

OLD DOGS AND ANIMAL SHELTERS



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A Report from the
Grey Muzzle Organization

The Grey Muzzle Organization

Helping homeless senior dogs

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Abstract. Senior dogs end up in shelters for a variety of reasons, sometimes because of neglect or abandonment, sometimes because their owners simply cannot care for them. The health of older dogs is at high risk in a shelter environment, and as a result, they may be less adoptable than the younger dogs (or perceived as such by the public). Some success has been achieved by organizations that focus on the needs of senior dogs and help match them with people that can appreciate and benefit from their affection and loyalty. However, this success requires funding. There is a great need for programs and organizations that help deal with the health needs of senior dogs, and get them out the shelter environment as quickly as possible.

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Today, there are thousands of senior dogs living in shelters. These include humane societies, SPCA shelters, animal control shelters, and other animal welfare facilities. The exact number is unknown, but we do know that every homeless animal agency in the country is challenged with helping these senior dogs.

To better understand the situation for senior dogs in shelters, The Grey Muzzle Organization interviewed six experts who work with abandoned senior dogs every day. We talked to the executive director and an adoption coordinator at two large shelters (the Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County in Washington and the Sacramento SPCA in California). We interviewed a leading veterinarian, an expert in geriatric medicine who also works with rescue dogs. And, we talked with the executive directors of two rescue organizations that work exclusively with senior dogs—two of the very few in the country— OldDog Haven in Washington state, and The Sanctuary for Senior Dogs in Cleveland, Ohio. These organizations are frequently the last resort for old dogs that can't survive, or are unlikely to be adopted, from large shelters.

Our Experts

Rick Johnson, Executive Director, [Sacramento SPCA](#), Sacramento, California

Cecily Joque, Adoption Coordinator, [The Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County](#), Tacoma, Washington

Dr. Fred Metzger, [Metzger Animal Hospital](#), State College, Pennsylvania

Kathleen Olson, Executive Director, [The Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County](#), Tacoma, Washington

Judith Piper, Executive Director, [OldDog Haven](#), Arlington, Washington

Deborah Workman, Executive Director, [The Sanctuary for Senior Dogs](#), Cleveland, Ohio

What these experts from around the United States tell us is remarkably similar, painting a consistent picture of the situation faced by senior dogs nationwide who have become homeless.

This report explains why senior dogs end up in shelters, their special health risks while there, and the challenges faced in getting them out of the shelter and into an adoptive or foster home. It also outlines successful strategies that could be funded with programs to help senior dogs that end up in shelters.

WHY DO OLD DOGS END UP IN SHELTERS?

If you have an older dog in your life, or have ever had the pleasure of sharing your life with a senior dog, you probably can't imagine allowing them to end up at your local humane society or animal control

facility. Yet shelters must care for many old dogs every day. Our experts shared some of the most common reasons for senior dogs being “turned in.” In no specific order, these are:

Moving. A very common reason for surrendering an old dog to a shelter is that the family is moving to a new home that won’t accommodate dogs. The Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County sees a much higher incidence of old dogs being turned in due to home moves than due to aggressive behavior, compared to other ages. Of course, there is no way to know how many of these are really “moves” and how many are actually the next issue.

Medical issues that the owner doesn’t choose to address. Deborah Workman, Executive Director of The Sanctuary for Senior Dogs, observes, “Some people think of a dog as a shirt. When there’s hole in the shirt, you get rid of it.” A very difficult situation for animal welfare workers to deal with is owners who know their dog should be euthanized, but reject the responsibility to see their dog through this last stage of their lives.

Can’t afford medical care. Another difficult, yet all too common scenario for animal welfare workers is people who would love to keep their old dog, but can’t afford the medical care. “Some people have to choose between the kids and the dogs,” says Cecily Joque, Adoption Coordinator at the Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County. “Some people don’t have the funds for medical care...it’s very sad to me.” And there are few charitable funds that such owners can go to for help.

