



Virginia Association of Counties

ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

VACo

APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 1, 2020.** Please include this application form with electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact Gage Harter.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Loudoun County
Program Title: "Busy Buddies"
Program Category: Organizational Development

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: John Sandy
Title: ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR
Signature: [Signature]

2020 VACo Award Submission

Organizational Development



Loudoun County Animal Services



Busy Buddies



Executive Summary

Loudoun County Animal Services (LCAS) receives over 2,400 animals a year, and as widespread spay/neuter efforts and access have taken hold in the community, the population of animals in need of sheltering has changed.



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Consistent with nationwide trends, more than 60% of homeless pets in Loudoun County arrive at the shelter in need of additional medical and/or behavioral intervention prior to adoption. Consequently, the team combined a set of staff-supervised, volunteer-driven, in-kennel enrichment programs to reduce stress in dogs which had historically led to behavioral decline, increased rates of contagious disease and euthanasia.

LCAS developed “Busy Buddies,” which carries minimal cost, and is almost entirely volunteer-operated, to significant success. Euthanasia over the past four years has dropped 21%, disease outbreaks have dropped by 60%, and length of stay has dropped by 9 days. Volunteers report high levels of satisfaction with the youth-friendly craft programs, and spots for volunteer opportunities now routinely have a wait-list. Initiating programs to preserve the mental well-being of the animals in shelter custody has had lasting impacts on the staff, the volunteers, and the dogs, and the program has since been expanded to provide enrichment for animals of all species needing temporary refuge at Loudoun County Animal Services.



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The Challenge

Loudoun County is required by the Code of Virginia to take in stray dogs, and through Department policy, must receive any unwanted, lost, homeless, seized or abandoned dog belonging to a Loudoun County resident. In the region, there is a high demand for adoptable dogs, which enables many pet owners to find new homes for their pets when needed, prior to engaging Loudoun County Animal Services. The resulting effect, is that the animals most often in need of shelter, are those who need additional support in order to be readily adopted. Young, untrained, physically healthy dogs, in particular, are received in disproportionate numbers and, as a result of their energy levels, suffer the challenges of a kenneled environment most significantly.



In dogs, frustration from extended confinement commonly results in excessive barking, mouthing, and jumping up, which compromises their adoption opportunities, and sometimes leads to frustration aggression, and irreparable behavioral deterioration. As the County maintains a commitment to public safety and lifesaving, LCAS set out to establish a rigorous mental enrichment program for the dogs in its custody to maintain a safe and adoptable canine population at the shelter.

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Program Description

Loudoun County Animal Services had been working with animal enrichment programs for a number of years, when, in 2016, the Department determined that a more proactive approach to managing the mental health of dogs was necessary. Dogs arriving at the shelter were increasingly behaviorally complex each year - demonstrating behaviors that were unmanageable by staff and volunteers, and undesirable by adopters. In spite of staff's best efforts, dogs who were once easy-going, well-loved family pets, were becoming frustrated and unruly - jumping up and barking at passersby, grabbing the clothing of volunteers, and uncontrollably tugging the leash during walks. The stress of going from couch to concrete kennel led to suppressed immune systems, and repeated outbreaks of kennel cough and GI upset ran through the facility. While there was a robust volunteer presence to walk the dogs, the challenging behaviors and chronic illness meant that their ability to maintain the dogs' adoptability was limited. Faced with continuing high rates of euthanasia, LCAS made the decision to create a structured, permanent, volunteer-driven enrichment program to combat the issues being seen at the shelter, and reduce kennel stress, poor coping behaviors, and disease.



A proactive approach to managing the mental health of dogs was necessary.



Program Description

Staff worked to outline a program that could be easily employed by volunteers with varying skill levels, and engaged the community in solution building. The team started with feeding all dogs from puzzle bowls, to slow down the twice daily feedings and allow the dogs a less frenzied meal time. However, beyond this, employee time was limited, and the need to engage volunteers from the outset was necessary. LCAS began to include enrichment building in the volunteer recruitment and training curriculum to great success and developed a list of activities that could be volunteer led, including:

Busy Boxes

Volunteers were asked to bring their own materials, including empty cereal boxes and newspaper, while the Department provided kibble and dog treats. The volunteers then stuffed the boxes with crumpled paper and treats to provide the dogs with a natural, safe, shredding activity that could be done in their kennels. This activity is part of the regular volunteer schedule, but is also held as a special event (such as on Thanksgiving Day afternoon) to engage the community in a simple, enjoyable activity helping homeless animals.



