



Using C.L.A.S.S. to Encourage Training and Increase Adoptions

in Your Local Shelter, Rescue Group, or Municipal Animal Control

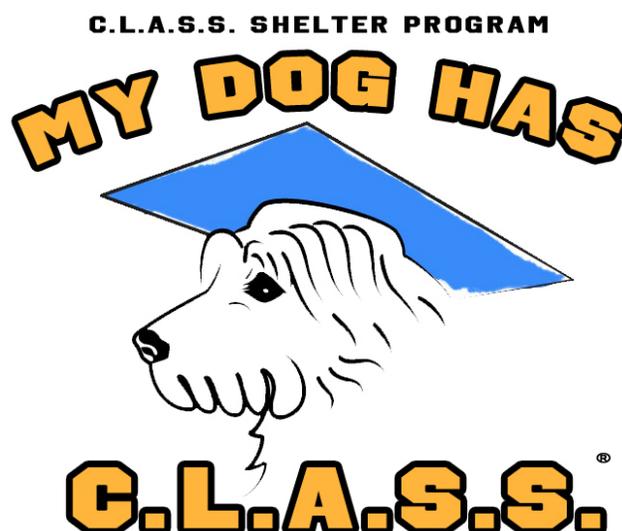
This article is geared toward trainers who work with dogs in need of adoptive homes. C.L.A.S.S. (Canine Life and Social Skills) is an educational program to promote positive training and strengthen relationships between humans and their canine companions. The C.L.A.S.S. Shelter Program can increase adoptions and lead to quieter kennels and less stressed dogs.

The C.L.A.S.S. Shelter Handbook (available for download at http://www.mydoghasclass.com/docs/shelter/shelter_program.pdf) includes a Training Orientation program for training shelter staff and volunteers, Lesson Plans, and supplemental training information to enhance a shelter's existing volunteer and enrichment program or create a new one.

How Can C.L.A.S.S. Help Our Shelter?

When you enter most shelters to look for your new best friend, you are bombarded by barking and jumping dogs, cowering and scared dogs, and dogs that look like they don't have a friend in the world. You find a dog you want to meet, a staff member tries to leash her up, all the while the dog is leaping and spinning. Once out of the kennel, she drags you down the hallway.

Now imagine entering the shelter to see dogs lying peacefully on dog beds, sitting quietly at the cage doors, tails wagging. All the dogs are well behaved and now your decision isn't so easy. What a wonderful world this would be.



What makes the difference between these two scenarios can be as easy as utilizing the Canine Life and Social Skills shelter program. By teaching these dogs a few handy skills, they now move to the head of the C.L.A.S.S. for adoption. These life skills help by:

1. Reducing the level of stress they feel while at the kennel
2. Teaching them useful obedience behaviors that their new owners can use to provide structure and guidance

We can greatly enhance the ability of a dog to adapt to its new home with decreased stress and fewer behavioral and adaptive problems. These dogs are then more likely to be accepted as family members in the home.

Mental versus Physical Exercise

In order to be well-adjusted pets, dogs need both mental and physical stimulation on a daily basis. The desire to "keep busy" is deeply ingrained in the majority of dogs.

Did you know that mental exercise tires a dog more quickly and thoroughly than physical exercise? It's true! Learning and following rules of any kind is a great form of mental exercise. As the dog goes through training, she learns a large amount and her mental capacities are greatly expanded.

Shelter dogs need more than a leisurely stroll around the building to work off their energy. Mental stimulation is important to the development and happiness of any pup, but it's absolutely essential for dogs that are waiting to be adopted.

Volunteers and staff using the C.L.A.S.S. program appreciate the structure and guidance the program provides. The easy-to-follow goals motivate volunteers to continue with the program.

C.L.A.S.S. Logistics in a Shelter

- Shelters, municipalities, and other non-profit groups can register their dogs for free.
- Evaluators who only use C.L.A.S.S. with shelter dogs get a reduced Evaluator registration fee (\$25.)
- Shelters may list dogs who pass a C.L.A.S.S. evaluation on the C.L.A.S.S. web site in the "dogs for adoption" section.

