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IMPACT REPORT 2020

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Dogs Playing for Life (DPFL) is actively redefining the meaning and importance of quality of life for sheltered dogs across North America. Our in-person playgroup and training seminars, Mentorships, and Shadow Program provide shelter staff and volunteers with the knowledge and hands-on experience required to better support the behavioral wellbeing of the dogs in their care. At our Canine Center Florida, we are working to provide quality of life that often results in live outcomes for at-risk sheltered dogs in need of our specialized training expertise. Finally, through our newly created and expanded virtual offerings, we have continued to support shelters across the country even when we are unable to mentor them in person due to the pandemic. Our 2020 Impact Report details our yearly efforts and includes analysis of our shelter survey responses and a discussion of DPFL’s overall developments, introduces our Canine Center Florida, and provides an overview of our other in-person programs and virtual offerings.

Survey Results (see pp. 5-22)

The responses to our surveys, which are administered to shelters before and after a playgroup seminar, reveal much about different organizations’ experiences with playgroups and the ways in which playgroups are benefitting dogs, humans, and shelters alike.

Among survey respondents:

- 92% have continued to run playgroups since their DPFL seminar
- 87% reported that dog fights requiring vet attention “never” or only “rarely” happen in playgroups
- 50% of shelters run playgroups at least 5 days per week

100% of survey respondents believed that the benefits of playgroups outweigh the risks

Shelters reported these organizational benefits of playgroups:

- Improvements in staff/volunteer handling skills (90%)
- Improvements in staff and volunteer morale (84%)
- Improvements in the public perception of the shelter (77%)

99% of respondents believed playgroups provide dogs with a better quality of life while sheltered
Shelters reported that playgroups **benefitted dogs** in the following ways:

- Helped the shelter make better adoption matches (98%)
- Allowed staff to better assess dog-to-dog concerns (98%)
- Supplied useful information about dogs beyond their dog-to-dog sociability (96%)
- Afforded shelters time to provide additional enrichment to their dogs (74%)

Shelters reported the following statistics a year after a DPFL seminar:

- Average canine live release rate increased 3.8 percentage points
- Average canine length of stay decreased by 11 days

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**For large dogs, the average length of stay decreased by nearly two weeks (13 days)**

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**Canine Center Florida** (see pp. 22-24)

Since the summer of 2017, DPFL’s Canine Center Florida (CCF) has worked with sheltered dogs at risk of behavioral euthanasia. As of December 31, 2020, CCF has:

- Served 240 dogs (81 new dogs arrived in 2020)
- Worked with dogs from 40 shelters and rescues (16 new organizations served in 2020)
- Achieved an **86% save rate** with this highly specialized and at-risk population

**Other DPFL Programming** (see pp. 25-26)

**In-Person Programming**

- Mentorships I and II: 235 mentees to date
- Shadow Program: 12 shadow students over a total of 51 days

**Virtual Programming**

- Virtual shelter meetings: nine shelters took advantage of this offering in 2020
- Dogs Playing for Life Learning Library: downloaded 409 times in 2020
- Playgroup Webinar Series: 415 total attendees from nine different countries and 101 new shelters and rescues reached in 2020
Introduction

Dogs Playing for Life (DPFL) is a nonprofit animal welfare organization with a mission to redefine the meaning and importance of quality of life for all sheltered dogs by improving their experience through playgroups and individualized training, resulting in urgent and responsible lifesaving. In 2009, DPFL founder and CEO, Aimee Sadler, began offering playgroup seminars to shelters and rescues across the United States and beyond, providing these organizations with the skills and practical knowledge to implement and maintain successful playgroups for their dogs. These seminars, and the programs they kicked off, have enhanced quality of life and improved outcomes for countless shelter dogs across North America.

Though playgroups remain the cornerstone of our programming, DPFL’s contributions to canine wellbeing have expanded and developed over the years.

• 2015: DPFL began offering a Level I Mentorship at our two model shelters
• 2017: DPFL opened its Canine Center Florida (CCF), an advanced board and train facility serving sheltered dogs at risk of behavioral euthanasia
• 2018: DPFL’s shadow program began helping shelter personnel and others interested in learning from CCF’s exceptional trainers to advance their skills
• 2019: DPFL began welcoming next-level students and mentees to CCF for our newest Level II Mentorship

Each year, we take a close look at our programming through the lens of our extensive data set and examine what is and is not working and how we can better support shelters, shelter personnel, and shelter dogs. What follows are lessons learned, discussions of advancements in the animal welfare field, and benefits experienced by shelters that have implemented our programming. We examine the ways in which DPFL playgroups and other programs can offer vast improvements in areas such as quality of life, lifesaving, shelter operations, and staff experiences. This report offers an in-depth look at the responses from our pre- and post-seminar surveys, provides a review of developments at our Canine Center Florida and with our other in-person programs and virtual offerings, and maps out the framework for DPFL to implement changes needed to remain an invaluable resource to the shelters and dogs we serve.
Shelters Served

We work closely with host shelters before and after a seminar in order to offer continued mentoring, to keep up on their progress and successes, and to administer surveys, which we use to evaluate our programming. The data reflected in this report come from our pre- and post-seminar surveys. Because some questions were added in later survey versions, response numbers vary. Throughout this report, the number of responses per question is indicated in parentheses as “n=x” as well as in each chart’s subtitle. For more information on the surveys and details about distribution, see the Appendix.

