

Building a Feline Behavior Volunteer Program... from Scratch

Melissa Taylor and Alese Zeman explain how, when charged with developing a community-wide education program to reduce the number of cats relinquished due to behavior concerns, they added a cat track to their shelter volunteer program to train feline behavior consultants who can provide community support – especially for at-risk populations of companion animals and their caregivers



Behavior volunteer Kevin Rook, a BV2, reinforces eye contact to build trust in former warehouse feral, Puu



BV4s learn about building duration in behaviors using chaining during a hands-on cat training session

There's no way we at Friends For Life Animal Shelter can handle all of Houston, Texas's feline behavior needs, but sometimes it seems like there's no avoiding it. Not a single day goes by that we aren't called by a desperate adopter, completely at their wits' end. What's even more alarming is knowing that the ones who reach out are just the tip of the iceberg: only a fraction of pet caregivers tend to contact behavior professionals, even though doing so reduces the risk that their pet will end up at an animal shelter (Mohan-Gibbons & Weiss, 2015).

At Friends For Life Animal Shelter, keeping pets with their families is at the core of our mission. But Houston has a problem: there are an estimated 1.4 million pet cats living here (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2017) and very little behavioral support available to caregivers. We can't know for sure how many cats are at risk, but municipal shelter data helps us guess that well over 3,077 local cats are given up due to behavioral concerns every year (City of Houston, 2020; Harris County. n.d.; Weiss et al., 2015). That's a lot of missed litter boxes!

To reduce these numbers, animal welfare experts have charged shelters with developing community-wide education programs and building relationships with local animal behavior consultants (Mohan-Gibbons & Weiss, 2015). This is easier said than done, when the number of cat behavior professionals in the area is in the low single digits. Overwhelmed with the daily calls for help on top of meeting the enrichment and training needs of our shelter's animals, we decided to add a cat track to our existing dog behavior volunteer (BV) program. Since then, this mentorship has been training feline behavior consultants to provide community support, especially for at-risk populations of companion animals and their caregivers.

The Program

No prior experience is required to begin our feline behavior track, but participants who complete it are certification-ready behavior consultants. It is a tiered mentorship, where each of five levels focuses on a dif-



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ferent aspect of cat training and behavior. As BVs demonstrate proficiency at each level, they are given more responsibilities at the next learning stage.

Professional animal training courses can be very costly and difficult to integrate with full-time jobs. However, our Friends For Life (FFL) program is free and largely self-paced. It's easy to understand why the world of animal behavior is so homogenous – the people who end up succeeding are typically those who can afford to invest time and money in the education. Through our no-cost, flexible instruction, we seek to remove this barrier to diversity in the profession and provide underserved communities with support. Rather than paying us for their education, our volunteers use their new skills and knowledge to work with the cats in our shelter and cats at risk of being surrendered to area shelters. It's a win-win situation for everyone involved!

The Tiers

The levels of the program are laid out with graded increases in time commitment and difficulty of learning material. It is neither expected nor desired that every participant progresses through all of them. Some BVs elect never to proceed beyond the first tier's concentration in enrichment. This isn't considered a failure; on the contrary, the volunteers who help us fulfill regular environmental enrichment goals provide a valuable service to the shelter. If they do choose to move up to the next tier, participants first complete duties relevant to their present level.

Level 1 / Enrichment: Feline BV1s start their journey learning about different forms of enrichment. They attend an orientation session featuring a presentation on the physical, mental, and social enrichment needs of cats. They also receive hands-on training in carrying out enrichment activities and ongoing support from our behavior staff.

Learning Objective: Obtain a working knowledge of cat enrichment needs.

Duties: 30 shelter cat enrichment activity sessions.

Level 2 / Body Language: Level 2 training includes an overview of cat communications through posture, movement, and vocalization. This level aims to develop a uniform language for our BVs to describe behavioral observations. They can then perform shelter duties that require an ability to chronicle feline body language, such as carrying out American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' (ASPCA) Meet Your Match Feline-ality™ adoption matching assessments.