Caretaker passes away. Owners that pass away without instructions or provisions for their pet in a legal will, or those who enter assisted living and are unable to provide for the dog are frequent circumstances for senior dogs arrival in shelters. Family members aren’t always interested, or may themselves be unable to care for the dog. Judith Piper, Executive Director of OldDog Haven, urges dog owners to keep records with veterinary history and information about the dog’s temperament, habits and routine care. OldDog Haven once nearly lost a diabetic dog surrendered by the owner without any information or medical history. Even a previous veterinarian’s name could have avoided the medical crisis that needlessly occurred.



Fritz, a senior German Shepherd, waits in his kennel at the Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County. Fritz was found as a stray.

Unknown – strays. Many old dogs in shelters are found as strays. Medical history for these dogs is guesswork. Deborah Workman talks of old [Burt](#), who was found collapsed in a ditch, and was later discovered to be full of buckshot and pellets, probably used as target practice. Burt turned out to be one of the most effective and best loved therapy dogs that The Sanctuary for Senior Dogs has trained, a testament to the resilience and vitality still in abundance in older dogs, and the contributions they can make to improving our lives.

Once in a shelter, our experts agree that the biggest issues for older dogs, as compared to their younger companions, are health and adoptability.

HEALTH PROBLEMS FOR SENIOR DOGS IN SHELTERS

Our experts were very clear on the major health issues for senior dogs in shelters, and all agreed on these top concerns:

Dental needed. Dr. Metzger, a leading veterinary specialist on senior pet care, warns that, “Dental disease is epidemic in older pets . . . the older dogs and cats that have neglected dental disease are just time bombs ticking As dental disease progresses, you’re going to get bacteria in the blood stream, and that’s going to cause major issues with the organs.” Dental disease is a double-whammy in a shelter environment: it’s too expensive for even the most well-funded shelters to fix, and the cost is off-putting to prospective adopters. Required dental work is by far the number one reason that shelters ask Judith Piper to take a dog – few people will adopt a dog needing this work.

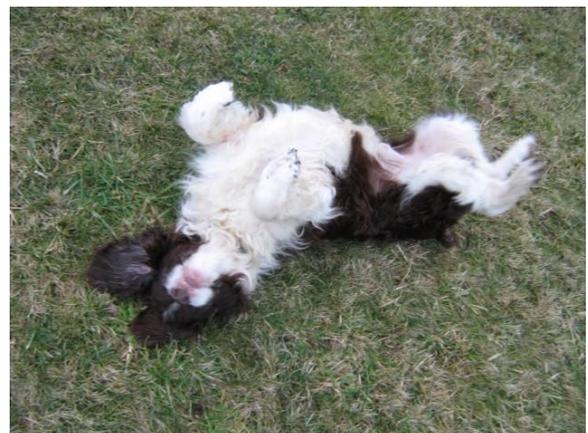
Blood work needed. Blood work is critical to diagnosing many common diseases in older dogs, including kidney disease, diabetes, and hypothyroidism. “We can help dogs with problems like hypothyroidism, but we need blood work to diagnose it,” explains Dr. Metzger. Like dental work, blood work is too expensive for most shelters. The Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County has been able to provide blood work in limited situations, but not for all senior dogs. The consequence for shelters, is limited knowledge for determining the best way to help the dog. (See Nellie’s Story, at www.greymuzzle.org, for an example of a dog who would have broken the heart of an adopter because the shelter had no idea she had kidney disease.) However, when a shelter can get access to this service it makes a huge difference. The Sacramento SPCA, which has a full-time veterinarian, just got the equipment to do their own blood panels. “From our standpoint it’s a wonderful addition, with immediate results,” says Executive Director Rick Johnson. Unfortunately, the Sacramento SPCA is the exception, and this kind of equipment is rarely seen in shelters.

