



## Melanie Isaacs

Director  
Team Dog

Melanie has been a Director of the community group 'Team Dog' since 2013, focusing on pet owner support, progressive shelter strategies and advocacy work.

She has spent many years working in Animal Management in NSW and holds a Cert III in Dog Behaviour and Training.

She attended internships with various well respected organisations in the USA in 2013 & 2014 to gain an insight in to pet owner support programs, focusing on keeping pets with their families and preventing surrenders.

Her passion lies with open minded and caring approaches to pet owner interactions, and positive legislative reform.

### Abstract

#### **G2Z through Pound Intervention and Pet Owner Support**

One area that is still extremely underutilised in Australia's sheltering landscape is the idea of 'Pound Intervention' – or, helping potential surrenders keep their pets at home.

Team Dog is an advocacy and welfare organisation with such a program in Sydney, focusing on assisting pet owners in times of crisis. This includes;

- The payment of reclaim fees;
- The provision of advice and support;
- The provision of resources such as behaviourists and containment systems;
- Low-cost basic veterinary services and;
- Assistance with legislation, especially in regards to Breed Specific Legislation.

Many pets entering shelters have owners who love and want them, but resources or lack of information sees them feeling the need to surrender. Intervening, and providing what is needed in an open-minded fashion can see huge benefits not only for the animal in their care, but for the numbers entering the sheltering system as a whole.

### Full Presentation

Historically, animal management and sheltering models have focussed largely on enforcement and punishment as a model to promote 'responsible pet ownership' and reduce companion animal issues throughout the community.

As community dissatisfaction with poor live release rates has grown, there has been many fantastic and positive improvements in the areas of adoption, fostering and partnerships with rescue groups, showing marked improvement in live release rates in pounds and shelters across the country.



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Most of these initiatives focus on the adoption or rescue of pets from the shelter, but one area that remains largely untouched in Australian pounds is programs that focus on preventing pets entering shelters in the first place, and the implementation of reclaim models that ensure that owners that love their pets are able to reclaim them. The 'rescue' model of improving live release rates is potentially unsustainable the long term, if well resourced action isn't also taken to keep loved pets in their homes, simultaneously.

Reclaim models around Australia typically require the full payment of fees prior to release of an animal. Very few shelters offer payment plans and most will not reduce the fees for individuals struggling to afford them. Pounds and shelters do not have an easy, outsourced way to enforce payment plans for fees, unlike penalty notices which are enforced through the State Debt Recovery Office, with consequences such as loss of license for non-payment.

The cost to reclaim one unmicrochipped, undesexed pet on the same day as impound in some of Sydney's largest shelters ranges between \$263 and \$389. When you consider that one of the key motivators for not microchipping and/or desexing pets is financial difficulty, it becomes clear that the reclaim of a pet can become out of reach very quickly for financially disadvantaged members of the community, and holding their pets to ransom for a very high payment will often leave them with no choice but to surrender their pet (in this paper, the term 'surrender' is used for both owners who arrive at a shelter to surrender and those who never reclaim an already impounded pet).

We typically see pet owners being advised of the above fees on day one, then spending 2-3 days borrowing funds from friends and family to reclaim. Of course, with maintenance rates of between \$20 and \$40 per day, the costs can often spiral out of reach very quickly. If someone was unlucky enough to have two pets escape at once, the funds are typically out of reach immediately.

In a country that is still killing hundreds of thousands of companion animals in our pounds each year, often for 'lack of space', should we not be putting the reclaim of owned and wanted pets as paramount in our sheltering model? Can we really say that there is a pet overpopulation, when many of the pets in our pounds are loved and wanted, but our model of sheltering prevents them from being returned home? If this pet was loved and well looked after, is it a positive outcome for it to enter the pound system and be either killed, or take up space in shelters, rescue groups and adoptive homes that could have been reserved for a truly needy animal?

## **Open-Minded approach**

One of the key aspects of our program is the provision of non-judgmental advice and support. Owners that feel judged, chastised or shamed are much less likely to seek or accept help, resulting in a much less successful program and far less pets kept in their homes.

Team Dog is firmly of the belief that most pet owners are good people who love their pets. Wilful abuse or neglect is rare, with the majority of non-ideal situations borne out of financial difficulty, lack of knowledge or lack of access to resources.

Making pet owners feel that they are 'irresponsible' is a sure-fire way to see your assistance declined, which closes off the potential to improve the situation for both that pet and it's owner.

