

## **Maddie's Fund® Final Report**

### **Saving Seniors: An Evaluation of Strategies to Increase the Adoption of Senior Dogs**

**September 2020**

**Lisa Lunghofer, Ph.D.**

## Acknowledgments

We wish to thank Maddie's Fund®, a national family foundation established by Dave and Cheryl Duffield to revolutionize the status and well-being of companion animals, for the generous grant that made this project possible. We are also indebted to the 76 animal welfare organizations throughout the U.S. that participated in this study. Their commitment to improving and expanding programs to help senior dogs is inspiring. We are grateful to the staff, volunteers, and adopters from each of these organizations who shared their experience and insight. We hope the project findings will inform development and dissemination of programs and practices to increase timely adoption of and live outcomes for senior dogs.

### **Maddie's Fund**

Maddie's Fund® is a family foundation created in 1994 by Workday® co-founder Dave Duffield and his wife, Cheryl, who have endowed the Foundation with more than \$300 million. Since then, the Foundation has awarded more than \$225.7 million in grants toward increased community lifesaving, shelter management leadership, shelter medicine education, and foster care across the U.S. The Duffields named Maddie's Fund after their Miniature Schnauzer Maddie, who always made them laugh and gave them much joy. Maddie was with Dave and Cheryl for ten years and continues to inspire them today. Maddie's Fund is the fulfillment of a promise to an inspirational dog, investing its resources to create a no-kill nation where every dog and cat is guaranteed a healthy home or habitat. #ThanksToMaddie.

When senior dogs enter shelters, they often face an uncertain future. The ASPCA reports the adoption rate for senior dogs (defined as seven years or older) is lower than that of all other ages combined and the live release rate is just over 50% (ASPCA, 2015). The Grey Muzzle Organization is one of the only national organizations dedicated specifically to advancing lifesaving efforts on behalf of senior dogs. The organization improves the lives of at-risk senior dogs by providing funding and resources to animal shelters, rescue organizations, sanctuaries, and other nonprofit groups nationwide. Grey Muzzle awards grants for programs that provide senior dogs with medical and dental care; adoption, foster and hospice services; and other supports to improve well-being and quality of life.

There is much to be learned from these grant-supported programs. For example, what are the facilitators of and barriers to adoption of senior dogs? What strategies are most effective in promoting their well-being? Answering these questions is essential to save senior dogs' lives and decrease the length of time they spend in shelter or foster care. This qualitative study aimed to explore these questions and involved individual interviews with 71 program directors, 41 volunteers, and 13 senior dog adopters representing 59 2018-2019 Grey Muzzle grantees from across the United States. Representatives of an additional 29 2019-2020 grantees participated in a series of virtual focus groups.

Using a comparative case study approach, the study provides an in-depth examination not only of the grantees' senior dog programs, but also the context in which those programs were implemented, and lessons learned. In fact, this is the first study to examine the state of efforts nationally to promote the well-being of senior dogs, beyond simply assessing live release rates. **The study sought not just to understand *whether* senior dogs' lives were being saved, but also *how and why*, and to identify potentially lifesaving approaches and strategies.**

### Key Findings

- The landscape of animal welfare is changing. Grantees see far fewer young, healthy dogs and more dogs who are older and often sicker. In addition, more senior dogs are being put up for adoption who would previously have been euthanized.
- The health needs of senior dogs have important implications for animal welfare organizations' business models. In fact, the cost to care for senior dogs was the challenge cited most frequently by Grey Muzzle grantees. Moreover, *unforeseen costs* are common; a dog may appear healthy initially, but closer examination may uncover medical issues that

could compromise quality of life and likelihood of adoption. Costs—anticipated and unanticipated—affect shelters’ and rescues’ choices about which dogs they accept. Developing new strategies to manage these costs will be essential to sustaining efforts to save senior dogs.

- Grantees noted an increase in senior dogs being surrendered by senior people. Animal welfare organizations should consider the demographics of the geographic area they serve and the extent to which the human population is “greying.” Outreach to older pet owners to encourage them to plan for the care of their animals could reduce the number of senior dogs coming into care when owners die or move into assisted living.
- There is disparity in the number of homeless dogs in various parts of the country. Homeless animals, including senior dogs, are more prevalent in the South than in the North, where animal shelters are increasingly operating below full capacity. Transports are critical to get senior dogs from locations with low demand and high supply to locations with high demand and low supply of companion animals. While transports are important for younger animals, they are particularly important for senior dogs who may face fewer promising prospects in an overburdened shelter.
- Collaboration is essential. Key resources and partners include veterinarians, volunteer fosters, public shelters, community-based organizations, and the public. Saving senior dogs requires a well-orchestrated effort among partners who may not always see an incentive to work together; no single organization can do it alone.
- The Grey Muzzle grant promoted new ways of thinking. The grants helped organizations to challenge long-held assumptions about senior dogs, most importantly assumptions that: 1) euthanasia is the only choice, and 2) the public won’t open their hearts and homes to older dogs.
- Grantees served nearly 2,100 senior dogs during the 2018-2019 grant period, and more than one in three grantees served more senior dogs than their grant application projected. Moreover, the grants had important effects beyond simply the number of senior dogs served. Specifically, the grants: 1) affected grantees’ decision-making about which dogs they could transfer in and/or the type of care they could provide, allowing them to take in senior dogs they would not have otherwise; 2) allowed grantees to provide additional medical and dental care, increasing the likelihood of senior dogs’ adoption and improving their quality of life; and 3) improved staff morale and commitment to serving senior dogs. These effects reflect the systemic change needed to improve the welfare of senior dogs and sustain those changes.

- Grantees described an increasing focus on community outreach to address minor health issues before they become costly and unmanageable. This raises important questions about the role of primary prevention efforts to improve outcomes for senior dogs.
- Trust matters and is reflected in relationships among shelters, rescues, donors, adopters, and the broader community. Trust among shelters and rescues empowers them to ask for help with senior dogs when they cannot provide appropriate care and positive outcomes, or as an alternative to euthanasia. Animal welfare organizations need to ask and trust the community to step up on behalf of senior dogs by adopting, fostering, or donating.
- Despite progress, marketing remains a challenge for senior dogs who generally have longer lengths of stay in shelter or foster care. Research is needed to identify messages and strategies that are most successful to promote adoption and fostering of senior dogs.

## Looking Ahead

Every day, shelters and rescues grapple with this question: Why accept a senior dog knowing he or she will cost more to treat, take longer to get adopted, and divert precious resources, like foster homes, from younger and more easily adoptable dogs? No matter how well-intentioned an organization or how committed they are to helping senior dogs, cost-related disincentives to accept older dogs are real. The question is: How do we overcome them?

Clearly, funding is an incentive to help homeless and at-risk senior dogs. It may be useful to consider how funding could be even more impactful by, for example, supporting a mix of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention strategies that aim to both keep senior dogs out of shelters and better meet the needs of those who do come into care. Given the importance of collaboration, how can funding or other incentives encourage partnerships among animal welfare organizations, veterinarians, and other social service providers? How might we use technology to promote collaboration and improve the well-being of senior dogs?

And it is not just about the dogs. Failing to address the role of people in the plight of senior dogs—for better or worse—is a missed opportunity. How can we support and encourage people to provide adequate care for senior dogs? What opportunities are there to work with human service providers and how could such collaboration help both human and animal welfare organizations? Ultimately, by helping senior dogs' people, we will help more senior dogs.

There is no single solution or magic bullet to achieving Grey Muzzle's vision of a world where no old dog dies alone and afraid. Saving senior dogs requires new ways of doing business, changes in thinking about which dogs are adoptable, innovative strategies to promote the joys of senior dog adoption, and a willingness to trust that—despite the obstacles and challenges—it is possible to work together to ensure all dogs spend their golden years in homes with families who love them. Senior dogs' lives depend on it.

Senior dogs are particularly at risk for poor outcomes when they enter shelters. The ASPCA reports that the adoption rate for senior dogs (defined as seven years or older) is lower than that of all other ages combined. Their analysis of data from CARDS (Comprehensive Animal Risk Database System) found the senior dog adoption rate to be 25% compared to an adoption rate of 60% for younger dogs in the sample. Moreover, the live release rate for senior dogs was 56.5% compared to a live release rate of 75.6% for younger dogs (ASPCA, 2015).

Regional data further support the risks faced by senior dogs who have been relinquished or find themselves as strays in shelters. For example, a survey of five open-admission shelters in South Carolina found that the average length of stay for a dog over eight years old is three times as long as the length of stay for dogs under eight (Saint Frances Animal Center, 2018). In these five shelters, 50% of senior dogs were euthanized, a rate two-and-a-half times these shelters' typical euthanasia rate for all dogs. Similarly, the Oregon Humane Society reports the average length of stay for a senior dog in their shelter is up to 3 days more than for an adult dog or puppy. With over 500 senior dogs in their care every year, that adds up to 1,500 extra days to adopt these older dogs. As a result, they can only accept a limited number of senior dogs from partner shelters, approximately 200 dogs a year (Oregon Humane Society, 2018).

The Grey Muzzle Organization is one of the only national organizations dedicated specifically to advancing lifesaving efforts on behalf of senior dogs. Grey Muzzle improves the lives of at-risk senior dogs by providing funding and resources to animal shelters, rescue organizations, sanctuaries, and other nonprofit groups nationwide. It is not a shelter or rescue group. Rather, Grey Muzzle awards grants for programs that provide senior dogs with medical and dental care; adoption, foster and hospice services; and other supports to improve well-being and quality of life. Since 2008, Grey Muzzle has awarded nearly \$2 million in grants to animal welfare organizations helping at-risk senior dogs nationwide. The organization also provides resources and information on the care of senior dogs to both the public and animal welfare organizations across the country and around the world.

While Grey Muzzle grants have supported efforts to meet the needs of homeless and at-risk senior dogs, there is much to be learned about the programs and strategies that are most effective in promoting their well-being. Information on best and promising practices to promote the adoption of senior dogs is essential to save senior dogs' lives and decrease the length of time they spend in shelter or foster care.

This project addressed this information need through an in-depth analysis of the lifesaving work of 59<sup>1</sup> Grey Muzzle grantees. The study sought to better understand, describe, and thoroughly analyze the grantees' senior dog programs, including the context in which they operate, lessons learned from their implementation, and their emerging best and promising practices. The goal is to use the project findings to inform development and dissemination of programs and strategies to increase timely adoption of and live outcomes for senior dogs.

The project addressed three primary research questions:

1. What policies, practices, and procedures have been implemented by animal welfare organizations to increase the adoption of senior dogs?
2. What are the similarities and differences across animal welfare organizations in these policies, practices, and procedures, and how do these similarities and differences affect key outcomes, including the number of senior dogs adopted and their length of stay in the shelter or rescue?
3. What issues must be considered and addressed to improve the care and increase adoption of senior dogs, and how did the Grey Muzzle grant affect grantees' work on behalf of senior dogs?

---

<sup>1</sup> These grantees' awards began July 1, 2018 and ended June 30, 2019.

## Participants

---

The sample included program directors, volunteers/staff, and adopters of senior dogs from Grey Muzzle grantees. The first and primary phase of the study drew participants from 66 organizations that received a Grey Muzzle grant in 2018-2019. The program director for each grantee was contacted by email to invite their participation in the study. The email included a summary of the project and a description of what participation would entail. Those who agreed to participate were included in the sample.

Each program director was asked to nominate up to three staff or volunteers and three adopters who worked with their senior dog program to be invited to participate in the study. The program director sent each of these nominees a brief introduction to the study and a description of the requirements of their participation. If the nominee was interested in participating, it was up to him/her to contact the Principal Investigator (PI) directly or to let the program director know that s/he would like to participate. A series of virtual focus groups was also conducted with 29 program directors from the 2019-2020 cohort of grantees.

Of the 66 2018-2019 grantees, 59<sup>2</sup> agreed to participate in individual interviews. Individual interviews were conducted by telephone with the program director from each of these grantees. Nine grantees also nominated other staff members to participate in individual interviews. A total of 71 interviews were conducted with program directors and staff, 93% of whom were female. In addition, telephone interviews were conducted with 41 volunteers and 13 senior dog adopters from these grantees. All but one of the volunteers was female, and as were all but two of the senior dog adopters. Twenty-nine program directors from the 2019-2020 Grey Muzzle grantee cohort participated in virtual focus groups.

## Design and Procedure

---

This qualitative study used a comparative case study approach to provide an in-depth understanding not only of the organizations' programs, but also the context in which those programs have been implemented, the rationale for the approach, barriers to and facilitators of

---

<sup>2</sup> Participating grantees represented 28 states and the District of Columbia: AZ, CA, CO, CT, DC, FL, GA, HI, IA, ID, IL, IN, KY, MA, MD, MI, MT, NC, NM, NV, NY, OH, OR, SC, TN, TX, VA, WA, and WI.



implementation, and lessons learned. Qualitative data collection methods included individual interviews with the program director, staff/volunteers, and senior dog adopters.

Interviews with program directors focused on three areas:

- Context: Rationale for the area of focus (e.g., medical care, dental care) and process by which it was selected, including challenges in caring for senior dogs and previous efforts or strategies to address them
- Program model:
  - Key program resources or components (e.g., staff, volunteers, equipment/supplies, screening protocols, adoption promotion strategies, training, evaluation)
  - Collaborative relationships (e.g., formal and informal relationships with other animal welfare groups, veterinarians, community groups)
  - Sustainability planning (e.g., steps taken to ensure the program continues)
- Challenges, successes, and lessons learned because of the grant

Data gathered from program providers was supplemented by interviews with senior dog fosters or other volunteers involved with senior dogs at Grey Muzzle grantee sites. In some cases, the program directors nominated other staff to participate in these interviews. The interviews explored:

- Motivation for fostering or otherwise volunteering to work with senior dogs
- Fostering/volunteering experience (e.g., training/support received, rewards, challenges)
- Ideas for program improvement

Similarly, interviews with senior dog adopters provided additional information to understand how the senior dog programs are perceived and experienced by adopters. Telephone interviews explored adopters':

- Previous experience with senior dogs
- Motivation for adopting a senior dog, including any barriers or challenges encountered
- Adoption experience (e.g., how they heard about the organization from which they adopted, rewarding and challenging aspects of senior dog adoption)
- Thoughts on how best to encourage others to adopt senior dogs (e.g., messaging about senior dogs, services offered by animal welfare organizations)

Additional qualitative data was gathered using virtual focus groups. Focus groups were conducted by telephone with 2019-2020 Grey Muzzle grantees having similar primary focus areas (e.g., dental care). Seven focus groups were conducted with representatives of 29 grantees, slightly less than half of the 2019-2020 cohort. This format allowed participants to discuss both shared and divergent experiences and perceptions, providing additional contextual information to enrich and help interpret interview findings. Focus groups also provided the opportunity to assess similarities in experiences and challenges between two cohorts of grantees.

Grantees were recruited to participate in the study in the spring of 2019, with individual interviews beginning immediately following recruitment and extending through the fall of 2019. Focus group participants were recruited in January 2020, with focus groups conducted in January and February 2020.

Prior to beginning all interviews and focus groups, information on the study was read aloud and study participants were asked for verbal consent to participate.<sup>3</sup> Detailed notes were taken during all interviews and the focus groups. Transcripts of the calls were analyzed using QDA Miner Lite, a qualitative analysis software program that facilitated coding of the data from each grantee site and identification of cross-site themes.

---

<sup>3</sup> All study materials were reviewed by the Institute for Global Learning Institutional Review Board, which approved the study on April 16, 2019.

Separate data collection protocols were used for grantee program directors/staff, volunteers, and senior dog adopters. While there was some overlap in findings, there were also unique themes. For that reason, below we present findings separately for each group. Quotes illustrate the themes identified and the perspectives of study participants. Quotes are identified only by grantee site, not by name, to protect respondents' anonymity.

## Program Directors

---

### Context and Background: The Changing Landscape of Animal Welfare

Changes in the characteristics and needs of animals coming into the care of animal welfare organizations provide an important backdrop for this analysis of Grey Muzzle grantees' programs. Forty-seven percent of grantees reported seeing an increase in the number of senior dogs they were caring for and/or an increase in the health needs of senior dogs in their care.

Grantees noted that more senior dog are being put up for adoption who might previously have faced euthanasia. The program director at the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago said, "More dogs are making it through the intake process and getting put up for adoption. We are open admission and are helping more senior dogs now. In the past, those older dogs that have medical issues would have been euthanized." She went on to discuss the issues those dogs present: "We are often finding incredible tooth decay and that doesn't make the animal adoptable. Dental cases take longer and require a higher level of vet support. It's hard to assume those costs." Austin Pets Alive! also discussed changes in the number of senior dogs that make it through the intake process: "We're the shelter of last resort in this region so we take a lot more senior pets. We have an agreement with the Austin, Texas shelter that they will notify us if they have seniors. Previously, they would have euthanized them without notifying APA! first."