C.L.A.S.S. in the Shelter

The shelter program will primarily focus on the B.A. Evaluation, although a dog that is progressing well can move to the next levels if a volunteer or volunteers want to work with him or her further. Once dogs pass the B.A. level of C.L.A.S.S., they can be listed for adoption on the C.L.A.S.S. web site, (www.mydoghasclass.com) which is sponsored by the Association of Pet Dog Trainers.

The behaviors required for the B.A. are basic skills that dog owners desire:

- Doors not being open invitations for running out
- Sitting politely while being leashed for their daily walk
- Walking nicely around the neighborhood without it turning into a tug-a-war race
- Meeting neighbors without acting like one of the Flying Wallendas
- Leaving the half-eaten French fries left on the curb, the lollypop in the neighbor kid's hand, and everyone's favorite—the dead squirrel in the middle of the street
- Not molesting the new owner at dinner time, instead sitting politely until released to eat
- Staying in place while you chat with a neighbor for a minute
- Settling down while the family gathers to watch TV or while company is visiting
- What the dog has is good, but what the owner has is better!

Getting Started with Volunteers

So you're sold on the C.L.A.S.S. shelter program, you have the staff and volunteers, but don't know how to get started. Here are some ideas of the type of exercises that can be taught by the various skill levels of those staff and volunteers.

Level 1 Trainers – Cuddlers

Cuddlers are those volunteers who don't have great dog training skills. They may either be new to dog training, newly cross-over trainers working on their positive reinforcement skills or those who just want to spend time with the dogs.

These volunteers are the backbone of the training. They will probably have the most interaction with the dogs while the dogs are actually in their kennels. The skills they can teach the dogs will directly impact the stress level of the dogs.

Cuddlers can oftentimes just spend time in the kennels with the dogs without really doing anything other than "hanging out." This helps the dogs relax, provides a realistic "home environment."

Level 2 Trainers

You may have volunteers to whom you may not feel comfortable teaching loose-leash walking or recall work. But they do have a skill set for teaching the stationary exercises necessary for helping the dogs become more adoptable.

While teaching these behaviors takes a little more ability, they can be taught by fairly new trainers. And just like the cuddlers, these trainers can do most of their work right in the kennels with the dogs.

Level 3 Trainers

The behaviors taught at this level require a bit more experienced trainer, one who understands how positive reinforcement works and has the patience to wait out many of the silly behaviors dogs may perform while in the learning stages.

These trainers should also have a good understanding of canine body language as well, as they will be moving dogs throughout the shelter among other dogs and well-meaning visitors.

Depending on the training methods used for these behaviors, it is important these trainers keep accurate logs on the dog's progress.

What it takes to be a C.L.A.S.S. shelter – Complete Buy-In

Whether you are a shelter staff member who wants to start this program or an outside trainer wanting to start this program at your local shelter, the first step is getting "complete buy-in" from the entire shelter staff.

So you've convinced the Shelter Director this is a great program. Now you have to work on the kennel staff—remember, this will require more work on their part in the beginning, until it just becomes second nature. And any change to the status quo is stressful.

If your shelter has a behavior department, this is the ultimate buy-in you have to achieve. Without their acceptance of this new program, you may have push-back in the way of "that's not how we do things around here."

And don't forget the volunteers who donate their time to help these dogs get adopted. If you make the process seem too overwhelming to them, they may feel it's too much trouble to continue volunteering. And we never want to lose our precious volunteers—they are the life blood of any shelter.

Baby-steps and relationship-building can really be the key. It will depend on the shelter, but in some cases offering to volunteer, showing up regularly, and asking what they need and want, rather than prescribing something right off the bat, can be one way in the door.

Cooperation

This is where smaller shelters have the advantage. Like in the business world, the larger the shelter, the more departmentalized it becomes and “office politics” arise where-ever humans work. Although well meaning, some staff may not feel the need to share information on certain behavior issues.

