

Shelter Dog Behavior Improvement: Dog Walking as Enrichment

Rebecca Johnson, PHD, RN, FAAN¹, Charlotte McKenney, RN, BSN¹, Sandra McCune, VN, BA, PhD²

¹Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Missouri; ²WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition, U.K.

Background: Several million dogs are euthanized in animal shelters annually after multiple relinquishment reasons (Scarlett, 2002; Salman, 1998; New, 2000 & Kass, 2001). Gains in pet adoptions are happening via shelter enrichment programs. We hypothesized that shelter dogs participating in a daily dog walking program involving elderly citizens, would have better behavior, higher adoption rates, and decreased euthanasia rates than dogs in a control group not in the walking program.

Methods: All participant dogs were pre-qualified for walking through the standard shelter behavioral assessment for adoption. The dogs, at least one year of age were matched with a control dog for size (small, medium and large). The experimental group walked with an older adult five days a week. The control group of dogs did not walk. Pre-test and daily behavior scores were assigned. The length of time each dog spent in the shelter was recorded as were adoption, move to foster care, release to a breed rescue group or euthanasia outcomes.

Results: There were 84 dog pairs. Outcomes for the experimental (walking) group: adoption n=58, to foster/rescue n=13, euthanized n=7. For the control group: adoption n=26, to foster/rescue n=28, and euthanized n=20. A chi-square test showed that the experimental group had significantly more adoptions ($p < 0.0001$) and fewer euthanasias ($p = .0063$) than the control group. The control group had significantly more dogs that went to breed rescue networks ($p = .00071$) than did the

experimental group. The control group had a higher total behavior score (exhibited more negative behavior). The Wilcoxon rank sum test was used to compare the experimental and control groups in terms of total behavior scores. Dogs in the experimental group had significantly better behavior than dogs in the control group ($p < 0.0001$).

Conclusions: The dog walking program was associated with desired dog behavior outcomes, better adoption rates and lower euthanasia rates.