The program director at the Connecticut Humane Society discussed the impact of the increase in older dogs with greater health needs: "I have been working a long time, so I've seen the shift. There are no puppies anymore. Animals are coming in and being medically assessed so they're not in and out in two days anymore. It's not about high volume anymore. We used to measure length of stay, but we don't worry about that anymore. We don't want them to be here longer than they need to, but they can stay as long as they need to get well." She went on to say, "We are seeing more senior dogs coming in who need a lot of dental and medical work, and dogs who have undiagnosed issues like diabetes are common."

At Pawmetto Lifeline in South Carolina they are “seeing more larger dogs, more senior dogs and more dogs and cats with behavioral issues. We’re seeing a decline in small dogs and puppies...With seniors it’s mostly medical costs that result in surrender.” At Asheville Humane Society in North Carolina the program director agreed: “We’re seeing a big increase in senior intakes. We have always had some, but we have a lot more recently...We’re also seeing a lot of need for dental work, abscesses and extractions.” At East Coast Corgi Rescue, the majority of their dogs are owner surrenders, and they are seeing “more seniors who are 9 or 10 years old who have fatty tumors or can’t do stairs, many are overweight and have trouble walking.” At NorCal Boxer in California, 25% of the dogs served in the past year were seniors up from 18% in the prior year.

Some grantees are not only seeing an increase in the number of senior dogs served, but also an increase in the number of very old senior dogs. The Humane Society for Hamilton County, Indiana has “seen an increase over the past year in the number of senior pets. It’s about 50-50 in terms of strays versus owner surrenders. A large percent of surrendered pets are seniors, and they cost more and are more labor intensive.” The program director went on to say, “We’ve seen a heartbreaking increase in the number of super seniors (over 10 years old). Even though we are open admission, we have developed a reputation in Indiana and throughout the U.S. for pulling high-need cases...We’re seeing an increase in requests from other shelters for help.” Live Love Animal Rescue in California also reported seeing an increase in older seniors: “We’re seeing more extreme seniors who are 15-16 years old. The scenario is pretty much the same—people are moving or dying.”

Several other grantees noted a relationship between aging populations of people and the surrender of senior dogs. At the North Shore Animal League, an open admission shelter in New York, the program director described a “consensus that there needs to be more focus on older animals and cats. We’re seeing more people who are aging and not able to care for pets. It’s consistent with the demographics in the country overall.” A similar trend was noted by the program director at UPAWS in Michigan: “During the last two years we have seen changes. We used to transfer in a lot of animals due to a low census. In the last two years we are getting more dogs due to owner surrender. It is mainly reasons related to the health of the owners that cause the surrender. I think it’s related to the Baby Boomers getting older.” At Vanderburgh Humane Society in Indiana “most senior dogs are owner surrenders. A lot of senior people who surrender are going into assisted living.”

At Lollypop Farm in New York the program director talked specifically about their experience as an open admission shelter: “We are seeing more dogs that nobody wants. They are sicker, older, and have more behavior problems. Vet care is so expensive. If you’re not open admission, you can pick the young, healthy dogs. It’s easier to pass the problem down the road.

We got animals from 40 of 62 counties in New York last year. What is happening in all of those counties that the animals had to come to Rochester to get surrendered?" She went on to talk about redefining "no kill:" "We are one of the few open admission shelters in the area. Our dogs are longer term and have more needs than five years ago—it's a lot different. We are working on redefining the conversation about "no kill." We see ourselves as an open admission shelter that strives to have a high save rate." Another open admission shelter in New York, the Animal Protective Foundation, has seen "fewer pets coming in but those coming in have greater needs" and are more often seniors.

Limited admission shelters and rescues talked about making a conscious decision to accept more senior dogs. Five grantees—from the Southeast to the Midwest to the Northwest—discussed having the ability to take more dogs, including more senior dogs, because they were often not operating at capacity with respect to their kennel space. In South Carolina, the Saint Frances Animal Center program director explained, "We've gotten more seniors in because we are reaching out to other shelters and taking them in. We're seeing more with medical needs that we haven't seen before." At Highland County Humane Society in rural Virginia, they "pull 40% of their animals from West Virginia and are getting a lot of hunting dogs and farm dogs. We see a lot of seniors that are discarded hunting dogs, either intentionally lost or stray. We have had an increase in senior dogs. We haven't had puppies in this county in years."

At the Leon County Humane Society in Florida, they have "seen senior dog intake grow over the past three years." The program director went on to explain that few of the dogs they adopt out as seniors are returned: "We do see a fair number of returns. We insist that if people have an issue they can't deal with, they need to return the animal. But we see fewer returns in senior dogs who are adopted as seniors than in animals in general. Every year we have animals returned who were adopted nine or ten years ago. Maybe dogs who are adopted as seniors are less likely to be returned because people have really thought through the decision. Maybe they have less concern about medical expenses because they are prepared for more expenses along the way, so they're less likely to return the dog as he or she ages."

### **Programs for Senior Dogs: Key Resources**

Grantees were asked to describe the types of resources that were integral to their senior dog programs. The two resources noted as most important were veterinarians and volunteer fosters.

**Veterinarians.** Given the medical needs grantees described their senior dogs as having, it is unsurprising that slightly more than 60% of grantees cited veterinarians as an important resource.

Grantees that did not have in-house veterinary clinics noted the importance of discounts offered by the vets with whom they worked, and most reported working with several different vets, including specialists. Only two grantees noted challenges related to veterinary services. At Shelter from the Storm in Wisconsin, the program director said that veterinarians were “hard to hire and hard to keep around.” There is a greater demand than supply, and they have found that many vets prefer not to do dental procedures, which senior dogs often need. At Auburn Valley Humane Society in Washington their primary struggle is finding licensed veterinary technicians who are willing to accept their minimum wage of \$15 per hour.

A noteworthy theme that emerged from conversations about veterinarians had to do with balancing the need to provide low-cost care to people with limited income and protecting veterinary businesses. Several grantees shared successes engaging veterinarians in their efforts to ensure all community members had access to needed care. For example, the program director at the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago explained: “We just increased our vet staff from 5.5 to 6 full-time vets. Our hospital is new and state-of-the art. We offer low-cost spay/neuter to anybody and a low-income clinic for other services. The clinic is not very active yet but we’re going to promote it in the vet deserts...and encourage vets to be ambassadors for us. We’ll provide a list of area vets and invite vets to be on the list.”

C.A.R.E.4Paws in California offers services through a mobile vet clinic. The program director described their work: “We do spay/neuter, vaccine clinics, and serve medical clients. Previously we didn’t require proof of income, but we didn’t want to take away business from vets so now clients need to show proof of unemployment, SSI, or food stamps. We get a lot of seniors without access to computers, so we just ask them to bring some documentation to the appointment. We haven’t gotten push back from vets. We try to send vets clients, and we encourage vets to come to the clinic and see the people we are serving. These aren’t people who would otherwise be going to the vet.”

At the Connecticut Humane Society, they have a public vet clinic that offers prices that are about 20% under market value. They have four in-house vets but use outside vets for more complicated surgeries. The program director said, “We have gotten no push back about our clinic. Vets refer to us. We don’t advertise the service but have never been at a loss for business. We schedule appointments four to five weeks out. The demand is from people who went to other vets and got a quote they couldn’t afford. We don’t compete with vets or threaten their business.”

Three other grantees, two of whom are in Washington State, mentioned some challenges collaborating with the veterinary community. In Washington, ordinances meant to protect veterinarians in private practice hamper shelters’ ability to provide low-cost care to clients who lack the means to pay private practice rates. The Tacoma/Pierce County program director

explained that they have a clinic but it is not “public-facing” due to laws against providing low-cost vet care, although a recent exception allows them to provide care to “qualified individuals within 30 days of adoption.” The program director noted that these prohibitions make it challenging to offer discounted medical care that could keep senior dogs in their homes. At Auburn Valley Humane Society, also in Washington, they have an in-house clinic and described similar challenges to providing discounted services that might prevent animals from being surrendered.

**Volunteers.** Approximately 50% of grantees cited volunteer fosters as an important resource. Ten grantees (17%) noted success—or at least few challenges—recruiting fosters. For example, in South Carolina, Pawmetto Lifeline’s program director explained, “We have no problem recruiting fosters. We average 175 pets in foster homes. I think our success has to do with being on call 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. We have a closed Facebook group for support and provide all the supplies fosters need. We also have a vet on-site that fosters can visit anytime.” Live Love Animal Rescue in California reported “getting a good cadre of fosters that are good with senior dogs. Some are developing expertise in certain areas (e.g., diabetes, mobility).” Heartland Animal Shelter in Illinois talked specifically about the role of fosters in promoting adoption: “Foster parents are so important. They’re the biggest advocate for the senior dogs. They are marketing them on their own social media. We have learned how important it is to focus on getting the dogs out into the community, not just on getting information out about them.”

Despite the importance of volunteers, as we describe below in the section on Challenges, 13 grantees (22%) said they had difficulty finding fosters, which affected their ability to serve more senior dogs. Challenges included convincing people to foster senior dogs and/or specific breeds of senior dogs, losing fosters who adopt their fostered dogs, and finding foster homes that are a good match (e.g., homes without other dogs or children).

## **The Role of Collaboration**

Grantees were asked to describe the role collaborative relationships play in their programs. Program directors highlighted collaboration with public shelters, other community-based organizations, transport partners, and the public as important to their work on behalf of senior dogs.

**Public Shelters.** Slightly more than half of grantees identified public shelters as key partners, with all of them reporting that they receive animals from them. While the most common scenario is that rescues or limited admission shelters receive animals from municipal or open admission shelters, several grantees that are open admission, including West Valley Humane Society, Lollypop Farm, Animal Rescue League of Iowa, and the Humane Society for Hamilton

County, discussed actively reaching out to other shelters across their respective states. At the Humane Society for Hamilton County in Indiana they prioritize taking in dogs most likely to be euthanized in other public shelters. The program director for Hamilton County explained, “We pull dogs from the Indianapolis shelter that euthanizes and from other shelters in Indiana. We primarily pull older dogs, especially a lot of older pit bulls. We focus on them because we know other groups aren’t going to do it. We get the list of dogs that are going to die if they don’t get pulled and work from that. We save 250 animals from outside Hamilton County each year.”

In some cases, there are formal relationships governing these transfers. For example, Pawmetto Lifeline in South Carolina has a contract with two municipal shelters to pull 1,200 animals annually from each shelter. For other grantees, the relationships are not formal but have been developed over time. Get a Bull works with Long Island, New York shelters from which they receive 90% of their dogs. The Get a Bull program director noted the importance of trust between the shelter and the rescue. Two years ago, they began working to establish themselves with shelters on Long Island and now have relationships with three municipal shelters that reach out to them for help with senior dogs. That trust is important because the shelter staff now feel comfortable allowing Get a Bull to come into the shelter to evaluate the dogs. This ensures Get a Bull has a better picture of a senior dog’s needs before committing to take him or her.

Home Fur Good in Arizona described a similar process of developing trust. The program director explained, “When we first started, Maricopa County had the second highest euthanasia rate in country. Now the county calls us about seniors or dogs with ringworm who would just have been put down before. Seeing that change in the county is rewarding but it has taken nine years to establish the relationship. We are very consistent, which has been critical to developing the relationship.” The program director at Frederick Friends in Maryland explained, “In the past year, the shelter felt freer to ask us for more help for more animals. Our goal is to support the shelter. The relationship is getting better. There’s more trust now because we understand that the shelter is doing their best by the animals, and even if they decide to euthanize, it’s not a decision made lightly.”

Several grantees that worked with more than one public shelter noted the variability in the care senior dogs receive. For example, in North Carolina the Peak Lab program director explained, “The difference in care dogs get at different shelters is huge. Dogs from some shelters get shots and other medical care. Other shelters do nothing, so dogs from those shelters require a lot more up front. We need to consider that in terms of what dogs we pull and from where.”

**Community-based Organizations.** Approximately 42% of the grantees talked about the importance of collaborating with community-based organizations, including other animal welfare groups, social service agencies, and other national organizations.



Fourteen grantees talked specifically about collaborating with other rescues. For example, Heartland Animal Shelter in Illinois has seen a growing number of referrals of seniors from other rescues. Lollypop Farm, an open admission shelter in New York, has several foster-based rescues in their area that use local veterinarians, which is expensive. They have a rescue partnership program through which they do at-cost spay/neuter surgeries twice a week as part of their effort to share resources with the community.

Breed-specific rescues offered both opportunities and challenges related to collaboration. Two grantees that are breed-specific said it was difficult to adopt out dogs that do not look “Lab enough” or “corgi enough.” Peak Lab Rescue in North Carolina talked about transferring dogs to other rescue partners if the dog “doesn’t look like the dogs people come to us wanting.” East Coast Corgi Rescue transfers corgi mixes to non-breed-specific rescues but also collaborates with other corgi rescues to get the dogs to areas of the country where demand is greatest. UPAWS in Michigan tries to work with breed rescues as needed but has not had much success because the rescues tend to “want the ambassador dogs,” dogs that are well-behaved and look purebred.

Six grantees addressed the importance of collaboration with social service providers. For example, the Asheville Human Society, which runs a helpline, “gets calls from caseworkers at veteran’s hospital or rehabilitation facilities who need help finding placements for people’s animals.” The program director at the Auburn Valley Humane Society in Washington talked about the importance of collaboration between social services and animal control, saying: “Rather than taking the dog away, we want to help solve the problem that led to the call.” One grantee, the Knoxville-Knox County Council on Aging, provides social services for senior citizens in Knoxville and Knox County, Tennessee and runs Knox PAWS, a program that works with area animal shelters to match senior pets with senior citizens.

Kane’s Crusade in Western Massachusetts focuses on connecting animal and human welfare services, working with the most vulnerable and underserved in their community. Every month they deliver Canine Assistance, Resource and Empowerment (C.A.R.E.) Kits to low-income families at risk of surrendering their dogs. The program director explained, “One of the things we have learned is how important collaboration is. You need to get beyond yourself and see how you can work with other agencies. We truly have something special in this area. We have a municipal shelter plus a private shelter that provide a low-cost wellness clinic. We have a great opportunity in Western Massachusetts to make a difference for people and animals. We didn’t want to duplicate services when we applied for the Grey Muzzle grant. The idea for the C.A.R.E. Kits came from a meeting with the shelter director who saw them as a need. When communities can build bridges it’s to everyone’s benefit. We serve more people because of that collaborative approach. It’s more effective and efficient not to duplicate services.”

Three grantees noted the importance of support they received from Susie’s Senior Dogs, a nonprofit social platform that brings attention to the plight of homeless senior dogs and provides funding to cover the cost of medical care in emergency situations. Saint Frances Animal Center in South Carolina used Susie’s to promote their senior dogs to potential adopters, which resulted in responses from all over the U.S. and adoption of the senior dogs that were promoted.

There were also some unique partnerships. Two grantees talked about collaborating with groomers who provide free or reduced-cost grooming services. Leon County Humane Society in Florida partnered with Aloft Tallahassee Downtown, a hotel that gives senior dogs a temporary home along with publicity and exposure. The partnership has been particularly successful in placing smaller senior dogs who have typically found permanent homes within two weeks. Louie’s Legacy in New York works with Foster Dogs, a nonprofit that offers an online database of active foster caretakers in the New York City area designed to match dogs in need with appropriate foster homes. The Heartworm Foundation in Texas is working to expand their partnership with the business community, specifically with banks that sponsor treatment of their heartworm positive dogs.

**Transport Partners.** Approximately one in three grantees discussed the importance of transport partners—either to receive or send out senior dogs. Six grantees noted that receiving transfers from other organizations was important to keeping their shelter kennels full or at least partially full. For example, at the Auburn Humane Society in Washington they “have a shortage of animals so have the capacity to bring animals in.” The program director explained that their kennels are “mostly 50% or less full” but their “bottleneck is medical care.” As a result, they are selective in the mix of animals they transfer in: “three are seniors, three are healthy and good to go, and three have medical needs.”

Similarly, Dane County in Wisconsin received about half of their dogs last year from transport partners, primarily in the South. The program director explained, “We get the potential transfer list from the shelters and can choose which ones we will take. We take bully breeds and dogs with medical issues but balance that out with dogs that can get adopted quickly.” At the Oregon Humane Society, 8,000 of the 12,000 animals they adopted out last year were transfers from partner shelters in Oregon, Washington, California, and occasionally Hawaii or Oklahoma. They try to have the shelter full on the weekend and receive transports weekly from California. At the Humane Society of Western Montana, they receive transfers regularly from rescues in North Central Montana and get small breeds from California.

