

Strategic Intake Customer Service Response Guide

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Introduction

This guide is designed to help animal shelter staff provide compassionate, resource-forward responses during challenging conversations with community members. Whether helping with a found pet or discussing a potential owner surrender, the primary goal is to support safe alternatives that keep animals out of the shelter whenever possible.

Staff at the front desk, call centers, and in the field are often the first and only point of contact the public has with the shelter. Each conversation is an opportunity to build trust, support people in crisis, and help animals stay safe in their neighborhood.

To be effective, we must move beyond phrases like:

- “Check the website.”
- “I’m not sure.”
- “That’s not my department.”

Instead, we must take an active, informed approach. This means knowing your local community resources—such as pet food pantries, low-cost veterinary care, behavior support, tenant advocacy services, and foster or rehoming networks—and being ready to connect people to them.

Effective diversion doesn’t mean saying “no” — it means saying, “Here’s how we can help in a different, and often better, way.” With the right information and a compassionate approach, the public can become powerful partners in lifesaving.



Together, we can meet people with empathy, reduce unnecessary admissions, and build a stronger safety net for pets in our communities.

Common Owner Surrender Responses and Resource Examples

“I can’t afford to take care of my pet anymore.”

“I’m sorry you’re going through this. You’re not alone—many people face tough times. Before surrendering, there may be support available to help keep your pet with you, like pet food banks, low-cost vet care, or temporary assistance programs. I’d be happy to connect you with local resources/set you up with our pet food bank/ give you some supplies.”

Resource links:

- [Norfolk – Hampton Roads Pet Resource Guide](#)
- [Resources | LA Animal Services](#)
- [Owner Assistance - Pasadena Humane](#)

“I’m moving and can’t take my pet / I inherited a pet and can’t keep it / Landlord wants me to get rid of my pet.”

“I understand how stressful moving can be. If you’re open to it, I can help you look into pet-friendly housing options or rehoming tools that allow you to safely find a new home for your pet without taking them to the shelter. We also may have items to help you make things more manageable for the time being like supplies, vet care help or foster options.

“You also have rights as a tenant to keep your pets. Let me send you some resources to housing groups that will understand your rights as a tenant and work with your landlord.”

Resource links:

- [Rehoming Your Pet | Rehome by Adopt a Pet](#)
- [Pets for Rehoming | Asheville Humane Society](#)
- [Rehome Your Pet | Williamson County, Texas](#)
- [Support for You and Your Pet | My Dog Is My Home](#)
- [Tenant Power Toolkit](#)
- [Housing Provider Resources | Pet-Inclusive Housing Initiative](#)

“My pet has behavior problems.”

“Thank you for being honest—that’s tough, and you’re not alone. First, can you describe the behavior you’re seeing? When does it happen?”

“Many behavior issues can be improved with some guidance. We can help connect you with low-cost or free training resources, behavior hotlines, or even virtual consultations with trainers. We also have some written resources available on the most common behavior issues and how to mitigate them.”

Note: If the described behaviors pose a safety risk, please notify your supervisor for next steps. You may want to deploy an animal services officer to pick up the animal.

Similar topic:

“I just don’t have time for the pet anymore.”

“I really appreciate your honesty. If you’re open to it, we can suggest ways to keep your pet mentally and physically stimulated even with a busy schedule. If rehoming is the only option, we can help you get your pet directly to their new home, avoiding a stressful shelter environment.”

Resource links:

- [Top-Rated Dog Training at Home on 1-1 Video Calls | GoodPup](#)
- [Behavior Resources | Asheville Humane Society](#)
- [Dog Behavior Resources | Women’s Animal Center](#)
- [Dog Training | Best Friends Animal Society](#)
- [Behavior Resource Library | Richmond Animal League](#)

“My pet doesn’t get along with other animals.”

“That’s a common challenge. Can you describe what you see when your pet interacts with other animals?”

“Sometimes managing the home environment or using basic training techniques can make it possible to keep everyone safe and happy. We have resources on pet introductions and separation techniques. If that doesn’t work, and you are able to safely keep the animals separate temporarily, we can help you with rehoming resources so you can rehome your pet instead of surrendering to the shelter.”

Resource links:

- [How to Successfully Introduce Two Dogs | Animal Humane Society](#)
- [Sibling Rivalry: When Canine Housemates Don’t Get Along | Fear Free Happy Homes](#)
- [How to Introduce New Cats to Your Home | Humane World for Animals](#)
- [Introducing a New Dog to the Resident Cat | Richmond Animal League](#)
- [Introducing a New Dog to Your Resident Dog | Richmond Animal League](#)

“We just had a baby; our pet isn’t happy about it and can’t keep him/her anymore.”

“Congratulations on the new addition! How are your pets reacting to the new baby? Can you describe what you see? Many families are able to keep their pets with some support—like baby-pet integration tips, safety planning, or help with temporary care during the adjustment. We can share those resources with you.”