DPFL has served a wide variety of shelters and rescues with demographics that vary accordingly. The annual intake of responding organizations ranged from 12 to 60,000 dogs with typical daily on-site populations of 10 to 650 dogs.

While both open- and limited- admission shelters have hosted seminars, shelters with open-admission policies (including municipal and contract agencies) make up the bulk of shelters served due to funding available to open-admission shelters through the ASPCA, the Petco Foundation, and Animal Farm Foundation. As of December 31, 2020, 81 percent of shelters served reported open-admission policies compared to 19 percent of shelters reporting limited admission.
Figure 2, below, shows the number of shelters served by state. DPFL has conducted the largest number of seminars in the South (38%) and the fewest in the Midwest (15%).

We run our seminars with an eye toward future sustainability and take care to ensure that instructors are demonstrating safe, attainable, and inspiring playgroups that shelters will be able to continue after a seminar’s conclusion. When asked whether they continue to run playgroups, 92 percent of survey respondents responded in the affirmative (n=124). Of the 10 shelters that reported having discontinued playgroups, only seven shelters had actually stopped playgroups altogether; two indicated that the suspensions were only temporary and a third specified that playgroups had slowed down but had not stopped entirely. When asked to provide their reasons for stopping playgroups, four shelters attributed the cessation to staffing difficulties, four to injuries (three due to injuries to people and one to dogs), and two to concerns about disease spread. While we are very pleased that the vast majority of responding shelters have retained their playgroup programs, we are motivated to continue to enhance the sustainability of our programming. Through our expanded shelter support resources, we hope to maintain or increase this high rate of program sustainability.

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1 This depiction excludes the four Canadian shelters served.
2 Though this is noteworthy, it stands to reason that shelters that have stopped running playgroups may not take the time to respond to our surveys, making it likely that shelters still running playgroups are overrepresented in the post-seminar survey sample.
Variation in the Application of Playgroups

Playgroups function differently in different organizations. The largest number of shelters (73%) reported primarily using playgroups for the purpose of providing enrichment to their dogs (n=94). The survey also asked about secondary and tertiary purposes for playgroup. Chart 1, below, shows the breakdown of playgroup purposes from most to least important.

Chart 1: Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Purposes for Playgroup
Total Responses = 94

DPFL aims to support shelters to reach Every Dog, Every Day!,™ a standard in which every dog in a shelter’s care receives meaningful out-of-kennel enrichment on a daily basis. Playgroups can provide out-of-kennel enrichment to a majority of dogs, but some will benefit most from an alternative form of enrichment. It is our hope that as shelters strive to offer dogs more opportunities for enrichment, playgroups will continue to be relied on to provide more meaningful outings that emotionally and physically satisfy the greatest number of individual dogs most efficiently. DPFL closely monitors playgroup size, frequency, and the percentage of a shelter’s total dogs participating as we continue coaching shelters post-seminar.

Asked to report on the approximate size of their playgroups by providing the average number of dogs typically out at one time, the largest group of shelters (35%) reported running small playgroups containing less than five dogs (n=165). Table 1, below, shows the playgroup sizes reported by responding shelters. It should be noted that the survey did not ask for number of play yards, so while it is possible that each shelter’s reported number of dogs are all directly interacting, it is also possible that dogs are divided into multiple yards that are all being supervised by one or more handlers simultaneously.
Table 1: Playgroup Size Reported
Total responses = 165

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Playgroup Size</th>
<th>No. Reporting</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One noteworthy change from our 2019 cumulative survey data is the increase in the number of shelters running very small groups with two to four dogs. The percent of shelters reporting groups of this size has increased from 27% in 2019 to 35% in 2020. This change may be related to the reduced numbers of dogs in many shelters as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (and therefore temporary). It is also a possibility, however, that playgroup size may decrease as lifesaving increases and shelters find themselves with larger numbers of selective dogs that may require smaller, more tailored groups.

We have historically coached shelters on the advantages of larger playgroups, which include the ability to attend to a larger number of dogs at once and/or to allow a larger number of dogs to play for longer periods of time, thereby enhancing quality of life and lifesaving for the greatest number of dogs. Furthermore, larger playgroup sizes can allow dogs increased socialization opportunities as well as increased choices regarding playmates. That being said, if a reduction in playgroup size coincides with favorable trends in reduced shelter populations and/or increased lifesaving efforts, and thus a reduction in the number of eligible dogs, we will be thrilled to adjust our recommendations to provide the best experience for dogs and people as our industry evolves. Lastly, it is worth noting that we have consistently advocated for the critical importance of shelters and shelter architects constructing play yards with multiple connected spaces in order to safely and efficiently facilitate multiple smaller playgroups at once. Optimally designed play yards will become more critical as shelters work to integrate more difficult dogs into playgroups. We plan to expand our relationships with shelter planners in order to ensure that play yards are constructed to be compatible with the aforementioned advances in our industry, and we will explore the possibility of additional funding sources for shelter play yard modifications.

Pertaining to playgroup frequency, 50 percent of shelters reported running playgroups at least five days per week. Twenty-seven percent of shelters reported running playgroups 3 or 4 days per week, and the final 23 percent reported running playgroups one or two days per week or only occasionally (n=162). We recommend daily playgroups as a way to attend to Every Dog, Every Day!, and because frequent exposure is essential to developing and maintaining skills in dogs and handlers alike.