The Connecticut Humane Society receives transports from South Carolina in collaboration with Saint Hubert’s WayStation Sister Shelter Program, which, according to Saint Hubert’s website, “leads the way for shelters in the Northeast who have both the capacity and the potential

adopters to accept animals from overburdened organizations where lower population density and a lack of affordable, accessible spay/neuter services result in homeless dog numbers that far exceed available homes.” The program focuses on the transport of older dogs, animals with special needs and larger dogs, many of whom are most at risk in overburdened shelters. A unique aspect of the program is that for every animal the destination shelter receives, they donate \$25 earmarked for low or no-cost surgeries for local pets. This “Give Back” component ensures that every adoption results in more animals being spayed/neutered in the source communities.

At Safe Haven of Iowa, they are looking to get more small dogs transported from rescues in the South. The program director explained, “Around here most elderly people want small dogs. The few small dogs we brought up from the South, people were so excited to see them available for adoption. We had people come in and say they wanted to give those older dogs the best possible new home. Being able to share those stories was helpful and important. We stumbled on the rewards of bringing small dogs from areas where they’re abundant to rural Iowa where they are not. Most of the dogs that come in as strays are farm dogs and are 50+ pounds. Our goal is to get more small dogs from other states. We never keep a small dog here very long.” She went on to explain that they currently had “only six dogs in building,” so could accommodate more dogs.

Other grantees discussed the importance of partners to whom they could send senior dogs. For example, the Heartworm Foundation has partners in New England and the Midwest that regularly take their senior dogs, including Albert’s Dog Lounge, a foster-based rescue in Wisconsin that provides homes to seniors, special needs, and hospice dogs. Saint Frances in South Carolina transports 30% of their dogs to the North where they can more easily be adopted, which, the program director explained, “opens up space for dogs that need more time,” many of whom are seniors.

**The Public.** Nearly one in four grantees talked about the importance of the public as a partner in their efforts to save senior dogs. The Animal Rescue League of Iowa’s program director explained, “The community has embraced special needs and senior animals. They get adopted just as quickly as other animals. It’s amazing how incredible people are in terms of stepping up to help special needs dogs. There’s someone out there for every animal in need.” At the Oregon Humane Society, the program director said, “People are not discouraged from adopting senior animals. Adopters are mindful of what they can provide care-wise. We see people with more means open their homes to senior dogs. It’s positive to see. The demographics of the animals we are seeing are changing and people are realizing that it doesn’t have to be a “perfect” animal to give you love. People are opening their hearts to more than just puppies.” At Saint Frances in South Carolina they have recently seen more interest in their senior dogs: “We are

grateful for the partnership with Grey Muzzle. I do feel we have seen more local people willing to adopt senior dogs. For a long time with local marketing we didn't get a good response. Recently we've seen a big increase in the public response. It fills my heart to see how much local response has grown."

In Las Vegas, The Animal Foundation's program director and adoption manager talked about the importance of building a trusting relationship with the community: "[The grant] has been a good opportunity to show the community that we were investing in different kinds of dogs, to show we are investing in all of our dogs. We are open admission with a city contract to do sheltering and haven't always had the best reputation in the community with respect to finding every animal a good home. We want to save every animal possible by end of 2020. Building a relationship with the community has been important. Seeing how many more people were open to adopting a senior pet has been [encouraging]...We focused on showing how great senior pets are and the community stepped up to help and open their homes." The program director at the Animal Protective Foundation in New York also felt that trust was important: "The broader community has been the most important partner. We are pleasantly surprised that the community wants to take senior dogs in as adopters or hospice fosters. We have been working with the community to build positive relationships and overcome mistrust and concerns about euthanasia."

At Live Love in California the program director noted the importance of modeling behavior: "An increase in the number of senior dogs adopted has brought in more people interested in adopting senior dogs." Second Chance Animal Rescue in Massachusetts also found that increasing the number of senior dogs adopted had a ripple effect: "Our biggest success is the number of senior pets we've gotten adopted and how quickly they have been adopted. They are adopted as soon as they are cleared. People who foster are adopting them. Having money for promotion has helped. We are promoting seniors more, which has raised general interest in adoption." Program directors at the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago, UPAWS in Michigan, and Shelter from the Storm in Wisconsin talked about repeat adopters of senior dogs. The Anti-Cruelty Society program director said, "The people who adopt senior dogs are very special. They mostly come in looking for a senior dog. Many are people who have adopted seniors before. They want dogs who are easygoing and like the idea of saving the life of a senior dog. They're a special breed of people who have big hearts and realize the dog may not be with them for a long time, yet they still come back to adopt."

At the Leon County Humane Society in Florida, the program director noted the importance of educating the community by telling the senior dogs' story from beginning to end: "When we get an urgent animal—and most seniors are urgent—we need to get him or her to the vet as soon as possible. We need the community to help. What we found is that the best way to do that is

to tell a story. We take phones out and capture as much of the story as possible so that in three months if we need to raise money, we can recap what happened. We need to remind ourselves that the public doesn't see what we see in rescue. They don't see what goes on from day 1 behind the scenes when we brought that animal into the shelter. It's important to paint that picture."

The program director at the Connecticut Humane Society put credit for the success of their program squarely on the public: "It was the community's success. They responded and adopted these dogs. We fixed them but people then stepped up and took on the care of these dogs knowing it might be a short-term relationship. Benny got adopted in two days, even though he went home with a huge bag of meds. The family fell in love with him and were willing to take on his needs. It takes time to let the community know that you're going to put dogs like Benny up for adoption. But now we know the community will step up."

## **Financial Sustainability**

Grantees were asked how they planned to sustain their senior dog programs. One of the key issues discussed was: How do we find new ways to manage the costs of senior dogs' care to sustain these programs?

Unlike shelters, many rescues rely on adoption fees as an important revenue source. Peak Lab Rescue in North Carolina explained: "It takes adopting out a lot of healthy puppies to afford to take on a senior dog. This year we lost an inordinate number of puppies to a herpes virus. We lost several litters, so we are stretched right now [in terms of funding to care for senior dogs]." She went on to describe the math involved: "We have a \$275 adoption fee for any dog. A puppy goes to the vet one time and gets one set of vaccines. It's \$100 worth of expenses, so we make \$175 per puppy, which is the equivalent of [what we raise placing] 10 senior dogs." In Wisconsin, the Shelter from the Storm program director had a similar perspective on the cost of puppies versus older dogs: "As much as I love helping senior dogs and medical cases, I can't sustain this organization focusing on them. We must bring in healthy adoptable animals to be sustainable. We don't have 100 puppies. We have to make a conscious effort to have young, cute, easily adoptable dogs."

At APA! in Texas the program director was clear about the challenges of integrating the care of senior pets into their business model: "We saw a big cost increase when we started taking more seniors. We take the most challenging cases, cases with big medical and behavior needs. For example, dental surgeries take a long time and cost more because they must be done by a vet. That's a challenge to our medical model because a lot of our medical care is done by vet techs. Vets are our most expensive cost. Despite the challenges, we never turn a pet down due to cost. We try to balance cost across whole shelter population." When asked about their senior

dog “program,” she explained: “It’s not exactly business as usual. We are still trying to adjust to the big needs of senior pets. We don’t have a separate program for senior pets, but we do have a marketing team focused on them. We need financial support to make saving seniors sustainable. Key to getting to a 98% save rate is helping senior pets in Austin.” In terms of sustaining the program, she said, “We don’t have a coherent program for seniors and don’t know if we want to. Our other medical programs are things pets get over. We can’t do that with seniors. We are treating it as a financial and a marketing challenge.”

C.A.R.E.4Paws in California originally did not require clients to pay anything for their mobile vet services: “We were going through our funding really quickly at first. We hadn’t considered making people pay initially but we learned that people can often pay something, and that money can go back in to serve the people who can’t pay. We can’t just depend on grants. We need to have a revenue stream.” As a result, they now ask people to pay \$100 or \$125 for a dental procedure and “put that back into the program as earned income.” Frederick Friends in Maryland and Get a Bull in New York both mentioned pursuing corporate supporters to fund senior dog care. In California, Live Love Animal Rescue “went to a few larger donors to get money for higher cost medical procedures,” but they want to “move away from raising funds specifically for individual dogs and move toward fundraising for specific programs.”

At Louie’s Legacy, they took advantage of the fact that they have locations in both New York and Ohio. They used their Ohio site—where veterinary care is less expensive—to help get senior dogs adopted: “We realized that transferring out to Ohio was important. Dogs were cleared for adoption in New York City, but they weren’t moving. Once we sent them to Ohio, they were adopted right away.”

Grantees that commit to “forever fosters” face some unique sustainability issues. In New Mexico, 14 of the 15 dogs in NMDOG’s home sanctuary program (i.e., long-term fosters) are seniors. NMDOG pays for all the costs associated with these dogs for life. They are working on adding a home sanctuary page to their website and will post the story of each of the home sanctuary dogs along with a “sponsor me” button. Their strategy is “to get people more involved on a personal level” with each dog and to increase financial support.

At Thulani in Northern California, they also provide lifelong care for the German Shepherds in their program. As such, it is important they have a sense of each dog’s age: “We learned to be more perceptive in terms of the dogs we bring in. Our financial model is based on bringing in dogs who won’t live long. It costs \$1,000-\$1,200 per year per dog, so financially we need to be relatively confident about how many more years the dog will live. We spend time looking at medical “clues,” like tracing back microchips to get a better estimate of the age of the dog...What makes it hard is that all the dogs have a hard story, but we can’t factor that in to the dogs we take [into our program]. Emotionally it’s hard.”

Pawmetto Lifeline in South Carolina is appealing directly to the public to support their senior dog program, but their strategy also involves leveraging the Grey Muzzle grant: “We don’t want to depend on grants. We have a base of donors that support seniors, and we’re working to increase that donor base. We use both Grey Muzzle and donor funds to help senior dogs. We use the Grey Muzzle grant as sort of a match to leverage public donations: We have this money from Grey Muzzle and with your support too we can help this senior dog. It makes helping the dog a partnership, so people know they’re not the only one stepping up.” Pets Alive in New York is revamping their monthly sponsorship program options to include “continued canine care” (primarily for their senior dogs). The program director at Watermelon Ranch in New Mexico also relies on community support to pay the costs associated with transferring in senior dogs: “The biggest pull is always puppies because they move fastest and generate the most money. About 25% of our intake is senior dogs. We try to keep the senior adoption fees low. We’re not trying to make money from them. We have a solid community that loves senior dogs and they are willing to donate. We also work with vets who will do work at a lower cost.”

Home Fur Good in Arizona increased their medical capacity to promote sustainability: “We are looking for ways to sustain our work. We opened a low-cost vaccine and microchip clinic and then opened a low-cost dental clinic. Our costs decreased because now we can do our own blood work and dentals. Last year we started to take more older dogs and were able to give them medical care and with good success.”

At the Asheville Humane Society in North Carolina, where their Grey Muzzle grant supports their helpline and efforts to keep senior dogs in their homes, the program director explained the need to ration their resources: “Our biggest issue is not being able to meet all the needs. We must be picky. We have to do an assessment. We get 350 calls per month on the helpline. It weighs on staff, there is strain on staff due to the inability to meet every need.” The program helps callers cover the cost of needed medical and dental care for their animals. She went on to describe what others should know about managing costs to sustain the program: “If someone is taking on this kind of program, you have to set criteria and boundaries up front. Otherwise you will just run out of money and then it will break your heart because you won’t be able to help everyone. It lessens burden on staff because they don’t have to make the decisions on their own. You need a framework even though every situation is unique. You can always change as you go.” She also talked about the importance of the pet owner contributing something and their ability to provide for the ongoing needs of the animal: “If it’s a \$3,000 surgery and the person can contribute nothing, that won’t work. We look at their long-term ability to care for the animal in making decisions about the allocation of money. We get an idea of what the vet can do and try to focus resources on cases that can have the best immediate outcome.”

The program director at the Humane Society for Hamilton County in Indiana talked about the time and money associated with caring for senior dogs and the importance of the Grey Muzzle grant as they work to find long-term solutions to sustain their efforts: “We don’t have a line out the door to get a senior dog. They wait longer [to be adopted] after they get initial care. Time is money. Every day there is an [additional] cost. We invest in their health but then we need to add the cost of daily care at \$13 per day per animal. Then there’s the cost of marketing. We invest heavily in marketing and promoting the advantages of senior pets. We’re revamping PAWS, our senior-for-senior program. It used to be just a subsidized adoption program, but we have shelters around us giving animals away for free. The Indianapolis shelter gives animals away every other week. It’s harder to use a reduced fee as an incentive. And we don’t make money on adoption fees. We lose money every time we adopt out a senior dog. The Grey Muzzle grant is critical to buying senior dogs time. It’s why their time doesn’t run out.”

### **A Philosophical Shift: Community Outreach, Prevention, and Early Intervention**

The high cost of providing medical and dental care, particularly to senior dogs, and a desire to keep animals out of shelters has resulted in increased focus on community outreach and preventing minor health issues from becoming costly and unmanageable.

Slightly more than one in five grantees (n=13) discussed an increased emphasis on community outreach aimed at keeping animals in their homes. At the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago the program director said “We have had a philosophical shift. We are providing more care in communities with no veterinarians. There are a lot of vet ‘deserts’ and we’re working with people who have animals in those areas...We’re building partnerships with other organizations to raise awareness of the importance of focusing on senior people and senior animals. What can we do to help those people care for their animals?” At Frederick Friends in Maryland, they are also focused on collaborative efforts to keep animals in the community and out of the shelter: “We have another new program called Project Hope that is focused on keeping animals out of the shelter. We help with rehoming and work with other groups like the Humane Society that helps people with vet costs.”

At the Asheville Humane Society in North Carolina they “are reaching out more to do targeted clinics. We did a clinic for the homeless population by partnering with providers of homeless services. We expanded work with the Spanish-speaking community. Previously none of the staff spoke Spanish. Now we have more first-generation Spanish-speaking clients.” A key part of these efforts is the helpline: “We created the helpline three years ago as part of our increasing work in the community. The number one request on the helpline is help with vet care. We are seeing senior people who are going into hospice and people on fixed incomes who need help. Once costs go over the routine, people can’t afford the added expense. We wanted to focus our efforts on people who put off minor work that could prevent bigger issues down the road. A



small growth that could be dealt with for a small amount of money today could turn into something major later. We are trying to assist people earlier in the process and help people with diagnostics. A lot of people don't know what the problem is, so we want to help them find out what they're dealing with. This will help senior dogs stay in their homes."

In South Carolina, Pawmetto Lifeline's focus is also on education and early intervention: "We're working on education regarding how to care for older pets. We want to focus on prevention. We have a lot of rural areas where people don't know that there are interventions they can offer for things like arthritis. People think the issues are due to age and so want to euthanize." The program director went on to say, "In working with the community, I have learned that education makes a difference. Education helps people make different choices about their pet—either in knowing it is time to say goodbye or realizing there are interventions that could improve quality of life. It's important how we treat people. [We try] to make people feel part of our team in decision-making, particularly about end-of-life decisions." As a result, she has seen a need to "educate people about how to be with a pet during euthanasia...The vet and medical team talk about why they think the pet is at the end of life from a medical perspective and then they talk about what the euthanasia process will be like. People also want to know what happens after the pet dies (i.e., cremation, return of ashes). We also focus on the emotional part, helping the person cope with the loss of their pet."

The program director at Lollypop Farm in Rochester, New York noted, "Overall we are trying to keep pets with their people...Once a week, we go door to door in the highest poverty neighborhoods. We pick up animals and do spay/neuter and treat medical issues and then bring them back to their people. Last year we served 124 pets, and this year we will serve 300...We ask ourselves how we fit into the puzzle of the human-animal bond." In addition, they are working to "identify and deal with the reasons pets are coming in at all." She went on to say, "We started a Pet Peeves hotline under a grant from Maddie's Fund. People call with issues and get professional advice. Then we got a second grant to film videos to address the issues we were most frequently hearing on the hotline. Now we have a hundred pdfs on the website to help people deal with the issues that might otherwise result in surrender. We're trying to stem the onslaught of animals coming into the shelter."

At Heartland Animal Shelter in Illinois they are "training volunteers to emphasize senior pets. Our talking points include how important routine senior screens are. We are working on pet retention, keeping senior pets in their homes." In Western Massachusetts, Kane's Crusade's primary focus is community outreach. Their Pet Family Advocacy program volunteers go to the homes of low-income residents at risk of surrendering their dogs due to economic, behavioral and/or housing issues. They deliver C.A.R.E. kits that include food, treats, toys and equipment like crates and leashes. Additional services include spay/neuter surgeries, veterinary and

vaccination assistance, dog training, and tenant advocacy for pet families seeking dog-friendly housing.

In New Mexico, NMDOG staff go out “a couple of times a year and hit the streets. We go into areas from which most of our calls come. We go door to door to do outreach and offer resources. It’s heavy work. These are areas where animals are seized, and people get arrested. We try not to just be punitive but also offer support and resources. Calls are down 40% in the areas we have gone through on foot. We used to drive through and see eight chained dogs, now we only see one. We have also seen an increase in requests for assistance and fewer cases of loose dogs.”