## **Eligibility**

To be eligible for Team Dog's assistance, you simply need to make contact and discuss your situation with us. We do not have requirements to show 'proof' of low income, as there are many people who may not qualify for such benefits but are nonetheless financially troubled, especially families in crisis.



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Our core belief is that most people are good, and will not take advantage of charitable services if they don't truly need them. Of course, there will be occasions where our services may be taken advantage of, however we believe it is more important to ensure that everyone that needs our help receives it, rather than implement 'proof' requirements which may prevent disadvantaged owners from being eligible for help in an attempt to shut out the very small number who use our services without truly needing them.

There are no paper application forms or written questionnaires - all assessments for eligibility are done through open and honest conversation. Owners are asked to advise the assistance required, a breakdown of the costs if the pet is impounded, details of their pet such as desexing status and whether they would be interested in desexing, and how much they are able to contribute towards any costs.

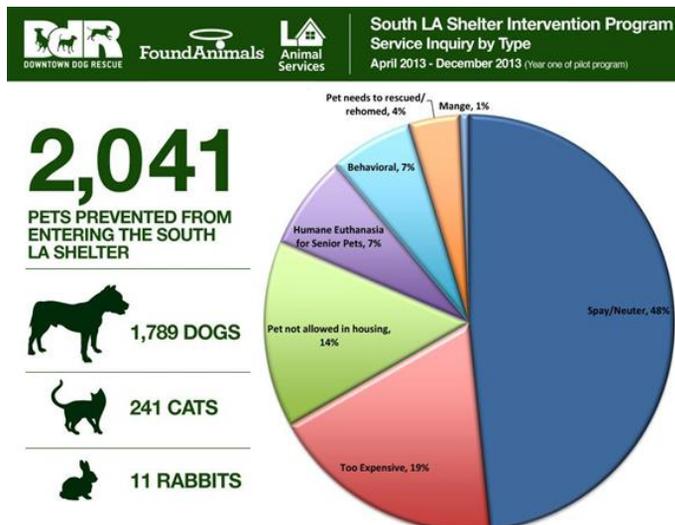
In many cases, owners are very interested in desexing, and if the pet is impounded (depending on the pound) we may be able to organise for the pet to have surgery prior to release - bringing the lifetime registration cost from \$192 to \$21 for a pensioner or \$51 for non-pensioner.

We do not require desexing as a condition of assistance - we firmly believe that this is an individual choice that should be made in an informed manner by each individual pet owner, and that effectively holding a pet to ransom in this way is counterproductive to our goal of building relationships with owners. We do encourage most owners towards desexing and discuss the pros and cons, and find that the majority are grateful for assistance to have the surgery done.

## Our Inspiration

Team Dog developed it's 'Pound Intervention' and 'Pet Owner Support' programs after being inspired by groups in the US doing similar things and achieving great results.

**Downtown Dog Rescue (DDR)**, based in South LA, have experienced huge success in their shelter intervention program - preventing 2,041 animals entering their local shelter in their first year of operation. They focus on owners arriving at the shelter to surrender their pets - intervening and discussing the situation, and offering assistance if they feel that this would keep the pet from being surrendered. Again, they focus on compassionate, understanding and non-judgemental interactions with pet owners.





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The area within which DDR operate in has mandatory desexing legislation, and as is often a result of such laws a huge percentage of animals being surrendered to the shelter are because of the inability to afford the surgeries. DDR intervene at the point of surrender (or failure to reclaim), identify the reason for surrender and provide resources and support to keep that pet at home.

Founder Lori Weise's states in her first year wrap-up blog post, "Poverty is and continues to be the #1 reason why the majority of our families felt the need to surrender their pet, despite the fact that there was no way to record this on our daily log."

Read More: <http://downtowndogrescue.org/programs/shelter-intervention-program/>

**Pets For Life**, a program developed by the Humane Society of the United States, describes their approach as such;

"By comprehensively addressing the lack of accessible, affordable pet care in under-served communities, Pets for Life keeps pets in the homes they already have, improving their quality of life and elevating the human-animal bond."

PFL helps both pets and their owners, through building trustful relationships with people and establishing an ongoing presence in the community. They conduct in-depth community assessments, provide ongoing neighborhood outreach and offer free services such as dog training, desex surgeries, vaccinations, pet supplies and general wellness care.

Through their innovative face-to-face program, markets implementing the PFL approach have an 89% desexing completion rate overall.