It's invaluable that everyone communicate for the welfare of the dogs. Lack of information on the skills learned can result in some backsliding in latency.

Consistency

As we all know, it is important in the learning stages of training that the dog receive the same information in the same way every time. So again, there must be cooperation and communication so everyone is consistent. There's enough going on in the shelter environment to confuse most dogs, they don't need to try to deal with it while learning new behaviors.

In larger shelters, there may need to be a training class set up for staff and volunteers so they all learn how each behavior is to be trained. Many of these personnel are in different stages of their own skill sets and may need to rely on others for teaching some of the skills to the dogs.

Patience

As dog trainers, we know the importance of patience with the dogs, but we need to also respect fellow shelter personnel and be patient.

For more traditional shelters with little interaction with the dogs other than cleaning, this is a whole new experience. With limited funding, most shelter staff already feel overworked, and the last thing this program should bring to any shelter is cause staff and volunteers to feel overwhelmed.

Don't try to take on every behavior with every dog on Day 1. You will have a revolution! Take it one day at a time, one dog at a time, one staff member or volunteer at a time.

Remember, this program is designed to make dogs more adoptable and relieve their stress levels while in the shelter. Causing additional stress to their care-givers will have a trickle-down effect on the dogs.

This program was not developed overnight so don't expect it to become the standard practice in your shelter overnight.

Our Shelter Needs Help

Download the Shelter Handbook at www.mydoghasclass.com/shelters for Lesson Plans and other information to enhance or create a volunteer training program. If you currently have a good volunteer base, it's a matter of providing training to get them up to speed. Don't make the assumption that one 2-hour training session will carry over. It may take several follow-up sessions to insure the volunteers are actually teaching the skills to the dogs.

If you need trainers to help get the program up and running, you probably have resources in your area that will be willing to help. Since you will be asking for volunteers, you may need to barter for their services by advertising their services to adopters for after adoption trainings.

Some resources to consider are training centers or dog obedience clubs in your area. Don't assume that every member of a local dog club is a traditional trainer. While many are, you may be surprised to find positive trainers who belong because they are interested in competing with their dogs. Yes, we are out there!

And of course, you can check the APDT web site to find local private trainers in your area. Again, since many of these trainers make their living training dogs, they may want some sort of barter system in exchange of free services.

And last but not least, remember to provide support for your volunteer trainers. Show your appreciation for their services, share your success stories with them and give them their share of the credit when your adoption rates go up.

I Want to Help My Local Shelter

Open Admission Shelters don't like to be called "kill shelters". Many of these shelters try everything in their power to eliminate euthanasia for population control. But because they accept all animals brought to them, in highly populated areas, they do the best they can. Try to not alienate them in your approach.

Limited Admission Shelters, also known as "no-kill" shelters, often have limited resources and have the same need as Open Admission Shelters to get their dogs adopted as quickly as possible to make room for new animals.

Municipal animal control facilities are probably the least funded and have the least human resources but need the greatest help. These tend to be small, often rural, shelters with high euthanasia rates. Again, they are doing the best they can and should not be alienated while approaching to offer help.

Breed specific rescue groups are groups in which dogs are held in private foster homes by volunteers who love the breed. Again, the faster these dogs can be made ready for adoption, the more room they will have for additional intakes.

With Open and Limited Admissions Shelters, if you don't already have a relationship with them, you may want to start with their Behavior Department, if they have one, or their Shelter Director.

With municipal animal control facilities, you need to find out if they are run by the police or sheriff's departments or the water department. Yes, believe it or not, many cities run their animal control through their water department.

With Breed Rescues, you can usually contact one of their officers, if you don't already have a relationship.

Regardless of which type of agency you are contacting, they probably don't have any additional funding in their current budget for any paid training. You may have to offer your services free of charge in the beginning. But you may be able to work out a deal of advertising your services to the prospective adopter at the time of adoption through a handout. It can be a win-win situation because the shelter dogs get the needed training for adoptability and you get free advertising for your business.