At Live Love Animal Rescue in California the focus is on creating outreach efforts that last: “We’re taking the step as an organization to create meaningful programs. We just started Families Forever to help keep animals out of shelters by helping with medical costs.”

The program director at Leon County Humane Society in Florida noted the possibility of unintended consequences of efforts to keep animals in the community: “We’re seeing a big shift in terms of trying to keep animals out of shelters. Shelters are putting more responsibility on people. But shelters that are making it more difficult to surrender animals mean rescues are seeing more of a need to help. We work with shelters and help transfer animals from them, but we also get calls from people who were turned down by the shelter. We’re the main rescue in town and we’re surrounded by rural counties that are lucky if they have a shelter. Unwanted animals have to go somewhere.”

For those animals that do come into the shelter or rescue, several grantees noted an increase in diagnostic procedures to catch health issues early and prevent more serious problems. At Saint Frances Animal Center in South Carolina the program director explained, “We’re providing more diagnostic medical care. If we know there is something wrong, we can address it. We have a vet on staff, x-rays machine, and we do blood work [regularly]. We have more resources than you’d expect for a rural shelter. We can diagnose a lot of things. With seniors you might know something is wrong but not be sure exactly what. Our dogs have gotten top-notch vet care. That’s hard to say in the South.” At Safe Haven of Iowa, they have begun doing blood work on all senior dogs to “alert them to possible issues.”

## Challenges

The cost to care for senior dogs was the challenge cited most frequently by Grey Muzzle grantees. Other challenges included recruiting fosters, effectively marketing senior dogs, program implementation, and working with clients.

**Cost.** Slightly more than half of grantees (n=31) cited costs associated with senior dogs as a primary challenge.

The unknown costs associated with senior dogs transferred in from other shelters posed a challenge. The Leon County Humane Society in Florida “wants to grow our senior dog program but we need to expect more issues with senior dogs, especially heartworm. A lot of senior dogs are from local rural shelters where they have little chance, so we take them in with big question marks [about how much they will cost].” Live Love Animal Rescue’s program director said, “Funding is the biggest challenge. We got dogs that unknowingly needed a lot of expensive medical care.” Tyson’s Place Animal Rescue in Michigan works specifically with people in hospice helping to rehome their pets, many of whom are senior dogs. They “anticipate unexpected medical costs” and “have a cushion because we can’t predict costs.”

In Wisconsin, Shelter from the Storm’s program director explained, “We recently got in over our heads taking in senior dogs and medical cases. Two cases were much more complicated than anticipated and cost thousands of dollars. Senior dogs’ needs are time-consuming. We have the ability in our clinic to provide a lot of medical care but it’s still resource-intensive.” At Second Chance Animal Shelter in Massachusetts the program director said: “Expect the unexpected. When a dog is surrendered, even if the person doesn’t say so, it could be medically related. Surprises are the biggest challenge. You may think a dog just needs a dental when they first come in, particularly if the dog doesn’t sit well for the initial exam. Once under anesthesia we may see more issues. For example, a mass removal may turn into something more involved. That’s why funding is so important. There’s a risk inherent in taking in the senior dogs. I estimate that 50% of senior dogs [we take in] present a surprise that comes with an associated cost.”

At the North Shore Animal League in New York staff talked about the cost associated with dogs rescued from mills: “We work with a mill dog rescue that coordinates with puppy mills. The puppy mill dogs tend to be older. We need funding to care for the puppy mill dogs because it’s expensive. Those animals have severe medical issues from lack of ever having had any medical care, being in cages all their lives, and breeding repeatedly.”

Maintaining funding for emergencies was also a challenge. PAWS Atlanta’s program director said, “The biggest need is funding the Help Me Heal Fund. We have so many medical emergencies, particularly with seniors. Some seniors come in and get adopted quickly, but others need a lot of care. Some have very expensive obstacles in the way of their adoption.” The costs associated with medical conditions that cannot be fully resolved was also problematic. The East Coast Corgi Rescue program director said, “Nobody wants Scrappy because he’s expensive. He’s diabetic. He has allergies. We put out his picture and sadly nobody responded. We have a foster willing to take on a diabetic dog, so we share his cost.”

Other grantees noted challenges accessing affordable care. In Tennessee, Knox PAWS program director said, “Financial challenges [are a big issue]. There are 53 vet clinics in the surrounding area but only seven that will see our clients’ pets. The issue is money. The vets can’t afford to discount pricing.” The program director at the Watauga Humane Society in North Carolina also described challenges accessing veterinary care: “The amount of time it takes to get seniors into the vet [is a challenge]. We have considered partnering with another vet that could offer the same rates. It goes back to length of stay. [The longer] we have to wait to have vet appointments” the longer the length of stay and associated cost. The program director at Kane’s Krusade in Massachusetts, which works to keep senior pets in their homes, said, “Vet expenses are one of the greatest challenges. For senior pets, it’s even more important. We see so many dental issues and so many serious dental cases.” She went on to discuss the challenges to find funding to cover these essential costs. Stop the Suffering’s program director said veterinary costs prevented them from helping more senior dogs: “Everyone’s vet costs have gone up. Ours have gone up tremendously. [As a result] we couldn’t commit to a doing lot more than last year.”

For Saint Frances Animal Center in South Carolina it wasn’t only the cost of the medical care senior dogs needed but also the length of time they stay in the shelter: “So many factors go into saving senior dogs. Having funding is critical because they are pricey. They also mean we need to move other dogs faster so we can accommodate longer stays [by the senior dogs]. Space is a big challenge. We know senior dogs will be in the kennel longer...Senior dogs are still in the category of harder to adopt out. They are expensive and take a lot of resources...Seniors aren’t flying out the door.”

At Peak Lab Rescue in North Carolina the program director noted similar challenges: “Senior Labs tend to stay two to three months as opposed to two to three weeks. They are universally heartworm positive, need dentals, and have mobility issues. The average dental costs \$750-1,000 and then there’s heartworm treatment and mobility that must be managed...We need to get these dogs adopted faster. While not many stay longer than 90 days, that means that home isn’t available for younger dogs for [those] 90 days.” So not only do senior dogs cost more up front, there are also opportunity costs associated with not having foster homes available for younger dogs who would be adopted more quickly and generate more revenue to support the organization’s mission.

Several grantees said specifically that costs affected their ability to take in senior dogs. Home Fur Good’s program director was pragmatic: “It’s more expensive for us to take seniors. They require blood work and likely other medical care. It’s harder to get them adopted. If it’s a choice between a 2-year-old dog and an 11-year-old dog with dental issues, we may have to be practical and often take the less complicated dog. In Indiana, Rosie’s Southside Animal Shelter’s

program director said simply, “Finances are the limiting factor in terms of how many senior dogs we can transfer in.”

The program director at Lollypop Farm in New York talked about the impact of costs on their services, the number of senior dogs they can help, and alternatives: “There is such an incredible need to find senior dogs homes. They take more time and clinic care, which is expensive...But nobody wants to adopt a dog with medical issues unless they know all the issues. We don’t have the dental equipment we need for all the dentals that are needed. We need to raise \$23,000 for a dental ultrasound machine. We do what we can. We send animals home with a medical waiver and all the information on what tests were done. If we could do more medical treatment, we would have better adoption rates. Also, if we had more reasonable cost of care in the community, we could keep more dogs in homes. It would be great to have a voucher program for vet visits, so they didn’t come to the shelter at all. Maybe vets could volunteer to see a certain number of animals per year at no or low cost.”

**Volunteer Recruitment and Retention.** Thirteen grantees (22%) said they had difficulty finding volunteer fosters, which affected their ability to serve more senior dogs. The program director at Safe Harbor Lab Rescue in Colorado explained, “We have a challenge getting fosters. We could take in more dogs if we had more fosters...I’m not sure people understand how important fostering is. Maybe we’re not advertising our need enough.”

Challenges recruiting fosters varied. The program director at Louie’s Legacy in New York said: “We have challenges recruiting fosters for seniors. We have a foster base and there are people who only take seniors but sometimes it’s hard to place older dogs. We recently pulled a 14-year-old pit bull from Newark, and people were hesitant to take him because they were afraid of the heartbreak. We haven’t found a specific strategy that’s more effective to recruit senior fosters. We do have current fosters reach out to encourage other fosters and share why they foster senior pets. It’s 50-50 in terms of people we try to recruit agreeing to foster.” At NorCal Boxer in California they “used to have a base of fosters who would foster repeatedly but now people are more likely to foster once or twice and then stop. A number of senior fosters adopted their dog.” Fosters adopting their dogs and then no longer fostering was also a problem for Peak Lab Rescue in North Carolina: “The availability of fosters is a problem. Fosters are our bottleneck. We have a foster-based business model. Some months 70% of fosters adopt, and we never see them again.”

At UPAWS in Michigan the program director explained: “It’s not a problem recruiting as much as retaining. It’s not for everybody. It’s hard for people to give up the animal. We have a lot of people who only foster once. I’ve tried to talk to those people. Either they didn’t understand the time commitment, or they couldn’t handle the emotional part.” The Leon County Humane

Society in Florida is “in a large city but has a pretty heavy turnover of fosters. There are several universities there and students leave for the summer or graduate.”

Other grantees mentioned difficulties finding fosters who were a good match for their senior dogs. NMDOG talked about the challenge of “finding the right match if a dog needs to be the only dog.” The Asheville Humane Society program director agreed: “It’s hard to find fosters for medium to large dogs. Fosters want dogs that are good with other dogs, cats, kids. It’s hard to find fosters for dogs who don’t meet all those criteria.” The program director for East Coast Corgi Rescue explained, “It’s hard finding experienced fosters. Finding a foster home that doesn’t already have a dog for corgis that don’t want to have other dogs around is hard. It’s hard to recruit non-dog homes with herding dog experience. We feel guilty that we can’t take more dogs because we don’t have enough foster homes.”

At Get a Bull in New York challenges recruiting fosters were compounded by their focus on seniors and bully breeds. Yet once they found fosters, they tended to keep them. The program director explained, “What sets our rescue apart is that I’m a trainer and am available to all our fosters. If for some reason I can’t meet with a foster, we set them up with a local trainer. We also do a lot of behavioral testing. All dogs come to me for a week for assessment. We want to set fosters up for success. We haven’t lost fosters other than to adoption.”

**Marketing.** Ten grantees (17%) noted challenges marketing the senior dogs and their programs. In New Mexico, the NMDOG program director said, “We need to expand our marketing. We need to get the dogs in front of the right people. We need to go to bridge clubs or garden clubs, places where there are older people who could provide a great home but might not be able to afford it. We need to expand our reach to recruit more forever fosters. A lot of the families are repeats. When the dog died, they wanted another.”

Rainbow Friends in Hawaii found it was “harder than they thought to adopt [senior dogs] out. Even fostering is a problem. We have tried to put more of an emphasis on it with more proactive marketing.” They encountered challenges implementing a senior-for-senior adoption program: “The biggest challenge is to foster or adopt senior dogs out to senior people. Older people say they don’t want an old dog. Maybe we need to change course on that. Even when we offered to cover all the care, we still couldn’t get people to foster/adopt, especially older people.”

At Safe Haven of Iowa, the challenge is “making people realize that senior dogs can be very rewarding. Puppies are cute but they grow up. Convincing people that senior dogs can be very rewarding is the biggest challenge.” For East Coast Corgi, the problem was marketing senior corgis who don’t “look like a corgi.” If a corgi isn’t “corgi enough,” they network to get the dog into another rescue that’s not breed-specific.

One grantee talked specifically about challenges involved with marketing their program to prospective foster families. NorCal Boxer in the Bay Area of California used their Grey Muzzle grant to implement a marketing strategy—focused on print ads in a local newspaper—to increase foster recruits. While the effort did “seem to have affected awareness of senior dogs (e.g., we saw an increase in website hits for senior dog bios), [NorCal] hasn’t seen an increase in foster homes as expected.” The program director went on to explain, “It’s hard to persuade people to take action. We thought we had good messaging. The ads were attractive but it’s hard to convert the readers into fosters...We’re trying to improve our foster home outreach since that’s our limiting factor – more so than money. I think it is a common problem with foster-based groups. Some move to boarding as a bridge but we still must find foster homes. With boxers you’re doing a disservice if you don’t put them in a home. You don’t see the dogs’ issues like you would see in a home. If we can get more fosters, we can help more dogs.”

**Challenges to Program Implementation.** Nine grantees described challenges using their grant funding to implement the program proposed in their grant application. Five of the nine grantees had grants to support senior-for-senior adoption programs. These five grantees experienced difficulties attracting senior people interested in adopting senior dogs. All nine grantees successfully redirected their Grey Muzzle funding.

At the Tacoma/Pierce County Humane Society in Washington “the initial hope was to help promote senior animals through a senior-pets-for-senior- people program.” The program director explained, “We wanted to use adoption stories to promote the program, but it was a challenge finding the right match. Senior dogs have medical issues and senior people didn’t have the money to take on chronic conditions. Many senior people were not physically able to take care of senior dogs. The program was something new we were piloting. One challenge was that marketing efforts didn’t take place in a focused way...We’re working through how to redirect the program. We’re trying to get more medical work done on senior dogs, including dentals and diagnostics. Another program that might be a better fit would involve supporting senior owners with the costs of caring for senior dogs.”

In Indiana, the Vanderburgh Humane Society’s Grey Muzzle grant supported an established senior-for-senior program. The program director said, “The grant was to waive adoption fees for 10 small dogs and 10 large dogs. We have done five so far—all small dogs. Several factors affected it, including that I was on maternity leave and I do the promotion of the program. We wonder if the age is too high. We had interest from people who were 60-65...but we were using 70 years old as the cut off. We might kick it back to 65 for free adoptions. We also had a harder time with larger dogs than anticipated. It goes along with the age factor. Older people are not necessarily interested in bigger dogs.” She added that, in retrospect, allocating more of the grant to medical care would have been helpful.

The size of the senior dogs was also an issue at Saving Paws in Arizona, a rescue focused on German Shepherds. The program director described their grant application to pilot test a new program: “We have a dense population of seniors during the winter in Arizona. We wanted to see what demand was for adoption or fostering among those seniors. We wanted to try it and see if it was successful. We were already doing senior adoptions but not senior-for-senior specific. It was only mildly successful with seniors.” She went on to explain some of the factors that affected their success: “Half to three-quarters of the seniors living in surrounding areas are snowbirds. They don’t want a large dog and/or don’t want to travel with them. Overall, we rescued more senior dogs in the past year—some were adopted or fostered by seniors but so many more were adopted by younger people. We were trying to get senior dogs out there more but found barriers to getting senior people to adopt shepherds. A lot of seniors live in retirement communities where large dogs may not be allowed. Also, many homes in Sun City have communal backyards [that couldn’t be used to get the dog out of exercise]. Younger seniors (50+) were more interested in our Love for Life program, a forever foster program. We found seniors are more open to fostering than adopting because of fear of commitment. I think people have a mental barrier. We need to show people that a large senior dog can be appropriate for a senior person, depending on the situation. It’s an issue of educating people. Most of the adoptions we have done with senior people are with people who had shepherds before.”

At PAWS Atlanta their senior-for-senior program was a logical next step in their community outreach efforts. The program director shared the history: “We had been having discussions about getting more involved in the senior community for some time. We previously started a program where we would help senior people care for their pets. The former executive director [who left several months prior to this interview] was passionate about reaching people who might otherwise give up their pets, which aligns with our mission around pets helping people. The Grey Muzzle grant and a grant from Pedigree allowed us to launch the senior-for-senior program more formally. Previously we offered a discount to seniors but didn’t have a formal program.” However, the senior-for-senior program struggled after the organization’s executive director left. She was the champion for the program and had taken the lead connecting with senior centers and working with adoption counselors to promote the program. The program director described a “communication breakdown when she left.” As a result, the program director said, “We are not seeing the numbers we would like to see. We think that if we ramp up efforts with partners, we will see better numbers. We are getting a lot of returns from seniors who adopted...We’re considering giving adopters a package to help them get started—maybe tailor packages to the senior-for-senior program, letting them know about various resources, not just through us but also our partners.”



At the Oregon Humane Society, they found that senior people were more interested in adopting younger dogs. The program director explained, “Senior humans weren’t as responsive to adopting senior dogs as we had hoped. Many have fixed incomes and are concerned about bills. Our goal was to get 88 senior dogs adopted but it’s very slow going because we have the Pets for the Elderly program going on at the same time (discounts to seniors who want to adopt any animal). Seniors have come in and wanted to adopt younger animals without medical needs. It’s hard to find seniors who were interested even with the adoption fee waived. So far, we have adopted 57 senior dogs and spent about two-thirds of the grant. [Over the next few months], we’re looking to try to provide as much medical care as possible before the senior dogs are adopted.”

