



# CHAPTER 2:

## DEVELOPING YOUR “ASK” IN 6 STEPS

Why develop your ask? Let’s say that you want to save the lives of shelter animals. How are you going to do that through advocacy? Think about these questions: How can shelters increase lifesaving outcomes? How can your community help with lifesaving outcomes? Your plea “to save shelter animal lives” is very vague for an ask to a decision-maker. Your desire for immediate shelter killing reduction must be clear.

### What is an “ask”?

An “ask” is a specific request made to a decision-maker by a group of individuals. Sometimes it will be referred to as your “request” in this playbook.

The next 6 steps will take you through what you need to do before making an ask: you must define your issue, problem, or situation you want to change. Why define your issue? Defining the issue justifies and guides what other due diligence you need. Then you will identify potential solutions based on the problem’s causes and eventually narrow it down to what you will ask decision-makers to do.

**An ask could include:** Elimination of a harmful policy; updating or amending an existing policy; developing a new policy; allocating or committing resources within a budget; enforcing a policy; demonstrating accountability for policy commitments; carrying out the provisions called for within policies.

### Step 1: Define the problem.

What are you hoping to change? What do you want to achieve? What are you hoping to accomplish? The answers to these questions will help define the problem you will solve.

#### Examples of problems:

- Feral or stray cats (aka community cats) are entering your community’s shelter in high numbers.
- Your city has breed-specific policies in place that target certain breeds of dogs.
- Pet stores selling companion animals in your community.



**Starting points to define your problem:**

- A single problem/instance or a hypothetical problem will not provide enough evidence for the decision-maker to consider it more than an isolated incident. If you don't have a specific example, don't make one up.
- Anecdotal information from community members, employees, and other residents are helpful, but are not proof of the problem itself.
- Can you measure the issue? To assist others to comprehend the issue, can you provide a range or estimate?
- The problem you identify with your shelter or community's activity may be big or complicated. If you are not detailed and propose a legitimate solution, you may receive the wrong response or solution implemented.
- Breaking the ask into smaller asks/requests may make your greater goal more achievable.

**Get community support!**  
 Identifying your problem should involve the community. If no one in the community agrees, it will be hard to convince decision-makers to address the issue. If a problem and solution are found from outside the community or by groups without community links, the approach will seem self-serving and unlikely to succeed. Bottom line: effecting local change requires local stakeholders.  
**“Community”** includes both residents and local business owners.

Be careful not to include a solution in your attempt to define your issue.

For example: “Too many pets are homeless” defines the issue, whereas “the shelter is not big enough for homeless pets” prematurely offers a solution (more shelter space).

While you identify something as a problem or issue, others might not even think it exists as a problem. This playbook will take you through steps and tables to create an ask statement with a solution that proves the issue is real and not merely anecdotal.

**Table 1: Define your issue/problem.**

1. In 100 words or less, describe the community issue you want to fix and why tackling the problem will reduce shelter killing and increase lifesaving.
2. Which individuals and animals are most affected by the problem? Who needs your advocacy?
3. When did the issue begin? Is it new, continuing, seasonal, or year-round?
4. What evidence or data supports that this issue exists? Do police or animal control reports, numbers, statistics or other data exist?
5. Where is the issue happening? Is this a local, county-wide, statewide, multiple-location, or other regional issue? Is this happening exclusively in private/non-profit shelters, rescue groups, public shelters, or more than one?
6. Is this a sheltering, animal control, or field services issue? Are they government-provided or outsourced?
7. How do others view this issue:

	Agree this is a problem?	See the issue as controversial?	See the issue as partisan or political?	See the issue as divisive or unifying?
The community				
Elected officials				
Department/shelter				
Other organizations in the community				

8. Has the shelter, government, non-profit, or other entity tried to solve this issue in the community before? If so, how long has it been since the last attempt to resolve the issue and what was the result?
9. What is your timeline? Is there a deadline set? Is there an emergency?



## Step 2: Identify causes.

After defining the problem, identify its main causes. Causes demonstrate the issue. To identify causes you must determine how the situation occurred and why. Don't make the mistake of confusing correlation and causation.

List out and work through the most likely causes. Most problems have multiple causes and multiple solutions. Make sure you have facts showing the presence, scope, and effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the issue in your community and the proposed remedy to convince the decision-maker that your ask/request is necessary. You'll find causes' answers and prioritize them later. You can start broadly and narrow down as you explore your findings. The more specific and clear you make your issue/problem and cause, the better able you are to develop a solution and ask to reach your goal.

**Pro tip:** When evaluating causes and solutions, keep in mind that developing a new policy will not help if decision-makers don't follow through. Be prepared to remind and follow up on commitments.