Learning Objectives: Observe and communicate overt changes in cat behavior.

Duties: Create three feline video ethograms; help five new BVIs get started with their enrichment duties; provide "free roam" time for five cats living in solitary kennels; complete five "Feline-ality" assessments.

Level 3 / Learning Theory: The program ramps up for the BV3s with

a 13-session training series on learning theory and mechanical skills. The trainees are instructed on reinforcer selection and delivery specific to cats as well as multiple ways of training novel behaviors. At this level they use positive reinforcement-based training methods to help cats cooperate for animal husbandry tasks, like nail trims and weighing. Upon completion of their instruction, BV3s sit for a 90-minute-long oral assessment with our training and behavior manager to demonstrate their understanding of learning theory and proficiency at training novel behaviors.

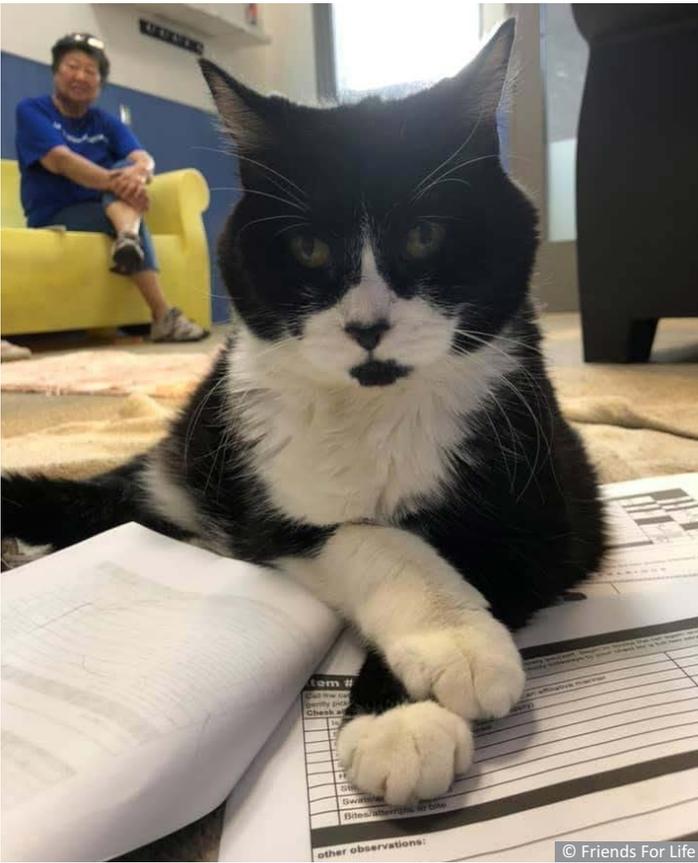
Learning Objectives: Demonstrate proficiency in the design and implementation of simple training plans, explain basic principles of learning theory.



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Behavior volunteer D'Andrea Keener, a BV4, visits a home to help a caregiver with a case involving inter-cat conflict





One of the duties of BV2s, like Beverly Burns, is carrying out matching assessments to help adopters find the right fit

Not every humane organization has the resources or demand for certified cat behavior consultants, but many shelter populations would benefit immensely from a team of volunteers skilled at meeting environmental enrichment goals.

Duties: Assist behavior department staff and senior BVs with eight cat training sessions; conduct five training sessions for each of the following: nail trims, crate training, and stationing for weighing.

Level 4 / Coaching Humans and Behavior Modification: In the 13-session-long BV4 series, volunteers learn about feline life stages, species-typical needs, and common problems caregivers face related to cat behavior. They also practice coaching humans how to train their cats and conduct simple behavior consultations. Their duties include teaching cat training skills to caregivers at our kitten kindergarten classes and behavior consultations. Upon completion of their duties, most BV4s are considered “certification-ready” as cat trainers. About half of our feline BV4s also participate in the dog track and, at this level, choose to sit for their CPDT-KA exam. Our BV program participants who take the CPDT-KA exam have a 100% pass rate.