At the Auburn Humane Society in Washington, which had a Grey Muzzle grant to provide vouchers for senior dog veterinary care that community residents could otherwise not afford, they did not find as much demand as anticipated. Clients need to be low-income (below \$80,000 annual income), fill out an application, and get an estimate from a veterinarian to have up to \$500 in care covered. The Humane Society reviews the application in just a few hours to ensure care is available when needed. The program director explained, “We haven’t seen as much need as we thought. We thought old dogs would be the ones to have the medical issues, but we see more expense with puppies eating things they shouldn’t. We thought we would launch the support program and be bowled over. Now we’re looking at how we market the resource and how we can broaden the scope. Instead of people in need coming to us, we need to go to the people. So, we are partnering with a food bank and working with the Department of Human Services. We think the program will gain traction once we get the word out. We said we’d serve Auburn, but we also started to reach out to other [nearby geographic areas].”

At the Dane County Humane Society in Wisconsin there were several factors that affected their use of the grant to do diagnostic blood work on senior dogs to prepare them for adoption. First, their chief shelter veterinarian who had been the champion of the program moved away around the time they received the grant. Second, they had a significant change in their intake of senior dogs. The program director said, “Our intake of senior dogs has gone down drastically this year: 78 came in and 61 were returned to owner. That’s not what we expected.” There has also been a change in the Humane Society’s focus: “We launched the Pets for Life program around the time we got the Grey Muzzle grant. The focus is going out into the community and providing a lot of outreach and assistance. We’re not seeing an increase in the number of animals coming in. At some point transfers will dry up. The next frontier is caring for animals in the community. It’s better for animals to stay in their home.” They were able to redirect their funding to cover the costs of more expensive medical procedures for senior dogs.

In Virginia, the Norfolk SPCA's Grey Muzzle grant was focused on medical and dental care to prepare senior dogs for adoption. The program director described communication challenges that initially affected their use of the grant: "We needed staff education about having the grant available. The issues were more on the administrative side than the animal side. We need staff to understand the reporting aspects of grants. We needed more communication between the clinical team and the marketing team." She went on to describe changes in the organization's direction that positively affected their use of the grant, including doubling the number of animals taken in and adopted from 800 to 1,700: "Prior to my arrival we had lost the community outreach piece. We weren't partnering with the Norfolk public shelter and transferring animals from them. Now we're doing that much more—we're strengthening the natural partnerships we should have. We can meet the grant commitment because now we have a higher intake rate. The overall change in direction meant getting more animals into the shelter."

The Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago had a grant to support dental care for senior dogs. Their program director described implementation challenges related to communication and fewer senior dogs than expected having dental issues: "I'm not sure why there weren't more dental cases. There was a disconnect between the clinic side and the grant [development department] side in terms of identifying dogs [that met the grant requirements]. But we didn't have a lot of senior animals [that needed dental care]. We do a lot of dentals and extractions, but we also do them for younger animals. There were fewer dental issues than medical issues [in senior dogs]." As a result, they redirected their grant to cover senior dogs' medical care.

**Clients.** Eight grantees noted challenges related to their clients. PAWS Atlanta experienced a high rate of return for their senior dogs: "We aim for an average of 5% returns but with the senior-for-senior program, we have seen a 50% return rate. A lot of people had recently lost a dog and were coming in for another one. They may have had unrealistic expectations. Housetraining is one of the biggest challenges because it's hard to work on at the shelter."

At Fairy Tail Endings in Florida, which helps low-income families keep their pets by providing them financial aid for medical treatment, their challenge is connecting with their clients and documenting the stories of the senior dogs they help: "We deal directly with owners. The people who are coming to us don't have connections to the community. They aren't savvy with technology. Fairy Tail Endings is an online group, but our clients are not. Clients don't have transportation. Connecting with clients is challenging. They may have cell phones, but many have limited minutes. They don't have Internet access. It takes more work for us to connect with our clients initially and then to get them services. It's hard to get pictures of the dogs we help. We have to send volunteers all over the county to get pictures. We ask vet clinics to take

photos, but they often forget. It impacts our ability to share successes with grantors and donors.”

The Kentucky Humane Society’s program director noted challenges educating their clients and helping them access services: “We need clients using our helpline to reach out earlier rather than later. How do we raise awareness of our resources and encourage clients to call us earlier? Also, we give vouchers, but clients don’t always use them because they don’t have transportation to get to the veterinarian. Access to transportation and/or transportation that’s pet-friendly is a big issue.” The Heartworm Foundation also noted the importance of education: “We have to keep contacting people. People are not educated about heartworm prevention. If we treat the dog, they need to continue the treatment. It works better if we can show people success stories. We explain that it’s \$5 per pill per month versus \$1,200 to treat the disease. We’re working on a reminder app to help people remember to give the pill every month.”

Other concerns include clients’ ability to afford future care for the senior dog. For example, at The Animal Foundation in Las Vegas one staff member said, “A lot of people are coming in and getting the senior dog discount, but we still worry about the cost. They will have to follow up at a full-service veterinarian.” At the Watauga Humane Society in North Carolina the program director agreed that the cost of ongoing care was problematic: “That’s the main issue we see in our rural area. We don’t see a lot of vet care for senior animals. People can’t afford care.”

### **Successes: Innovation and New Directions**

Grantees described a range of successes, some related directly to senior dogs and others that affected their work more generally. We present them here to provide a more detailed picture of the breadth and depth of our grantees’ work. We describe the specific impact of the Grey Muzzle grant—including successes and lessons learned—in greater detail in the following section.

**Adapting/Adopting Best Practices.** Seven grantees talked about adopting or adapting best practices, some from animal welfare and others from human services. The program director at the Asheville Humane Society talked about their helpline and the “training we do on working with people in crisis. We do training on motivational interviewing. Our Community Solutions Department focuses on working with people in difficult situations. We need to balance animal knowledge with people knowledge. We cross-train with Child Protective Services (CPS), Adult Protective Services, and domestic violence service providers. We need to know questions to ask. We make referrals to other social services (e.g., Meals on Wheels). I look at what is out there for people who work in human services. What kinds of training do they get and how can that be adapted to be used in the shelter? For example, we do training on boundaries because we often need to make people understand what we can and can’t do.”

Frederick Friends in Maryland has been encouraging their shelter partner to look at best practices promoted by organizations such as the ASPCA. The program director said, “The ASPCA has Adoption Ambassadors and we have tried to get the shelter to look at that as a model. We worry that if the shelter has more fosters, they will have their foster dogs for a really long time because they need help knowing how to get them adopted.”

Kane’s Krusade in Massachusetts embraces a One Health approach to animal welfare that emphasizes the connections between people and their animals. The program director explained, “More than 90% of the people we serve are elderly or disabled. Our focus is surrender prevention using a Pet Family Advocacy Model. What makes it different is that it’s a true evolution of surrender prevention. We focus on the pet family as a unit. We have a holistic approach. We believe the well-being of the animal is tied to the well-being of their people.” She went on to discuss the central role of empowerment and her desire to expand the model: “Advocacy is about helping families to be empowered. We empower people to be part of something bigger and to share their stories. People often say if they weren’t working with Kane’s they would be in bed all day. The vision is to grow that model but also to integrate this way of seeing things into work with other service providers. We want to develop training around Pet Family Advocacy so we can bring the model to other systems and professionals like social workers, therapists, and people working with the homeless. We want to begin to connect the dots for so many people. We want to help providers understand that animals are a lifeline for so many vulnerable people. It’s about advocating for the pet family and creating a new paradigm so we can approach wellness in a different way. If your companion animal is your best friend and you’re using food stamps to feed him then your physical health is going to be affected. If you stop feeding the pet, your mental health will be affected.”

At Lollypop Farm in New York they rely heavily on their strong social media and digital presence. The program director said, “Our dog walkers all have Instagram accounts and use hashtags. We have miles of trails on our property. We try to help people envision themselves with the dog, so they take dogs’ pictures outside to help people visualize the dog in settings with them (e.g., hiking, sitting on bench, playing in the yard). We have started doing geotargeting using pet stores and dog parks, for example. If you walk through that space, you start getting our ads. It helps us better target our audience. We work with media partners to define and identify the geotargets.” They are also looking to start a Stray at Home program that they learned about in Austin, Texas to deal with the large number of strays they receive annually. If a stray is brought in by a member of the community, Lollypop Farm takes custody, but they ask the person to keep the animal during the hold period.

Live Love Animal Rescue in California received a grant to promote fostering by developing a series of videos featuring real-life fosters from various backgrounds talking about their

experience fostering different types of animals (e.g., kittens, special needs animals). They are also using the Maddie's Fund Pet Assistant app to check in regularly with fosters. The app has links and resources for common problems like diarrhea. The program director explained, "The foster provides information on the animal in their care. Live Love gets results of surveys about the dogs' needs emailed to us. For example, a foster flagged the need for dental work using the app and we followed up. We're trying to work smarter not harder."

Pawmetto Lifeline in South Carolina has recognized the need for more resources on dealing with pet loss, including decision-making and grief. The program director said, "Education is very important to us. I'd like to have more materials on when and how to say goodbye. We need to educate people about why it's important for them to be there in the room when their pet dies. We do offer grief counseling and have a certified counselor that does sessions monthly."

**Giving Back.** Six grantees discussed noteworthy efforts to give back to the community. In California, C.A.R.E.4Paws responded to the growing demand for their mobile veterinary services in low-income neighborhoods by launching a program for volunteers who do rescue work. They offer volunteers who work with animal welfare organizations a \$100 credit for dental care for their animals. The program director said, "We have at least one person taking advantage of that at every clinic. We are committed to giving back to people who are committed to helping animals, many of whom don't make very much money and have trouble caring for their own pets."

At North Shore Animal League in New York they believe their senior-for-senior program is providing an important community service. For seniors in need, they provide vet care for life for the senior dog they adopt. The program director explained, "We are helping seniors get companionship. Vaccines don't cost that much, and we can absorb the cost of veterinary care."

In Massachusetts, Kane's Crusade's approach is "to see people as the solution not the problem." The program director explained, "80% of our volunteers are from the pet families we serve. Our focus is on paying it forward. Part of the intake process [to receive pet food, supplies, and vet care] is explaining the expectation for recipients we serve to give back."

The Kentucky Humane Society is working on a three-year pilot project called "Love 120," an effort to positively impact animals in all 120 counties in Kentucky over the next decade. A grant will allow them to work intensively with three rural communities to help them become models for animal welfare and sheltering. They will help with access to spay/neuter, wellness, and medical care. Their helpline will be taking calls from the three counties. The program director explained that she hoped the initiative will help make more stories like this one possible: "We were working with a shelter in Western Kentucky that told me they were full and needed to euthanize. I suggested they do an adoption special instead, and they had 10 dogs adopted. They

just weren't accustomed to thinking of alternatives like that, for them the only choice was euthanizing for space."

**Expanding Services.** Six grantees talked about a variety of ideas to expand services, some already implemented and others in the planning stage.

At C.A.R.E.4Paws they are looking for ways to run the mobile clinic more than three days a week to meet increasing demand. The bilingual clinic manager has enabled them to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking communities. The Humane Society of Western Montana is working to expand wellness services: "We started PetWorks, a free wellness clinic for low-income families. We're trying to offer monthly clinics. If people come to the clinic with something that needs more medical attention, we can use the Grey Muzzle grant. We're talking about having senior-for-senior clinics and providing transportation." At Rainbow Friends they are offering a class series, "Aging is not a Disease," designed to educate the public about the care of older animals. Topics range from nutrition to enrichment to how to give pills and subcutaneous fluids.

At the Humane Society for Hamilton County in Indiana they would like to grow their Bucket List fosters. The program director said, "Bucket List fosters take animals at the end of their lives. We'd like to be able to fund extraordinary care in foster homes for animals that have six months or a year to live. It's currently not a large chunk of what we spend because it's hard to find fosters to do that. We're hesitant to grow it because we would need the money to support it. So, our staff take home the terminal cases. It would be an opportunity for us if we could get funding for it. We see a need."

The Kentucky Humane Society started a foster hospice program in early 2018 after "seeing a need to help senior animals that didn't have long to live." The program director explained, "Shelters don't want to euthanize but don't have options. We piloted the foster hospice program with our employees. It was successful so we opened it to all our volunteers. We have been able to pull animals from surrounding shelters. Eight dogs have been served through the program so far. We have a foster now who has her second foster hospice dog." In response to a question about any burnout they are seeing, she said, "We are not seeing caregiver burden. It's more the case that fosters are reporting a good experience. We have done a good job of creating standard operating procedures and recruiting fosters. We make fosters feel like they are part of the decision-making process when it comes time to euthanize. We provide ashes and clay pawprint to the fosters. They appreciate that."

Knox PAWS, a program of the Knoxville-Knox County Council on Aging, supports senior citizens to adopt pets from local rescues. The program director "thinks more social workers and social service organizations need to look at what we have done at Knox PAWS and consider a similar program. We're seeing the difference made in the lives of the people and dogs. I think every

state should have such a program.” Her goal is to grow the program and help more seniors who already have pets get vet care they can’t otherwise afford. She explained that the program “takes senior people to rescues to find a pet that’s a good match. We have fosters on the back burner in case someone goes into the hospital. Clients can call us anytime. We check in every six months by phone or home visit and the animals have an annual physical exam. If the client isn’t mobile, we transport them to appointments. We take the dogs for grooming. The Feed a Pet program covers the cost of food. A collaboration with the University of Tennessee provides volunteers to help deliver food. We also work with Meals on Wheels.” Kane’s Krusade is also looking to integrate their CARE kits into Meals on Wheels services to reach more vulnerable senior citizens.

**Fundraising.** Six grantees discussed successes with new or modified fundraising strategies. For example, Live Love Animal Rescue in California shared progress in promoting monthly donations: “Most of our funding has been from individual donors. In the past year, we went from 20 monthly donors giving \$800 per month to 47 giving \$2000 per month. It was a big achievement to increase monthly donors. We made the increase by initially focusing on forever fosters most of whom were seniors. We had terrific pictures taken of them and promoted them saying the dogs were in their care permanently and we need help in an ongoing way to make sure they get the care they need. It took discipline. In the month of October, we pushed only monthly donors. We hadn’t stayed consistent to one message for 30 days ever before.”

The Live Love program director also discussed their efforts to leverage the Grey Muzzle grant as a match: “We were excited to include the challenge grant because we thought it would be a good addition from Grey Muzzle’s perspective. The idea was to increase the impact of the Grey Muzzle grant and use it to leverage more funding. We looked at it as a way to energize supporters and attract new ones. In some ways it worked but not every foster dog makes a compelling story. To make the challenge grant successful you need a foster who can take good photos and share quirky, cute stories. It helps if the foster is technologically savvy. Challenges that had good fosters and compelling stories were the best. The fundraising challenges were always for a specific dog and a specific medical condition. It helps if the dog’s story has a particular hook.”

Both Frederick Friends in Maryland and the Connecticut Humane Society noted the importance of pictures documenting the stories of the senior dogs helped. The Connecticut Humane Society program director explained, “Benny had to have a hernia repaired. We used him as our first social media case. The fundraising response was tremendous. It was the first time we showed people the journey from start to end. It was a good test case. We hadn’t used before pictures ever before. We had never taken the risk to show an animal before we knew what the outcome would be. There was a risk that we were asking for money for a dog and what if the dog didn’t

make it. The response to support Benny was amazing. We will continue to use the “complete journey” approach to fundraise.”

The Humane Society of Western Montana uses the Nanci Wishcamper Fund to supplement the Grey Muzzle grant. The Fund is generated from a \$20 fee to hold an animal someone is interested in adopting and is used to cover the cost of extraordinary medical care often needed by senior dogs.

### **Lessons Learned: The Effect of the Grey Muzzle Grant**

The Grey Muzzle grant had important effects beyond simply the number of senior dogs served. These effects reflect the systemic change needed to improve the welfare of senior dogs and sustain those changes.

**Challenging Assumptions.** Approximately 20% of grantees said the Grey Muzzle grant challenged long-held assumptions about senior dogs, most importantly assumptions about euthanasia and the public’s willingness to open their hearts and homes to older dogs. The program director at the Animal Protective Foundation in Schenectady, New York talked about being more open-minded about senior dogs: “The grant changed the way that discussions occur about options for senior dogs. It’s more a change in perspective. What more can we do? Before we would have thought of rescue or euthanasia as the only options [for an older dog with medical conditions]...When I started in shelter 15 years ago any dog over eight years old would be euthanized without any discussion.” She went on to explain how the grant helped them learn they “could do more than they realized. We didn’t realize the obstacles and barriers we were putting in place. We don’t want to think that money was what stood in the way of a pet’s life, but it really was. The grant helped our team to realize there are options and we can rely on the community. We needed to trust them and let them step up [to help senior dogs.]” At the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago the program director talked about how their Grey Muzzle dental grant helped them “evolve into the 21st century and realize they can do so much more,” particularly with respect to dogs that are suffering from dental disease: “When I first started dental disease wasn’t anything we thought about.”