Because of the enormous benefits playgroups provide to most shelter dogs, DPFL hopes to see at least 80 percent of shelters’ populations participating in playgroups regularly. This target
percentage takes into account those dogs that may be unable to participate in playgroups for medical or legal reasons. We also recognize that there may be dogs that will not find playgroups beneficial and that shelters may lack the ability to safely integrate others that could benefit. As handlers' skills increase over time, some organizations will likely find themselves integrating even larger proportions of their populations. Chart 2, below, makes it clear that while the largest proportion of respondents reported meeting this 80 percent participation standard, shelters displayed significant variation in the percent of their canine population regularly participating in playgroups.

Volunteer involvement is another area in which shelters tailor playgroups to work within their individual contexts. DPFL highly recommends incorporating volunteers and regularly consults with shelters on ways to increase their volunteer support, particularly as it pertains to playgroups. As a lack of volunteer support is a hindrance cited by many struggling playgroup programs, we now offer guidance on the topic to each individual shelter served and offer continued follow-up support and a written resource on expanding volunteer participation in playgroups. We are also hopeful that shelters will be able to use our new virtual resources to expand their volunteer orientation and training.

While the majority of organizations (57%) indicated that playgroups are led exclusively by shelter staff, another 38 percent of shelters indicated that staff and volunteers both lead playgroups, and among the final five percent of shelters, volunteers led playgroups (n=163).

Survey results also revealed that in 80 percent of shelters, volunteers help to run dogs to and from playgroups. Recruiting volunteers to act as runners can provide a vital learning opportunity for future playgroup leads. Moreover, using volunteers in this way can also allow
individuals to participate and contribute to playgroup programs even when they may not have the skill, confidence, or desire to lead playgroups. Among the 20 percent of shelters where volunteers did not contribute to playgroups as runners, seven respondents (4%) indicated that this was due to COVID-related restrictions (n=163).

It is not surprising that the shelters we have served differ in how they apply playgroups. Throughout all the variation we see, our ongoing goal is to support shelters to work within their individual parameters and to tailor their unique operations to attend to Every Dog, Every Day!

**Shelters’ Experiences with Playgroups**

One of the primary objectives of playgroups is to enhance sheltered dogs’ quality of life. Our analysis examined metrics before and after the implementation of playgroups to detect changes over time. Shelters were asked to provide an assessment of the quality of life experienced by dogs in their care in the form of a ranking where one indicates very poor quality of life and 10 indicates very good quality of life. While this is a subjective measure, we believe it can nevertheless shed light on the experiences of shelter dogs. Looking at both pre- and post-seminar responses, the quality of life ranking provided by shelters prior to a DPFL seminar was 6.2 (n=90), while the ranking provided after a seminar was 7.3 (n=123). For shelters that hold playgroups five or more days per week with at least 80% of their populations, the average rankings were 6.9 on the pre-seminar survey and 8 on the post-seminar survey, suggesting that quality of life improves after the implementation of playgroups and improves still more when playgroups are offered more frequently and to more dogs (n=22).

In addition to measuring effects on their canine participants, we also want to understand how playgroups are perceived by shelter staff. We found that 97 percent of respondents reported that staff are either enthusiastically (58%) or generally (39%) supportive of playgroups. Three respondents reported staff members to be indifferent to playgroups and a single shelter reported that staff members tend to discourage playgroups (n=114). In our experience on the ground at shelters, it is not uncommon to encounter staff expressing doubts and concerns about the implementation of playgroups. We frequently work collaboratively with staff during seminars to resolve concerns around risk, workload, time management, and other apprehensions that tend to accompany the implementation of new programs and protocols. As surveys are completed at least three months after a seminar takes place, it is possible that staff support of playgroups tends to increase as playgroups are implemented and become routine. It may also be that this survey question is too simplistic to capture more complicated dynamics at shelters. For this reason, we continue to engage in conversations about morale and the experiences of the personnel actively engaged in playgroups when we check in with shelters post-seminar.

We also asked shelters to report their statistics on both the pre- and post-seminar surveys. In addition to benefitting our follow-up support, keeping track of key metrics such as live release
rates and lengths of stay help us to identify and monitor any general trends that shelters running playgroups exhibit. In our analysis of respondents’ shelter statistics, organizations that did not provide pre- and post-seminar numbers were eliminated, as were shelters that were clearly only estimating their length of stay numbers. For this reason, numbers of total responses are smaller in this section.

Looking at Canine Live Release Rates (CLRR) for all shelters before and after a DPFL seminar, we see a small shift in the direction of more lifesaving. The CLRR of all reporting shelters averaged 90.5% on the pre-seminar survey and 93.4% on the post-seminar survey (n=88). Examining just the data of shelters running playgroups for at least a year, the effect increases slightly from an average of 90.3% before to 94% after a seminar (n=53). Chart 3, below, shows the CLRR increase in both samples. These percentage point increases in CLRR of 2.9 and 3.8, respectively, represent a promising improvement for several reasons. First, in terms of their live release rates, shelters often plateau in the mid-eighties to low nineties and find it difficult to make any progress beyond that point. The possibility that playgroups are helping shelters to move the needle on this difficult population—typically large dogs with moderate behavioral needs—is an exciting one. Second, when you look at these increases in terms of actual lives, the numbers become more meaningful. If, as an example, we consider a shelter with an annual intake of 3,000 dogs per year, that comes out to between 87 and 111 additional dogs saved each year.