Learning Objectives: Coach caregivers in teaching their cats novel behaviors; explain principles of behavioral modification; list the features of feline developmental stages; characterize species-specific behaviors and needs, and articulate how these can present challenges to caregivers.

Duties: Observe 15 behavior consultations; develop and co-teach a six-week kitten kindergarten class.

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This video, [Behavior Volunteer Profile D'Andrea](#), shows BV4 D'Andrea Keener teaching kitten kindergarten, demonstrating a training exercise, and spending quality time with the residents at the FFL shelter. Keener also talks about why she thinks behavior volunteer programs can help at other shelters, especially in underserved communities.

Level 5 / Behavior Consultations: BV5s, who are independently certified as trainers or are “certification ready,” are equipped to help with our outreach programs. BV5s receive coaching about collecting baseline and intervention data and conducting functional assessments to effectively provide solutions to behavior problems.

At this stage, they join our Behavior Consult Club, which meets on a biweekly basis to discuss our cases and receive support from our brain trust of fellow behavior consultants, including our behavior and training department staff. The goal of this stage is to accrue consultation experience necessary to achieve certification through a third-party independent certification body as a cat behavior consultant.

Learning Objectives: Collect objective data on cat problem behavior; conduct functional assessments for consultations; formulate hypotheses regarding functional relations between behaviors and environmental events; recognize when and how to conduct functional behavioral analyses.

Duties: Conduct behavioral consultations with adopters and members of the public; prepare Certified Cat Behavior Consultant (CCBC) application, if desired.

This video, [Feline BV Program Training Montage](#), shows a montage of some of FFL’s behavior volunteers engaging in their daily training and enrichment for some of the FFL shelter residents.

Growing Your Own BV Program

Houston is not the only community that suffers from a lack of behavioral support for cat owners. If your local shelters are also at capacity, keep in mind that humane education outreach is a key factor in reducing intake numbers. Plus, training and enrichment programs can decrease stress, disease, and length of stay in shelter cats. These are two areas that can be directly improved with the help of a thriving behavior volunteer program.

Interested in starting your own Feline BV Program? Here are some ideas to help you get started:

- Identify your shelter and community pain points and tailor a program to address them. Not every humane organization has the resources or demand for certified cat behavior consultants, but many shelter populations would benefit immensely from a team of volunteers skilled at meeting environmental enrichment goals.
- Put together learning materials: curricula, instruction plans, presentations, recommended reading lists, etc., geared towards increasing knowledge and skill in your shelter’s areas of interest.
- Encourage well-rounded learning in your BVs by providing both classroom lessons in theory and hands-on training with cats, and host lectures by speakers from different areas of expertise.
- Visit conferences as a team, online, and in-person to get inspired with new ideas and build team cohesion.
- Supply ample and continuing volunteer support by scheduling regular times to answer questions. Allow them to practice training and consulting with behavior staff members.
- Recognize the progression of each volunteer from one level to another. Behavior volunteers donate much of their time at the shelter and at home gaining knowledge and learning new skills



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Friends For Life Behavior Volunteer Program graduates, Beth Brown CCBC CPDT-KSA and Joanna Wachowiak-Finlaison CCBC CPDT-KA, earn feline agility titles with shelter cats Jimmy and Parker

so that they can help your local animal welfare culture flourish. They deserve positive reinforcement, too!

- Lastly, consult with a “mentor” shelter that has been through the process! Behavior and training departments with volunteer programs, like Friends For Life, are happy to help you best serve your community. Contact us and we would be thrilled to share our learning materials and guidance with you to get your BV program off the ground!

