Case Study: Getting Pets Back Home

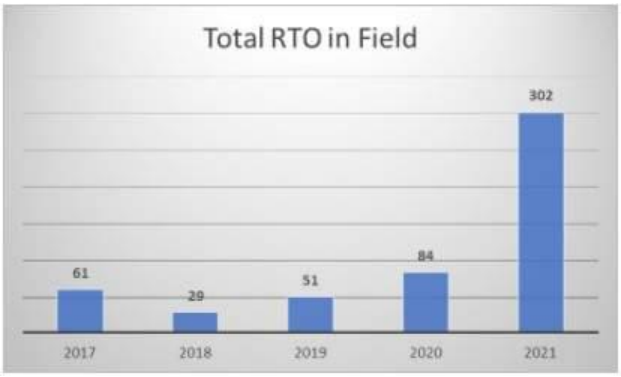
When a lost pet is found, the ideal outcome is identifying the owner and returning the pet home as soon as possible. Return-to-Home should be the primary goal of animal shelters and animal control officers for each lost pet they pick up. Tulsa Animal Welfare in Tulsa, Oklahoma has had a history of being a high-volume shelter with limited positive outcomes for animals. More recently, however, they have been making a concerted effort to shift their practices towards positively engaging the community and prioritizing getting pets back home to their families.

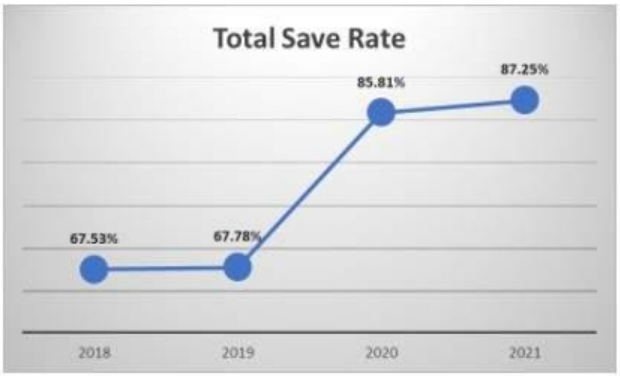
Before the focus on return-to-owner, the overall culture of the shelter and field team was to pick up all loose animals and bring them into the shelter. This practice obviously led to full animal control trucks, full shelter kennels, and a low save rate. “The overall culture was pick them up and bring them in”, said Kristin Barney, Tulsa's embed director.

Tulsa Animal Welfare sought out the assistance of Best Friends and in February 2021, received a full operational assessment. Tulsa also began participating in the Best Friends embed program in April 2021.

Kristin said this about why the change was made, “We wanted to not only do the community a service by bringing back their animals but encourage conversation upon meeting the owner to address what we can do to prevent this from happening again, as well as provide

additional help for any other issues. It gives us the opportunity to not only reduce our shelter intake, but be proactive in managing the complaints and use it as an opportunity to build a relationship."





As the field officers began to prioritize returning pets to their homes in the field, Tulsa Animal Welfare saw a dramatic increase in successful field Return-to-Home outcomes in 2021. Tulsa officers returned 302 animals to their owners in the field in 2021, more than three times the number of animals that were returned in the field in 2020 and almost six times as many animals as in 2019. Tulsa Animal Welfare's save rate has also been steadily increasing over the last few years, no doubt catalyzed by their new community-focused programming, such as field return-to-owner.

When asked about the challenges, Kristin said, "To begin the process, some officers were hesitant to participate in returning dogs back to their owners. As small victories started to happen, and the numbers showed that there was real, tangible impact, the officers started to buy in. Another challenge we faced was showing the community that our role in animal services is different than it has been in the past. We are going for a community-based model, but that takes the community for it to be successful. Leveraging the community to assist in our efforts has been a challenge because they

were used to the old ways. Most people are ecstatic about our return-to-owner efforts, but it is a new concept for some."