Resource links:

- [Dogs and Babies | ASPCA](#)
- [Cats and Babies | ASPCA](#)
- [Top Ten Tips for Baby on the Way | Family Paws](#)
- [Helpful Tips for Before and After Baby Arrives | Family Paws](#)
- [Introducing a New Dog to Children | Richmond Animal League](#)

“My pet is old/sick, and I can’t care for them anymore.”

“I’m so sorry you’re facing this. We’d like to help you keep your pet if you’re open to some ideas. Pets that have been in a home environment for most of their lives have a hard time adjusting to a shelter environment, especially older animals that require special medical care. Pets that are older and have medical needs also have a harder time getting adopted. Depending on the situation, we may be able to guide you to low-cost vet clinics, hospice care resources, or organizations that support senior pet guardians. If that is not possible for you, let me send you information on how to rehome your pet, including contact information for senior pet rescues.”

Resource links:

- [Assistance With Veterinary Care | San Diego Humane Society](#)
- [Financial Assistance for Veterinary Care | San Diego Humane Society](#)
- [Resources | Muttville](#)
- [Pet Financial Assistance Resources | Best Friends Animal Society](#)

“My child lost interest in the pet.”

“That happens more often than you think. Many families go through this and find a way to continue caring for the pet as a family responsibility. We can share some enrichment ideas or rehoming tools if needed.”

Resource links:

- [Keeping Kids Interested | MSPCA-Angell](#)

Found Cat Responses and Resources

When someone finds a litter of kittens or notices a roaming cat, their instinct is often to bring the animal to the shelter. This response comes from a place of compassion and concern. However, in many cases—particularly with healthy outdoor cats or kittens under 8 weeks of age—the shelter may not be the most appropriate or beneficial situation.

Shelters can be stressful for young or unsocialized animals, and in the case of neonatal kittens, separation from their mother too early can be life-threatening. Similarly, many outdoor cats are thriving community cats that are better off remaining in their familiar environment.

This section is designed to help staff navigate these situations with clarity, professionalism, and empathy. By asking a few key questions and offering informed next steps, you can empower community members to safely support these animals where they are—often resulting in better outcomes for both the animals and the shelter system.

“I found a litter of kittens.”

“Thank you for looking out for them! If they seem healthy and safe, the best first step is to monitor them from a distance—mom may be nearby and will likely return. Kittens under 8 weeks old do best with their mother. If she doesn’t come back or the kittens are sick or injured, we can guide you on the next steps and connect you to resources like bottle-feeding guides or foster support.”

Some questions to ask:

- Have you seen the mama cat?
- How old do the kittens look? [How to age kittens guide](#)
- Are they cold, crying, thin, or sick/injured?
- OR Are they chunky, quiet, warm, and healthy?
- Are they in an unsafe location? If so, move them somewhere more secure but nearby where mom can still find them.

Resource links:

- [Newborn Kitten Progression and Cat Age Chart With Pictures | Alley Cat Allies](#)
- [Neonatal Kitten Toolkit | Best Friends Animal Society](#)
- [Found Kittens | Best Friends Animal Society](#)

“There’s a cat living in my yard, and I think it’s a stray.”

“Thanks for caring. Many outdoor cats are community cats who are healthy and doing fine outside. If the cat looks well-fed and relaxed, it may not be lost. Shelters are generally not the safest place for a healthy cat, especially if it’s not social. We can help you determine whether the cat should be picked up and guide you on what to do next.”

Some questions to ask:

- Does the cat have a tipped ear? If so, it has been neutered, vaccinated, and is likely a community cat that is being cared for and more comfortable outside.
- Have you seen more cats around? We can guide you to a local TNVR service.
- Is the cat friendly and healthy? We can help scan for a microchip and help determine if this is a neighbor’s indoor/outdoor cat.

Found Dog Responses and Resources

Please refer to the [**Best Friends Friendly Finder Playbook**](#) for a step-by-step guide on how to assist these conversations.

If the finder is able and willing to assist, consider enlisting them as a temporary foster caregiver for the pet. If they are unable or unwilling to help, you can explore placing the animal in another temporary foster home or proceed with shelter intake, as appropriate.

It’s always best to intervene before the animal arrives at the shelter, as most people who bring in a found pet are likely to leave it there. Establishing a lost pet or resource helpline in advance can increase the chances of keeping the pet within its home neighborhood. Aim to make the process as convenient as possible for the finder—for example, by having an animal control officer deliver supplies, scan for a microchip, take a photo, and provide flyers on site. This proactive approach supports reunification efforts while easing the burden on shelter resources.

Best Friends does not endorse telling finders to just set dogs loose if they are unwilling or unable to keep them. This is not helping the public or the lost animal.

“I found a dog running loose in my neighborhood/a loose dog followed me home.”

“Thank you for helping keep them safe! Are you able to keep the dog safely contained in your yard or a spare room? If you can hold onto the dog for a bit, we can walk you through posting on local lost & found pet pages, scanning for a microchip, and we can help you create a flyer. Most dogs are lost

within a mile of their home, and often, the owner is nearby and searching.”