![Chart 3: Average Reported Pre- and Post-Seminar CLRR: All Shelters vs. Shelters Running Playgroups For At Least a Year](chart3.png)

Differences in Canine Length of Stay (CLOS) numbers from pre- to post-seminar are even more impressive. The average CLOS of all responding shelters decreased a full week from 29 days on

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3 For example, a shelter reporting a length of stay of “30-50” or “about 60” days is unlikely to have pulled their numbers from their shelter software, which is the most reliable way to obtain accurate data.
the pre-seminar survey to 22 days on the post-seminar survey (n=66). Looking again at a subsample of data from shelters running playgroups for at least a year, an 11-day decrease in canine length of stay is evident with CLOS decreasing from 30 to 19 days (n=39). Chart 4, below, depicts these changes.

The survey also asked shelters to report more complicated CLOS numbers including CLOS of large dogs (defined as dogs weighing 40 lbs. and up) and CLOS from intake to adoption, to rescue, and to euthanasia. Because these metrics are more difficult to pull from many shelter software applications, the total responses for these four metrics are much lower and range from 29 to 37 responses. Although they are more difficult to obtain, we believe these numbers provide a critical piece of the puzzle as more general length of stay numbers tend not to accurately illuminate the experience of more specialized populations (e.g., large adult dogs; dogs awaiting rescue) that may experience significantly longer stays.

For the latter three metrics (CLOS from intake to adoption, rescue, and euthanasia), the numbers appear to be trending in the right direction with CLOS several days shorter post-seminar in each case. Length of stay of large dogs, however, shows a much more significant decrease from pre- to post-seminar. The 30 shelters that provided numbers for this metric reported an average reduction of nearly two weeks in the length of time large dogs spend in the shelter after a playgroup seminar. Though the sample is small, these numbers are encouraging since large dogs typically experience the longest shelter stays and are the most likely to participate.
in and benefit from playgroups. Table 2, below, shows responses for all four “advanced” CLOS metrics.

**Table 2: Average Pre- and Post-Seminar Advanced CLOS Metrics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Seminar CLOS</th>
<th>Post-Seminar CLOS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40+ lbs.</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake to Adoption</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake to Rescue</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intake to Euthanasia</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increased quality of life for dogs in shelters is a universal goal of all playgroup programs. These significant decreases in length of stay offer the possibility that DPFL playgroups may impact quality of life in an even more profound way. Simply put, the single greatest way to enhance a shelter dog’s life is to get that dog out of the shelter and into a loving home. We are thrilled to see that DPFL playgroups are significantly contributing to this goal.

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4 Shelters are never discouraged from integrating small dogs into playgroups, but instructors emphasize safety measures and recommend either segregating small dogs or combining them with specially selected (well-known and trusted) large dogs.
Playgroup Health and Safety

Safety has always been a priority for DPFL, and we consider safe participation in playgroups—by both dogs and humans—to be fundamental. For this reason, we continue to gauge the safety of playgroups to scrutinize our training efficacy and to ensure that shelters maintain safe practices. The post-seminar survey poses questions on altercations, dog-to-dog and dog-to-handler injuries, and disease spread.

Prior to implementing playgroups, shelters were asked to rank their concerns individually on a scale from 1 to 10. The average concern level of all 106 pre-seminar responses came in at 4.5 for injuries to dogs, 4.7 for injuries to handlers, and 3.2 for disease spread.

When asked how often dog fights that require veterinary attention occur in playgroups, 87 percent of respondents answered “never” or “rarely” (n=163). Chart 5, below, provides a visual depiction. DPFL consistently reaches out to respondents reporting even occasional altercations to determine whether we may be able to provide additional training or support. Comparing these responses to last year’s numbers, shelters reporting no altercations are up several percent (from 13% in 2019), and “occasional” altercations are down 3 percent (from 15% in 2019). This is certainly a positive trend and we will continue to focus on safety throughout our programming.

Chart 5: Frequency of Altercations Requiring Veterinary Attention
Total Responses = 163

Chart 6, below, depicts estimated dog-to-dog injuries per month. Asked to provide an estimated range of dog-to-dog injuries (whether minor or serious) occurring each month, the majority of respondents (58%) reported between 0 and 1 injuries per month, while just one percent reported between 6 and 10 injuries in a typical month (n=165).^6

In an attempt to quantify the number of injuries actually occurring in a shelter running our Every Dog, Every Day! model (daily playgroups with at least 80% of the population participating), we asked one of these best practice shelters, a municipal organization with an annual intake of approximately 1,150 dogs per year, to record each unique dog-to-dog interaction for one month. Observations took place three days per week, and playgroups included an average of 42.5 dogs for an average of 557.25 interactions between dogs per session. The total number of interactions for the month was 6,687, during which time the shelter experienced one fight with sustained contact that resulted in a puncture injury, which equates to 0.01 percent of the total interactions.

Another way to look at the dog-to-dog injury data supplied by shelters is to come up with a rate of injury. To do this, we examined shelters’ typical number of dogs on site, the number of days they run playgroup (respondents reporting only occasional playgroups were eliminated from this analysis), the percentage of their population regularly participating in playgroups, and the number of dog-to-dog injuries reported per month.

