Cooped-Up Pooches? Loan 'Em Out!

A temporary buddy for your sheltered pooches can help them burn off energy—and even get adopted

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By Debbie Swanson

The Dog Trotter program helps keep the Delaware County SPCA's canines well-exercised. Dog Trotters
It’s a fact: A socialized and well-exercised shelter dog is happier, easier to care for and more likely to win favor with visitors. But keeping all those dogs fit, busy and happy is a challenge.

To meet that challenge, some shelters have figured out ways to help their dogs enjoy runs, hikes or a day at the park with minimal intrusion into their staffs’ schedules. It’s not just a pipe dream—by implementing or partnering with programs that give dogs more than the typical trot around the grounds, you can cut down on the kennel crazies and help keep your pooches pacified. And while shelter dogs go out on the town to burn off some energy, they’re also doing a bit of self-marketing.

Running Off Steam

At the Delaware County SPCA in Media, Pa., the Dog Trotter program started with a greyhound mix with an abundance of energy.

“One of our more active volunteers, an avid runner, offered to take [the dog] on a run,” says Justina Calgiano, director of public relations and special events. That excursion was a success, so they tried it with other dogs who could benefit from a more energetic outing.

Soon the Dog Trotter program was off and running, and participating dogs were showing positive results—they were more able to settle down and less hyper around visitors. The program became part of the shelter’s regular volunteer programs, attractive to existing volunteers as well as running enthusiasts who might not otherwise have volunteered at a shelter.

“We don’t require a regular commitment of our runners,” Calgiano says; their thinking is if a runner isn’t feeling up to par or is recovering from a race, they don’t want her to feel obligated to push through it. Their overall flow of runners has been consistent; on average, approximately six pre-screened dogs are available, and each gets out for about two jaunts per week—just enough to take the edge off that restless energy.

On the opposite coast, a volunteer’s suggestion blossomed into the Run-Dog-Run program at the Seattle Humane Society. Emily Keegans, behavior program director at the shelter, says the running program—now in its seventh year—not only keeps dogs fit, but helps with their training.
“Many of the dogs that are preapproved for running are also in our behavior program,” she explains. “Once the dog is back from his run, he’s often handed right over to a trainer, who spends some time on behavior skills. They’re calmer, able to settle down and focus.”

Keegans admits that when the volunteer initially suggested the idea, she was leery. “I worried about injuries and managing the program.” A saving grace is that it’s been completely volunteer-run; when the program’s founder relocated, another equally committed volunteer took over.

Seattle Humane asks that volunteers be comfortable running three to five miles, keep to an established route and carry a cell phone. “That helps if we need to go pick them up if they have a problem,” Keegans says. “But that seldom happens—one a dog started limping; another time a runner had a minor issue.”

At both shelters, runners must first go through training classes to get them up to speed on shelter basics and dog handling.

Such programs don’t replace the need for in-cage enrichment and mental stimulation, says Inga Fricke, director of shelter and rescue group services at The HSUS, but they can be a great addition to your efforts to keep shelter dogs happy and physically enriched.

**Good for the Dogs, Good for the People**

If your shelter isn’t ready to implement and manage its own running program, there may be a group in your area willing to romp with your dogs (a quick Internet search will likely turn up some running or jogging groups you could target).

RuffTail Runners in Austin, Texas, pairs runners and walkers with shelter dogs. Athletically minded adults sign up for the program, pay a small fee and attend mandatory training. Then they’re eligible to go into a participating shelter to take out a dog for a run, a hike or even a dip in the lake.

The program opened to the public in 2011 by founder Rob Hill, as a spinoff of a local program focused on running and fundraising for homeless dogs. Lindsay Marsh, co-director of RuffTail Runners, says it’s been a huge benefit to the shelter dogs. “Pit-bull-type dogs are in the majority.
They really are just perfect—they listen, love to be active and most relish the opportunity to make new friends and jump in the lake for a quick dip.”