However, their resource sheet states, "Although extremely important, the PFL program's success is not measured solely by the number of pets who are sterilized. Some of the most critical work is building a positive reputation and consistent presence in the community where the people realize they can rely on the PFL team for a variety of information and services"

Read More, including a detailed guide for implementing the PFL program: <http://www.humanesociety.org/about/departments/pets-for-life>

**BadRap's 'Keep Em Home' program**, based on Oakland, California:

"A lack of affordable, pet-friendly resources including housing, behavior/training help and spay/neuter options can push even the most resourceful pet owners towards the difficult decision to give their dogs up to crowded shelters, and in some cases, to go homeless to keep their dogs. We'd like the opportunity to help you keep your dog."

BadRap's mission statement is "Securing the future of the American Pit Bull Terrier as a cherished family companion", their 'Keep Em Home' project provides the following to 'Pit Bull' owners in need:

Desexing, behaviour counselling and dog training, renting challenges, homelessness issues including temp boarding, good samaritan support (assisting Good Sam's rehoming lost Pit Bulls after their owners have been searched for. Note that impounding is not mandatory in the area they operate), free microchips, pet food resources, financial help for vetcare.

Read More: [http://www.badrap.org/keepem\\_home\\_project](http://www.badrap.org/keepem_home_project)

## Payment of reclaim fees

A large proportion of our funds and program is directed towards the payment of reclaim fees for already impounded pets with owners struggling to reclaim due to cost. As the cost of reclaim in NSW is so high, due to it being mandated that an animal be lifetime registered prior to release (for an entire animal this is currently \$192), there is a strong need for this service in our community.



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We work hard to forge positive relationships with local pounds and shelters, and some work with us to reduce fees where possible. Owners are asked to contribute as much as possible to reduce the amount needed to assist.

Partnerships with various mental health, housing and crisis support organisations are also infinitely valuable. Peter was referred to us by his Recovery Support Worker, John from the Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW Inc.



Peter's dog, Jeddah, plays an important role in helping Peter cope with depression and improving his general well-being. Jeddah had escaped and been impounded at Campbelltown Pound, with Peter unable to cover the \$239 to reclaim her (the fees had already been capped at this point). Peter was able to borrow \$100 from his lovely supportive mum (who only had \$150 to her name), and we committed to cover the rest. On release, the pound elected to only charge the mandatory lifetime registration fee of \$192. This partnership between SFNSW, Team Dog and the pound saw a loved and needed dog back home with her loving owner, who needs her too, freeing up space for other pets who really need the help.

## **The provision of advice, support and resources**

We also offer assistance to pet owners who may be considering surrendering their pet to a shelter for reasons that can be resolved. Many of these people initially approach us to take their pet on or advertise their pet on their behalf. We provide an understanding ear as to the problem, and offer to provide assistance to keep the pet if the situation sounds like it could be resolved. This assistance can take any form, but is most commonly referrals to trainers, provision of containment help, provision of low-cost basic veterinary work, assistance with finding rental properties, short term emergency boarding & referrals to other organisations who may be able to assist.



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If the problem can't be resolved, we provide links to resources on our website to enable people to advertise their pets for rehoming themselves, in an attempt to avoid the animal being surrendered to a pound.

Janelle approached us asking for help with rehoming her young dog, Max, in an attempt to avoid surrendering him to the local shelter.



Janelle & Max

In conversations with Janelle it was clear she adored Max but felt she couldn't provide him with what he needed. Janelle had recently escaped a domestic violence situation with her children, was living with her brother, and had no funds to speak of. Max needed vaccinations, microchipping and desexing, lifetime registration and food, and Janelle was aware that she was unable to provide these things to him. Where she was staying was not suitable for Max, and she was unable to afford the cost of escaping the property.

Janelle attended our event and as much food as possible was provided for Max, and desexing at a local local vet was provided for Janelle free of charge.



Max received a free microchip, vaccinations and desexing. A lifetime registration was provided to Max.





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Max with just some of the food and treats donated by Team Dog



Max with his new kennel & dog run donated by Team Dog



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Janelle was extremely appreciative of our assistance, stating that she had no idea that organisations like us could exist to help her out in a time of need. Max was a support and comfort for Janelle given the terrible situation she had recently escaped from, so to lose him would hugely impact on her well-being, as well. It is for this reason that Team Dog strongly feels that we contribute to human welfare just as much as we do animal welfare.