### **Table 2: Identify the causes of the issue/problem.**

1. What causes are preventing the community from solving the problem or from increasing lifesaving?  
Are there multiple causes?
2. What causes do the most harm to animals in the community?
3. Of the causes you identified, does one need to be addressed or resolved before the others can be?  
Which causes could be solved more easily, which causes would be harder to solve?
4. Do you have evidence or data that these causes created the issue?
5. If the issue and causes are in more than one community, is every cause in every community or location or just some?
6. Are the causes created by a:
  - a. Current policy or law? If yes, what is it and how is it not working?
  - b. Current policy or law not being implemented correctly or effectively?
  - c. Gap between policy and implementation or application?
  - d. Gap in law and policy?
  - e. Cultural difference in the community?
7. Has this cause been attempted to be eliminated before in the community by the shelter, government, non-profit or other organization before or currently?
  - a. If yes, what was attempted? How much time has elapsed since the last attempt to eliminate the cause was made and what was the result or outcome?
8. Does the cause cost money or create a financial burden for the community or is it generating revenue?
9. If there is more than one cause, which cause are you going to try to eliminate now?



### Step 3: Find and evaluate solutions and alternatives and predict outcomes.

Remember, decision-makers are often approached with problems in the community or goals the community wants to reach. Unfortunately, not much will change if these issues and goals do not accompany a suggested remedy or solution. A persuasive policy recommendation will help the decision-maker understand your ask/request. The decision-maker must understand what you are asking of them, so be specific as you work through your due diligence process.

Why not ask for every solution to fix a problem? Because if everything is a priority, then nothing is. Long lists of requests or issues without solutions may overwhelm the decision-maker.

**Remember:** There may be multiple solutions to solve a problem. Due diligence will lead to various causes and solutions. Depending on political and policy developments, you may need to update your “how” to request a smaller, greater, or different action. Besides asking for the right solution, attainability is crucial. If the solution is too big right now, break it down. Also don't be afraid to increase your ask/request if given the opportunity.

Your solution must be quantifiable. Advocacy and policy changes have many elements, making it hard to quantify success at times. A straightforward ask makes measuring success and improvement easier. Investigate solutions for the causes you found during due diligence. Think through their short-term and long-term impacts. It will help you choose the best solution. Your solution must solve the problem and outperform alternative solution options.

Solutions and asks must include verifiable, measurable milestones. Milestones are short- to medium-term steps you take to attain your final ask or objective, and they can help you assess your timeline for your ask.

As part of your evaluation of solutions you will check the issues' history. Has your problem been addressed before? Maybe in another city? Successful or unsuccessful attempts to overcome this challenge can provide a lot of information and insights for your own situation. Be honest with yourself and others when evaluating your solutions.

**Pro tip:** Avoid becoming trapped in an echo chamber that blocks out other possibilities. Make sure your ask is backed by the best solution or action you find to avoid the decision-maker choosing a less desirable option. If your ask is too broad or unclear, you risk push back or inaction.





**Table 3: Identify and evaluate solutions.**

1. Is the cause you are trying to eliminate simple enough to find solutions for or will it need multiple solutions or actions? Is the solution specific or complex? Will it take multiple actors or actions?
2. What are the potential solutions to eliminate the cause? Will any potential solutions identified eliminate more than one of the problem's causes? What solution(s) will you propose to eliminate the cause? If the solution eliminates the cause, will the problem remain? What causes will remain?
3. Are there existing solutions being implemented to eliminate the cause already? If yes, why is there still a need for a new solution?
4. How long will it take to implement the solutions you pick to solve the problem? Are there incremental solutions that would assist in eliminating the cause? Are there other actions that need to be taken before any of these solutions can be implemented? Is there a temporary solution to any of the causes? If yes, should it be tried first?
5. If the issue and cause are in more than one location, is the solution applicable to all the locations?
6. If any of the causes are created by legislation or policy:
  - a. Have you reviewed the ordinances? Is new legislation needed to implement a solution?
  - b. Is there a workaround solution to the cause that can be achieved without legislative action?
  - c. Is there a specific or general law or policy that should be addressed?
  - d. Can eliminating, amending, or rewriting the current law or policy eliminate the cause? Would implementing or re-interpreting the current law or policy eliminate the cause?
7. What are the programmatic objectives/strategies that need to be put in place to achieve a higher lifesaving rate in this community?
8. How will the solutions improve access and delivery of services to shelter animals or animals in need? Which solution will most improve the lives of shelter animals or the animals in need?
9. What actions or resources are being used to achieve higher lifesaving rates in this community currently?
  - a. Does the best solution cost money? If yes, what is the estimated cost, is it affordable, and is there a funding source identified? If not, are there estimated cost savings?
  - b. Will existing government or shelter resources be able to fund the solutions to the cause?
10. How will the change caused by this solution be measured? For example, an increase or improvement, a decrease or reduction. Is there qualitative or quantitative data to prove that the solution would eliminate the cause?
11. Do you have case studies of policy interventions working in similar situations?
12. Are you certain that acting is better than doing nothing or pursuing a different course of action? Is progress worth the cost of change or doing nothing?
13. Can you think of any unintended consequences or negative outcomes that could be a result of this solution? Do your solutions have any side effects? Any drawbacks? These must be considered when offering solutions.
14. Does your answer solve the problem or just reduce it? Is this okay? If you simply tackle part of the problem, do you have to divide it into phases due to timing or other factors? Steps may help you achieve a goal by taking measures based on timing or resources to be analyzed later.
15. Does the community like it best? As you learn more about the neighborhood and the decision-makers you will approach with your ask, this stage may need to be repeated.
16. Has this solution been attempted before in the community by the shelter, government, non-profit or other organization? If yes, how much time has elapsed since the last attempt to implement this solution was made and what was the result or outcome?
17. Is the community/shelter/governing body aware of the solution? Do you expect them to support the solution?
18. Will the solution meet the deadline if there is one?