Marsh says that in addition to burning off energy and taking a break from the noise and stress common to any busy shelter, the dogs gain invaluable exposure to “bikes, strollers, dogs and other things they’ll experience once they get adopted.”

Mike Kaviani, behavior manager at Austin Pets Alive!, a participating shelter, is thrilled with the RuffTails program. Aside from the obvious benefit of calmer, happier dogs, he says it boosts the dogs’ adoptability.

“When an active person comes in looking for a running buddy, we can easily point out several tried-and-true candidates, ready to hit the trail,” he says.

While the focus is on the dogs, Marsh says the benefit to the community has also been great. With several colleges in the area, many volunteers are students who miss their dogs back home or need an outlet for their stress.

Her favorite human success story came from the wife of a runner who was suffering from depression. She told Marsh that “there were mornings where it was tough for him to get out of bed,” Marsh says, “but he knew the dogs were counting on him.”

Taking Out the Tourists

Shelters fortunate enough to be in an area with a lot of tourist traffic can take a less athletic approach to canine excursions. Many people on vacation miss their pets, and some shelters are softening the blow by lending out canines to dog-sick tourists.

At the Kauai Humane Society in Hawaii, a “field trip” program enables visitors to check out a dog for a day. The staff provides leashes, towels for the rental car and water bowls, as well as plenty of ideas for dog-friendly destinations, including beaches, parks and hiking trails.
“Families, couples, honeymooners come by,” says Penny Cistaro, executive director at Kauai Humane. “People who miss their own dogs, who, like me, feel something is missing on a hike if a dog isn’t part of it.”

The trips also yield valuable insight into the dog’s personality. “People fill out a day diary … do [the dogs] like the water, riding in a car? Things of that nature,” says Cistaro. These journal notes help potential adopters fine-tune their hunt for a new family member.

To help publicize the program, the shelter partnered with a local e-commerce site, which got the message out among hotels and tourist destinations. It also maintains a Facebook page, where even tourists who have returned home post about the fun they had with their doggie companion.

On a typical day, between 3 and 10 dogs are out of the shelter and enjoying the island. And many of the one-day visits become permanent; since the program’s inception in January 2013, 207 participating dogs have been adopted, many of whom then fly back to their new owners’ homes on the U.S. mainland.

You don’t have to be in a tropical paradise to find visitors in need of a dog-fix. In Utah, the Ivins City Animal Shelter partnered with the nearby Red Mountain Resort to launch a successful hiking program. In place for about 10 years, the Pound Puppy Hike program has become a favorite of resort guests.

“It’s more of a walk than a hike,” says Tracey Welsh, general manager of Red Mountain Resort. “Guests take the dog through the scenic trails of St. George Valley and Padre Canyon, and are supplied with leashes, doggie treats.”

The program runs year-round, enabling tourists and pups to enjoy the splendor of every season. To date, about 50 dogs have found forever homes through Red Mountain Resort guests. “Guests love the dogs,” Welsh says, “and the dogs love to walk with guests.”

Looking to get your dogs out and about?
Whether you’re pairing up with runners, day-trippers or tourists, here are some tips for success:

- Work with a veterinarian or behavior specialist to develop a system for prescreening eligible dogs; consider factors such as breed, health, age, ease of handling and energy level.
- Make a quick wellness check of all eligible dogs each day before they head out the door.
- In warmer climates, implement a cutoff temperature above which it’s too hot for running. Post daily updates on social media to avoid disappointed volunteers; allow walks or swimming instead.
- With day trips, take a credit card deposit to ensure the dog is returned and a contact number to reach the borrower.
- Prepare a printed handout to give to one-time visitors. Include shelter hours, local leash laws, dog-friendly destinations, emergency phone numbers, etc.
- Unless you’re sending your pooches on overnighters, implement a doggie curfew at least an hour before closing; you don’t want to wait for a dog held up in traffic.
- Whatever the outing, use the opportunity to raise awareness. Dress the dogs in a bright “adopt me” vest, give their human companions business cards to share with potential adopters and post photos of the fun on social media!

About the Author

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