



# DOG DAY OUT

## A STARTER GUIDE

**vca**  **Charities**

in collaboration with  
**Kristen Hassen of  
Outcomes for Pets**



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“My family experienced the magic of taking a shelter dog on a field trip when we visited Maui Humane Society. Not only did it allow us to provide a sweet dog named Jake with a few stress-free hours of walking (and snuggling), but it also provided a meaningful way for us to explore the island. **It truly felt like we improved Jake’s whole life by giving up a few hours of ours—and if we can replicate that experience for more people, pets and shelters, it’s a win for everyone.**”

**KIM VAN SYOC**, Executive Director  
VCA Charities



# Their Faces Say It All

When shelters first began sending dogs on field trips, what surprised staff the most was seeing **shelter dogs who were otherwise stressed, anxious, and worried transform in front of their eyes, becoming happy and calm.** We also learned for many of the field trip dogs, a nap in a quiet car was what they needed the most, as many shelter dogs are exhausted from the noisy hustle and bustle of kennel life.

If you feel stuck with your current processes and programs and wonder if there is anything else you can do, we hope you will read through this guide and start your own Dog Day Out program at your shelter. In our experience, and the experience of more than 100 shelters and rescues who have Dog Day Out programs, the payoff is exceptionally high. **Not only will you get to see those smiles and wagging tails, but we believe you'll also notice increased staff and volunteer morale, higher adoption rates, and a shorter length of stay.**







“Our Dog Day Out program is primarily led by volunteers and requires almost no staff time. I manage the care and housing of dogs and there is just nothing better than seeing six or seven of our dogs leave each day to go have adventures. I truly can’t imagine ever going back—**Dog Day Out is our way of welcoming in the community every day and inviting them to be a huge part of giving the dogs a second chance.**”

**KEANI KAPELIELA-BANNISTER**, Animal Care Manager  
Maui Humane Society



# What is Dog Day Out?

Dog Day Out is a program where shelter dogs are taken on short field trips by volunteer community members, **providing much-needed stress relief, socialization, and exercise as well as increasing dogs' chances of finding a permanent home.**

In most shelters, dogs spend 23 hours or more each day in kennels, surrounded by strange smells, loud barking, and unfamiliar people and other dogs. Over time, the stress of confinement takes a toll on the mental and physical health of the dogs. In addition to becoming sick, dogs in shelters often develop stress-related behaviors that can make it even harder for them to find a home. This is truly life-threatening because medical and behavioral issues sometimes result in dogs being euthanized when they become sick or too difficult to handle.

**The Dog Day Out program is a simple solution to the problem of dogs declining in shelters** by creating a way for community volunteers to help out, without ongoing time commitments or roadblocks. Dog Day Out is a day trip foster program that pairs adoptable shelter dogs with members of the public to go on field trips for a couple of hours or the whole day.

In 2023, VCA Charities brought together a group of shelter experts, along with 10 shelter partners, to facilitate a pilot training program for Dog Day Out. These 10 shelters have a combined annual intake of more than 200,000 pets and include some of the largest shelter systems in the United States. The results of this training were nothing short of amazing. In the pilot shelters, the majority of dogs going on field trips found homes in fewer than four days. **What's even more remarkable is that many of the dogs who were adopted as a result of the Dog Day Out program were considered 'long stay' dogs who had been in shelters for months.**







"As the Animal Services Director, I've witnessed firsthand how our Dog Day Out trips have revolutionized our operations. By engaging more of our community, these outings have become powerful tools for building interest in our animals, meeting people where they are, and ultimately, increasing adoptions. **Through these initiatives, we're not only enriching the lives of our shelter dogs but also fostering stronger connections between our organization and the community we serve.**"

**SARAH AGUILAR**, Director, Santa Barbara County Department of Animal Services



Dr. Lisa Gunter, Assistant Professor of Animal Welfare and Behavior at Virginia Tech University, conducted research on short-term outings and their impact on shelter pets within nonprofit and municipal animal shelters, half of which were open admission. Her team discovered [short-term outings and temporary foster stays made it 5 to 14 times more likely that participating dogs would be adopted](#). The team also learned a key to success was allowing community members, not just regular volunteers and staff members, to take dogs on outings.

