reason to visit the Humane Center come there for an agility or fly ball class and become donors or volunteers. The audience is further broadened through several animal behavior classes offered through the University of Richmond School of Continuing Studies that Babcock teaches at the Center.

How They Feel About What They Did

Babcock says that she is immensely proud of the work that has been done with the Behavior Helpline. "We have provided help where help was needed — and strengthened the bonds between many, many owners and their pets. Watching the bond between dog and owner blossom as they complete a class together, develop better means of communicating, learn tricks, or simply try out agility obstacles is even more gratifying. Once that bond is there and strong, you know that this pet won't be entering yours or any other shelter — and that the owner will be an advocate for your organization and reward-based training methods well into the future."

Running behavior programs is very challenging work, Babcock remarks, "but just one truly heartfelt thank you each week from an owner who was frustrated and now sees solutions can make all of the hard work seem worthwhile."

Some Words of Wisdom

Be Prepared For

- Emotional burnout

According to Tripton, it is very difficult to deal with Behavior Helpline calls all day every day, especially since some problems really can't be solved. She advises providing Helpline staff with people to whom they can go to discuss cases or just to vent. "Some calls do try my patience," Tripton admits. "Sometimes I just have to back away and remember that, at least, the person did reach out for help." Babcock adds that Helpline staff should have other duties or experiences that let them see the organizations' happy endings. "If you're just dealing with problems, you can get a very skewed view."

- Receiving all kinds of pet-related calls on the Helpline

Because the Helpline number is readily available, people call when they see an animal in trouble or even to grieve about the death of a beloved pet. According to Tripton, you have to be prepared with referrals to help with all kinds of problems – "and sometimes you have to be there just to listen."

- Some people don't really want help

According to Babcock, some people want to tell you all the problems with their animals, but they really don't want to hear solutions. You have to be very creative in getting them to stop venting and start listening.

Next Steps

The Richmond SPCA is in the process of developing their own behavior sheets to host on their website.

In keeping with the idea of cross-training staff and ensuring that the messages delivered to the public by various departments are similar, the Richmond SPCA has recently moved the Admissions/Surrender department and the Behavior Helpline into one department, sharing resources and personnel. According to Babcock, this will minimize burn-out in any one individual and will provide opportunities for education and creative brainstorming between individuals on the trickier cases.

Richmond SPCA: Thumbnail Sketch

Richmond SPCA
Robin Starr: CEO
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www.richmondspca.org



The Richmond SPCA is a No Kill humane society dedicated to the principle that every life is precious. Since 1999, the organization has worked to make Richmond one of the safest cities in the United States for homeless animals. In addition to adopting a new and progressive operating model that includes aggressive rehabilitation, adoption, spay/neuter, pet retention, and humane education programs, the Richmond SPCA developed a formal cooperative arrangement with the City of Richmond to create an environment in which all animals ending up in shelters would have a much stronger chance for survival. As a result, nearly 5,000 fewer homeless animals lost their lives citywide (Richmond SPCA and Richmond Animal Care & Control combined) in 2006 than in 1999 (a 77% reduction) and the live release rate in Richmond climbed from 46% to 76%.

The Richmond SPCA provides training and consultation as a partner in ASPCA® Mission: Orange™, a national initiative to train and support other cities across the country interested in becoming humane communities.

Stats

From Oct. 1, 2005 to Sept. 30, 2006, the Richmond SPCA:

- Saved the lives of 4,325 animals through adoption, re-homing and behavioral assistance programs.
- Rehabilitated approximately 2,300 sick and injured pets
- Achieved a citywide save rate of 76%, giving Richmond one of the lowest euthanasia rates in the country
- Spayed or neutered 11,017 animals in their on-site clinic
- Delivered 8,512 hours of humane education to area school children and 3,060 hours of adult education

Staff

43 full time. 43 part time

175 active volunteers

Operating Budget

\$3.3million

Business Type

501(c) (3) nonprofit