

Thanks to advice from an admissions counselor at the Animal Care Centers of NYC (ACC), Melida Knibbs and her dog Das are still together. Now Knibbs is spreading the word about the agency's "unbelievably great" service.

Unnecessary Surrenders? Fuhgettaboutit!

A revolutionized approach to intakes is paying off for New York City shelters

BY JULIE FALCONER

The second time Das almost pulled her down during a walk, Melida Knibbs made a difficult decision. "I can't manage this dog anymore," she told herself.

The 80-pound mixed breed had come into her life three years earlier in a round-about way. She had adopted him from her son, who had gotten Das from a friend who, Knibbs was told, had saved the dog from an abusive situation. Das was sweet and loyal, but nervous about rain, heavy traffic and loud noises. If something spooked her on a walk, she'd make a beeline for home, dragging Knibbs behind her.

Knibbs had already fallen once on a walk. She feared she might one day break a hip. Plus, Das was a heavy shedder, and to

keep her neatnik husband happy, Knibbs had to vacuum dog hair from the furniture twice a day.

Her husband had been urging her to give up the dog, and Knibbs finally agreed. One day last summer, she loaded Das into her car and drove from her home in the Bronx to the Manhattan shelter run by the Animal Care Centers of NYC (ACC). She wept the whole way and started crying again when she and Das were in the shelter lobby.

Knibbs expected to simply answer a few questions and hand over her dog. And if she'd shown up at the shelter a year earlier, the situation might have played out that way. But by 2015, ACC had a dramatically different way of handling intakes.

A New Take on Intakes

For Aurora Piacentino, ACC senior manager of shelter operations, inspiration for the new approach to owner surrenders came from nearly 3,000 miles away. In spring 2014, she attended the HSUS Animal Care Expo and learned about the work of Downtown Dog Rescue, a Los Angeles nonprofit that runs pet-retention programs in high-intake municipal shelters.

"I must have filled up my entire notepad with notes and things to look into," she says. "Because they're dealing with populations very similar to ours, a lot of the same challenges, a lot of the same things that we see here. ... To see them making such a tremendous difference ... helped convince us that,

[life preservers]



ACC admissions supervisor Aleah Simpson says the agency's new approach to intakes allows her to combine her passion for helping animals with her interest in human welfare issues.

even though it's a huge step, this is the right thing for us to do."

ACC's own data underscored the need for change. With shelters and admissions centers in five New York City boroughs, the municipal agency takes in more than 30,000 pets a year. After several years of focusing its efforts on getting more animals into homes, ACC was seeing record numbers of adoptions. But the number of pets coming in was also growing.

Front desk staff had long witnessed some common themes behind pet surrenders: Owners couldn't afford veterinary care; they'd fallen on hard times and were moving to temporary housing that didn't allow pets; they didn't know how to resolve common behavior problems.

While staff members provided surrender prevention advice at times, "there seemed to be a barrier," says Aleah Simpson, ACC admissions supervisor.

One problem was that front desk staff didn't just handle intakes. They were responsible for returns to owners, license tag traces and other client services, says Simpson. "They were overwhelmed and didn't have time to sit down with clients and have those really in-depth conversations to see if there was anything we could do to help them keep their pet."

The environment in which staff-client conversations took place was also far from

ideal, says Piacentino. "This client is coming in; they're already not thrilled to be in this situation. There's probably some bit of self-consciousness or shame about the situation, and we're asking them to talk ... about what they're going through in a crowded lobby with no privacy."

Once Piacentino and her staff identified these barriers, a new vision began to take shape of an intake process that no longer resembled the DMV but was modeled after human counseling centers. Admissions counselors with stellar

people skills would focus solely on intakes, spend more time with each client and allow owners to tell their stories in a private office.