In short, **Dog Day Out programs and overnight fostering are both effective ways to get dogs adopted quickly while simultaneously increasing their quality of life.** If you've been thinking about how to maximize the impact of your dog foster program, inviting the community and even tourists to the shelter to take dogs on field trips is a proven strategy for success.

# Benefits of Dog Day Out

For busy animal shelters that are full or above capacity, Dog Day Out programs are low-risk, easy to implement, and can have a huge impact. Here are some of the greatest benefits:

- **Reduce kennel stress.** Quickly and effectively address kennel stress to enable overlooked dogs to receive the attention they need to get adopted.
- **Save money.** There is no cost other than the supplies that go with the dog and caregiver.
- **Volunteers can help.** The program can be managed by a staff member or volunteer.
- **Save time.** There are a number of shelters doing Dog Day Out programs so there are standard operating procedures and policies you can leverage.
- **Get dogs adopted.** Outings can increase a dog's chance of getting adopted by five times or more, so you will start to reduce your kennel census immediately.
- **Improve morale.** The program can alleviate compassion fatigue and burnout because staff and volunteers get to see their favorite dogs thrive with regular outings and attention.
- **Get marketing material.** You'll receive photos, videos, and stories to help you market your dogs and the Dog Day Out program.
- **Learn about your dogs.** You'll learn more about the dogs and their behavior outside of the shelter to help you make better matches with potential new families.
- **Improve safety.** This program can help reduce kennel stress which in turn may help prevent unwanted behaviors, including possible bites, which can help make your shelter safer.
- **Gain supporters.** You'll generate community support when you welcome the public to help support your staff, this program, and your shelter animals. Many of your Dog Day Out foster caregivers may turn into regular volunteers, fosters, or even adopters!



# For the Love of Field Trips

**Dog Day Out programs make it easy for people to be part of the solution.** As lives become increasingly busy and people are overcommitted and overscheduled, Dog Day Out gives more people the option to foster for a few hours, even if they cannot take a dog home for days or weeks.

Most people choose to do an outdoor activity with their foster dog, which means taking a dog on a field trip could have an added health and fitness benefit for the caregiver. Plus, when people take a dog out, they get to take photos and videos, which they can share on their own social media platforms and with the shelter to help get participating dogs adopted. Often, people who take a dog on a field trip **fall in love with fostering and come back time and time again** or become regular foster caregivers.

We know one of the biggest obstacles to getting shelter dogs adopted is they are often 'unknown,' meaning very little information about the dog is available, especially if they come in as lost or stray. By inviting participants to provide feedback, and by smartly enhancing marketing materials, Dog Day Out programs can combat this stigma and overcome barriers as a result of no previous behavior history. As expected, **the more we know about adoptable dogs, the more we are able to share with potential adopters, and the faster dogs can get adopted!**



## Try This!

To get your staff and volunteers excited about starting a Dog Day Out program, hold a practice session with your own staff and/or volunteers. Select some of your longer stay dogs and pair people up to take a dog on a field trip.

Upon return, the group should gather to talk about their experience, share photos, and discuss how the shelter can engage the public to take dogs on field trips.





## Case Study: Maui Humane Society

The staff at Maui Humane Society market their [Dog Day Out](#) program to tourists as well as seasonal and full-time Maui residents. Consider your own community—what groups of people could you invite to take a dog out for a field trip? For example, if you have a college or university in your city or town, you could market the program to students. If you have a community with an abundance of retirees, you can market your program to people who have time during the week to take dogs on field trips—or focus on older or smaller dogs with less exercise needs (shelter dogs love to nap on a soft couch, just as much as they love a long walk).