Cecily Joque believes, “We could make dogs more adoptable with just the basics – blood work and dentals.” Other common issues for senior dogs in the animal welfare system include:

Arthritis. Geriatric dogs lying on cement floors in shelters is a bad situation. Cecily Joque explains that, “The geriatric dogs get stiff and sore. The beds that we have are not the most expensive, but the dogs love



A very thin, unnamed 11-year old Basset mix rests on his cot at the Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County. The cot was a paid for by a donor. His roommate, a 12-year old English Springer Spaniel, Byron, who shows signs of neglect, is not so lucky, although the staff have given him a blanket. The Basset mix was adopted through the shelter; OldDog Haven took Byron and as of the writing of this article, is working on a dry eye condition, and skin issues and ear infections. He reportedly has a wonderful personality. Below, Byron enjoys a roll in the grass at OldDog Haven.



them, and it gets them off the pressure points.” Unfortunately, there are not enough to go around for all senior dogs. As dogs get stiffer, more uncomfortable and less active, they might not “show” as well to potential adopters, compared to a lively younger dog.

Skin conditions. For Judith Piper, skin problems and allergies are the second most common reasons for shelters to ask her to take a dog. Skin conditions make a dog very unappealing to adopters. This problem requires more than money to fix – it requires dedicated care and nursing, with treatments such as frequent medicated baths and special diets. Foster homes are often willing to do this; shelters simply don’t have the resources.

“The problem is there’s no place for them to go. Barring a program like ours, of which there are very few, there *is* no place for them to go if they’re not adoptable.”

Judith Piper, OldDog Haven

Kennel cough. While kennel cough is a highly treatable upper respiratory virus, it can be a serious concern with senior dogs in a shelter environment. OldDog Haven has lost several dogs that came from shelters when they succumbed to pneumonia that started with kennel cough at the shelter. Rick Johnson finds that diseases such as kennel cough are worsened by stress, “It’s a big problem . . . because of the proximity of so many dogs, it’s spread around. . .”

Mass removal. Senior dogs tend to have fatty tumors, skin tags or warts, and other benign masses that make them unappealing to adopters, not only cosmetically, but because adopters might be worried about cancer. Typically these can easily be removed, but again, money is involved.

As Dr. Metzger points out, “For a shelter to do all these things is impossible.” If an old dog’s health issues are not feasible for a shelter to solve, and no rescue is available (and the very few that exist can take only a small fraction of the dogs in need), the dog is in severe danger of being euthanized, or living longer term in a stressful, deteriorated quality of life.

THE NEED TO GET SENIOR DOGS OUT OF THE SHELTER

Clearly, senior dogs are more at risk in the shelter environment than dogs of younger ages. Our experts concur that the first order of business is to get old dogs out of this environment as soon as possible and into homes, either adoptive or foster.

Adoption. The goal and ideal solution is to place senior dogs in adoptive homes, but this can be challenging. The medical issues described above are a big factor. Judith Piper explains the attitude of many potential adopters: “There’re so many dogs available, why choose one with something that looks like a big problem, or looks ugly, or takes a lot of effort?”

And then there is the competition with younger dogs. Cecily Joque believes, “We think of it as adopting a pet into a family. But we are a consumer-driven society. A consumer looks at two dogs, a 2-year-old lab and a 9-year-old lab who needs a \$200 dental . . . and has no history.” Deborah Workman often sees older dogs put in the adoption ward among young dogs and puppies, who just don’t get noticed. “At some of the larger adoption events they are virtually ignored. People say ‘oh, look at the puppy,’ and then they’re gone.”, says Deborah. She believes that traditional shelters could help by restructuring the

facility, for example, putting the senior dogs together in the first room visitors pass through. But of course, this requires money and space.

Many people have the mistaken assumption that an older dog will die in several months. “People think that an older dog will automatically develop some expensive disease and drain their entire bank account. These are possibilities, but they’re not likely,” comments Deborah Workman. It’s less likely if the dental procedure and blood work described above have been completed. And as Kathleen Olson, the Executive Director of the Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County, points out, “There are no guarantees. A younger dog could also have an accident.”

Foster homes. Foster homes are a good alternative for dogs that are not adopted right away, or that need some additional nursing before adoption – a skin condition is a good example. “Senior dogs are so easy to foster,” says Cecily Joque. Yet putting together a full-scale senior dog foster program takes money (especially for medical treatment) and requires a great commitment of time to manage the homes and dogs. The Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County would like to get more senior dogs into foster homes, but the funds are not necessarily available for the common medical treatments that would allow them to go into foster care.