## Step 4: Identify problem solvers or decision-makers.

How can we be certain that we are approaching the appropriate decision-maker at the appropriate moment if we are unaware of how they operate? If you understand the legislative or regulatory process and how decisions are made in your town's political context, you'll be able to see each phase as an opportunity to influence and engage with decision-makers.

Remember: Each decision-maker, elected official, or government department/agency has specific powers and duties—also known as their jurisdiction. Knowing what they must do to complete their job, what they must not do to abuse their position, and what they may do at their discretion provides you more chances to engage them and make a difference. Likewise, many nonprofits and government agencies have oversight boards, committees, or commissions. Depending on their power, they may make the final decision. Like a legislative body, you need to understand their operations, agendas, and committee procedures. Gathering this information as part of your due diligence will pay dividends for you later.

Decision-making often follows a hierarchy. You often need to convince other decision-makers before the ultimate decision-maker. You need to work through this as part of your due diligence to ensure you are on the correct path. Be open to change as you identify your decision-maker and narrow ask or request.

To figure out who your decision-makers are you will be asking questions like these: Who can solve your problem? Who can enact your solution? Who makes the decision? What's the chain of command?

Basic knowledge of the way the local governing body or department functions is essential to a successful ask and advocacy campaign.

**Pro tip:** Often there is a chain of command in decision-making. Just because someone is lower in the chain, don't forget they may need to be persuaded too. They're still important and deserve respect.



### **Examples of what governments typically have control over:**

- **Regulations:** Tighten or loosen existing standards of pet ownership.
- **Subsidies and grants:** Modify the conditions of eligibility for public funding for rescue groups.
- **Provide services:** Give people vouchers for services so they can choose to use them when they might not otherwise.
- **Allot budgets:** Increase, cut or shift budgets or staffing of departments.
- **Information:** Require disclosures or ratings for certification for animal services.
- **Create or modify private and public rights:** Property rights or dispute resolutions.
- **Education:** Warn of health dangers or advocate for rabies vaccines.
- **Contracts:** Privatizing public services like animal control.



#### **Table 4: Determine who can solve the problem. Who is the decision-maker?**

1. Are you seeking a change at a private/non-profit shelter or public shelter?
2. If a private or non-profit shelter(s):
  - a. Do they have a governing body such as a board of directors who make policy or operational decisions or does the shelter director make those decisions? Does the shelter have a non-profit or “friends of” group that supports the shelter?
3. What department or government agency regulates shelters?
4. Does your solution involve changing public or private shelter, department, government agency policy or regulations or a law? If yes: What department or government agency oversees the shelter, animal regulations, animal services, or animal policy?
5. Does the shelter director, department or government agency director, city manager, mayor, or legislative body have the authority to implement the solution you are seeking?
6. Does a legislative body have jurisdictional control over where the issue is taking place, or is it a combination/joint powers?
7. Is the issue already reflected in any of the legislative, administrative, or department’s agenda or likely to be? Are there any competing law or policy solutions to this issue (existing or likely to be proposed) that you are aware of? Are there other animal welfare policy initiatives being discussed currently, or in the recent past, or expected soon by governing bodies in the impacted community? If so, would they solve the causes and issues identified?
8. Does your solution involve changing policy or activities in contracted services? If yes:
  - a. Are the contracts currently in effect? If yes, when were they approved and when do they expire? Who approves the contracts? Do they have to be voted on by the elected governing body?
  - b. If they have not been approved yet, when are they expected to be approved or voted on?
  - c. Is it an amendment or extension of a current contract or a new contract?
  - d. Is there or has there been a request for proposal (RFP) period?
  - e. Who reviews the proposals to make a recommendation to the person or body who approves it?
  - f. Do you have copies of the current, past, or proposed contracts or RFP?