**“Our three-week pilot program has resulted in 14 of our 23 long-timer dogs being adopted! Most dogs were adopted within 4 days of their field trip but several were adopted either the day of or the day after going on their outing.”**

**ASHLIEGH GOEBEL**

Volunteer Engagement Manager,  
Arizona Humane Society

## Field Trips Have Gone to the Dogs

If launching a Dog Day Out field trip program is of interest to your shelter, here are the next best steps to get started:

- ❑ **Create kennel cards.** Design and print a kennel sign to place on kennels when a dog is away on a field trip so staff and volunteers know the kennel is still in use and the dog is available for adoption.
- ❑ **Recruit volunteers.** Recruit volunteers to help you launch the program. These volunteers will get the Dog Day Out foster caregiver everything they need for the outing and provide them with important information about the safety and wellbeing of their foster dog. These volunteers will also receive the dog when they return from the field trip. For some shelters, you may be able to get started with existing volunteers who already know a little bit about your shelter operations.
- ❑ **Location, location, location.** Make a list of local places for the caregivers to take pets on field trips. This may include local stores that allow dogs, pet-friendly coffee shops, or fun, dog-friendly tourist destinations. You'll also want to include local walking paths, trails, or hikes in addition to any areas that you do not walk dogs exploring.
- ❑ **Make a list of dogs.** Make a list of 10 to 15 dogs that will be available each week for Dog Day Out field trips. These should be dogs without significant handling issues or behavioral challenges. If you have a behavior specialist on staff, utilize their expertise when making your selections.



- ❑ **Emergency contacts.** Create an emergency contact card for caregivers to take with them, which includes a live response phone number if the dog escapes or they have another emergency.
- ❑ **Pet identification.** Make tags that have the name of the shelter and contact information. You'll want to put these on any dog that goes on a Dog Day Out field trip.
- ❑ **Assemble supplies.** Purchase dog-walking equipment, including martingale collars, flat leashes, and harnesses.
- ❑ **Get ready to go.** Assemble all supplies ahead of time and put everything in a designated backpack. Ideally, the supplies needed for Dog Day Out will have a dedicated space for refilling and storing bags so inventory is always accounted for and ready for the next outing.
- ❑ **Pick the program times.** Determine the days and times of your pilot program. At first, you may want to only offer Dog Day Out field trips two or three days a week until the program has been piloted and proven. You may also want to define pick-up and drop-off times depending on the time of year, the weather, shelter operating hours, and busy adoption hours.
- ❑ **Tell everyone.** One of the most important components of your program is telling the public about your new Dog Day Out program and how they can be part of it. As a minimum, leverage your social media, push out through any email, website, or marketing assets and work with local media to pilot the program and generate excitement within the community.



## What goes in a Dog Day Out go pack?

- ❑ Backpacks branded with field trip messaging
- ❑ Harness (we recommend the Freedom No Pull Harness)
- ❑ Collar with tag
- ❑ Flat clip leash appropriate for the size and weight of the dog
- ❑ Insulated water bottle (during warm weather, pack two bottles per backpack)
- ❑ Travel water bowl
- ❑ Doggie seat belt
- ❑ Waste bags and holder
- ❑ Laminated instruction card
- ❑ Treats in a disposable bag or treat pouch
- ❑ Favorite dog toy or enrichment chew toy
- ❑ 'Adopt Me' gear including bandana, leash sleeve, and/or vest



# Safety Considerations

In addition to providing a brief instructional training at the beginning of every foster outing, you'll want to create guidelines for the Dog Day Out foster caregivers. These should include:

- ❑ **Waiver.** The caregiver reads the dog's bio information and signs a foster waiver at the start of the field trip. [See a liability waiver template here.](#)
- ❑ **Keep dogs solo.** Day trip foster dogs should not be introduced to the caregiver's own pets or any other animals during the outing unless given written permission by a designated staff member.
- ❑ **No dog parks.** Dogs should not be taken to dog parks or places where there are frequently off-leash dogs.
- ❑ **Equipment.** Dogs must wear a martingale collar with the tag attached, a front clip harness, and a leash during the outing. The leash may be removed only if the dog is in a private, confined area (if the caregiver takes the dog home).
- ❑ **Eligibility.** Only dogs available for adoption should be taken on Dog Day Out trips unless written approval is given by the designated shelter staff member.
- ❑ **Vaccines and preventatives.** Dogs going on field trips should have current and documented Rabies vaccines as well as flea and tick preventives.
- ❑ **Disclosure.** If dogs have any known or documented behavioral challenges, this will be disclosed to the foster caregiver who will acknowledge they are aware of the challenge and are choosing to take the dog on an outing.