Odie with his adopter, Bettye. Odie was severely neglected because his owners were “waiting for him to die.” A caring neighbor brought him to a shelter. Foster care at OldDog Haven helped him regain weight, strength, lost fur, and prepared him for a happy home. Odie now brings much joy to Bettye and her family.

Lifelong hospice care. Dogs that are not primarily adoptable need a lifelong hospice care situation. They may have a serious health condition such as a congenital heart condition that would not allow them to be placed for adoption. Nevertheless, with a little effort they can often experience a wonderful quality of life for months or years. For an abused dog, this may be the happiest time in their lives.

The bottom line: our experts agree that time is the critical factor for senior dogs that wind up in shelters. “For those that aren’t adoptable, we need to find somewhere for them to go quickly enough so that they don’t waste away in the system”, says Judith Piper. The people who work to help these dogs often must deal with heartbreaking situations. Cecily Joque says, “It kills me when an old dog comes in, they’ve given someone their entire lives, and here they sit.” A dog that was particularly difficult for her was a dignified and handsome senior boxer “gentleman”, who in just five days deteriorated to the point where he couldn’t move his back legs. He had to be euthanized and Cecily was with him; this was all she could do.

Judith Piper and Deborah Workman, who take in many of the most at-risk or deteriorated dogs, both describe their most distressing cases as those where they just can’t help the dog even in intensive home care—the old dogs that are so abused, starved, or medically neglected that they only live a short time. “When I can’t reach them, can’t let them know they’re

safe, it tears me up,” says Judith. For Deborah, it’s “The ones where I think, okay, I see what this dog has been through, here comes the good stuff – and the good stuff lasts two weeks.” Both organizations must turn away 20 to 50 requests per week from shelters, due to limitations on foster homes, funds, and management resources.

THE POSSIBILITIES FOR SUCCESS

Despite the frustration and sadness, all of our experts have many positive stories to tell, as well as many ideas of what can be done to help more old dogs.

Adoption success. Rick Johnson is extremely positive about the potential for adopting senior dogs. “As time has gone on, we have certainly seen more elderly animals that are being put up for adoption.” He believes that in many cases, there is nothing other than age that would make a dog not adoptable (barring the medical conditions described above). “So, we have had 10-13 year old dogs put up successfully for adoption.” Cecily Joque recalls a 14-15 year old German Shorthaired Pointer who was deaf, but was happy, waggy, and found a good home. Rick attributes much of the Sacramento SPCA’s success to their strong focus on providing as much information as possible to potential adopters. “We make sure that they understand that they may be taking on something that has a bigger financial impact than they were thinking about. We don’t want them to walk away without understanding.” Because the Sacramento SPCA is equipped with more medical equipment than many shelters, such as the ability to do blood panels, they are able to provide this important information to adopters.

OldDog Haven and The Sanctuary for Senior Dogs have also demonstrated that old dogs can be highly adoptable, and these specialized rescue groups have become experts in getting an older dog to an adoptable point, evaluating them for the best home, and advertising them. OldDog Haven was able to find adoptive homes for 160 dogs in 2007, a full 50 percent of the dogs they took in (most of the remaining 50 percent are in lifelong hospice care).

“There’s nothing more enchanting than to look at a dog that has a little wiser look than a puppy. People are looking to connect with that animal.”

Rick Johnson, Sacramento SPCA

The appeal of senior dogs. Rick Johnson believes that some people make especially strong connections with senior dogs. “There’s a look you get from a dog that has lived a wonderful life and unfortunately found himself or herself here. Normally that wins them over. If they connect with that dog, age is really not going to matter. Very few people walk away once they have connected with a dog that has a grey muzzle.” Connecting senior dogs with the particular people who will appreciate them—and this may include senior people—makes a huge difference in the ability to get senior dogs out of the shelter. And senior

dogs frequently give back to their adopters – they enrich the lives of the people who care for them, including the elderly, and are often easier to care for than a puppy or young dog. Old dogs make great companions for people that aren’t able to commit to a dog for 15 years.