Several grantees discussed changing assumptions about the adoptability of senior dogs. Three interviewees from The Animal Foundation in Las Vegas talked at length about the importance of education and public relations. One respondent said, “People think nobody wants senior dogs but it’s not true. It can be changed by how we talk about senior dogs...We need to change perceptions.” She went on to say that their Grey Muzzle grant to cover senior dog adoption incentives “created the opportunity for a conversation and to shine a bright light on senior dogs.” Another respondent from The Animal Foundation agreed: “In my opinion the grant helped to motivate us and helped us focus more on senior animals. We make more of an effort



to make sure they are being featured often. We are sure to take a senior dog when we do a television spot and are doing more in terms of featuring senior dogs on social media.” As a result, he said they were “educating themselves about the needs of senior dogs and now they can better articulate to patrons the advantages of senior dogs.” The program director noted the snowball effect of senior dog adoption: “It helps to get anyone to adopt a senior dog. The importance can’t be overestimated. Once other people meet the dogs, that helps them see that senior dogs can be great pets.”

The program director at Shelter from the Storm in Wisconsin was proud of their success in educating people about senior dogs. She noted that exposing their volunteers to senior dogs changed their perceptions about the adoptability of older dogs. At Stop the Suffering in Ohio they used their grant to provide medical care to about half of their senior dogs and were able to successfully place those dogs. As a result, the program director said, “A good number of our group now see senior dogs differently.” At the Richmond Animal League in Virginia the program director talked about challenging staff not to think of a senior as any harder to place than any other dog: “We can give an adopter enough information that age shouldn’t scare anyone off. We don’t highlight “senior” dogs. Instead, we say this is a dog and here’s what we know about him or her.”

In Florida, the Leon County Humane Society program director explained, “We weren’t promoting senior dogs much [before], so we expected them to stay in a foster home longer and tie up that home. Now we see that when they get the medical issues cleared up, people have it in their hearts to help senior dogs.” She went on to explain, “The Grey Muzzle grant opened our eyes to the adoptability of senior dogs. It’s a nice example to show other funders.”

Leveraging their medical grant also helped the Watauga Humane Society in North Carolina change community perceptions of senior dogs. They advertised the Grey Muzzle grant and received an outpouring of community support, including one donor who offered to pay all senior dog adoption fees for the year. The benefit extended beyond senior dogs, as they found community members subsequently began donating monthly to sponsor senior cat adoption fees.

In Maryland, Friends of Frederick said they encouraged shelter staff to ask them for help even in cases the shelter assumed were a “lost cause”—particularly senior dogs who needed hospice care. The program director talked about the importance of having funding to offer when the shelter reached out for help with the care of senior dogs for whom they had no other alternatives. One of the concerns raised by the shelter was what they assumed were the high costs of hospice care. Interestingly, the Kentucky Humane Society also assumed high costs for hospice care (hospice care provided by foster families) but upon launching the hospice program found that it only cost about \$100 more per animal than regular care. At Shelter from the

Storm, the program director admitted that “it has taken some convincing to get staff to believe that people will adopt hospice pets,” but they have seen success thus far.

**Increase in Number of Senior Dogs Served/Saved.** Based on final 2018-2019 grant reports, grantees served nearly 2,100 senior dogs during the 2018-2019 grant period, and more than one in three grantees served more senior dogs than their grant application projected.

About 25% of grantees talked specifically about successes related to increasing the number of senior dogs served and/or saved. For example, at the Heartland Animal Shelter in Illinois the Grey Muzzle grant has allowed them to “save more lives” by taking in “more dogs from other shelters who would otherwise be euthanized.” As the program director explained, “We have been promoting the grant and what we are doing for senior dogs. We have gotten a lot of interest from seniors. As a result, our senior-for-senior adoption promotions are wildly successful—so much so that we have started doing them for cats, too.”

Home Fur Good in Arizona used their grant to “take their work a step further and serve older dogs who need more work.” In fact, they increased the number of senior dogs served by 49%--considerably more than their original goal to serve 28% more senior dogs than the prior year. Grant funds supported placement of senior dogs with medical issues in permanent foster homes. The fosters provide daily care and grooming, but the shelter pays for any needed medical treatment. While they initially conceptualized the program as focused on senior people, particularly those with fixed incomes, they had greater success increasing the number of senior dogs served by opening the program to people of any age who were willing to serve as permanent fosters.

At Get A Bull in New York the grant covered the additional \$500-\$1,000 in average costs associated with each senior dog they serve, allowing them to increase by 57% the number of senior dogs they were able to take in and place compared to the prior year. The Animal Foundation in Las Vegas used their grant to provide an adoption incentive (i.e., discounted adoption fee) and saw a 66% increase in the number of senior dogs adopted compared to the previous year. Moreover, they decreased the length of senior dogs’ stay at the shelter from 11 to 8 days. They explained that the adoption incentive provided an opportunity to open the conversation with potential adopters and educate them about the benefits of adopting a senior dog.

The Heartworm Foundation has a unique mission to help the thousands of homeless dogs that enter the Montgomery County, Texas shelter system every year, 40% of whom are heartworm positive. A heartworm positive dog is 75% less likely to be adopted than a heartworm negative dog. The Heartworm Foundation removes heartworm as a barrier to adoption by working with the shelter, adopters, and rescues to supply treatment. Their Grey Muzzle grant allowed them

to increase the number of senior dogs in the Montgomery County Animal Shelter whose heartworm treatment they could pay for. In addition, they removed the typical 30-day waiting period, making seniors eligible for treatment immediately and reducing their length of stay at the shelter by 22%.

Live Love Animal Rescue in California talked about the Grey Muzzle grant giving them confidence to take more senior dogs knowing they had financial security to treat unanticipated issues: “Having the grant allowed us to take senior dogs knowing we have options for funding to treat medical issues that may arise.” Moreover, the grant had an impact beyond the dogs served directly: “Being able to bring in more senior dogs inspired us to find advocates for other senior dogs we couldn’t bring in. One pit bull named Loretta was in bad shape. We realized we couldn’t help her, but we worked with the local pittie rescue to raise money to save her. It’s an example of us wanting to think about what else we can do. It’s easy to keep doing what you’re doing if that works and not try new things. But in the case of Loretta, we identified a need. We realized we couldn’t meet it ourselves, but we found a partner who could.”

**Decision-making.** Closely related to increasing the number of senior dogs served is the impact of the Grey Muzzle grant on grantees’ decision-making about which dogs they can transfer in and/or the type of care they can provide.

About 22% of grantees (n=13) discussed how the Grey Muzzle grant affected decisions about which senior dogs they could take in and/or treat. In New York, the Animal Protective Foundation’s program director explained: “Our grant focused on medical care for senior dogs. We were doing dentals but anything additional we weren’t doing. With the grant we could do more blood work, dentals, mass removal but we went into it conservatively. We were operating as we had been previously in terms of the medical care we thought we could offer. Then we saw more severe cases, cases that we would have sent to other rescues in the past. But this year [with the grant], we felt we could take on the cases.”

The Connecticut Humane Society program director described providing care for dogs they may not have been able to serve in the past: “Part of the intent of the grant was to complement what we were already doing, but it also provides more money to do more. For example, one senior dog needed two hernia repairs and had incontinence among other issues, including heart problems. The grant allowed us to take that dog.”

NorCal Boxer’s program director also described how funding affected their decision to take seniors: “Until 2014 we didn’t pull seniors because we didn’t have money to pay for vet care. They cost twice as much [as younger dogs]. Every year since, we have pulled more seniors because we have the financial resources to care for them.” At the Richmond Animal League in Virginia the program director talked about how they make decisions about which dogs to

transfer in: “We try to take the ones that Animal Care and Control (ACC) says they need the most help with...ACC can look at the senior pet and think they have a choice other than to euthanize.” The Norfolk SPCA program director talked about feeling more confident in making decisions about senior dogs because the grant “gives us a safety net when we’re transferring in animals.” That safety net is critical because one of the biggest challenges grantees identified was the unknown cost associated with senior dogs.

At Live Love Animal Rescue in California the program director said, “We pride ourselves on taking in harder dogs from shelters or as owner surrenders...Our board is now more likely to vote to take in a senior dog who might need surgery.” But she went on to say that decisions about which senior dogs to take need to be made in light of their impact: “We recently have had more discussion about voting to release funds for specific dogs. One dog had only a 40% chance of seeing after cataract surgery. We are having more conversations about how to use the grant in the most impactful way.”

Louie’s Legacy’s program director describing using the grant to accept senior dogs whose medical needs were substantial: “The grant enabled us to help dogs that need more treatment as opposed to the typical seniors who just need some dental or blood work. For example, the grant allowed us to help Flower who had her jaw completely hanging down. She required a complete dental extraction.”

At Pawmetto Lifeline in South Carolina the program director said the grant gave them a better chance to help people in need in the community: “With the Grey Muzzle grant we can care for some older dogs we might have had to turn away in the past. We can offer more pet retention services and support, which is important to us. We have a wellness clinic and some people come in and are able to pay for the exam itself but often the senior dogs need more than that, things like blood work, and the owners don’t have enough money to pay for those additional costs. We first ask the owner to apply for a care credit, basically a credit card for medical care but it has a high interest rate. People need a sufficient credit score to get the care credit, so not everyone qualifies. It’s those people who don’t qualify that we help.” She went on to say that with the grant “we can look at seniors in a different way, especially with respect to pet retention services. The grant changes the way the wellness clinic staff looks at senior dogs.”

**Benefits of Extra Care.** Twenty-five percent of grantees (n=15) specifically discussed the relationship between the grant, being able to provide additional medical or dental care, and an increase in the likelihood that a senior dog would be adopted. At the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago, where their grant was focused on dental care, they “learned the importance of having healthy animals. It makes them adoptable. People don’t want to adopt an animal with bad teeth or an animal with systemic issues or one who can’t eat and has bad breath. Anything we can do to get them to be more adoptable is key.”

In Washington the Auburn Valley Humane Society program director also talked about the importance—and cost—of dental care: “With our first grant we focused on dental and equipment because it’s important that when you adopt an animal out the adopter won’t have an \$800 bill [for dental treatment].” Pets Alive in New York used their Grey Muzzle grant to support a “Senior Canine Tooth Fairy” program to provide dental treatment for seniors. Their program director said, “We wanted to remove an inhibitor to adoption. The grant helped six dogs get dental cleanings and tooth extractions, which in turn helped increase adoptions. Four of the dogs got adopted and another one is in foster and will likely be adopted soon.”

Frederick Friends in Maryland noted cost and unknown health issues as barriers to adoption. The grant helped them address medical issues: “It’s helpful because adopters want to know the health status of dogs. People are already reluctant to adopt a senior and then put on top of that the cost of a dental and they may reconsider.” The Montgomery County, Texas shelter director who worked with Grey Muzzle grantee the Heartworm Foundation discussed the importance of removing as many barriers to adoption as possible: “People’s first thoughts are what types of bad habits or medical issues does the senior dog have. With the Heartworm Foundation providing heartworm treatment for our dogs, it takes away at least one of those barriers to adoption.”

Providing screening up front increased the adoptability of senior dogs in Dane County, Wisconsin: “With the funding, we were able to do screening right away. Most of our senior dogs got blood work done [to make sure they were medically ready for adoption]. Once they were ready for adoption, it seems like they move really quickly.” At Heartland Animal Shelter in Illinois they also found that using the grant to expand their diagnostics helped decrease senior dogs’ length of stay: “We have cases where we took a senior dog that looked fine but we were able to find conditions we wouldn’t have found from a physical exam. We learned how important that is for the adopters and the dogs.” That resulted in a protocol change: “We’ll do blood work and urinalysis for all senior dogs going forward.”

At Shelter from the Storm, also in Wisconsin, they used their Grey Muzzle grant for veterinary care for their senior dogs: “We get them as healthy as we can before we promote them, which helps decrease the time it take to get them adopted.” West Valley Humane Society in Idaho agreed that being able to provide medical care has an impact on senior dog adoptions: “Funding can greatly impact what we can offer. When we can go outside of basic care (e.g., spay/neuter), we have better success [getting senior dogs adopted].”

The Humane Society for Hamilton County in Indiana sees investing in senior dogs’ health as part of their marketing strategy: “We invest in enrichment, a good diet, and removing lumps and bumps. It’s not unusual for us to pay for dentals. We want [senior dogs] to feel and look their

best so we can better encourage their adoption. Our marketing approach is to say: Yeah, she's 12 but she's right as rain—new chompers, good blood work.”

**Improving Quality of Life.** About 14% of grantees talked specifically about the ways in which the grant improved quality of life for the animals they served. For example, at West Valley Humane Society in Idaho they had been doing blood work only when an issue was suspected, but their Grey Muzzle grant enabled them to do routine blood work on all of their senior dogs, which allowed them to find and treat conditions that would have otherwise gone unaddressed. In turn, they could provide adopters with clearer information on each dog's health. As a result, the program director said, “I feel like we are providing better service.”

At the Asheville Humane Society in North Carolina some of their greatest successes involved using the grant to help animals suffering from treatable conditions—“things that can be treated and taken care of completely like ear infections.” The program director talked about how “treating problems that are fixable can completely improve quality of life.” Similarly, in Chicago the Anti-Cruelty Society's biggest success was “seeing animals come in in such a deteriorated state and leave healthy for new happy homes.” At UPAWS in Michigan their grant was used to get senior dogs the medical care they need “as long as the dog has a good prospect.” They consider success “getting the seniors out of the shelter and into a home for whatever time they have left.”

The program director at Fairy Tail Endings in Florida spoke specifically about the impact of dental care: “Seeing the effect of dentals is the most gratifying thing. It's such a quality-of-life enhancing procedure. So many owners we see are debating euthanizing because of dentals. It's amazing to see their health completely turned around [after the dental procedure]. A very large number of vets reach out to Fairy Tail Endings because their clients have scheduled euthanasia and the vets know that dogs' issues are treatable if the people have some financial help. That's about one-third of our clients. When people finally have the dental procedure done, they're amazed that their dog goes back in time (reverse aging!) because they feel so much better.”

In New Mexico, the focus was not only on quality of life for dogs. The NMDOG program director discussed their forever foster/sanctuary program and how the Grey Muzzle grant affected people's quality of life: “Another unintentional benefit is that a lot of forever foster parents are seniors themselves. A lot of them have had dogs before and don't necessarily want to adopt a dog themselves. Some are on a fixed income or can't drive to vet appointments. This program offers a benefit in that they can bring the dogs back into these folks lives who would otherwise not be able to have a dog. A- is foster mom to a bonded pair of dogs. She talks about how much she loves having the dogs there. She's on oxygen but can still get around, and the dogs give her a reason to get up.” The program director went on to say, “We didn't expect the human benefit aspect, but the program has brought joy and companionship to senior humans.”

**Improved Staff Morale.** Six grantees talked about the impact of the Grey Muzzle grant on their staff's morale. At Home Fur Good in Arizona the Grey Muzzle grant enabled them to serve more senior dogs and promote those efforts. As a result, they started to get more positive feedback and their team expressed "pride in being able to help senior dogs." The program director explained, "It has given our team a lift. They want to do right by these animals and are pleasantly surprised that others wanted to do the same. No one has asked why we are 'wasting' time on senior dogs. Social media got the public interested and moved them to act [to adopt senior dogs]."

At Saint Frances in South Carolina the program director talked about the impact on her staff: "It's been heartening to staff. They have been trying to save more dogs for the past five years...It's important to show how committed we are to every life...To see the transformation in the senior dogs we provide care has made the staff feel that their work matters." At NorCal Boxer Rescue in Northern California the program director talked about the impact of the grant on the way the public perceives them: "We are happy that people see us as an organization that's committed to senior dogs and dogs most in need—not just the cutest, youngest, and healthiest dogs. We're also glad to see [our commitment to senior dogs] reflected in data that show people are looking at the older dogs on our website."

The Humane Society of Western Montana's Grey Muzzle grant was used to keep senior dogs in their homes by providing financial assistance for medical care. The program director talked about how the grant had affected the way staff from different departments interact to implement the senior dog program: "It's great to see the interaction between clinic and finance staff. It's easy to get stories about thankful people. People want to tell their stories." She explained that both clinic and finance staff felt a part of these happy stories. When a client came in who needed financial assistance, the staff worked together to ensure the person and the senior dog got help.

The Live Love program director explained the importance of the Grey Muzzle grant to their organization: "When we first started, we weren't sure if we'd ever get a grant. Grey Muzzle was our first big grant. It gave us a shot of adrenaline. Because Grey Muzzle believed in us, we believed more in ourselves. It helped us in terms of being disciplined and thoughtful. It also helped us bring in many more grants since then. We're able to do so much more than 18 months ago."

