



WORKING DOG INNOVATIONS  
BETTER OUTCOMES POWERED BY DATA



# Embracing Animal Welfare

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A guide for discussions about animal welfare  
in your organization

# Leadership & Animal Welfare

## Setting the Tone From The Top

Implementing more animal welfare-centred practices in your organization can seem daunting – once you start asking questions, you may see more animal welfare concerns than you were anticipating. The goal is progress, not perfection – after all, Rome wasn't built in a day.

A good place to start is by taking note of themes that keep popping up, and focus on those big issues first. Are you seeing a significant percentage of overweight dogs across your programs? Start there. Are you noticing that many of your dogs are experiencing stress when they move between homes or into training? Addressing these bigger welfare challenges will yield positive results for your dogs and your people, and help to generate momentum for tackling other animal welfare concerns.

Being an animal-welfare first organization starts with a strong commitment from the top of the organization. Leadership commitment is foundational to embedding animal welfare into all organizational decisions.

- Make animal welfare discussions a standing agenda item at leadership and board meetings.
- Foster an understanding that the welfare of your clients is enhanced when the animals they partner with enjoy a positive welfare state.
- Consider possible impacts on animal welfare in all aspects of your programs: marketing, events, facility planning, placements, training, and release. Have at least one staff member with an animal welfare lens involved in all decision-making that affects your dogs, and respect their concerns.
- Make animal welfare everyone's concern. Ask “what possible welfare concerns are there if we pursue this course of action?”



# Leadership & Animal Welfare

## Supporting Staff Through Education & Resources

Because the idea of prioritizing animal welfare has an inherent logic – *of course we're committed to the welfare of our animals*, you may think - many leaders adopt an “animal welfare first” mantra without investing in the education and resources to help their staff really understand animal welfare, start questioning current practices, and start implementing welfare-based practices. When the organization does not invest in understanding, questioning, and change, practices don't shift.

### Places to start:

- Fund and encourage continuing education in animal welfare for all staff levels.
- Provide access to workshops, conferences, certifications, and relevant literature.
- Foster a culture where welfare discussions and questions are welcomed and acted upon.
- Support interdisciplinary collaboration between all your teams, not just those in Canine Programs. The actions of your fundraising, marketing, development and administrative teams might have impacts on animal welfare that you haven't considered before.



# Leadership & Animal welfare

## Questions for Reflection

- How often does animal welfare feature in leadership discussions?
- What education opportunities are available for staff and leadership to stay current on welfare science?
- Is animal welfare education part of staff, leadership and board member onboarding?
- Have we ensured that our organization has more than a surface-level understanding of animal welfare principles and their application?
- How do facility and program decisions explicitly incorporate welfare considerations?
- Are leaders modeling and reinforcing a welfare-first mindset throughout the organization?
- Do we have blanket policies, or are decisions made based on individual dog needs?



# Breeding Program

Welfare-centered breeding means:

- Decisions are guided by each dog's individual needs, not production quotas.
- Having more breeding females than required to allow the flexibility to prioritize welfare while still ensuring your organization is able to reach your production goals.
- Considering the welfare of all dogs involved in your breeding program:
  - Broods
  - Studs
  - Teasers
  - Puppies you're producing
  - Other dogs and animals in the households in which your puppies are reared

Breeding programs are unique among the programs in your organization, because they allow you to be proactive about welfare, not just reactive. You are creating puppies whose lives will span 12+ years, and the decisions you make ahead of breeding have an impact on the lifelong welfare of each puppy produced.

Decisions made now affect:

- Health span and quality of life
- Behaviour and trainability
- Long-term welfare of every puppy, not just those retained.



# Questions for reflection

- Do we consider the brood's individual whelping history when making breeding decisions?
- Do we have a threshold for when to stop a breeding attempt based on welfare concerns with the sire or dam? What interventions will we consider to secure a breeding?
- Do we provide training for the sire and dam ahead of breedings to make blood draws, breeding and other interventions as stress-free as possible?
- If using a teaser, do we consider her comfort and welfare state?
- What is our stance on assisted reproduction (AI, TCI, surgical AI, sedation) to secure a breeding?
- Do we consider the welfare of the puppies we're producing, especially when we are aware that the breeding risks producing puppies with a problem?
- Is our whelping setup optimized for brood comfort? What adjustments do we make for stressed dams? Do we use any other methods/interventions to improve welfare outcomes for the brood and her puppies?
- Are decisions made on an individual basis regarding when to remove a dam from her litter, considering what is in the best welfare interests of the dam and puppies?
- If broods need to be moved from their home for whelping, what steps are in place to support her during the transition?
- Do we consider the welfare implications of rearing a puppy with a birth defect or chronic health condition?
- Do we conduct long-term follow-up on all puppies we produce, not just those we keep, to monitor our health and temperament trait production to help us make future breeding decisions to promote better welfare?
- Are puppy socialization exercises tailored to the needs of each individual puppy?



# Puppy Raising

Puppy-Raising is a challenging period for assessing welfare and adapting conditions to meet individual needs: puppies are moving through vulnerable development periods, puppy-raisers have varying observation skills for identifying concerns, and there may be constraints within the puppy-raiser's lifestyle that are difficult to modify. It is also a period where neuroplasticity is at its height, and the dog's welfare state during this period can have lifelong affects, positive or negative.