Other cases have seen us partnering with dog trainers & behaviourists to provide low cost access to behavioural modification, the provision of containment systems such as Pingg String devices for serial escape artists, and a call-out to the community to provide dog-walking services to incapacitated pet owners.

## **The provision of low-cost basic veterinary services**

Team Dog runs free microchipping days at least twice per year, targeting areas that may have low rates of microchipping and desexing, and/or high rates of dog nuisance and aggressive incidents. Typically free dog food and treats are also provided to disadvantaged pet owners and to encourage pet owners to attend with their pets. Both cats and dogs are eligible for a microchip.

We also partner with a select number of vets who provide low cost rates for desexing and vaccination, and assist individual owners to access these services as needed.

## **Assistance with legislation, especially in regards to Breed Specific Legislation**

In a state where Breed Specific Legislation is legislated (NSW), despite the extensive and undisputed available evidence that it is a global failure at improving community safety, we often have requests from pet owners who are having trouble navigating a system that is set up for them and their dogs to fail.

Thankfully, outright bans are not present in NSW however the conditions for owning a 'restricted dog' are extremely costly and prohibitive for most pet owners, including the construction of a custom built enclosure that often costs in the vicinity of \$2-3k minimum to construct professionally. Such an enclosure is a permanent structure and cannot typically be erected at rental properties. A 'restricted dog' cannot be rehomed, meaning that dogs with owners who cannot comply are seized and killed.

There is an 'appeals' process by which an owner can have their dog breed assessed (and temperament assessed if breed assessed as a 'Pit Bull X') following receipt of a Notice of Intention to declare the dog to be a Restricted Dog from a local council. This is primarily where our assistance comes in, helping people with prohibitive costs for assessment (\$82.50 + travel for BA, \$220 + travel for TA), ensuring they understand the process and timeframes provided, as well as speaking to local councils on their behalf if their opportunity for appeal is being obstructed.

It is unfortunately a common occurrence for dogs to be declared as restricted simply because the owner is unable to afford to appeal, and be subsequently destroyed due to being able to comply with the costly requirements to keep a restricted dog. Our aim is to work within the legislation to give each and every dog and its owner the best chance of success.

We have also advocated on behalf of impounded dogs that have been given the label of 'restricted' either formally (through inaction by their previous owner) or arbitrarily by council officers or shelter staff.

11 year old Kirra was impounded by Hurstville Council after escaping her property during a storm.



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Kirra & her owner, Scott

After being brought to the shelter, it was found that Kirra was microchipped as a pure-bred American Pit Bull Terrier, meaning she is automatically designated as a 'restricted dog', without the opportunity for a breed or temperament assessment.

Scott contacted us in desperation as Kirra could not be released unless he had an enclosure built that meets the specifications for a restricted dog - something both extremely costly and impossible to get approval for in a rental.

Scott advised that when he took her to the vet for a microchip as a young pup, the vet convinced him to list her as an APBT, despite Scott's insistence that she was an Amstaff X. The vet was persistent, and in the end Scott agreed after the vet told him that the breed could be changed by Scott in the future if he wanted to (not true).

Shelter staff agreed that Kirra was absolutely lovely, and in her 11 years she had never been involved in any incident nor impounded previously (or her designation as restricted would have been actioned). We contacted Andrew at Hurstville Council and respectfully requested he make a submission to the Office of Local Government that Kirra's breed should be changed to 'Pit Bull X', to allow a Notice of Intention to be issued and for her to go through assessment.

Andrew actually wasn't aware that this was an option for Kirra, so we directed him to the section covering this in the guidelines for authorised officers, and encouraged him to contact the OLG himself for confirmation.

Andrew confirmed this with the OLG and made the submission after Scott Lifetime Registered Kirra. She was breed assessed as a 'Pit Bull X' and subsequently passed her temperament assessment, meaning she was able to return home with no restrictions beyond what any dog owner must comply with.

Because Andrew wasn't aware of this provision in the guidelines, and Scott was unable to comply with the conditions for keeping a restricted dog, without our intervention it is likely that Kirra would have been killed. This kind of positive collaboration with councils who are open to giving every dog a chance creates a positive attitude towards councils by their constituents, and many of our followers thanked Andrew & the Council on their facebook page following Kirra's story being shared.



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## Other Legislation Assistance

Three of Team Dog's seven members have worked in Animal Management in Sydney, meaning that as an organisation we have a strong understanding of the Companion Animals Act and how that pertains to pet owners.

