

City-Provided Dog Training Proposal

By Michelle Cornelius

Background:

According to Dr. Sophia Yin, dog training needs to be more than simply teaching a dog a few simple commands like sit, stay, lie down, and heel; it should also “help train leadership and communication in humans and impulse control in dogs” (Yin 2012). Since most dog aggression is due to fear and anxiety (Yin 2009), this type of training can help prevent dog bites by helping owners recognize fear in their dog’s body language (Yin 2011). It can also eliminate other undesirable behaviors like those associated with separation anxiety (Yin 2012).

Proposal:

Everyone benefits when dogs and their owners complete training classes. The dog is more well behaved resulting in a less stressful home environment, making it less likely that a dog will be returned or surrendered due to behavior issues.

The proposal is that the City provide vouchers to adopters to cover the cost of dog training. The vouchers would be paid for using money from the Animal Welfare Trust Fund so it would not affect the General Fund. Due to limited resources (both financial and staff), vouchers would initially be given to people who adopt dogs with behavior issues and owners who are considering returning or surrendering their dog due to behavior problems. For the purposes of this proposal, dogs with behavioral issues are those which are available for adoption to the public.¹

If the program is successful and there is enough money in the Animal Welfare Trust Fund, then the program can be expanded to offer vouchers to everyone who adopts a dog from LAAS.

Measuring success:

- Success can be measured by comparing the number of behavior dogs adopted and returned within a certain time frame before and after implementation.
- The number of owners who opted for training in order to keep their dog.
 - Note: It may be difficult to compare before and after because the owner surrender reason can be vague. For example, among the top 3 reasons people surrendered their pet was “too many” and “no time.” “Too many” could include dogs not getting along with each other and “no time” could include behavioral problems like being destructive or excessive barking.

¹ For the purposes of clarity, dogs that have been designated as “rescue only” by Animal Services are not available to the public for adoption and would therefore not be eligible for the voucher program.

- Since not all dog bites are reported to LAAS, it may be difficult to measure the impact the proposed training program will have on this variable. However, there should be data on dogs returned due to a dog bite which broke the skin (because of the rabies observation protocol), so this could be used to measure success.
- Surveys can be sent to owners asking whether they thought the training was useful in resolving the problem, making adjustment to a new home easier, and helping create a healthy human-dog bond.

Requirements:

According to the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior, the most effective and humane training is rewards-based (positive reinforcement); adverse training has negative long-term effects, is less effective and harms the dog-human relationship. Therefore, any approved trainers should only be using rewards-based training.

CPDT-KA and CPDT-KSA certifications appear to use positive reinforcement (the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers [advises people to avoid trainers](#) who use dominance and submission training).

Cost:

Adopters would be provided \$150 vouchers to cover the cost of training. This amount could be increased to \$300 if the dog requires private training because he or she does not get along with other dogs.

Petco and PetSmart may provide training at a discount which could reduce the amount used from the Animal Welfare Trust Fund.

Petco

They state on their [website](#) that all of their trainers are “taught science-based training principles that reward appropriate behaviors instead of punishing negative ones.” Their trainers are also AKC Canine Good Citizen (CGC) evaluators (some homeowners insurance offers discounts to CGC dogs).

Group classes:

- Complete package: \$379 (19 weeks)
- Essentials package: \$249 (12 weeks)
- Single classes: \$149 (6 weeks)

Private classes:

- 4 sessions – \$219
- 6 sessions – \$299

Virtual group classes:

- Puppy basics – \$99 (4 weeks)
- Adult basics – \$99 (4 weeks)
- Separation anxiety – \$99 (4 weeks)

Virtual private lessons:

- Single lesson (45 minutes) – \$59
- 4 private lessons (4 weeks) – \$229

PetSmart

PetSmart states on their [website](#) that they use positive reinforcement training.

Group classes:

- Beginning (6 weeks) - \$129
- Intermediate (6 weeks) - \$129
- Advanced (6 weeks) - \$129
- Beginner + Intermediate - \$219
- Premium Package (Beginner + Intermediate + Advanced) - \$329

Private:

- 30 minutes: \$45
- 1 hour: \$89
- 4 hours: \$219

Virtual training (private), four 30-minute sessions: \$126

They also offer a 3-week course on anxiety-related behaviors.

Potential problems:

Unlike a spay/neuter voucher which requires the owner to make a trip to the vet's office, training requires a time commitment of several weeks. The concern is that some people will not complete the training and therefore some sessions would be paid for but unused. There could be a requirement that owners would have to pay for unused sessions, but this would

require staff time to verify completion rates and send notices to people who owe money, so it would probably be better to wait to see if this is a problem big enough to require a solution (if there are very few unused sessions, it wouldn't be worth the staff time to verify completion and collect on unused sessions).

Benefits:

Overall, the goal of this proposal is to reduce owner surrenders, adoption returns, and dog bites. Fewer animals in the shelter makes it less stressful for staff, volunteers, and the animals. Dogs who have more opportunities for exercise will likely be calmer when in their kennels which will help them get adopted. Additionally, if fewer animals are in the shelter it allows for more time to network animals with medical or behavioral issues; when the shelters are at capacity, these animals are at very high risk of being euthanized. Furthermore, if staff are overwhelmed and exhausted, they have less time to provide service to the public and they may be at higher risk for workplace injuries.

The prevention of dog bites is an important public health issue; every day over 1,000 people nationwide visit the emergency room as the result of a dog bite (Yin 2009). As stated previously, the impact of this program on the prevention of dog bites is difficult to measure but data should be collected in order to better understand if it is serving this purpose.

Fundraising:

Owners who receive vouchers can be placed into a database and they can be included in future fundraising appeals; if the owners found the training useful, hopefully they would be willing to make a donation to keep the program going.

Summary:

It can sometimes be difficult to convey to adopters the importance of dog training and they may only realize how valuable it is once they take the course. By offering training for free, hopefully more owners will take their dog to training classes. City-provided training could help shelters place dogs with behavioral issues as well as reduce the number of dogs returned or surrendered to the shelter due to behavior issues.

References:

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior, 2021. "[Position Statement on Human Dog Training](#)"

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