The program director of Knox PAWS, which pairs senior adults with senior dogs and provides ongoing support, talked about the importance of the human-animal bond. Although only having been on the job a few weeks, she had already done five placements and said, "Seeing the love from the animal and the client motivates me." She went on to say that she already "gets calls all the time from clients wanting to share what their dogs 'did today.'"

**Improved Business Processes and Strategy.** Five grantees talked about the ways in which the Grey Muzzle grant improved their business processes and strategy. For example, at Frederick Friends in Maryland the grant “opened their eyes to the need to track grant expenditures, which is helpful for future grants.” The program director went on to explain that carefully tracking revenue, expenditures and success stories helped them to better document and share their impact, which improved their relationship with the county shelter they support.

Live Love in California reported a similar experience. Managing the grant helped them to be more disciplined in terms of record-keeping and tracking data, which are particularly important as they transition from a small rescue to a medium-sized organization in terms of revenue and number of animals served. This discipline has also improved their service. The program director explained, “The grant helped us identify new opportunities. We are now working more with data. Being more organized and systematic has allowed us to better serve our dogs and adopters. We can better identify the dogs who need more attention to get adopted, which is something we used to do more informally. Now we use a database to track needs and identify those most in need of special attention.” At Pets Alive in New York, “The grant helped us think about the importance of covering [dental] costs and how to seek out funding to cover these expenses in the future.”

The Animal Foundation in Las Vegas used their grant not only to help more senior dogs during the grant period, but also to build relationships with other partners that would benefit senior dogs long after the grant ended. The challenge they sought to address was encouraging rescue partners to pull more senior dogs from their open admission shelter. Their strategy was to give rescues vouchers for free or reduced-cost services at their clinic if the rescue pulled a senior dog. While they found that their partners did pull more senior dogs, they did not always redeem the voucher. The program director explained that the act of offering the incentives was an important step for them: “Even if the rescue didn’t redeem the voucher, it helped develop relationships with them. It helped rescues to see us as a partner that could help provide care and services for the animals they take in from our shelter.”

## **Opportunities and New Directions**

Grantees were asked to describe the types of resources or support—other than financial support—that would help them serve more senior dogs. The consensus was that marketing strategies for senior dogs was the biggest gap. Grantees wanted to know what marketing strategies were most effective, how messaging could be used to promote adoption, and how to effectively engage the community in conversation about senior dogs. They also noted the need for more promotional and informational resources specific to senior dogs.



Slightly more than one in four grantees said networking opportunities would be helpful, including developing regional foster networks, sharing best practices, and promoting mentoring opportunities.

**Marketing.** More than one-half of grantees (n=31) said it would be helpful to have senior - specific information, resources, and tools to promote fostering and adoption.

The program director for the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago said, “From a marketing perspective, how do we market older dogs? I have seen the Grown Ass Dogs campaign, which was surprising and engaging and showed the benefits of adult dogs in contrast to puppies. We need tools and resources to do senior animal focused promotions. We have some but people don’t always gravitate to them.” The Vanderburgh Humane Society program director also mentioned the Grown Ass Dog PSAs, saying, “We need more shareable resources for marketing that can just be inserted into what we have now.” The Dane County program director said, “We need to market better. How do we get the message out to the community about the value of senior pets?”

Asheville Humane Society wanted to know “what are the new ideas on how to get dogs placed either in foster or adopted.” At Home Fur Good in Arizona they expressed interest in knowing what others have found effective: “We would love to know what others are doing. Are there special promotions that are effective? We do the same things we do with other dogs but are there marketing techniques that are more effective?”

The Austin Pets Alive! program director observed: “The marketing piece is really important. There is a class of adopters that go specifically for senior pets. To connect that crowd with senior pets is the challenge. We need to get the volume of marketing out there. We need to give senior dogs a spotlight that the younger pets don’t need.” The program director at Heartland Animal Shelter in Illinois agreed with the need for a spotlight on senior dogs: “Having something to shine a light on them and highlight the fact that they’re seniors is most helpful. A universal tool or platform would be really helpful—a way to celebrate them and why they’re great.”

The Heartworm Foundation’s program director echoed the importance of marketing and the need to figure out what’s most effective: “Marketing and education are important. How do we market seniors more effectively? We tried different campaigns but we’re stilling figuring out what to appeal to when marketing a senior. We tried couch potato for people who don’t want a puppy. We need more information on what marketing works best. What has worked best are the sad, sad videos that pull at heart strings, but people don’t want to see sad stories all the time. Cute, fun videos don’t get as much attention. The sad ones get thousands of views and shares.”

Staff at The Animal Foundation agreed: “We need resources related to marketing and having conversations about seniors. What I assumed would be the hardest things to talk about are easier. People like a sad story and are often up for taking on a major medical need. Those stories get the most reaction. People like to adopt animals because they like to tell their friends...they rescued a dog with a story—same with rescue partners.”

The Norfolk SPCA program director also mentioned sad stories and the need for new strategies: “We need help around the marketing of senior dogs to the public. How do we put senior dogs in a positive light to increase adoption as opposed to telling sad stories? How do we grow that through social media and fundraising? How do we focus on senior dogs as amazing companions? We embrace opportunities to bring animals to senior centers. We can handle bringing them in and getting them medical care but would love to do more to market them...The education piece is also important. We need to help people to know where to get care for their animals and how to prevent issues in the first place.”

At Saint Frances in South Carolina the program director noted the importance of understanding the adopter’s point of view: “I wish we could get a better idea from the adopter’s perspective. I feel like I’m in an echo chamber. I don’t know what the barrier is to adopt a senior dog. I know money and medical care are issues. The other barrier is sadness over losing them quickly. We need consistent messages from a lot of different sources that senior dogs make great pets. To some extent what is compelling about senior dogs is the sad stories. We have the best luck advertising the sad, hard luck cases. How do we replicate Susie’s Seniors success [promoting and getting senior dogs adopted]? A well-known site like that focused on sad and happy stories is key to getting the word out.”

At The Animal Foundation a staff member talked about educating the public: “We need more public education related to senior animals. We need to do more to try to overcome the stigma attached to senior dogs. We need to do a better job dealing with the people who come in wanting only puppies. How do we help people to consider other older dogs? They need to consider the advantages of having a dog that is housetrained, trained in general, good on the leash, and familiar with people. A lot of times people don’t think of those advantages. We have done PSAs to educate people.” The Watermelon Mountain Ranch program director specifically mentioned the need to educate the public using statistics: “Statistics would be helpful, for example the number of seniors in municipal shelters. We have found that people are moved by the numbers. People sometimes don’t understand why a rescue would invest in care for a senior pet. It’s helpful to have stats and numbers about the extent of the need to help senior dogs.” At the Southampton Animal Shelter Foundation staff described “parallels to humans and people being sidelined because of age. Older dogs and people deserve love and respect. There is a need for education about the needs of and our responsibility for senior animals.”

At Live Love in California the focus was on engaging the community in conversation about senior dogs: “We need help to open the community up to sheltering and fostering senior dogs...We need to continue the conversation about promoting senior dogs for adoption. We have enjoyed the Grey Muzzle webinars. Opportunities with the Adoption Show and Senior Spotlight are helpful. The issue is sometimes getting fosters willing to take special needs dogs. We need to get past that hurdle. We need to reassure people that it’s not that scary—you can do it too.” At Louie’s Legacy, the focus was on helping people overcome fear: “We need reading material or other information to encourage people, so they aren’t so scared of fostering senior dogs. We need to help people feel okay with facing the pain of loss of older dogs. We need a better way to help people realize it’s not just about them; it’s about the dogs. They will have to face grief, but the difference it will make for the dog is worth it.”

The UPAWS program director talked about the need for new approaches to messaging around senior dogs as individuals: “Advertising is a big part of this. The public might hear we have a nine-year-old dog and think the dog is ancient. A nine-year-old small dog isn’t the same as a St. Bernard. We need to educate the public. We need to convey different messages. Some people have no idea. We need to help people understand what issues are manageable. We need to be able to tell people what they are realistically looking at. We need to have a conversation with people about their lifestyle. People may come in looking for something totally different but by having a conversation we may be able to steer them toward a dog that’s a much better fit. We need to try not to pigeon-hole senior dogs. For many you’re not just taking them home for the end of their life. Many of them have a lot of energy. We walk dogs four times a day and some of the seniors do just as well as the younger dogs.”

The Lollypop Farm program director suggested the possibility of collaborative marketing strategies: “What could we do in terms of cross-promoting animals? Social media has helped grow awareness. What about joint campaigns on why you should have a senior dog. How could we pool resources and do a series of videos to promote senior dogs? We could hire a videographer if a couple of organizations pooled their resources, but we would need to do things that aren’t heavily branded. We get materials from the ASPCA, but all you can see is the ASPCA branding all over it. It goes back to collaboration with all partners being equal. It may not make sense to promote one of our senior dogs in Colorado, but there are some things to share across all organizations. Collaborative messages could be important.”

The Watauga Humane Society program director suggested promotional materials specific to senior dogs: “We need promotional materials like posters or things to give away at events. It would be good to have something to hang on the kennel, something to put senior dogs in the spotlight. Maybe have something that says: Thanks to Grey Muzzle this is what senior dogs are receiving.”

Several grantees suggested developing informational materials that could also be used for promotional purposes. Frederick Friends suggested “tip sheets for fostering or caring for animals with issues like incontinence.” Of informational materials, the program director at the Ani-Cruelty Society said, “We could add things into their wellness fairs as part of our outreach efforts—information on how to brush teeth or giveaways of dental chews.” NorCal Boxer’s executive director suggested developing educational materials, including “pamphlets about common issues” senior dogs face. The Safe Haven of Iowa program director noted the need for “information that would look more authoritative coming from someone other than us. We need a good write-up about what things people adopting a senior might want to watch for. We need things to help adopters be more vigilant, like literature on the care of senior dogs.” At the Richmond Animal League in Virginia the program director mentioned the need for “resources that are printable and things to include in adoption packages.”

The Asheville Humane Society program director talked about the possibility of developing adoption packages to promote senior dog adoption: “We’re looking at doing adoption care packages. If a potential adopter felt there was some support, it might make a difference for dogs with more complex issues. It also might make a difference in the long-term [for the dog]. We would need to tailor the package to the dog. For example, if the dog needs a special diet, we could offer vouchers for prescription food or offer an annual exam with blood work or training for behavioral issues.”

The program director at the Leon County Humane Society in Florida agreed about the need to give adopters more support: “We need something to hand to adopters like 10 hot topics for people new to senior dogs. When we did the puppy mill rescue, we put together informational sheets about flight risk, potty training, and dental care. It was almost dummy proof. In the excitement of getting the pet, people don’t remember what you tell them. When we talk to people about adopting a senior dog people might mention being concerned about X, Y, or Z. It would be good to give people a reference sheet [to address those concerns].” Staff at PAWS Atlanta suggested that providing more support post-adoption could be a way to get more senior dogs adopted: “Having a community database for [people] adopting seniors might also help. There are vets that offer discounts for seniors and free counseling services for people who have lost a pet. It would need to be specific to each community [but could help alleviate some of the concerns about adopting a senior dog].”

**Networking.** Sixteen grantees discussed an interest in networking with and learning from other grantees, though the topics of interest varied.

Three grantees discussed ways in which networks of foster homes could be developed and shared. Staff from both Get a Bull in New York and NorCal Boxer in California suggested a coordinated approach by region. NorCal’s program director said, “Maybe we could organize a

warehouse of foster homes, especially people committed to senior dogs. It would be great if rescues in a [geographic] region could share their resources in terms of fosters.” The Highland County Humane Society program director suggested that it would be helpful not only to share lists of fosters who would take long-term and hospice cases, but also lists of receiving shelters that take seniors and sanctuaries that take hospice cases.

Two grantees noted the need for low-cost options for consultation. The program director at the Connecticut Humane Society talked about medical consultations: “We use consultants especially with internal medicine, but they charge us [quite a bit]. It would be good if there were a school or other source to provide consultation at a lower cost. As shelters become more sophisticated in the care provide, we also need more sophisticated consultation.” At East Coast Corgi Rescue the focus was on behavior consultations: “We would like to work with behavior consultants who aren’t going to charge \$500. We need help for special cases.”

The networking topic mentioned most often had to do with best practices. Seven grantees wanted more opportunities to share best practices, and two of them specifically mentioned mentoring as a strategy to disseminate those practices. The program director at the Humane Society for Hamilton County “would love to see best practices for things like rolling out a hospice program or recruiting fosters.” NorCal Boxer staff agreed that best practices for recruiting fosters would be helpful. The Kentucky Humane Society is interested in learning more about what works with respect to helplines: “For the helpline, we’re always looking for opportunities to increase knowledge or talk to other organizations that have a helpline. We’re looking for webinars, training opportunities for staff. Same for fospice programs. We want to reach out to other organizations doing similar programs to find out what’s working for them.”

With respect to mentoring, the Live Love staff said, “There are large organizations that do a lot well. There are mid-level organizations like ours that do some things well, and there are small organizations trying to learn the ropes. Maybe some kind of mentorship would help. We have researched whether there are nonprofits that offer legal or accounting advice...We could use more mentoring and support as we move to the next level as a nonprofit.” The Animal Protective Foundation talked about guidance Grey Muzzle provided: “[A Grey Muzzle board member] connected us to other groups that had hospice programs. Networking is useful. It helped us develop protocols and not recreate the wheel, which was helpful. It would be helpful to connect new grantees with people who have done what they’re trying to do. It could help them get going faster.”

The program director at Saint Frances discussed not only the importance of sharing best practices but also of more hands-on collaboration: “South Carolina is still really struggling with animal welfare. We have transplants here that introduce ideas that might not come here otherwise. More rural shelters don’t have the resources we have. There are lots of municipal

shelters with high euthanasia rates. We need communication among shelters. It takes a village. How could Grey Muzzle facilitate that communication? For example, there's a No Kill SC initiative through the Charleston Animal Society. The initiative is fabulous in theory but hasn't made the progress hoped. It introduced shelter directors to each other but nothing much came of it. Despite the initiative falling flat, we have done things on our own. We partnered with shelters in Myrtle Beach on a grant. We also partnered with two other rural shelters. We had access to each other in ways that we might not otherwise have had [because of those introductions]. If Grey Muzzle gets six applications from South Carolina, maybe you could facilitate that group and communication—maybe do something regionally. All funders encourage collaboration, but the funders ask us to figure out how to do that. Shelters in the South are so overwhelmed that the idea of being able to look beyond themselves and think about another shelter can feel unreasonable. But if you call me and say, 'The shelter next door is working on a [specific] problem, would you work with them to fix it?' that would feel more concrete and manageable."

The Lollypop Farm program director summed up interest in working together to share best practices saying, "We're open to learning from others about what works. Nobody is a competitor. We need to work together; it's a collaboration."

## Senior Dogs: Through the Eyes of Volunteers and Adopters

---

### Volunteers

**How they got involved.** Half of the volunteers were motivated to get involved with the grantee's work on behalf of senior dogs because of their own senior dog (either a foster or an adopted senior). The other half noted being motivated by a general love for animals. A volunteer from the Animal Rescue League in Iowa said, "My own dogs are aging, and I wanted to help."

Another volunteer with the Kentucky Humane Society explained, "I have always had a soft spot for the senior animals. It hurts my heart to see an animal once so loved now lost and alone in a shelter. I want to make sure that, even if the first part of their life wasn't the best, the last part is. I feel like, as a veterinarian, it is my job to help those animals that most need it."

**Role.** Half of the volunteers mentioned fostering as one of their roles. The other half noted doing a variety of tasks (e.g., events, social media, fundraising). Six fosters specifically mentioned fostering hospice dogs.

**Length of service.** The average length of time volunteers had been working with the grantees was 5.4 years with a range of 1 to 20 years. Almost all the volunteers (40 of 41) were female.

**Volunteer experience.** Thirty of the volunteers talked specifically about their volunteer experience. Nearly half of these volunteers (47%) noted the importance of communication and

guidance provided by the grantee. A volunteer foster at Thulani in Northern California said, “I can call for support and approach them with problems without hesitation, though I haven’t had problems so far. The people at Thulani help me feel comfortable with fostering.” A foster at PAWS in Atlanta spoke of her experience as a hospice foster to Jason who has congestive heart failure (CHF): “I go to PAWS every day to get Jason IVs. The vet that works at PAWS is amazing. She will answer any questions. I can text her anytime. I’ve been through CHF so I’m already familiar [with the disease], but I have numbers for everyone who could help. Everyone is very responsive.”

**Challenges.** Twenty-three volunteers discussed challenges they faced in their volunteer role. The most noted challenge, cited by 30% of these volunteers, was dealing with the emotional aspect of volunteering, particularly fostering senior dogs. One volunteer said, “I don't think we have gotten to the challenging part yet. The challenging part is going to be saying goodbye.” Four volunteers noted challenges dealing with the unknown in terms of health issues and how the dog would fit in with other animals in the home.