## Try This!

Hold a Dog Day Out event on a specific day and time, marketing the opportunity to the public. Include staff from multiple departments in the planning and implementation so they feel ownership over your program. As people and dogs return from their field trips, staff and volunteers can take photos and interview them to learn about their experiences. At the conclusion of the event, have a meeting to debrief, using the following as an agenda:

- What worked well?
- What was the highlight of your outing?
- Did you notice a change in behavior when you had the dog out of the shelter?
- What did we learn from the participants?
- Were there any challenges, and how can we address them?
- How can we scale the program to regularly offer field trips?





“We took Phantom out on Sunday. Best day ever! The program is amazing! It gave her the opportunity to take a nice walk, visit the pet store, get a pup cup, and get snuggles! **It gave her a break from shelter life and some time to have some fun! It also gave her exposure to potential adopters.** Many people came up to us to meet Phantom. I can’t wait to do this again!”

**SHERRY ANN**, Dog Day Out Volunteer  
Baltimore Animal Rescue & Care Shelter (BARCS)

## Launch and Market Your Program

How you market your program is essential to its launch and viability. Here is a checklist to make sure you’re giving your program the best chance of immediate success:

- ☐ **Post on social media.** Advertise the program on social media weekly (at a minimum).
- ☐ **Take advantage of holidays.** Invite people to help give a shelter dog a break on holidays like: Valentine’s Day, Superbowl Sunday, and Thanksgiving.
- ☐ **Use your website.** Create a [Dog Day Out webpage just like Baltimore Animal Rescue & Care Shelter \(BARCS\)](#) in Baltimore, Maryland! This page is simple, easy to navigate, and gets people excited about taking a dog on a field trip. We also love the Dog Day Out web pages created by [KC Pet Project](#) and [Arizona Humane Society](#)! Don’t forget to include a simple sign-up form.
- ☐ **Engage local media.** Invite a local reporter to participate and talk about their experience.
- ☐ **Reach out to influencers.** Invite well-known local businesses, sports teams, and public figures to participate and raise awareness for your shelter and adoptable pets, as well as encourage the community to support your program.
- ☐ **Share the successes.** Share success stories with testimonials from participants—be sure to ask for photos and videos!
- ☐ **Include it in your messaging.** Talk about Dog Day Out every time you talk about foster or adoption, make it a part of your key messaging!
- ☐ **Use posters and print.** Create a flyer to advertise your program at your shelter, and anywhere you hang print promotions.



# Measure Success

When you begin your pilot program, you should identify the pilot period, which can be anywhere from 30 to 90 days. You'll also decide what data you want to collect. **We recommend you track the following data:**

- The number of unique dogs that went on Dog Day Out field trips.
- The total number of outings.
- The outcomes of the dogs that went on outings.
- If dogs are adopted after the outing, record the length of stay between the outing and the adoption and if the dog was adopted by someone he or she met on the outing.
- Behavior changes after the outing—Is the dog less stressed and more engaged with volunteers or staff? Is there more tail wagging? Conversely, were there any bites or negative incidents that occurred during the outing?
- Document any negative incidents so you can address the root causes.

At the conclusion of the pilot program, have staff and volunteer teams meet to discuss what worked, what didn't, and how to move forward to make Dog Day Out a permanent program. Remember it is normal to have highs and lows during the introduction of a new program—the end result is what is most important. **If done correctly, the program will not only be engaging for volunteers and your community but can result in more pets being adopted and more lives being saved.**

Beyond the data, shelters can use the pilot period as an opportunity to gather and share success stories—dogs that had a great time on their field trip or found their new family because they went on an outing. These types of stories help shelters recruit more foster caregivers during the pilot period and generate community support for the program.



