



## *Fears Facts and Forever Homes: What We Know About Free Pet Adoptions*

### **Live Webcast Audience Questions and Answers**

**By Dr. Susan Krebsbach**

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**1) Q: Does impact diminish if fee waived events are offered more frequently?**

**A:** It is possible that the impact per event may decrease because when free pet adoption events are held more frequently, the sense of urgency to adopt also decreases. However, if the free pet adoption events are planned strategically (e.g., during kitten season, on certain holidays, etc.) with concerted promotion, the overall impact should yield the same increase in adoptions of less frequent free adoption events, if not more so.

**2) Q: One research project about free adoptions had a significant percentage (43%) of people who didn't bother to respond to the questionnaire. How can we know that free adoptions aren't contributing to an increase in dumped cats without this data?**

**A:** A good response rate for all types of surveys across most industries is about 20%. Therefore, a 57% response rate is considered excellent! Because of this, the conclusions from the study are statistically significant and valid (i.e., the vast majority of pets adopted remained in the home - 95% of cats, 93% of dogs).

**3) Q: Why not offer at least a minimal adoption fee for these special populations rather than giving them away?**

**A:** Offering a reduced fee for special populations of pets is an option to increase adoptions, as well. For example, the Dubuque Regional Humane Society was very creative – and successful – when they cut the adoption fees in half for their “Benchmark Dog Adoption Special.” This special was for those dogs who were at the shelter for a long period of time. Because of this promotion, they were able to adopt the majority of their dogs “who had been on the roster awhile.” Free pet adoptions are just one marketing tool to attract the public’s attention, leading to the adoption of a larger number of pets.

**4) Q: Do you think it is better to have free adoptions every day rather than ‘free adoption day’ every now and again?**

**A:** Daily (or frequent) free pet adoptions are effective if special populations of pets are targeted for a specific period of time – creating the “urgency” for potential adopters to act quickly.

**5) Q: How do you respond to those that say free animal adoptions attract the wrong kinds of adopters?**

- A:** As was discussed during the webcast, there are several responses to this concern:
1. Research tells us that there is no correlation between what someone pays for a pet and how much they love and value them.
  2. Nearly everyone in rescue has adopted a pet that they have not paid for and still loved them.
    - a. For example, of my three dogs and four cats, one dog and three cats were adopted “for free” and I love them just as much as the ones for whom I paid an adoption fee.
  3. Protection of the pet is in the adoption screening process. This process does not change when the adoption fee is waived.

**6) Q: How can we avoid making pets look like “commercial products” to be sold rather than sentient beings to be adopted?**

**A:** Christie Keith does a great job of addressing this in her blog post entitled, “What opponents of free pet adoptions don’t get.” Specifically, she states:

“We absolutely have to lose our fear of using the language and practices of retail to promote shelter pets. Of course a pet is not a car or an appliance. Pets are living creatures who deserve the utmost respect and care. They also deserve loving homes, and if utilizing the well-worn psychological pathways mapped out for us by retail-focused marketing research helps us get them there, and there is no data to support our fear that free and low-cost adoptions are less successful than full-price ones, how can we justify opposing them? We can’t.”

Read the blog post here: <http://www.doggedblog.com/doggedblog/2012/09/what-opponents-of-free-pet-adoptions-dont-get.html>.

**7) Q: I wonder what the return rate is on animals that were adopted during a “free” event vs. those that an adopter actually paid for.**

**A:** As reviewed during the webcast, one of the conclusions from the study entitled, “Case Study: Free Cat Adoption at Edmonton Humane Society” specifically states that fee-waived cats were just as likely to remain in their homes as non-fee-waived cats. For the full article: <http://www.aspcapro.org/resource/saving-lives-adoption-programs/saving-power-fee-waived-adoptions>.

In addition, two other studies that were reviewed during the webcast (i.e., “A Comparison of Attachment Levels of Adopters of Cats: Fee-Based Adoptions versus Free Adoptions” and “Outcome of Pets Adopted during a Waived-Fee Adoption Event: Maddie’s<sup>®</sup> Matchmaker Adoptathon) support this conclusion.

**8) Q: How do you avoid people coming to expect “adoption specials” and therefore waiting to adopt only at those times?**

**A:** I suppose one way to avoid this expectation is to offer adoption specials at random times so they cannot be predicted by the public. Also, we know people often become connected to a specific animal and will not want to wait until an adoption special for fear that he or she will be adopted prior to the event. Therefore, excellent promotion of adoptable pets available from your organization is another way.

**9) Q: What does the shelter or organization do to screen the free adoption applicant? Does free mean free for all?**

**A:** The adoption screening process does not change for free pet adoptions – it remains exactly the same. As stated by Second Chance Animal Rescue:  
“...our adoption standards are exactly the same as they always are. We still turn people away if we do not feel that they meet our expectations or if we don’t feel like it’s a good match...Nothing changes for us...”

