

The Revolving Shelter Door

The day comes for many dogs when their people no longer want them. The dog is faced with the challenge of surviving the biggest threat to their existence. Making it out of an animal rescue and into a forever home. More dogs are euthanized in shelters than die from disease, illness or natural cause. This raises the question, how can animal rescues ensure that dogs have the best chance of survival?

Most animal rescues and shelters are largely funded by donations and run by volunteers. The people who keep them going devote their time and money to saving these dogs and operate with limited funds and resources to resolve a disheartening epidemic. It is sobering to think of the thousands of dogs that are euthanized each year, many of which could have been avoided had breeders and dog owners been more educated. For the most part, it is not as if people intend to breed and raise dogs that later end up in a shelter. It happens because people do not have the information to avoid this cycle.

The key to a successful adoption is matching the right dog with the right people. It seems simple but few rescues focus on this concept as they should to avoid unsuccessful adoptions and dogs being returned to shelters. Think of the impact this scenario has on the animals when a dog is returned. This is simply a bad situation which has many negative consequences to a dog's behavior and well being. The instability and shelter environment is less than ideal living conditions compared to a stable and loving home. Bouncing between homes and shelters will take its toll on a dog causing them stress and potentially causing more work for the next people to undo the damage from this damming time in a dog's life. Research by Sue Sternberg, author of Successful Dog Adoption, and founder of the Assess-A-Pet temperament test states "Any length of stay longer than 2 weeks is long-term sheltering, and the negative effects of the kennels can start taking their toll" In addition, the people who adopt a dog and decide to return it, swear off adopting dogs from shelters and spread the word of their terrible experience. Once a dog is returned to a shelter, the dog and the people involved are all heart broken and now the dog has even less chance of surviving this situation especially if they are returned because they behaved aggressively. The cycle costs the animal rescue more financial resources and more time to help just one dog.

Approximately 80% of shelter dogs have some kind of behavior problem. It may be that they are fearful, destructive, aggressive, and many of them lack even basic obedience. It is no wonder why they end up being surrendered to a shelter. Now the challenge is to find a person that can give a home to a dog that needs their puppy education in adulthood, or that needs behavior modification training to resolve unwanted behavior. To ensure these dogs find the homes they need, it is crucial to identify the specific needs of each dog as well as find a person willing and capable of filling these needs. This is not an easy task being that rescues have such limited resources. They often focus on getting the dogs into homes with as little financial investment and time as possible all the while believing more dogs are being saved.

There is an astounding number of dogs in need of homes. With little space and funds, animal rescues need an efficient and effective method of adopting these dogs to forever homes. The solution to this cycle is temperament testing. Dogs have all sorts of personality types and not all dogs are suitable for all people. If a dog's physical and mental needs are not met, their frustration often manifests into nuisance behaviors such as barking, destructive chewing, running off and even aggression. As well, not all dogs are suitable for all lifestyles. For instance, some dogs would be better off living without children or other dogs. All too often a dog is placed in an unsuitable home because the rescue was unaware of the dog's personality and behavior. Imagine that you adopted a dog having great expectations for them only to discover they want to eat your cat. Now you are faced with the decision to return the dog or manage your pets around each other which will inevitably lead to both pets living a compromised quality of life. A mismatched home is so easily avoided with temperament testing. With this information we can know, with reasonable accuracy, if a dog is well suited for a home with children, cats, livestock, other dogs or a busy social environment. It seems senseless that the new owners, who may be novices, are the first people to introduce a dog to their children and other pets. This can be a dangerous situation. The animal rescues may not know, but they can be held liable if they neglect to investigate a dog's temperament and a person or animal is injured. People expect shelter employees and volunteers to be experts but it is important to remember that although these compassionate people may have plenty of experience with dogs, they are not Animal Behaviorists, a title that is earned with a university education. Spending time with dogs does not make a person a Trainer or Behaviorist any more than spending time with people makes a person a Psychologist.

This raises another question. For those shelters and rescues that do perform temperament tests, who developed and is administering the test? There are an array of temperament tests being used but few are scientifically valid. Many are open to interpretation and leave room to draw false conclusions. If the people administering the test are not trained in canine behavior to some extent, they can easily draw false conclusions. Dogs can be labelled as safe when they are not and behaviors can be overlooked all together. An inaccurate conclusion can lead to dire consequences for both people and dogs. People and other animals could be injured and a dog could be euthanized. It just seems sensible to choose a dog suitable for the family who is adopting them to avoid the shelter cycle all together. Just because a dog is not suitable for any and every situation does not mean they should be euthanized. Instead they can be adopted to a home where the people do not have those specific social requirements and the dog can still live a happy and fulfilling existence. For those dogs who need behavior modification training to resolve complicated problems such as fear or aggression, they will need an experienced owner who is willing and knowledgeable to work with the dog to resolve the behavior or at least reduce the conflict as much as possible. Without temperament testing, a dog may not get the training he or she needs to live up to their full potential and people are left feeling frustrated and disappointed. If we only investigate each dog and assess their needs and then place them in a well matched home, the cycle is avoided. Rescues will benefit greatly by having a good reputation as a place to

find good dogs and people will be thrilled with their new companion. Valuable time and money will be saved and more dogs will find forever homes.

If you are considering adopting a dog, have them temperament tested by a Trainer. You will find the perfect companion to suit your needs and possibly save sending another dog through the revolving shelter door.