^6 This one percent comprised two shelters. DPFL has been in communication with both shelters and has provided additional support and resources.
Due to the nature of the data collected, this approach provides an estimate of the frequency of injuries occurring in playgroups. Having averaged the reported number of dogs on site (117.44), the population regularly participating in playgroups (58%), and the number of days shelters hold playgroups (4.77), we find that on average, 68.12 dogs participate in approximately 20.75 playgroups per month, which provides 1,413.49 opportunities for injury compared to 2.05 reported injuries per month for a rate of injury of 0.14 percent. In this way, while there will always be certain risks inherent in dog-to-dog interactions, it is evident that the level of risk associated with DPFL playgroups is quite low while the benefits gained from healthy interactions are frequently immense.

With the assumption that serious injuries to handlers will be even less frequent, we also asked shelters to provide the number of handlers injured to the degree that they required medical attention in the time since each shelter’s seminar. In answering this question, then, respondents could have been looking at a timespan as short as three months and as long as eleven years. Chart 7, below, shows handler injuries over the lifetime of respondents’ playgroup programs.

Chart 7: Serious Handler Injuries Reported Since Playgroup Seminar
Total Responses = 112

While occasional injuries to both dogs and humans must be expected when working with living beings in adverse conditions such as a traditional kennel environment, shelters are demonstrating that playgroups can be run in a way that minimizes injuries to all involved. DPFL

Both “percent of population regularly participating in playgroups” and “number of dog-to-dog injuries per month” were collected as a range. For the former, we took the midpoint for each reported range (e.g. for 70-79% participating, we used 75%). For the latter, we took the high number of the range in order to provide the most conservative estimate (e.g. 2-3 injuries per month was recorded as 3).
While there will always be certain risks inherent in dog-to-dog interactions, the level of risk associated with DPFL playgroups is low while the benefits gained from healthy interactions are frequently immense.

In response to the question “Have playgroups been deemed the cause of an infectious disease outbreak at your shelter?” 94 percent of respondents answered in the negative (n=164). Those that did believe playgroups caused or contributed to the spread of disease pointed to a variety of illnesses from conjunctivitis, upper respiratory infections and kennel cough to intestinal parasites including Coccidiosis and Giardia, to ringworm. Two respondents, comprising one percent of the sample, mentioned more serious viruses including parvo and distemper. The level of the threat presented by parvo and distemper depends heavily on a shelter’s geographical region. Shelters in warmer climates may opt to enforce a longer vaccine hold period before dogs are integrated into playgroups to minimize the risk of more serious diseases. DPFL always defers to medical experts to provide the safest protocols that balance the risk of disease with the equally deadly risk of behavioral deterioration due to confinement.

When asked whether their veterinary staff supports playgroups, just 4% of responding shelters replied in the negative (n=163). Indeed, multiple shelter veterinary medicine specialists, including Dr. Cynda Crawford of the University of Florida’s Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Program, Dr. Sandra Newbury of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Dr. Kate Hurley of the University of California, Davis, endorse and support playgroups as an integral component of canine enrichment in progressive sheltering and affirm that their inclusion is consistent with the Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters. Throughout the industry, shelter medicine experts now recognize the potential for unavoidable vectors in kennel environments and are allowing for more flexibility in managing herd health. Less rigid guidelines surrounding dog-to-dog contact can offer shelters the opportunity to address the mental and emotional wellbeing of the dogs in their care in addition to maintaining their physical health.
Shelter Practices and Protocols

In many cases, implementing a playgroup program has initiated favorable changes in various shelter-wide practices and protocols. Table 3, below, shows the full list of changes made as a result of playgroups.

Table 3: Changes Made as a Result of Playgroup Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>No. Reporting</th>
<th>Percent Reporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promoted playgroups as an adoption and marketing tool</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altered an assessment process to include playgroup observations</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified adoption standards or counseling</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discontinued on-leash assessments</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Started or expanded a volunteer program</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified medical or quarantine restrictions to allow playgroup participation</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Started incorporating kennel cough dogs into standard or separate playgroups</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified cleaning processes</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discontinued or modified a battery assessment process</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Started an adoption follow-up program</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these apply</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Benefits of Playgroups

As evidenced by the significant improvements in canine length of stay and canine save rate, two of our industry’s most critical metrics, it is evident that shelters are measurably more successful after implementing DPFL playgroups. Among our survey responses, the multitude of wide-ranging organizational and dog-specific benefits is just as apparent.

Organizational Benefits

As part of an ongoing attempt to learn how organizations may be benefitting from playgroups, the survey asked respondents whether they have experienced a number of frequently reported advantages of playgroups. Improvements in the following areas reach far beyond the boundaries of play yards and touch even those dogs and people not participating in playgroups.

First, 41 percent of shelters reported an increase in volunteer support after implementing a playgroup program (n=158). Here, too, some shelters (6%) referenced COVID-related restrictions in response to a follow-up question about reasons for not allowing volunteer

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8 In a “battery assessment process,” a dog is put through a series of individual tests in an attempt to determine temperament and adoptability.
participation in playgroups. Since staffing is a constant struggle cited by a majority of the organizations we support, an increase in volunteers may be the difference between maintaining and abandoning crucial programs such as playgroups.

Second, asked whether implementing playgroups improved staff and volunteer morale, 84 percent of respondents answered in the affirmative (another 10% were unsure; n=100). An improvement in this area both makes sense—shelter representatives often report increases in their own happiness from witnessing happier, calmer, more enriched dogs—and has vital implications for overall organizational wellbeing. To name but one possibility, when morale is low, turnover may be higher, which in turn results in less sustainable programs and more resources spent on training and orienting a steady stream of new staff.