We provide advice and assistance to owners who may be facing council action surrounding noise or dog attack incidents. Team Dog is extremely pro-animal management and will decline to assist further than helping an owner understand their rights if it is our opinion that a declaration should be made given the circumstances, or there is a high likelihood of the incident occurring again.

## Changing attitudes within pounds and shelters

Through our ongoing work and partnership with pounds and councils, we are seeing positive change being implemented by these entities themselves, after seeing the successful outcomes we have facilitated.

Campbelltown Pound are now regularly waiving \*all\* fees bar the mandatory lifetime registration fee in the cases we assist with, as well as also freezing fees to allow owners a few days to get funds together without an increase. For a pound that, up until quite recently, had quite a lot of public attention for less-than-stellar live release rates and practices, this is an incredible change in attitude that is to be hugely commended.

They held Larry's cat, Sylvia, for three weeks while he and his brother searched for a way to get the funds together to get her released.



Larry & Sylvia



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Larry is homeless, and took 9 year old Sylvia off the streets six years ago. She had been missing for two months but he never gave up looking, and eventually found her in the pound. Given her age and the fact that she had contracted cat flu while at there, she was at a high risk of being killed had she not been reclaimed. The shelter knew this and instead held on to her for that amount of time, had her seen to by the vet, and charged only the lifetime registration fee to see her released. Larry needed Sylvia as much as Sylvia needed Larry, so this was especially touching.

A collaboration with CatRescue NSW saw Larry able to take Sylvia to the vet for follow-up medication for her flu and a general health check-up with their support.

After Matthew's 10 year old dog, Rocky, went missing from home, he spent three days searching for him, eventually finding him on the Campbelltown pound website in the evening.



Matthew & Rocky

He contacted us that night, concerned about what the cost might be to retrieve Rocky, as his funds were low until he received his tax return. Rocky wasn't microchipped or lifetime registered, but he was desexed, meaning the registration fee would be much lower than if he wasn't. We asked Matthew to contact the pound the next day to get an idea on costs, and come back to us with a breakdown and how much he could contribute.

Matthew came back to us the next day not requiring any assistance - the pound had waived much of the fees, only charging him \$172, and he was able to borrow enough from friends and family to reclaim Rocky on his own. Campbelltown's positive approach to fee waiving meant that a loved and well looked after dog went home with an added microchip, and our funds were saved for the next case who truly needed it.

## Changes we'd like to see, and are currently advocating for

- The repeal of Breed Specific Legislation. We are strong campaigners on this issue, due to the overwhelming and undisputed evidence that it does not increase public safety. In the meantime, we'd like to see all councils doing all they can to give any good dog targeted by BSL every possible chance within the current legislation. Our preference is to work with councils that are amenable to achieving this goal, however on occasion have had no choice but to launch public campaigns into the actions of councils if they have not been open to providing dogs the options they deserve under the legislation. These campaigns are by and large very successful, as the public is quite passionate about this issue.



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- The implementation of a system whereby pound fees can be sent to the SDRO to be followed-up on, much like penalty infringement notices are. This would allow animals to be released to their owners without being held to ransom, but provide shelters with a way to make payment plans enforceable without having to take legal action.
- For Trap/Neuter/Release for community cats to be supported in legislation, for a much more humane and effective way to manage this population than traditional catch & kill models
- The implementation of animal management models that focus on education, ease of compliance and incentives for responsible pet guardianship first, with strong enforcement reserved for those who then continue to breach the Act or behave recklessly with their animals.

## Results

In our first year of operation, we assisted 36 pets (32 dogs & 4 cats), preventing them from entering a shelter (or not leaving), and keeping them with families that love them.

Our 2015 results, to time of writing (mid July) have seen us assist 67 pets (52 dogs and 15 cats) - almost doubling our results for the whole of 2014 already. This has largely been facilitated by the addition of five fantastic Community Support Workers to assist with enquiries and the constant expanding of our reach and partnerships with various pounds, shelters and other community support groups for referrals.

We have high hopes for our continued development and achievements in the coming years.

To follow our work and access our resources:

[www.teamdog.com.au](http://www.teamdog.com.au)  
[www.facebook.com/theteamdog](http://www.facebook.com/theteamdog)

For information or collaboration: [info@teamdog.com.au](mailto:info@teamdog.com.au)

For assistance (can only be offered within NSW/ACT at this time): [help@teamdog.com.au](mailto:help@teamdog.com.au)