K9 Storytime

While it had been previously thought that more exercise was better for confined animals, research has shown that quiet social time with kenneled dogs was substantially more valuable in helping them relax and feel less anxious. Children of all ages and abilities are continually visiting the shelter to learn about the facility, practice their reading skills, and spend time outside of the kennels (no physical contact needed) reading to the dogs awaiting homes. This aspect of the program has proven especially popular with homeschooling groups.



KONG Stuffing

KONG rubber dog toys have been provided to LCAS at no charge, through the KONG corporation's charitable giving program. At the beginning of their shifts, volunteers routinely spend time socializing with one another, while stuffing KONGs with canned dog food to later be provided to the dogs on a schedule. Similar activities, such as coating Frisbees with peanut butter and hanging them from dog kennels, are also handled by volunteers, and well loved by the dogs.



"Animal shelters often resist enrichment programs because the staff already have so much to do. But when enrichment gets more dogs out of your shelter faster, you'll realize that enrichment doesn't just save time, it saves lives."

- Amy Martin, Operations Manager

Program Description

Monday Field Trips

This program allows members of the public to take dogs out of the shelter on Mondays, when the facility is closed. This allows dogs to have a break from the shelter, and get exposure for adoption, while engaging new volunteers looking for a short-term service commitment. This program is extremely popular, and routinely maintains a wait-list. The information gleaned from these one-day field trips is very valuable, and gives prospective adopters more information on how the dogs might be in a home, and out around town. Once returning from the field trip, the dogs are typically happy and relaxed, and substantially less stressed in their kennels.



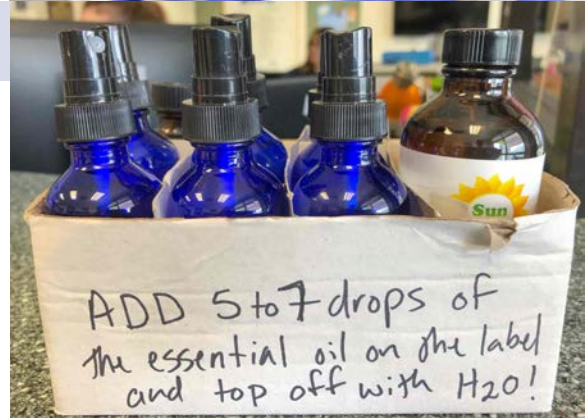
Doggy DIY Time

The Department is contacted multiple times a week by youth and community groups wanting to support the organization. Historically, many of these groups would bring items such as homemade dog treats, that, while thoughtful, were frequently unusable due to sheer volume, or spoilage or storage challenges. Volunteer groups interested in service activities are now given a list of age-appropriate tasks that can be done at home, and this method provides LCAS with a continual supply of homemade dog toys, while minimizing training burdens on staff and maximizing community engagement.



Olfactory & Auditory Stimulation

Each day of the week is dedicated to holistically enriching the shelter environment through the two primary senses used by dogs. Daily, staff alternate between olfactory and auditory stimulation. Staff introduce novel and pleasant smells into each dog's kennel via essential oils or food spices. Alternately, the shelter plays a mix of soothing music, nature sounds, audiobooks through the shelter wide intercom system and adult volunteers read to dogs experiencing high levels of stress.



Busy Buddies is, in part, so successful because it has become a structured part of everyday care for sheltered dogs. Staff utilize and appreciate the daily volunteer engagement, as their focus on Busy Buddies has reduced the compassion fatigue associated with euthanasia and shortened the amount of time between canine intake and adoption. It was recognized that volunteers were seeking meaningful engagement opportunities with homeless pets, and this program has enabled them to feel empowered and helpful, while making a noticeable change in the dogs' behavior, and simultaneously reducing euthanasia that would historically result from stress-induced behavioral issues.

Fiscal Impacts

The Busy Buddies program has operated at **almost no expense to the County**. A volunteer coordinator was already in place at LCAS, and with the launch of the program, she was able to recruit and focus volunteers for these specific tasks. Through use of an Amazon wish list, friendly, proactive social media postings, and refocusing those wishing to collect items for the shelter, the overwhelming majority of toys, feeder puzzles, food and treats were donated, and many of the other activities are being sustained through recycled materials, such as empty cereal boxes, discarded tennis balls from local gyms and collected newspaper. Donations typically arrive on a continuous basis with minimal solicitation, but in the event that a county wanted to replicate the program without requesting donations from the community, the program is still extremely low cost.