Third, 90 percent of organizations reported that implementing playgroups improved the handling skills of their staff and/or volunteers (another 7% were unsure; n=105). This is a particularly encouraging finding. Skill in handling dogs is immensely beneficial both within and outside the play yards, and the fact that nine in ten shelters are experiencing better handling skills on the part of their personnel has wide-reaching implications. A higher level of skill in this area may lead to fewer injuries and bites to handlers, better supported—and therefore less stressed—dogs, and increased opportunities afforded to dogs displaying more difficult behaviors in and out of playgroups.

Finally, asked whether they felt that the implementation of playgroups had improved the public perception of their shelter, 77 percent answered “yes” (another 15% were unsure; n=107). Shelters that enjoy a positive reputation in the community may benefit from an array of improved opportunities including better funding, increased attendance at fundraisers and other events, and more individuals interested in volunteering and adopting.

Shelters have also reported time savings as a result of providing enrichment to multiple dogs at once. This time saved can, in turn, create opportunities to add or expand other beneficial activities. We find it very compelling that the majority of respondents reported that playgroup actually allows them more time to comprehensively enrich, train, and provide for their dogs.

Nearly three-fourths (74%) of shelters reported being able to supply additional enrichment opportunities beyond playgroups, and over half (53%) reported being able to provide additional training or engagement opportunities. In this way, not only are playgroups providing additional enrichment and growth opportunities to the dogs that attend, but, as a direct result of playgroups, shelters are finding themselves more able to provide an array of beneficial experiences to all of the dogs in their care.

We find it compelling that the majority of respondents reported that playgroup allows them more time to comprehensively enrich, train, and provide for their dogs.
**Dog-Specific Benefits**

A final section of the survey asked whether shelters experienced an array of benefits directly related to dogs’ experiences and the ability of shelter personnel to secure the most appropriate placements for the dogs in their care.

Most impressively, in response to the question “Do you feel that the benefits of playgroups outweigh the risks?” one hundred percent of the survey’s 161 respondents answered “yes.”

Because playgroups can function as a means of assessing dogs for traits and qualities far beyond playstyles and sociability with other dogs, the survey also asked several questions about this possibility. Nearly all respondents (96%) felt that playgroups reveal information about individual dogs beyond their sociability with other dogs (n=161). Common responses to a follow-up question that asked what playgroups reveal to shelter staff (beyond dog-to-dog sociability) mentioned dogs’ overall personalities, comfort and sociability with people, confidence, energy level, housetraining/bathroom habits, response to interruptions from a handler, and interest playing in water. Another common theme in these responses was the utility of observing dogs outside of the highly stressful and aversive kennel environment.

Table 4, below, provides a list of playgroup benefits along with the percent of respondents that reported experiencing them. Each of these benefits speaks to the tremendous impacts playgroup programs are having on dogs, staff, and organizations as a whole.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PG Benefit</th>
<th>No. Agree (total responses)</th>
<th>Percent Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefits outweigh risks</td>
<td>161 (161)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved quality of life</td>
<td>160 (161)</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved adoption matches</td>
<td>157 (160)</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More accurate dog-to-dog assessments</td>
<td>156 (160)</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reveal more than just dog-to-dog sociability</td>
<td>154 (161)</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved staff/volunteer handling skills</td>
<td>94 (105)</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved staff/volunteer morale</td>
<td>84 (100)</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved public perception of shelter</td>
<td>82 (107)</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased volunteer support</td>
<td>65 (158)</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a separate survey administered to all our shelters served in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that more than three-fourths (78%) of survey respondents reported that
playgroups played a role in placing dogs into the most appropriate foster homes during the pandemic.⁹

### Playgroup Impact Takeaways

Ultimately, responses to our pre- and post-seminar surveys show that playgroup programs are being effectively maintained in shelters of all sizes and admission types long after the completion of a DPFL seminar. Shelters are running safe playgroups with minimal injuries to human and canine participants and very minimal disease spread. By and large, shelter staff are supportive of playgroups and volunteers are regularly participating in the majority of shelter playgroup programs. Shelters are seeing countless benefits emerge from playgroup programs including improved quality of life for dogs, improved staff/volunteer handling skills, and increased staff and volunteer morale. Playgroups are frequently being used to obtain more effective assessments and to market dogs to potential adopters. Shelters are seeing enhanced lifesaving and decreased shelter stays after implementing playgroups. We look forward to continuing to monitor these and other trends as we add information and statistics from additional organizations to our ever-growing data set.

We also believe the analysis of our survey responses presents a unique opportunity to reflect on areas where we may be able to improve our programming and better support shelters, such as:

- **Playgroup Size Monitoring:** We will continue to monitor playgroup sizes while encouraging shelters to attend to Every Dog, Every Day! We are continually reevaluating our programming to ensure that it is safe, sustainable, and easily adapted in different organizational contexts, and that playgroup size recommendations are consistent with providing the best overall welfare opportunities.

- **Increased Volunteer Participation:** Volunteers are vital, and we hope to increase the number of shelters reporting high volunteer participation rates. Through more targeted conversations and support during our playgroup seminars and via opportunities to observe high-performing volunteer programs during our Mentorship I offerings, we are committed to helping shelters reap the immeasurable benefits of a strong volunteer core.

- **Data Support:** It is of paramount importance that shelters provide the most accurate and targeted data possible to measure programming efficacy. Our top data priorities include:

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Working with software companies to create instructions for shelters that need help to reliably track more complicated and actionable metrics, such as length of stay for large dogs.