## Questions for reflection

- Do we thoughtfully match individual puppies with their puppy-raisers to ensure that the puppy is in the best environment to help it thrive?
- How do we ensure we have sufficient raisers to avoid bouncing puppies between homes?
- How do we prepare the puppy and new home for a smooth transition?
- Do we focus on the quality or quantity of socialization experiences?
- Do puppies have access to enrichment and decompression activities?
- Do we educate staff and volunteers to recognize behaviour as a welfare indicator, not just a training problem?
- Are we catching behaviour struggles and welfare concerns and implementing a quality training plan before they become something more serious?
- Does the way we solicit information from volunteers encourage them to share problems, or are we missing critical information because volunteers fear they will be blamed for the dog's behaviour, or the dog will be released from training if they share their concerns?
- Do puppies have choice and control in their training? Are we using coercion without being aware of it?
- Is the type of equipment the puppy is wearing helping them to achieve a good mental state, or compromising its mental state? Is the equipment being used as intended, or is it being misinterpreted as a punisher?
- Do we used assessment data to tailor training plans to improve welfare for individual dogs, or just as data points?



# Formal Training

The formal training period presents a number of potential welfare challenges. Often dogs are still in the adolescent period where relationship is important, and are moved out of their familiar environment and family. Housing dogs in kennels introduces other welfare questions, as does training dogs in prisons or other institutional settings.

In general, changing the model of how your organization operates is neither practical nor necessary. Asking welfare-centered questions, and adjusting practices accordingly can drastically impact outcomes for your dogs, leading to more dogs achieving a good welfare state in training and going on to placement.

## Questions for reflection

- How do we manage transitions thoughtfully to reduce stress (new places, handlers, routines)?
- Can we optimize the kennel environment: size, layout, visual access, noise levels, rest quality?
- Are we able to provide alternatives for dogs who struggle with kennels?
- Do we provide opportunities for enrichment such as sniffing, chewing, exploring, playing? Is there variety in the type of enrichment offered?
- Do we have access to a veterinary behaviourist to support our staff with difficult welfare cases?
- Do our training equipment and methods avoid pain or physical stress? Does this particular dog find the equipment (whether training tools like head halters, martingales, harnesses or collars, or working gear like bracing or guide harness, cape or pack) it is asked to wear stressful?
- Do we intervene early with tailored behaviour support to prevent welfare decline?
- Do we monitor for stress-related health issues linked to training load?
- Do our trainers have the skills to respond to stress and distress appropriately? Do we recognize behaviour problems as a welfare struggle and not a dog wilfully acting badly?

# Working Dogs

It goes without saying that keeping dogs in a positive welfare state enhances the success and working lives of your teams. Asking questions at the organization level about how to maximize a dog and team's welfare greatly enhances the work your organization is doing. Including your clients in the discussion through surveys or town halls, can give you an even deeper understanding of the welfare challenges your dogs may be facing in the field.

## Questions for reflection

- How many of our matches are successful, with the dog staying in the placement through its working life? When matches are not successful, do we have a process for learning about what factors contributed to it not being successful, and do we make adjustments?
- Are field reps or staff assessing welfare beyond weight and Public Access Test success during annual visits?
- Are clients taught how to recognize welfare concerns and respond appropriately?
- Do clients know when and how to contact the organization if issues arise?
- Is there a culture of partnership and proactive welfare advocacy? Do clients feel comfortable that if they share welfare concerns they will get help, or do they worry that if they share concerns their dog will be taken away?
- Are training resources appropriately allocated to support dogs and clients when there is a welfare concern?
- When a welfare concern is raised by a client, staff, veterinarian or member of the public:
  - Is it investigated promptly?
  - Or does it wait until next scheduled Public Access Test?
- Do we provide clients information on the importance of enrichment and decompression? Do we work with clients to develop enrichment and decompression opportunities that are accessible to the individual client.
- Are welfare metrics used to inform retirement decisions?



# Released & Retired Dogs

What happens to dogs after your organization determines they will no longer be a working dog - whether because the dog is being released from training for a health or behaviour concern, or a dog is being retired from working with a client - is a key point to consider in animal welfare discussions. If a dog is in a poor welfare state when it is released or retired, what does the organization do to ensure that the dog will achieve a better welfare state as it moves on to a new owner?

## Questions for reflection

- Do we identify any health or behaviour problems before relinquishing ownership?
- Do we ensure an appropriate, documented treatment or management plan is in place?
- Do we confirm that adopters understand the dog's ongoing needs and have the resources to support or meet those needs?
- Do we provide information to adopters on how to help the dog through the transition to a new home?
- Do we offer ongoing support to adopters when issues arise?
- Do we follow up with adopters to assess the dog's health and temperament through its lifetime?
- Do we survey adopters to see how we did as an organization with appropriately preparing them for the dog's needs, and setting them up for success in helping the dog achieve a positive welfare state?





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Our mission is to offer strategic, educational, and operational support to working dog organizations, empowering them to advance their missions and positively impact their communities.

At Working Dog Innovations, we live by the concept of One Welfare, recognizing the vital connection between outcomes for people, animals and the communities in which we live. Our dedicated team is here to help your organization achieve optimal outcomes for your clients, dogs, and communities by implementing best practices across all areas of operations.

We believe in living by our core values - kindness, compassion, integrity, trust, and collaboration - while employing evidence-based practices to ensure your organization thrives.

### **Our Services:**

- Production & Operations Planning
- Educational Support
- Consulting

**Contact us for a free consultation!**



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