**Best parts.** Thirty-six volunteers talked about the best parts of their work. Nearly 90% said the best part of their work was that it was rewarding to help senior dogs and see their transformation or, in the case of hospice dogs, know you are making them comfortable to the end. One foster said, “You’re truly saving the dog by fostering. You’re being part of the key to success. Seeing the dog leave better behaved than when you first got him [is rewarding].” A hospice foster volunteer from the Kentucky Humane Society talked about the rewards of her role: “The most rewarding part was when Jake first went down the stairs to the basement. When we first got him, I really thought he would die within a month. He just laid in my living room and it seemed every step he took was a challenge. We got him on pain medication, joint supplement, and had his perineal mass removed and he was a different dog. One day I was sitting in the basement, looked up, and here Jake came trotting toward me. It was by far once of the greatest feelings I have ever had. Most senior animals don't make it out of the shelter. This program is giving these animals a chance. Its honestly so amazing, and it’s making me tear up thinking about it. So many lives have been saved because of this. So many lives have ended happy because of it.”

A foster with Safe Harbor Lab Rescue in Colorado explained: “They provide excellent medical care for the dogs and thorough screening of potential adopters, so we know that each dog we grow to love will go to a good, safe, appropriate home. It has been wonderful and rewarding. We just had our 10th foster find a great home.” At Live Love in California, a volunteer said, “I love everything about the dogs. These dogs just seem like they’re grateful. They’re so loving, it’s a pleasure to take care of them...What's my favorite thing about fostering? To see a sick, scared or stressed out dog turn into a happy almost puppy-like dog. That's the best!”

## Senior Dog Adopters

Thirteen adopters of senior dogs were interviewed. All but two were female.

**Adoption experience.** All the adopters said their experience adopting a senior dog was positive. An adopter working with Knox PAWS in Tennessee said, “I learned about Knox PAWS from others in my senior living building. I appreciated that the coordinator was patient in taking me around to partner organizations to meet dogs and never ‘forced’ a dog on me. She was looking for a genuine bond between dog and person. I adopted a senior dog and had no issues with the process.” An adopter from Stop the Suffering in Ohio said, “I thought they were very thorough and appreciated that they truly tried to make sure the dog was a good fit in our household. I liked that [the senior dog’s] previous foster came to my house and that the organization followed up with me after adoption.”

**Concerns.** Adopters were evenly divided with respect to concerns about adopting a senior dog. Half of adopters said they had no concerns about adoption and the other half said they had some concerns about potential health needs and associated costs, though the concerns did not dissuade them from adopting.

**Rewards.** Forty-four percent of adopters said seeing their senior dog’s transformation was the greatest reward of adopting him or her. One adopter from Ohio said the best part was “knowing they’ve overcome previous hardships and have comfort, new experiences, enjoyment, and relaxation.” An adopter from North Carolina said, “It’s no different from adopting any dog. They’re always happy to see you. It’s good to see them comfortable. When I first got Crumpet, she’d fall over in a stiff breeze. Now she’s so much better.” One in four adopters specifically mentioned the love they received from their senior dog. One adopter said the best is “loving her, and her loving me back. She’s great company, a great lap dog.” Another said, “He gives so much love!”

**Would they adopt again?** All 17 adopters (14 adopters and 3 volunteers who also adopted senior dogs) said they would adopt a senior dog again without hesitation. One adopter said, “I totally would because of the unconditional love, maturity (“you know what you’re getting”), and knowing I’m making a life-changing difference.” Another said, “Most definitely, yes! I specifically seek out dogs 8 years and older whenever searching online. I think too many people want puppies.” And a foster who also adopted a senior dog summed it up: “I will only look for seniors from now on. The experience of adopting and fostering them is more rewarding. The dogs are more grateful.”



## Volunteer and Adopter Recommendations to Increase Adoption of Senior Dogs

Forty-two of the volunteers and adopters talked about how we could increase the number of senior dogs adopted. Approximately 60% said there needed to be more focused promotion of senior dogs, including the benefits of adopting them and messaging to help overcome stereotypes and preconceived ideas (e.g., old dogs are slow, aren't fun). A volunteer at the Kentucky Humane Society who had also adopted a senior dog said, "We need to showcase more of the 'perks,' for example that they are already trained. We also need to point out that they deserve a second chance." A senior dog adopter from the Asheville Humane Society said, "We need more of a spotlight on senior dogs and how much fun they can be. They need to be featured on television and in ads more often." A volunteer with Stop the Suffering in Ohio agreed with the need for more marketing: "We need videos, PSAs, and social media to show the true energy of a senior dog."

A volunteer with Peak Lab Rescue in North Carolina also discussed opportunities to reframe the conversation about senior dogs: "We need better photos and video to showcase the activity level and give a better impression of seniors as still spunky and active. I think sometimes people get turned off to senior dogs right away just by hearing the number of their age because of preconceived notions." At PAWS in Atlanta, one volunteer agreed: "We need to work on changing people's mindset. They are thinking that it will be too hard and painful [to have a senior dog]. We need to change the mindset to how awesome senior dogs are and how rewarding and easy it is [to adopt one]." She went on to discuss the Summer Love program that gives people a chance to "try out" having a senior dog: "From Memorial Day to Labor Day, we have a weekend foster program. It shows people how easy it is to work a senior dog into their life."

Seven of the 42 volunteers and adopters talked about people and senior dogs serving as "ambassadors." An adopter from Safe Harbor Lab Rescue in Colorado said, "We need more testimonials and personal advocates for senior dogs. I talk to people at work about adopting seniors and consider myself an ambassador."

A senior dog adopter from Saint Frances Animal Center in South Carolina explained: "If people had the opportunity to meet a dog without making a judgment and if shelters promoted the senior dogs and took them to events, [it would make a difference]. If someone met [adopted senior dog] Charlie, they would never guess he was 9 or 10 years old. I think people think senior dogs are arthritic and slow and cranky, but that has never been my experience."

Seven volunteers and adopters suggested monetary incentives to increase senior dog adoptions. Suggestions included funding for medical expenses, discounts at veterinarians, and low-cost or fee-waived adoptions. An Adoption Counselor at Little Shelter in New York said, "Due to my experience as an Adoption Counselor, I know that sometimes people pass up

adopting a senior dog due to anticipated medical expenses. If there were more help from shelters with medical expenses (like the support provided to fosters), more people would be inclined to adopt seniors. That help could include low-cost medications, discounts on prescription food, and general financial help for adopters.”

## Focus Groups with Program Directors

---

Twenty-nine program directors from Grey Muzzle’s 2019-2020 cohort of grantees were divided among seven focus groups aimed at further exploring the challenges and opportunities identified in the individual interviews, described previously, with program directors from our 2018-2019 cohort of grantees. Specifically, the focus groups asked participants to discuss challenges they were encountering serving senior dogs—particularly in increasing the number of senior dogs served—and the types of resources or supports that would help address those issues.

Slightly more than 50% of the focus group participants said costs were the major barrier to serving more senior dogs. They noted the extensive medical and dental needs many senior dogs have. The program director from Stop the Suffering in Ohio said, “As we all know, senior dogs are expensive. The ones we pull from rural shelters have pretty much had no veterinary care through their lifetime or were outside dogs or were very neglected.”

On average, the program directors reported that about 10-15% of the animals they served were senior dogs. To increase the number of senior dogs served, grantees noted not only needing more money, but also more human resources. For foster-based rescues, increasing the number of senior dogs served would require increasing the number of foster homes, which has proven challenging.

For shelters whose kennels are typically full, serving more senior dogs would require not only more money but also a shift in decision-making about how kennel space is allocated. For example, the program director at the Austin Humane Society in Texas said, “We could serve more senior dogs with more money. Our kennels are always full, but we have all age dogs. We would need to decide how many senior dogs versus other age dogs we would need to ‘balance.’ We also need to have space for emergency cases like hurricanes or hoarding situations, so we need flexibility.”

Focus group participants agreed that networking was important to improve their work on behalf of senior dogs. This included sharing best practices and lessons learned among the grantees and establishing or expanding new collaborative relationships in their respective communities. Opportunities to network virtually as opposed to meeting in person were favored. Grantees were especially interested in learning from one another about how to

successfully market senior dogs: What kind of appeals are most successful? What should we focus on in marketing? What does the research on marketing strategies tell us?

The grantees also discussed opportunities to leverage and expand current collaborative relationships. For example, PAWS in Philadelphia discussed the idea of forming regional partnerships to pool resources such as access to low-cost dental care. The program director noted that cold-calling area veterinary clinics to ask if they would provide discounted dental care was neither efficient nor effective. She suggested that animal welfare organizations might work together to develop a shared “database” of providers who would offer discounts as opposed to having each shelter or rescue trying to develop a personal relationship. A similar model might also be possible to promote or share volunteer opportunities, including foster homes.

The goal of this study was to inform development of approaches to increase timely adoption of and live outcomes for senior dogs. It sought not only to provide an in-depth comparative analysis of Grey Muzzle grantees' senior dog programs, but also to describe the context in which those programs were implemented. By examining similarities and differences in approaches, challenges, successes, and lessons learned, the aim is to contribute to the body of knowledge about what works and what more is needed to save and improve the lives of senior dogs nationwide.

While the study used a convenience sample of shelters and rescues, which is not necessarily representative of animal welfare organizations nationally, the findings provide a starting point for discussion about strategies to improve the well-being of senior dogs who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. In fact, this is the first study to assess the state of efforts nationwide to promote the well-being of senior dogs, beyond simply assessing live release rates. **The aim was not just to understand *whether* senior dogs' lives were being saved, but also *how and why*, and to identify potentially lifesaving approaches and strategies.**

### Key Findings

**A Changing Landscape.** The landscape of animal welfare is changing, both in terms of the “demographics” of homeless animals and the areas of the United States in which they are most prevalent. In many parts of the country, spay and neuter programs have worked admirably, resulting in a dramatic decrease in the number of homeless puppies. Grantees said they were seeing far fewer young, healthy dogs and more dogs who were older and often sicker.

These changes have important implications for animal welfare organizations' business models. Rescues that rely on puppies and younger dogs to generate income may need to reassess fundraising strategies. Open admission shelters that are required to accept every animal will likewise need to consider how to accommodate intake of animals that may be more costly to care for—both up front due to immediate medical needs and over time due to potentially longer lengths of stay. Given that grantees noted an increase in older dogs being surrendered by senior people, animal welfare organizations should also consider the demographic landscape of the area they serve and the extent to which the human population is “greying.” Outreach to older pet owners to encourage them to plan for the care of their animals could reduce the number of senior dogs coming into care when owners die or move into assisted living.

Regional differences also have important implications. There is clearly disparity in the number of homeless dogs in various parts of the country. Homeless animals, including senior dogs, are more prevalent in the South than in the North, where animal shelters are increasingly operating below full capacity. Getting senior dogs from areas of high supply and low demand to areas of low supply and high demand for companion animals is an important piece of the puzzle, and transports play a vital role, both for sending and receiving organizations. Yet, they are only one piece of the puzzle.

**Senior Dogs and the Role of Choice.** It is important to recognize that, unlike open admission shelters that must accept every animal, limited admission shelters, rescues, and sanctuaries *have a choice* about which animals they take in—whether from a cross-country transport, another shelter across town, or an owner surrender. Decisions about which animals they accept—and don't accept—can have a profound impact on senior dogs.

The choice is influenced by several considerations. First, senior dogs that *are* accepted into a shelter or rescue often need veterinary care that can be costly. Second, in the absence of that care, senior dogs will likely wait longer to be adopted, as adopters may be reluctant to take on added medical costs. Finally, even if an investment is made in medical or dental treatment, older dogs may still be passed over by adopters who fear losing them too soon.

The result is a significant opportunity cost—and a disincentive—to accept senior dogs: Why accept a senior dog knowing he or she will cost more to treat, take longer to get adopted, and divert precious resources, like foster homes, from younger and more easily adoptable dogs? This is a question addressed every day by shelters and rescues that choose to take in older dogs. No matter how well-intentioned an organization or how committed they are to helping senior dogs, the disincentives to accept older dogs are real. The question is: How do we overcome them?

**The Importance of Working Together.** Findings suggest that collaboration is critical to serving senior dogs. Key resources and partners include veterinarians, volunteer fosters, public shelters, community-based organizations, and the public. Saving senior dogs requires a well-orchestrated effort among partners who may not always see an incentive to work together; no single organization can do it alone.

Veterinarians are essential to providing the care senior dogs need, both to improve their well-being and increase their odds of timely adoption. While some grantees have in-house veterinarians, many rely on community veterinary practices. How can we encourage more veterinarians to partner with animal welfare organizations to provide reduced-cost care? What incentives do veterinarians need to make such partnerships feasible?

Rescue-based organizations and some shelters rely on fosters to expand their capacity to serve senior dogs. Yet, grantees described foster recruitment as a key challenge. How can shelters and rescues recruit more fosters? How are organizations that have success attracting fosters different from those that struggle to recruit volunteer foster homes?

Once senior dogs are safe and healthy (or healthier), how do we persuade the public to open their hearts and homes to them? Several findings show promise but also suggest more work is needed. One in five grantees said a benefit of their Grey Muzzle grant was that it helped them challenge assumptions that senior dogs were unadoptable, not only assumptions about the public's willingness to adopt older dogs but also their own staff members' thinking. Interviews with senior dog adopters and volunteer fosters suggest there are indeed people who are extremely invested in caring for senior dogs and willing to adopt them—in fact, some will only adopt senior dogs. Several volunteers even had no hesitation about providing hospice care. One hundred percent of adopters said they would adopt another senior dog. While reason for optimism, grantees identified help with marketing senior dogs as their greatest need, noting that older dogs typically take longer to be adopted. Clearly there is more work to be done to promote adoption of senior dogs, including identifying messaging that is most effective and developing promotional materials.

**The Impact of Grey Muzzle Grants.** What about money? All the grantees said the Grey Muzzle grant positively impacted their work on behalf of senior dogs. Moreover, the grants had important effects beyond simply the number of senior dogs served. These effects reflect the systemic change needed to improve the welfare of senior dogs and maintain those changes. Specifically, the grants: 1) affected grantees' decision-making about which dogs they could transfer in and/or the type of care they could provide, allowing them to take in senior dogs they would not have otherwise; 2) allowed grantees to provide additional medical and dental care, increasing the likelihood of senior dogs' adoption and improving their quality of life; and 3) improved staff morale and commitment to serving senior dogs. These are important achievements that pave the way for continued efforts to save senior dogs, but questions about financial sustainability remain. Saving more senior dogs will require rethinking business models and developing new marketing strategies.

### Looking Ahead

So where do we go from here? Grantees described an increasing focus on community outreach to address minor health issues before they become costly and unmanageable. What role can primary prevention efforts like these play in improving outcomes for senior dogs? It is likely that a combination of strategies focused on primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention is required to fully address the needs and circumstances of senior dogs. The application of a

public health model to senior dog welfare is perhaps a viable framework to consider the range of strategies comprising a comprehensive approach.

Clearly, funding is an incentive to help homeless and at-risk senior dogs. It may be useful to consider how funding could be even more impactful by, for example, supporting a mix of strategies that aim to both keep senior dogs out of shelters and better meet the needs of those who do come into care. Given the importance of collaboration, how can funding or other incentives encourage partnerships among animal welfare organizations, veterinarians, and other social service providers? As we are learning from our experience dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, technology plays an increasingly important role in our ability to work together. How might we use technology to promote collaboration and improve the well-being of senior dogs? It may also be useful to consider how to adapt best practices (e.g., motivational interviewing) from other disciplines.

And it is not just about the dogs. Failing to address the role of people in the plight of senior dogs—for better or worse—is a missed opportunity. How can we support and encourage people to provide adequate care for senior dogs? What opportunities are there to work with human service providers and how could such collaboration help both human and animal welfare organizations? Ultimately, by helping senior dogs' people, we will help more senior dogs.

Finally, one of the themes that emerged throughout these interviews was trust. Trust matters, and it is particularly important to the welfare of senior dogs. It is reflected in relationships among shelters, rescues, volunteers, donors, adopters, and the broader community. Trust among shelters and rescues empowers them to ask for help with senior dogs when they cannot provide appropriate care and positive outcomes, or as an alternative to euthanasia. Animal welfare organizations need to ask and trust the community to step up on behalf of senior dogs by adopting, fostering, or donating to pay for their care. Developing trust is a process. It takes time—sometimes many years. But it is central to the collaboration that is necessary to promote the well-being of senior dogs.

There is no single solution or magic bullet to achieving Grey Muzzle's vision of a world where no old dog dies alone and afraid. Saving senior dogs requires new ways of doing business, changes in thinking about which dogs are adoptable, innovative strategies to promote the joys of senior dog adoption, and a willingness to trust that—despite the obstacles and challenges—it is possible to work together to ensure all dogs spend their golden years in homes with families who love them. Senior dogs' lives depend on it.