Assisting shelters to more accurately monitor and record in-shelter bites. We hope to discover best practices for tracking this important metric as bite data tracking is essential to understanding a shelter’s overall safety habits. We are committed to helping organizations function as the safe havens they are intended to be.

As our subset of “best practice” shelters (those running playgroups five or more days per week with at least 80% of their populations) grows, we will closely monitor the data provided by shelters that are running our Every Dog, Every Day! model. We are eager to study, learn from, and share the trends and impacts of shelters that are successfully enriching the lives of the dogs in their care.

Canine Center Florida

DPFL’s Canine Center Florida was developed in response to a resource gap in the animal welfare field. Although DPFL’s in-person training programs are providing support and structure to dogs struggling to cope with high-stress kennel environments in shelters across the continent, shelters frequently do not possess the resources needed to meet the emotional and behavioral needs of all the dogs in their care. As lifesaving increases, we have seen a small but persistent population of dogs that frequently end up being subjected to long-term kenneling which can cause further deterioration and may even lead to behavioral euthanasia. When DPFL had the opportunity to open an advanced behavior center where dogs failing to thrive in traditional shelter environments could receive the individualized attention and customized training they would need for successful placement, we jumped at the chance to provide this much-needed resource, and demonstrate its impact, to shelters across the country.

Since the summer of 2017, staff at CCF have worked tirelessly to provide for sheltered dogs in need of specialized training expertise. CCF sits on 13 fully-fenced acres in North-Central Florida and offers 36 kennels that are filled by an ever-changing population of dogs of a variety of sizes, breeds, ages, and temperaments. Dogs admitted to CCF receive customized treatment plans, at least three meaningful out-of-kennel experiences per day, and comprehensive in-kennel enrichment as well as playgroups where appropriate. Dogs are handled and trained by staff from around the country and by DPFL mentees and volunteers, which supports the generalization of skills. Staff, many of whom stay in on-site dorm rooms, routinely take dogs on community field trips to provide additional exposure and on overnight sleepovers to “proof” training and assess the dog’s responses in a more home-like environment.

CCF kennels are consistently at capacity as organizations from around the country seek live outcome opportunities for their most behaviorally challenging dogs. Over its three and a half years, the current overall save rate at CCF is 86%. As many of the dogs sent were euthanasia candidates at their shelters of origin, we believe this speaks to our team’s tremendous skill and dedication.
years, CCF has served 240 dogs with 81 new dogs arriving in 2020 alone. Notably, in a survey administered in 2020 to all our shelters served, 85 percent of responding shelters reported the need for an advanced board and train facility where they could send their most behaviorally difficult dogs.\textsuperscript{10} To date, CCF has served dogs from 40 shelters and rescues including 16 new organizations in 2020. Along the way, we have developed relationships with a number of placement partners. In some cases, placement partners supply CCF with socially appropriate “helper dogs” that learn obedience and other skills for a short period of time in exchange for their help teaching dogs with dog-to-dog issues. In other cases, placement partners may engage in “trades” with CCF in which the placement partner sends a dog in need to CCF in exchange for two or more dogs that have completed their training and are ready to be adopted. After dogs are placed, we conduct adoption follow-up with all adopters. Every dog that has been through our program receives a lifetime of free behavioral support to ensure that adopters have the knowledge and resources they need to be successful.

The current overall save rate at CCF is 86 percent. As many of these dogs were euthanasia candidates at their shelters of origin, we believe these numbers speak to the tremendous dedication and skill of CCF staff and to the advantages of DPFL’s Completing the Cycle model.\textsuperscript{11} In this proposed model, shelters across the country would have the option to send their most behaviorally difficult dogs to separate regional advanced training facilities. In addition to saving more lives, this would free up shelter time and resources that could then be devoted to ensuring better quality of life for each shelter’s remaining dogs. It is worth mentioning that while we are proud of the current 86 percent save rate, there may be reason to believe that this save rate is not sustainable over time. CCF is tasked with helping the dogs at the fringe of our nation’s lifesaving efforts; the dogs whose behavioral histories and/or tendencies have prevented them from being rehomed. As the shelter industry at large continues to reach new heights, it stands to reason that the challenges the dogs in need of our expertise face will increase in complexity. While this uncharted territory brings uncertainty, our CCF team is driven to continue to learn, innovate, and share every possible solution along this journey while providing excellent quality of life no matter the outcome.

Length of stay (LOS) for dogs at CCF varies and has been steadily decreasing over time as dogs that were sponsored for an unrestricted period are replaced by dogs working within more targeted timeframes (typically 30, 60, or 90 days). The average LOS for all dogs that have been outcomed since CCF’s inception is 150 days. Dogs outcomed in 2020 had a shorter LOS at 136 days. We expect this number to continue to decrease in the coming years as sponsored, longer-stay dogs find placement. When considering LOS at CCF, it is essential to take into account the


\textsuperscript{11} See “The ‘End Game’ of Sheltering: Canine Programming from Enrichment to Advanced Behavioral Intervention”
Ontario dogs, who were confiscated from a known dog fighting situation in Ontario, Canada, placed in the custody of the local SPCA, slated for euthanasia, and, nearly two years later, were sent to CCF for further evaluation and training. In all, CCF cared for 30 dogs from this group and achieved a 93 percent save rate for this special population. Among the first dogs ever to arrive at CCF, the Ontario dogs were sponsored for an unrestricted period of time and, due to the unique challenges they presented, significantly inflate average LOS numbers. It was never expected that these dogs would have a short stay at CCF, and while we are forever grateful to this memorable group of dogs for what they have taught us about staying flexible, thinking creatively, and prioritizing quality of life, we have also narrowed our focus in the time since taking the Ontario dogs and now heavily prioritize our goal of achieving live outcomes within targeted timeframes.