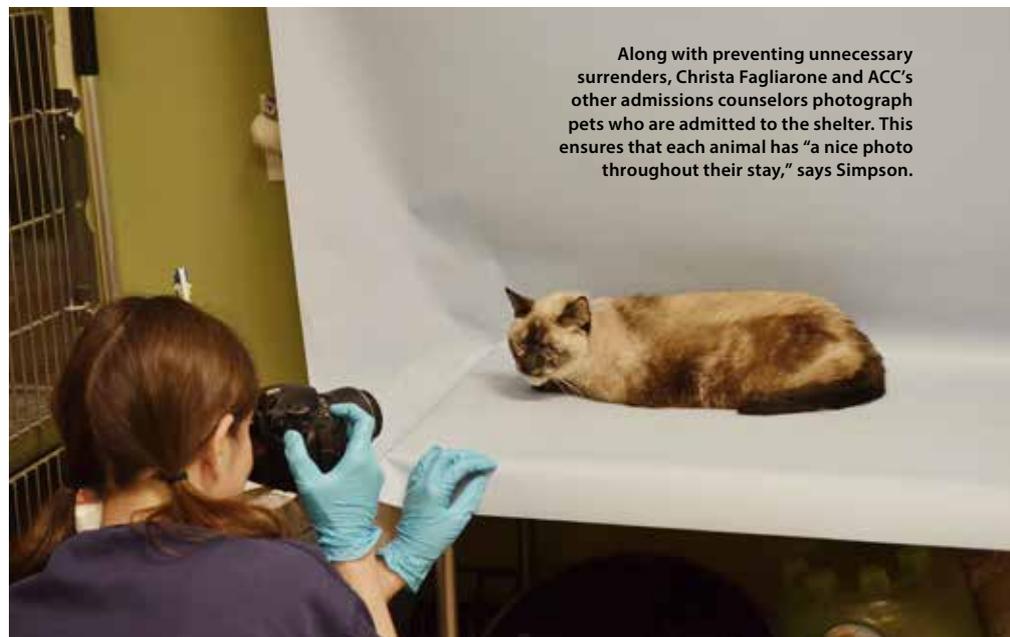
The pilot program launched in July 2014 with three counselors covering the busiest shifts at the Manhattan and Brooklyn shelters. The six-month goal was to keep 150 animals in their homes and to divert another 150 directly to rescue partners. "We blew through that right away," Piacentino says.

The numbers surprised even her: "I really was expecting the public to be not as willing to work with us—more sort of, 'I've made up my mind, this is what I'm going to do'—and that simply just wasn't the case."

With proof of the program's effectiveness, ACC was able to raise money to expand the program. Today, it has six counselors (three per shift) at each of its five locations.

By the end of October 2015, the new admissions department had kept nearly 1,400 animals from entering the shelter system and was averaging 93 prevented intakes a month.

Beyond the numbers, the approach has "helped us become more of a friendly, more



Along with preventing unnecessary surrenders, Christa Fagliarone and ACC's other admissions counselors photograph pets who are admitted to the shelter. This ensures that each animal has "a nice photo throughout their stay," says Simpson.

of an accessible place,” says Piacentino, “and more of a resource to the community versus ‘that scary shelter.’”

Hands Across the Boroughs

Like any new program, the admissions department faced some challenges.

In New York City, where space is at a premium, making room for private offices wasn't easy. “We definitely had to get a little creative,” says Simpson. “Moving rooms around, trying to repurpose offices. In our Brooklyn location, we had to build a little office on the side of the corner. It's smaller than we'd like, but it still gives that barrier of giving that privacy. ... If we're really swamped, we'll even go outside on benches just to speak with a client away from the rest of the clients.”

Some mental reconfiguring among the staff was also needed. “Not that our staff weren't empathetic,” says Piacentino, “[but] they were just used to just taking the animals in and not really interacting on that deep of a level with the clients.”

So ACC brought in Joyce Friedman of The HSUS and Jenny Coffey of the Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals. These licensed social workers helped train ACC staff how to navigate difficult situations and maintain a nonjudgmental attitude. “It's been a great shift for us culturally,” says Simpson, “to realize that, when provided with resources, people will actually keep their pets.”

Coffey, who manages the Help for Pets and People in Crisis program of the Mayor's Alliance, is a longtime advocate of services that address the human issues underlying animal homelessness and suffering. The Mayor's Alliance is now one of about 30 local organizations that ACC partners with to provide a range of resources to struggling pet owners.