The Internet. An extremely effective way to connect potential adopters with senior dogs is the Web. OldDog Haven relies on its website to get the word out about adoptable dogs, as well as to recruit foster homes. Adopters frequently tell them that they visit the website every day to read dog stories, and then one day the perfect dog arrives. The Sacramento SPCA has had similar success with their website. Rick Johnson explains: “The Web has helped a lot. At least 40 percent of people who adopt have already identified an animal. I think this helps in particular with senior [dogs]. I believe they show well.” Even with the potential, the work required to maintain a current list of senior dogs with appealing stories and good pictures can be a challenge for volunteer-driven organizations.

Special senior programs and policies. The Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County has two volunteers who come in every Monday, assess the dogs, and work with rescue organizations to take those who are not immediately adoptable. One of these volunteers focuses on senior dogs. Building strong working relationships between shelters like this one, and rescue organizations like the Sanctuary for Senior Dogs, is a critical factor in finding the best situation for senior dogs and for getting them out of the shelter environment quickly. Other special programs include Seniors for Seniors, which some shelters use to match senior adopters with senior dogs, at a reduced rate. The Sacramento SPCA gives their staff latitude to wave the adoption fee for a senior dog if they have already determined that the potential adopter can provide a good home.

The reward. Despite the personal frustrations experienced by many of our experts, and countless others who work to rescue old dogs, the rewards outweigh the defeats. Deborah Workman and Judith Piper immediately give the exact same two-word answer when asked what keeps them going: “The dogs.” And both immediately mention how happy a senior dog can be when it’s found a safe and caring home. “It’s their smiles,” says Deborah. “They are just so happy. There’s nothing like an old dog. Nothing like the love of an old dog. The forgiveness, the devotion. You see gratitude in their eyes. It’s just words until you experience it.”

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Without a doubt, more organizations like OldDog Haven and The Sanctuary For Senior Dogs are needed nationwide. Cecily Joque describes how excited she was when OldDog Haven was formed. “We were just ecstatic when Judith came on the scene.” Such organizations need management and financial support, especially for medical costs. OldDog Haven, which helped over 300 dogs in 2007, spends 92% of its income on dog expenses, and 77% on vet care alone. In addition, shelters also need support with medical treatment and programs to help senior dogs go to foster or adoptive homes, such as the success that the Sacramento SPCA has built.

“Our biggest need is always medical cost. Always. It’s difficult to find grants to cover this.”

Deborah Workman,
The Sanctuary for Senior Dogs

Programs that would help improve the situation for senior dogs in shelters include:

- Encourage the formation of more organizations like OldDog Haven and The Sanctuary for Senior Dogs, who provide a place for senior dogs that are not adoptable from shelters.
- Provide a cost effective programs for dental care and blood panels for senior dogs in shelters or rescue organizations.
- Provide cots for senior dogs in large shelters.
- Special designs for large adoption facilities to highlight senior dogs and reduce the competition with young dogs.
- Help form senior foster programs for large shelters.

- Assist shelters and rescue organizations better connect senior dogs with adopters who will appreciate them, by utilizing websites or creating senior-for-senior adoption programs.
- Provide medical funds that help owners who want to keep their old dogs, but can't afford the medical care.
- Provide medical assistance for people adopting senior dogs who could not otherwise afford it.

Employees and volunteers at many shelters and rescue organization are ready and anxious to help. They just need the resources to do so. Kathleen Olson, who is the executive director of a shelter that takes in 50 dogs per day, points out how invested her staff are in the animals. Much could be done to help these staff and volunteers help old dogs.

The Grey Muzzle Organization was founded to help homeless senior dogs. Our goal is to fund programs such as those described above, that help keep dogs healthier when they end up in shelters, and most importantly, help place them in caring homes as soon as possible. We depend on donations from compassionate and thoughtful individuals to do this work. Please visit www.greymuzzle.org to find out how you can help.

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