Before and after photos are a great measure of success! On a recent visit to Arizona Humane Society, Kim Van Syoc, VCA Charities Executive Director, took Blaire on a field trip to a botanical garden. These two photos, taken just hours apart, clearly demonstrate the benefit a few hours out of the shelter can do for a dog's spirit and overall wellbeing. **Not only do photos outside of the shelter help convey how fun a field trip can be, it also shines a light on a dog's true personality in a natural setting.**





## Case Study: Humane Society of Tulsa

"One of our most notable Dog Day Out excursions so far was Toboggan. Toboggan is a six-month-old Boxer mix that had been overlooked for weeks at our Adoption Center. He went on a Dog Day Out and ended up at a local bar and grill in a popular shopping district in Tulsa. His volunteers ate lunch on the pet-friendly patio, and the patrons at the table next to them saw the Dog Day Out backpack and asked what they were up to. One of the men spent time with Toboggan and ended up submitting an adoption application. He followed up by adopting him just 48 hours later! In less than one month, we have seen the HUGE impact this program is going to have on our pets. Our community is ready to jump in and start advocating for Tulsa's pets, and nearly every person that has gone on a Dog Day Out has immediately signed up for another!"



# Frequently Asked Questions

Dog Day Out programs create a constant stream of new helpers, which can help you grow your volunteer base and bring new energy and enthusiasm to shelter teams. We also know starting a new program doesn't come without concerns and questions, which is why we addressed the most frequent ones our initial partners asked.

## 1. Who will be in charge of the Dog Day Out program?

The person in charge will need to be able to coordinate staff, volunteers, and the outing schedule. This can be a dedicated volunteer or a staff member. Different people can manage the daily field trips and for larger programs, you'll want to have a schedule for who is leading each day.

## 2. How much does it cost to run this kind of program?

You will need some basic supplies which are listed on page 11. You can purchase these or even get them donated. Otherwise, there is minimal cost to running a Dog Day Out program unless you decide to have a dedicated staff person to manage the program.

## 3. How many dogs can we send on field trips without a dedicated staff person?

Santa Barbara Animal Services sends out more than 200 dogs on outings every month, and established programs like the one at Maui Humane Society sends out dogs almost every day. We encourage shelters to start small and then increase the size and scale of the program as your staff and volunteers get comfortable with it.

## 4. Is there an age limit on who can participate?

It depends on your shelter. Some shelters allow people 16 or older to take dogs on field trips while others require field trip fosters to be 18 or older. In many cases, shelters allow and even encourage children to participate as long as an adult is with them—Dog Day Out is a great group, friend, or family activity!

## 5. What happens if some dogs are not suitable for a field trip?

We recommend starting with dogs without known incidents of aggression towards people or pets, and it is important to select dogs that can be easily handled by most people. We also recommend you *do not* exclude dogs who are simply struggling with kennel stress because they are the ones who need a kennel break the most. Each shelter will need to determine their threshold for what dogs are eligible for field trips and the most important part is to disclose anything you know about each dog to the foster caregiver.

## 6. Can shelter dogs interact with owned dogs during an outing?

We recommend you keep dogs on outings separated from other pets in your home or in public. Field trip fosters should not take dogs to dog parks or other places with high numbers of off-leash dogs.

### 7. What if the dog isn't returned from a field trip?

We have not heard of this ever happening, but if it did, you should follow your shelter's policy for what happens if any foster does not return a foster pet. A friendly phone call can clear up any confusion that might result in a foster not bringing back a dog at the scheduled return time.

### 8. How do you know where to send Dog Day Out participants on a field trip?

We recommend shelters and rescues create lists of recommended locations for foster field trips. Talk to your current volunteers or fosters about places they enjoy taking dogs and create fun itineraries for various dog personality types including those with high energy, the ones who love to cuddle, dogs who are food motivated, live for a car ride, or a leisurely stroll.

### 9. What is the best way to market our Dog Day Out program?

You should consider creating a web page where people can sign up to become a field trip foster and we highly recommend you market the program on your social media channels. It is most important to make it easy to enroll and participate in field trips. When done right, we guarantee you'll have repeat volunteers—and ambassadors—looking to help support your shelter and your pet population.

### 10. Do I need to have insurance to start the Dog Day Out Program?

The liability waiver can be used to mitigate any potential liability issues, but we recommend checking with your broker or insurance provider since coverage can differ depending on the policy and state.

## Did You Know?



**23 hours**  
is the amount of time  
most dogs spend in  
kennels at the shelter



The majority of dogs  
going on field trips  
find a home in just  
**4 days**



Short-term outings and  
temporary foster stays increase  
a dog's adoption chances  
**5-14 times**





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