While some situations have straightforward solutions, in more complex cases, it's not unusual to have people from six or more organizations emailing back and

forth, Simpson says. “The more we collaborate, the more lives we're able to save.”

For a cat who survived a fall from a high-rise apartment window, an ACC counselor sat down with the owners and completed an application for an ASPCA emergency vet care grant. When a veteran was evicted with her two dogs, ACC called on Matt Wildman, an HSUS employee and volunteer with the Mayor's Alliance. Wildman guided the owner through the process of having her pets registered as emotional support animals, while a rescue group fostered the dogs until she was able to find an apartment.

Clients who need extended support or home visits are often referred to the Healthy Pets Project of NYC, a nonprofit founded in 2014 by former ACC employee Jessica Martin. Coffey, who has been instrumental in getting the city's emergency housing providers to add rooms for people and pets, is



A kind woman rescued Precious from the streets but was struggling to afford the expense of a new dog. The Animal Care Centers of NYC connected the owner with the Healthy Pets Project of NYC, which is helping her with dog food and other necessities.

the go-to person when domestic violence victims need housing that will accept their pets.

“Even two years ago, I would think there wouldn't be options for so many of these



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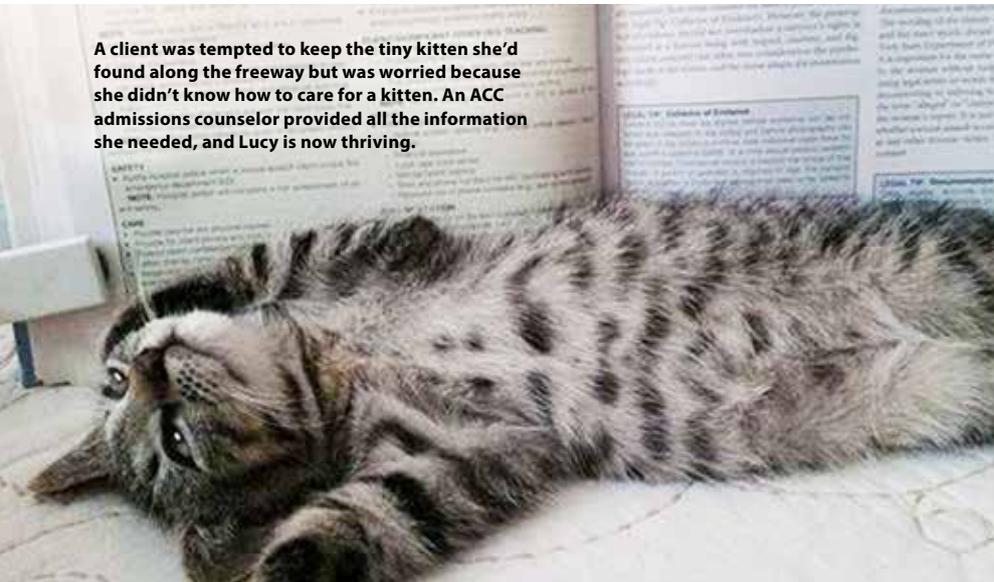




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A client was tempted to keep the tiny kitten she'd found along the freeway but was worried because she didn't know how to care for a kitten. An ACC admissions counselor provided all the information she needed, and Lucy is now thriving.



pet owners and their animals,” Coffey says. “And each day I feel like [Simpson] is coming up with more solutions. ... Everything has changed now, and it’s just a much more humane response for the animals definitely and also for the people.”

Let’s Talk This Out

A humane response doesn’t always mean keeping an animal in his home: It’s figuring out the best solution for the owner and the pet.

Sometimes this results in a “deferred intake,” where the owner holds on to the animal until a foster home is found. That was the case for Magic, a 10-year-old poodle whose owner had inherited him from her mother but was moving and dealing with other life challenges and could no longer care for him.

“As hard as we try to make it as nice as possible for animals, at the end of the day it’s still a shelter,” says Simpson. “For an elderly poodle, who was losing vision, there would be just too much stimuli and would be very stressful.”

Instead of immediate surrender, the owner agreed to keep Magic for 10 days, while ACC sent his details to 250 rescue groups. Poodle Rescue of Vermont stepped up, and Magic is now doing great in his new home.