“I found a pet with no collar.”

“It’s great that you’re helping. Do you have a couple of minutes to talk about how we can help this dog possibly find his/her home?” We recommend checking for a microchip at a local vet or shelter. We can also provide you with flyers and links to online networks to help find the owner.”

“I found an animal who’s been dumped/abandoned”

“That’s heartbreaking to hear. First, may we ask why you feel that the animal has been abandoned? It’s possible that the animal is lost and not abandoned.”

- Where is the animal located currently?
- What is the condition of the animal?
- Have you tried (asking around, knocking on doors, etc.) to look for the owner?

If the person responds that they witnessed the animal being abandoned, then it’s appropriate to see if they are willing to be a friendly finder for this animal / bring in for impound / scan for a microchip.

“There’s a roaming dog who’s aggressive/scared.”

“Thank you for reporting. Would you be able to describe the behavior you are seeing, or are you able to send video or pics of the animal?”

“What is the dog’s body language, can you describe it for me?”

“Where exactly is the dog right now? Does it appear to be in any danger / or a threat to people/ animals?”

Note: If the animal truly is showing signs of aggression or is in an unsafe area, be sure to let the person know not to intervene and let them know that an animal control officer will be deployed.

“This dog has been roaming around the neighborhood for days.”

“Thanks for noticing. Long-term strays can still have families looking for them. If you can help by sharing photos or keeping them safe temporarily, we’ll give you the tools to search for their people.”

“I found this pet; can you take them now?”

“Thank you for helping them. We may have limited space, but do you have a little bit of time to talk

about how we can help this dog? If possible, sometimes a short-term hold by a finder (aka “[friendly finder](#)”) makes all the difference. We can give you the templates for found dog flyers, and print them out for you, if you would be willing to post them in your neighborhood. Would you also be able to post on NextDoor or on your social media? Any of these options will help us find this pet’s home, and we want to work whatever you are willing to do to help.”

Responses to Common Pushback

Difficult conversations are a routine part of animal shelter work, especially when individuals are distressed, frustrated, or overwhelmed. When addressing pushback from a patron, your role is to stay calm, show empathy, and guide the interaction toward a constructive, compassionate solution.

Key guidelines:

- **Stay calm and professional.** Keep your tone neutral and grounded, even if the patron is upset.
- **Acknowledge their emotions.** Let them know they’ve been heard.
- **Redirect toward support.** Highlight available resources and options that can lead to a safe, humane outcome for the animal.
- **Know when to escalate.** If the patron becomes increasingly agitated or uncooperative, do not attempt to manage the situation alone.

Escalation protocol:

If the situation does not de-escalate:

1. Remain composed.
2. Clearly and respectfully end the conversation.
3. Notify your supervisor immediately.

Sample language for escalation:

“I’m sorry, but I’m not able to assist you further at this point. Let me get my supervisor to speak with you.”

“My taxes pay your salary.”

“I hear your frustration, and I want to help as much as I can. While the shelter receives some public funding, our space and resources are still limited. Our goal is to keep pets out of the shelter, when possible, because it’s often better for the animals and more cost-effective overall. I’m here to help find a solution.”

“I don’t care; I’m not leaving with the dog/cat.”

“I understand this is a difficult situation and I appreciate you wanting to help this animal. However, we do have a process we must follow to ensure the best care for every animal. We’re not able to take in animals without going through that process first. I can walk you through the next steps and we can see how to best support this animal.”

“I can’t foster. I don’t have time.”

“I totally understand—fostering isn’t for everyone. Are you willing to help post flyers or let your neighborhood know this pet is lost? We can give you the templates for found dog flyers, print them out for you, if you would be willing to post them in your neighborhood. Would you also be able to post on NextDoor or on your social media? Any of these options will help us find this pet’s home, and we want to work whatever you are willing to do to help.”

“I don’t have time to help find the owners; that’s your job.”

“Thank you for taking the time to bring this animal to our attention. We know your time is valuable. Because shelters are stretched thin, community help is often the fastest and most effective way to reunite pets with their families. Even something simple—like posting a photo online or on a neighborhood app—can save a life. We’re here to walk you through it step by step if that helps.”

“I can’t foster this dog — I’m not allowed to have pets/my dog doesn’t get along with other pets.”

“Thank you for being honest—we definitely don’t want to put you or any animals at risk. If fostering isn’t possible, that’s okay. We can still support you with other ways to help, like sharing the pet’s info with rescues or rehoming networks. You’re not alone in this.”

“This isn’t my animal; it’s not my responsibility.”

“I totally understand—it can feel overwhelming to get involved. Even small steps, like keeping the animal safe temporarily or sharing their info, can make a big difference. We’ll do our part to support you however we can.”

“I’d rather they be euthanized than die on the streets.”

“I understand you care and don’t want the animal to suffer—that’s why we want to work together to find a better option. Euthanasia is a last resort, and there are often safer and more humane alternatives through community help, rescue groups, or even temporary care. Let’s see what’s possible first.”