### **Step 5: Developing and evaluating your ask statement.**

You have now identified your problem, chosen the cause you would like to solve, you’ve picked the best solution for solving the causes of the problem, and you have identified the decision-maker to make all this happen! What’s next? Your ask statement! Like an elevator speech or pitch it is a short summary of the problem, cause, solution, and what needs to happen.

**Remember:** As you craft your ask statement, just like when attempting to define your issue, do not leave room for ambiguity. Room for others to add their own biases or interpretations won’t get you where you are trying to go.

Start with your main issue or goal, then your desired action, and your proposed solutions. Make it clear. Don’t be afraid to change the sequence a few times to make it more natural if you need to. It does not have to be exactly in the order listed in the table.

Sometimes incremental asks or methods for distinct decision-makers throughout the chain of command may require you to modify your core ask statement.

**Pro tip:** Focus on what you’d like them to be in favor of rather than only what you want them to oppose.



**Table 5: Developing your ask statement**

<b>What: The main problem or goal statement.</b>	<b>Example:</b> We have an overabundance of community cats who live in our community. Community cats are being killed at the shelter.
<b>Who: The decision-maker, stakeholder, or institution with the power to act on this issue.</b>	<b>Example:</b> The Jonestown City Council has the power to implement an ordinance.
<b>Why: A short sentence or two that supports the goal and solutions.</b>	<b>Example:</b> Trap-neuter-return (TNR) is an animal-friendly, veterinarian-approved, and cost-effective method for keeping free-roaming cats safe, healthy, and out of shelters while reducing their numbers over time.
<b>How: The specific action you want the decision-maker, stakeholder, or institution to do, or goal you want to achieve. The specific action or change you would like taken to carry out your desired change.</b>	<b>Example:</b> Change the city ordinances to allow for TNR and community cat programs. Sponsor or vote for an ordinance to allow for TNR and community cat programs.
<b>By when: Name or list the measurable outcomes and the deadline or timeline.</b>	<b>Example:</b> June 15th is when the Council votes on new animal control contracts who would implement the CCP.
<b>The ask statement:</b>	<b>Example:</b> Jonestown kills more feral or community cats than other communities which costs more money in the long run than allowing for TNR would. The Jonestown City Council should change the ordinances to allow TNR prior to the next animal control contract approval so that a CCP can be implemented as soon as possible. As a result, there will be fewer cat litters, fewer kittens to fill the shelter, and fewer cats and kittens being killed.

**Remember:** Too complex or too many asks at once may waste your time. Prioritizing may require choosing between one large request and several smaller ones. Break down large initiatives that need a lot of planning and resources into smaller segments to make them easier to implement.

Just as you might need to rearrange the parts of your ask statement to make it flow more naturally, you must evaluate it to ensure that it is detailed, clear, and will lead to your desired outcome.

**Pro tips:**

- Use consistent terms, words, and meaning in your ask statement and extra research, documents, statistics, or handouts.
- Avoid unclear or generic words. Be concise. Speak simply.
- Avoid employing rhetoric to denigrate or mislead your opponent or yourself.
- Avoid using animal welfare specific terms, jargon or medical terms the average person wouldn't know.
- When speaking to decision-makers, less is more. If they ask you a question you don't know the answer to, don't make it up. Offer to get back to them with more information.





**Table 6: Assess the ask statement.**

Assessment criteria:	Yes/No	Why or why not?
1. Does your ask statement clearly express your desired action?		
2. Is it results oriented?		
3. Is it action oriented?		
4. Does it state who can make the decision or action happen?		
5. Does it state why they should make the decision?		
6. Does it give a timeline?		
7. Does it give a measurable outcome?		
8. Does it communicate: a. how the goal will be achieved? b. how the issue will be resolved?		
9. Does it use simple, clear words, phrases, and ideas to avoid misunderstandings?		
10. If completed, will it be: a. life saving for shelter and community animals? b. fulfilling for your organization? c. fulfilling for the community? d. fulfilling for the decision-makers?		
11. If you answered "No" to any of the questions, is that something you need to go back and fix in your ask statement?		

**Reminder:** Are you advocating or are you lobbying? Make sure you are aware of lobbying laws, rules, and regulations for your city and state. Make sure to follow any registration or disclosure requirements or guidelines.

**Pro tip:** Rehearse your ask and supporting information several times in front of the mirror and friends until you are comfortable with it. Have friends roleplay objections with you so you can think about how to overcome them.