For an annual intake of around 1,000 dogs, all of the program's supplies could be purchased for less than \$2,000

However, much of the success of Busy Buddies is a result of engagement with the community. An animal services facility that promotes transparency and engagement with local citizens is better able to build trust and support the mission with the aid of volunteers. Asking the community for something as simple as an empty cereal box might sound strange, but it offers local supporters a chance to understand the facility's focus on sound welfare and mental health management for the animals in its custody. Expanding transparency around the mission and vision of the shelter will create lasting relationships and empower future conversations around the shelter's needs and allow for an all-County approach to humane animal sheltering and reducing euthanasia.



Items	Year One	Subsequent Years
KONGs	\$350	\$70
Peanut Butter*	\$260	\$195
Frisbees	\$50	\$10
High Value Treats*	\$550	\$413
Leashes & Harnesses for Monday Field Trips	\$250	\$50
Total	\$1,460	\$738

*edible item cost is reduced through targeted donation drive campaigns

Sample budget for 2 year operation of Busy Buddies for a shelter with 1,000 dogs/yr annual intake. Year two projected to be lower, due to pre-existing materials.

Results & Success



Busy Buddies was formalized into a Department-wide program during a time when shelter staff recognized the need for optimal community interactions, increased lifesaving and modernized programs. In addition to Busy Buddies, LCAS adopted more progressive and customer-friendly policies regarding pet adoption and animal care. However, Busy Buddies is largely believed to be the primary factor behind the Department's significantly improved metrics.

Length of Stay

Length of stay is a standard tool of measurement in animal sheltering, simply calculating the number of days between an animal's arrival, and their departure. Prior to the inception of Busy Buddies, a dog was at Loudoun County Animal Services for an average of over 20 days prior to adoption. In the years since LCAS adopted the new enrichment protocols, Length of Stay has dropped to an average of less than 12 days until adoption, a clear indicator that happier, healthier, more relaxed dogs are adopted more quickly. With the Virginia Department of Agriculture estimating a single daily cost of care at \$17.40, and an average of over 600 dogs adopted each year, **Busy Buddies is estimated to have saved Loudoun County Animal Services more than \$88,000 in the past four years.** With the reduced stress and shorter length of stay, there has also been a significant decrease in contagious disease, resulting in reduced medical expenses relating to the treatment of contagious disease.



Live Release Rate

From 2016-2019, compared to 2012-2015, the number of dogs surrendered by local citizens, and found stray in Loudoun County is almost the same (2,795 compared to 2,987). However, the live release rate has improved dramatically. Busy Buddies was implemented as the staff moved in more progressive directions for the animals in their care and with the newfound prioritization of enrichment, volunteer participation spiked and public support of the shelter's animals soared. Following LCAS' new initiatives, **1,079 more dogs left the shelter alive than in the four years prior and live release rate for canines went from around 77% to nearly 93%.**



Results & Success

Volunteer Engagement



Busy Buddies was a key element in the reinvigoration of the volunteer program. Historically, the program struggled with retention, and was ineffective at short-term engagement opportunities for those with interest, but limited time to give. Busy Buddies' Doggy DIY Time and Field Trip Mondays allowed service-minded groups and individuals to support the shelter on their own time, in their own communities, through supply drives, toy building, in-home activity programs and spending a day with a dog out of the kennels. Overall, volunteers report very high levels of satisfaction, and the regular volunteer pool has increased from 46 in 2015 to 174 in 2019. Using the Virginia Average Value of Volunteer Time estimate, in-shelter volunteers save Loudoun County approximately \$26.75/hour in labor costs, and this number does not include the hundreds of people who chose to volunteer at one-time or offsite events and activities.

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Closing Summary

Animal shelter enrichment programs are frequently overlooked by staff at municipal animal care agencies due to poor understanding of the benefits, perceived high cost, and unfounded concerns over complications (such as mess and lack of community interest). While enrichment programs can take quite a bit of staff engagement at the outset, these programs can be largely self-sustaining, and costs are negligible to non-existent. Busy Buddies has demonstrated that volunteer engagement with canine enrichment programs is worthwhile and a critical facet of humane animal sheltering. **Over 1,000 more dogs have left the shelter alive in the past four years than in the four years prior** and volunteers are lining up for ways to engage with the program, recognizing the value that enrichment has for animals in an institutional environment.



The Department has since expanded the program to all species, including guinea pigs, rabbits, cats, and pigs, and expects to see continues success with those animals as well. Enrichment may seem like an “extra” feature, but, it is an easily-implemented and cost-effective tool in saving lives and engaging the community with the mission of your local animal shelter.

