

External interviews –Summary of key points

“I’m not sure lots of shelters are coming to grips with changes in adoption. We’re seeing a different paradigm, but we haven’t figured it out yet. The organizations that will thrive are the ones that have done the work to diversify how to be relevant and important to their communities.”

Jim Tedford, Association for Animal Welfare Advancement

The national context

The US animal welfare movement is transitioning from a focus on rescue and shelters toward a wholistic approach that meets the needs of people together with animals.

- The shelter economic model is becoming more difficult to sustain.
- More concern about “animal welfare deserts” in lower income and rural areas.
- 75% of pet owners see no vet.
- More recognition of the reciprocal links between animal and human well-being.
- Emerging concerns about some rescue and transport practices and organizations.

Interstate transportation appears likely to be the main source of animals for adoption in the northern and coastal US for the foreseeable future, but challenges are likely to increase.

- Surges and drops in the number of animals being sheltered at one time.
- Fewer highly “adoptable” animals: older, larger, more health and behavioral problems.
- Hard-to-predict disruptions in the supply of animals for adoption.
- Higher costs for transport, veterinary and behavioral care contribute to the long-term pressure on “shelter economics.”

Greater professionalism in the animal welfare field is countered by the proliferation of small and unregulated groups.

- There is more access to professional development.
- The most effective organizations have built quality by becoming regional multi-facility operations (San Diego and Wisconsin were cited.)
- Thousands of very small, amateur and unregulated transport organizations have sprung up to meet demand – perhaps 150 in Rhode Island.

Expanding access to veterinary care to more families is seen as a key problem for the animal welfare field to solve.

- Good pet care is good human care.
- Early care avoids costly care needs later in pet’s life.
- The costs of care are rising with specialization and commercialization of the field.
- Cost is the top barrier to obtaining vet care.

- Services are concentrated by income, leaving large low income “animal welfare deserts.”
- For-profit vets generally support expanded subsidized care, but only if means-testing is used—opposition can be fierce if they feel their business is threatened.

People and pets

Our informants identify many benefits to their own relationships with animals.

- Receiving and giving “unconditional” love, empathy, caring.
- Learning compassion, caring, responsibility.
- Relief from loneliness, depression, stress, anxiety.
- Companionship, happiness.
- Connections to other people through their pets.
- Richer emotional experience, including difficult emotions like grief.

Informants see that attitudes toward animals have changed greatly over their lifetimes

- More formal process for finding and adopting pets.
- View of rescue and adoption as a socially responsible choice.
- More people see pets as members of the family.
- Greater readiness to spend money on health care and other needs.

Perspectives on the Potter League

People interviewed have an extremely positive yet limited perspective on the Potter League

- Every person gave the Potter League top marks for their own personal experiences as Potter League adopters, volunteers, partners, donors and professional peers.
- Seen as the best shelter in the state by RI informants and as among the very best small shelters in the US by national peers.
- Universally positive views of staff and volunteers as dedicated, caring, effective.
- Many knew little about Potter League programs beyond adoption.
- Many were not aware that most adoptions come from out of state.
- Those who knew of education, wellness and subsidy programs generally had direct experience as participants, partners or peers.
- Those who knew of other programs were highly positive about them.

All informants believed the Potter League should continue to keep adoption as its core program as long as it is possible to do so.

- Seen as at the center of the Potter League’s mission and identity.
- Potter League seen as the preferred source of pets.
- See adoption as relieving animal suffering.
- Out of state source of animals was not seen as an issue if local needs are met.
- Rescue from distant disasters was seen as an emerging and important need.
- All informants support adoption until it is no longer needed or not feasible due to cost.

Nearly all informants support helping lower income people to have and keep pets

- Very supportive of pet food banking
- Support subsidies for wellness screening, preventive care and vet care (reservations about unfair competition from veterinarians)
- See pet ownership as having social benefits: better physical and mental health.
- Some see connections between supporting pets and meeting human needs for food, housing and homelessness, domestic violence prevention, etc.
- Underlying belief that all people should have access to animals in their lives.

Perceived need for new and expanded programs

Access to wellness and veterinary care for all

- Pets in Need experience shows that lower income need far exceeds available care
- Many human service organizations seem ready to partner
- Means testing is still seen as essential by veterinary community

Other ways to help people provide a better life for their pets

- Education about pet care before and after adoption
- Animal training
- Behavioral problem-solving
- Supports for lower income, elderly and other vulnerable pet owners
- Day care and boarding
- Problem-solving to avoid separation and surrender

Support human animal connections other than permanent adoption

- Therapy visits to elderly and others
- Interactive animal programs for families
- Short- and medium-term foster care

Strengthen the statewide animal care network

- Collaborations, partnerships and potentially mergers of organizations
- Structured capacity building: Training and leadership
- Legislative advocacy

Informants with more knowledge offered some advice about institutional strategy

- Redefine and strengthen municipal relationships by supporting the needs of police and animal officers. (Smith)
- Undertake formal rebranding to establish that the League is an animal resource center, not just a shelter. (DiCicco)
- Pursue more planned giving and possibly a capital campaign targeting aging Boomers. (Smith and Poirier)
- Establish a clearer position on no-kill to head off small rescue organizations. (Linnell)
- Don't presume on long-time funders: reach out to program officers (Linnell)
- Do more to reward and retain animal care staff.

Potential for collaborations

- **RI Veterinary Medicine Assn. (Block):** More proactive engagement in statewide legislation, meeting veterinary care needs for low income households (subject to means testing)
- **Women's Resource Center (DiPersio):** Staff exchanges, learning
- **Martin Luther King Center (Strout):** Wellness clinic at MLK
- **Friends of Aiken Animal Shelter, Georgia (J. Miller):** Allow heartworm+ dogs in RI (legislative)
- **Pets In Need (Weitsma):** Participate in clinic for homeless, collaborative grant writing.

Individuals interviewed

Dr. Michael Blackwell DVM MPH, Director, Program for Pet Equity, College of Social Work, University of Tennessee

Gary Block, Owner and Humane Soc Vet Assn., Ocean State/Bay State Veterinary Services

Adrian Boney, Program Officer, Rhode Island Foundation

Harriett DiCicco, Consultant, Former Board President of the Potter League

Lori DiPersio, Executive Director, Women's Resource Center

Colleen Harrington, Transfer and Way Station Coordinator, St. Huberts

Deborah Linnell, Program Officer, van Beuren Charitable Foundation

Mike Miller, CEO, Newport County YMCA

Jennifer Miller, Board President and Transport Coordinator, Friends of Aiken Animal Shelter

Wendy Montella, Outreach Coordinator, Southcoast Health

Randall Poirier, Partner, Independent Financial Partners

Melanie Reilly CVT, Instructor & Practicum Coordinator, New England Tech - Vet Tech Program

Gary Ruff, News Editor, Newport Daily News

Robert Silvia, Former Town Council member,

Christie Smith, Past Executive Director of the Potter League,

Heather Strout, Executive Director, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center

Ceri Sveilich DMV, Veterinarian, RI Spay/Neuter Clinic

Jim Tedford, CEO, Animal Welfare Advancement

Charles Twitchell, Executive Director, Prince Charitable Trusts

Joe Warzycha, Animal Cruelty Officer, Rhode Island Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Hank Wietsma DMV MS ABVP, Founder, Pets in Need

Karen Wilkey, Potter League donor