



Training Playbook: Proven Lifesaving Strategies for Big Dogs

Introduction

One of the most challenging populations for shelters across the country is large dogs. Big dogs tend to have a longer length of stay, which results in greater potential to succumb to shelter stress, and stress can lead to undesirable behaviors or illness, which further handicaps the dogs' chances of a positive outcome. This playbook is designed to give an overview of strategies that have been successfully implemented by agencies all over the country, and to assist you in creating a customized protocol for your organization utilizing their experiences, standard operating procedures and best practices. The goals are to reduce length of stay, maintain the dogs' mental health while they're in the shelter and ultimately increase your save rate for large dogs.

Program Overview

Many programs exist to help you get a well-rounded and objective perspective of individual dogs' personalities, help you market them to potential adopters, and assist you in fulfilling their natural desires and reducing their stress while they are in the shelter.

Every agency, of course, has its own physical design, staffing levels and volunteer programming, all of which can play a role in how programs are implemented. However, every agency can overcome its individual barriers to implement some aspects of this programming. From providing ongoing enrichment to engaging staff and volunteers, aspects of positive housing for large dogs can be incorporated into the daily schedule.

Program Composition

The following describes a variety of programs that you can review and implement at your agency. Each program has different workforce needs, internal and/or external resources needs, and other elements that you and your team must take into consideration for successful implementation. Keep in mind that many of the needs can be met by using your volunteer workforce and asking for donations to support the program. Implementing even a portion of a program will help you take your lifesaving for large dogs to the next level.

The first step to deciding what programs you should implement is to truly understand how you are assessing the behavior of dogs coming into your agency and how you are determining their individual needs and outcome path as a result. This [two-part webinar](#) from the ASPCA will provide you with ways to gather information from a variety of sources to create a more accurate picture of each individual dog. After watching the webinar, meet with your team to discuss how you can incorporate improvements into your current process. Something as simple as updating the forms you use for admitting dogs — to gain more insight into their individual personalities, needs, likes and dislikes — can make a huge difference.

Next, take a look at what daily life is like for dogs in your facility from their perspective. The first 24 to 48 hours in a shelter are crucial for helping dogs adjust to their new environment and feel some level of comfort. **Enrichment should begin for each dog upon entry to the shelter and continue throughout their stay.** This can be achieved by incorporating physical and mental stimulation into their day, as well as maintaining some level of familiarity for them (such as leaving a dog with the same blanket, which contains her smell). The *Humane Animal Control* manual has an [appendix on enrichment for dogs in shelters](#) that has some great ideas for you to incorporate.

There are many other resources that focus on enrichment (see the list below). Keep in mind that enrichment doesn't have to be expensive or complicated; it can be free and easy. Also, every environmental factor plays a role. Something as simple as a radio playing soothing music can calm the kennel environment, just as staff cleaning with energizing music can irritate the kennel environment.

Play groups are another important form of enrichment. Dogs are naturally social beings, and many have a desire to interact with other dogs. By allowing shelter dogs to play with each other, we not only relieve stress and provide mental and physical stimulation, we learn a tremendous amount about their behavior. Play groups are more accurate indicators than on-leash behavior of a dog's ability to be social with other dogs. [Dogs Playing for Life](#) is a great resource for learning how to implement dog-dog playtime.

Many agencies have also incorporated outing and sleepover programs to give dogs a break from the shelter environment and capture more information about how the dog behaves outside the shelter. [This resource](#) can give you more information and serve as a guideline for setting up your own program, and [this resource](#) can serve as a guide to create your own feedback form.

While you are working on helping dogs to maintain their physical and mental health in the shelter, the team should also be marketing them to help move them to a home, a rescue group or some other positive outcome. Marketing should be done using accurate, objective information accompanied by good-quality photos of the dogs. You'll want to write biographies that help people picture the pet in their home. If possible, include a photo of the dog outside the shelter environment and, if applicable, shoot a video of the dog playing well with other dogs. Many resources exist to assist with all aspects of marketing pets in shelters, and websites such as [Hearts Speak](#) can provide you with everything you need to scale up your marketing efforts.

Another helpful strategy is to include a staff member involved in the daily care of the dogs in [daily rounds](#), so the entire team can be alerted when an individual dog is starting to succumb to shelter stress. A plan for that dog can then be incorporated to increase enrichment and marketing to push for a positive outcome.

Finally, it's critical to use the agency's foster program to give stressed dogs a break

from the shelter environment. How a dog behaves in a shelter can be drastically different from how he behaves in a home. You'll want to take every opportunity to safely manage behavior, while moving the dogs out of the shelter as quickly as possible.

Procedure and Program Information Documents

Now that you have a general understanding of some programs and resources that can help reduce length of stay, maintain mental health and ultimately increase your save rate for large dogs, the following documents may act as templates as you implement aspect of the above at your shelter. Keep in mind that there is no exact or perfect form of implementation. Using the considerations and program composition notes above, you should use the following only as guidelines or building blocks when creating your own programs.

If you need further assistance or clarification, please reach out to your [regional strategist](#), [regional director](#) or the Best Friends national shelter support team at team2025@bestfriends.org.

- Best Friends [Canine Care and Enrichment](#) playbook
- Best Friends [Length of Stay](#) Manual
- [Enrichment on a Dime \(webinar\)](#)
- [Enrichment for shelter dogs](#)
- [Kennel enrichment](#)
- [Dogs Playing for Life manual](#)
- [Additional marketing tips](#)

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