In the case of a woman who couldn’t afford to take care of her three dogs, an ACC counselor worked with Martin of the Healthy Pets Project to craft a hybrid solution. The woman surrendered her two shih tzu mixes, who would be easier for the shelter to place, but kept her largest and oldest dog, a shepherd mix named Bear. Martin arranged for Bear to be neutered and vaccinated, and continues to provide his owner with dog food while she looks for a job.

Listening to clients’ stories and crafting solutions based on their individual situations takes time—about 20 minutes per client compared to 5 minutes under the old system. But that extra time is well spent, Simpson says, even if surrender turns out to be the best option. “We have a better picture of what this pet looks like in a home, so it’s easier for adopters to figure out if it’s a right match.” And an empathetic approach tends to elicit more honest answers, too—“once that person doesn’t feel like they’re going to be judged in that moment, they might open up and tell you the real situation,” says Simpson.

Work in Progress

ACC’s admissions department continues to evolve, fine-tuning its data collection system and working to fill gaps in the re-

sources it can offer clients. Right now, the biggest gap is in dog training assistance for reactive or undersocialized dogs, says Simpson. The agency has a list of trainers who offer discounted rates, but “that rate can still be jarring for our clients, especially when they have very limited resources for themselves. That’s one area where we feel we’re not helping as much as we’d like.”

Decreasing client wait times is another goal. When you’re dealing with emotional situations, efficiency can sometimes fall by the wayside, says Simpson. ACC is helping its counselors learn “to be able to take control of a conversation, and to do it in a way to make sure that person still feels heard, but to do it in a way that’s in an acceptable amount of time so we can service all the clients coming through our doors.”

Piacentino hopes to one day hire more counselors and move some intakes to an appointment-based system. She dreams of having a dedicated telephone hotline where people can talk through their issues in real time.

In the meantime, the agency regularly receives praise from clients like Melida Knibbs, who says she will never forget that moment last summer when ACC admissions counselor Christa Fagliarone led her and Das to an office.

Knibbs explained the reasons she was surrendering her dog: the heavy pulling on walks, the shedding, her fear of falling again. Then Fagliarone told Knibbs about a front-hook harness that would prevent Das from pulling as hard. She took out her computer and showed Knibbs the product on Amazon. She gave her the name of an anti-shedding shampoo and a better quality dog food that she could buy at Costco.

“Christa helped me see that maybe I can manage him ...” Knibbs says. “She said, ‘Would you be willing to try that?’ and I said, ‘Yes, I’m not ready to give up my dog.’”

As soon as she and Das got home, Knibbs ordered the harness. “It really works. He still pulls me because he’s heavy, but I can restrain him from pulling me forward.”



After they lost their jobs, Zeus' owners were worried they wouldn't be able to provide their young puppy with proper care. An ACC counselor connected the couple with the Healthy Pets Project of NYC, which paid to have Zeus neutered and vaccinated and provided dog food and toys.

The shampoo and new food have also cut down on Das's shedding, so Knibbs no longer needs to vacuum twice a day.

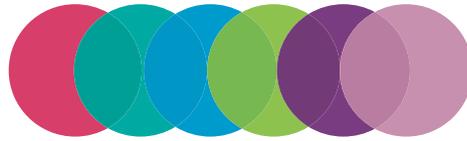
Her husband wasn't thrilled when she returned with the dog, but Knibbs says her experience at the shelter strengthened her dedication to Das. "This baby is not going anywhere. She adds quality to my life. She's my companion. If I'm up until 2 in the morning, she's there with me."

Four months after she visited the shelter, Knibbs' enthusiasm for the agency and its staff hasn't subsided. She wishes she had extra money to donate. When her work schedule eases up this spring, she plans to volunteer.

"I'm very indebted to them," she says. "If I'd walked in somewhere else, or [met with] another individual who was not as caring ... they could have just as easily have said, 'OK, just sign here,' and just take my dog. And then I would have regretted it, and it would have been worse for me and my dog." ■

Learn more about pet-retention strategies at animalsheltering.org/keep-pets-in-homes.

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