Now

Seven years ago, we were just as desperate as local cat owners, looking for qualified behavior professionals to help with the immense caseload here in Houston. Now that our Feline BV Program is flourishing, we have a squad of skilled volunteers ready to work with our shelter cats and public client cases. They are involved in nearly all our behavioral work, including but not limited to:

- Environmental enrichment.
- Adoption matching assessments.
- Simple husbandry training for wellness (nail trims, crate training, etc.).
- Peri- and post-adoption counseling.
- Socialization for fearful cats.
- Kitten kindergarten.
- Public classes on enrichment and common behavior concerns.
- Low-cost or free behavior consultations for cats at risk for relinquishment.

Specialized training for volunteers is not the norm in animal sheltering. Building a comprehensive program from the ground up can be a labor-intensive endeavor. On the other hand, so is dealing with all the fallout from lack of feline behavior support in the community.

Behavior programs do not have to be complicated, resource-heavy projects. Even a relatively small volunteer-driven initiative can be part of a solid defense against animal relinquishment. And no shelter has to



start from scratch anymore because other humane organizations, like Friends For Life, have done it for them and are ready to help. ■

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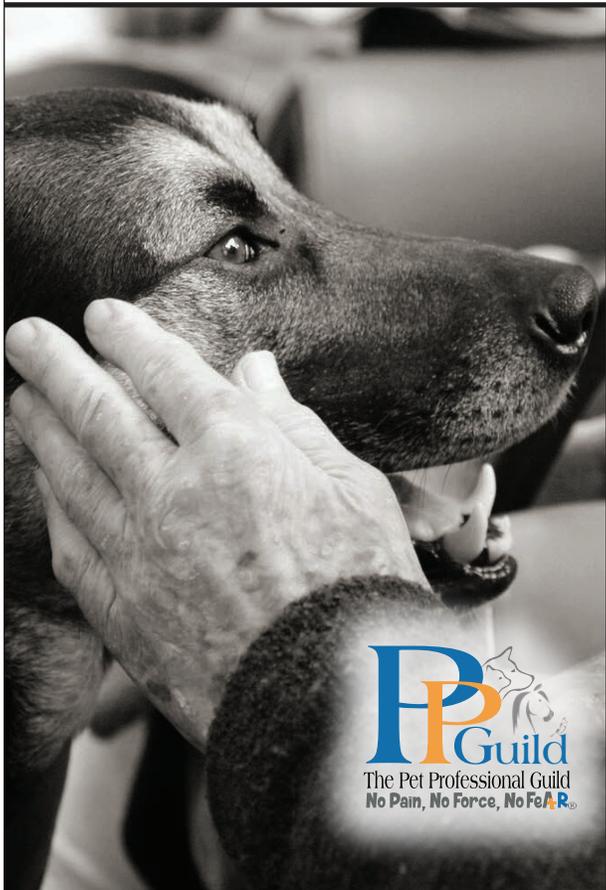
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Melissa Taylor CBCC-KA is the behavior and training manager at [Friends For Life Animal Shelter](#) in Houston, Texas. She has logged more than 20 years in shelter animal behavior, starting with an internship at the ASPCA's Animal Behavior Center in New York City. She developed a lasting love for cooperative care from training live-stock and wildlife as the coordinator of the behavior and training department at the Houston SPCA, and applies the same principles to the dogs, cats, exotics, and humans she works with now at Friends For Life. Over the course of her career, she has focused on the development of shelter humane education programs, particularly those for volunteers, with the intention of mentoring new companion animal trainers and behavior consultants with practices steeped in evidence and based on building trust, security, and partnership. Melissa has started several shelter behavior volunteer programs and consults with other humane organizations on starting such initiatives of their own.

Alese Zeman CPDT-KA is the outreach coordinator at [Friends For Life Animal Shelter](#) in Houston, Texas. Most of her career has been spent teaching mathematics in public charter schools where she learned to deliver excellent content and drive community change. She has earned several education awards, leadership roles, and her master's in teaching. She has since turned to animal behavior and sheltering. She now uses her education skills and animal behavior knowledge to share the innovative, evidence-based practices used at Friends For Life.

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