**10) Q: Do you find that fee waived events are mostly held for cats vs. dogs?**

**A:** Fee-waived adoption events are used for dogs, cats, and other animals available from the animal shelter or rescue organization (e.g., rabbits, guinea pigs, etc.). Although there is no comprehensive data that I am aware of that identifies if fee-waived events are held more commonly for cats vs. dogs, I have a feeling that this may be true. The reason for this is that most animal shelters and rescue organizations across the nation, in general, have to deal with a larger population of cats than dogs within their organization.

**11) Q: Our municipal shelter has an open adoption process. We can only decline adoptions at the sole discretion of the shelter manager and only due to really troublesome concerns. How can we ensure quality placements without the backing of leadership?**

**A:** From what you describe, it sounds like there should be some time invested in developing an adoption screening process that is acceptable to both shelter leadership and staff that ensures quality placements as much as possible, yet not burdensome to these parties and the potential adopter. I realize that these types of protocols take effort and time, but in the end they are well worth the investment.

**12) Q: How does a shelter or rescue finance the vet bills, food costs and staff costs if you give animals away?**

**A:** Adoption fees only scratch the surface when it comes to financing all of the costs associated with maintaining animals in shelters and adopting them out. A fee-based revenue model is not a sustainable one. Revenue models that are sustainable involve raising money through such things as donor development and fundraising events. Christie Keith, in her blog post entitled, “Can animal rescue groups survive without adoption fees?” goes into this in more detail here:

<http://www.doggedblog.com/doggedblog/2014/07/can-animal-rescue-groups-survive-without-adoption-fees.html>.

**13) Q: What would you say to government shelters that aren't necessarily dependent on adoption revenue, but have taxpayers and elected officials to report to as well as legislation that may preclude fee-waived?**

**A:** If indeed there is legislation that precludes fee-waived adoptions (and I would double check to make sure that there is such a law), then the law needs to be changed. In order to do this, I would recommend presenting all of the data that we know about fee-waived adoptions from the research that was presented during the webcast and resource list. I suspect that local officials will be very interested in the positive publicity that comes from adopting more animals in the community and the taxpayers will be attracted by the potential cost savings per animal due to decreased shelter stays.

**14) Q: How can you do home checks on 856 homes before you give these animals away?**

**A:** Home visits of potential adopters is difficult no matter what the number and no matter what is charged for the adoption fee (unless your organization has a large staff or volunteer base trained to perform this – I personally do not know of any organization that has this luxury). So first, I would suggest that your organization revisits the need for home checks. If home checks are decided to still be a requirement prior to adoption, then I would suggest pre-screening (i.e., doing home visits) prior to the free pet adoption event.

**15) Q: I understand that the process is not dependent on price but how does the screening process not change at a mega event?**

**A:** The adoption screening process does not change even for a “mega event” but the number of individuals trained to perform them (staff and volunteers) will likely increase. In addition, some organizations perform pre-screening of potential adopters prior to adoption events that are likely to generate more interest from the public. That was what the Dane County Friends of Ferals has done in the past when we have participated in events like Maddie’s Pet Adoption Days.

**16) Q: I have heard you address the “money paid doesn’t equal love”, but have not heard you address the concern that if cost is driving the adoption decision, perhaps the potential home may not have the resources to provide adequate food, shelter and vet care.**

**A:** Free pet adoption events are not targeted for people who cannot afford an adoption fee – and the research presented during the webcast confirms this. It is simply a psychological marketing strategy to create a sense of “urgency.” As Christie Keith eloquently put it in her blog post entitled, “What opponents of free pet adoptions don't get”:  
“Free pet adoptions are not aimed at people who otherwise couldn't afford a pet, and that's not primarily who they attract. Just as Nordstrom holds special sales only for its best and, presumably, wealthiest customers, just as car dealers and appliance stores and luxury

hotels have special promotions, shelters and rescue groups who do free adoptions know that the “free” part is a marketing strategy, not a hand-out.”

For the complete post: <http://www.doggedblog.com/doggedblog/2012/09/what-opponents-of-free-pet-adoptions-dont-get.html>.

**17) Q: Don’t cats freak out at these busy and intense events? Ethologically, cats should be overwhelmed by the stimuli at such events. Comments?**

**A:** Of course, some cats can get stressed by events that generate more visitors to the shelter. Therefore, the personality of individual cats should be taken into consideration with regards to placement within the building during the event. For example, cats who are known to seek out human attention should be the ones who are showcased towards the front of the shelter where there is likely to be more foot traffic and shyer cats where the foot traffic can be regulated (e.g., a cat or adoption room with controlled access). Of course, the best place for any cat to be is in the comfort of a caring home with his or her people – the goal of all adoption events, making the potential temporary stress caused by the increased foot traffic well worth it.