As our CCF team continues to provide advanced behavior modification, enhanced quality of life, and lifesaving placement opportunities to dogs from around the continent, we are simultaneously striving to create a model of sustainability. We are actively developing relationships with new placement partners to expand our impact while conducting thorough analyses of each dog’s pathway and progress—even after adoption—to analyze our results and to demonstrate a measured and replicable program. As the need for services like CCF grows, we hope to expand our program to multiple locations around the country and to establish more lifesaving regional collaborations.

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12 For more, see “The Ontario Dogs, Finding Home.”
Other DPFL Programming

In-Person Programming

DPFL is committed to educating current and future animal welfare professionals. Through our varied programming, and in many cases via the generous sponsorship of the Petfinder Foundation, students can acquire one-on-one coaching and increase their knowledge and skills to help larger numbers of the dogs in their care. Our in-person programming includes the following:

- **Fancy Footwork Seminars**, DPFL’s own brand of leash work and protocols for kenneled dogs, designed to teach shelter staff and volunteers the skills to handle dogs more effectively while minimizing the harmful effects of being kenneled in a stressful environment.

- **Level I Mentorships (MI)** at two model shelters, Austin Pets Alive! and Longmont Humane Society in Colorado. These mentorships provide attendees with extensive one-on-one coaching on leading playgroups as well as an introduction to Fancy Footwork.

- **Programming at DPFL’s Canine Center Florida (CCF)**
  - **DPFL’s Shadow Program**, which has helped shelter personnel and others interested in learning from CCF’s exceptional trainers to advance their skills. Unlike the more structured mentorship programs DPFL offers, the shadow program allows students the freedom to choose their own curriculum and preferred number of days of instruction.
  - **Level II Mentorships (MII)** are focused on mentoring more experienced shelter staff and volunteers to incorporate behavior modification techniques into playgroup practices. Level II mentees also learn more advanced training protocols for shelter dogs needing targeted intervention.

To date, DPFL has had the honor of working with 235 mentees. We have also instructed 12 shadow students over a total of 51 days. Not surprisingly, 2020 has been a difficult year in terms of these in-person offerings as we have exercised caution in order to ensure the health and safety of staff and students alike.
Virtual Programming

With the knowledge that we remain limited in our ability to reach large audiences through our in-person seminars and other programming during the pandemic, and thanks in part to continued support from the ASPCA and the Petco Foundation, we introduced three new major resources in 2020.

- **3-Part Playgroup Webinar Series**
  - Designed to instruct attendees on the intricacies of playgroups for shelter dogs
  - Offered on an ongoing basis
  - Continuing education unit credits (CEUs) available with CAWA, IAABC, and IACP
  - 415 individuals have attended Part 1 and 246 people completed the entire three-part series
  - 101 new shelters and rescues reached in 2020

- **Virtual Shelter Meetings**
  - Offered to all shelters served as a means of providing extra support from afar
  - Completed 9 meetings in 2020

- **Dogs Playing for Life Learning Library**
  - Includes our Playgroup Video Library, which incorporates footage from our nearly 300 seminars
  - Downloaded 409 times between October 5, when it was published on our new website, and December 31, 2020

The Video Library contains over six hours of fully annotated and narrated footage from our nearly 300 seminars.
Taking Stock and Looking Ahead

Though it certainly did not go as expected, 2020 was nonetheless a productive year for DPFL. Even as we scaled back and took extra precautions in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to pivot and create virtual offerings to sustain our support to shelters. We are excited to maintain and expand these offerings to provide shelters practical and accessible resources in a variety of formats.

As we look ahead to the coming year, we are grateful for opportunities discovered and connections forged in 2020 and we are optimistic that the future holds limitless possibilities. New survey responses strengthened our understanding of how shelters are using playgroups and the impact playgroups are having on dogs, people, and organizations. Through these responses, it is abundantly clear that despite the uncertainty in the world around us, the need for shelters to comprehensively enrich and train their dogs, and the need for a specialized resource for those dogs most behaviorally at-risk, continues to be pervasive. We are eager to meet this urgent need through serving more organizations and reaching the milestone of 300 shelters served in 2021, and through developing relationships with new placement partners and finding new pathways for our dogs at CCF. As we await brighter days ahead in which we can gather in greater numbers, we are confident that we can continue to improve the experiences of shelter dogs and their caretakers in person, virtually, and on the ground at CCF.

Finally, we want to express our deep gratitude to the more than 160 shelters that took the time to thoughtfully respond to our surveys. These organizations have not only demonstrated their commitment to bettering the lives of pets and people alike through the power of playgroups, but their participation in our survey allows us to offer the most measured, data-driven, and comprehensive canine enrichment model in the industry. Thanks to the wealth of information received from these valued partners, we are able to make informed decisions about program enhancements and opportunities to improve, all while strengthening the case for focusing on the ethic that the more we provide our dogs a life worth living, the more chances they get to truly live.
Appendix
Survey Details

The goal of the surveys reflected within this report was to assess the impact of DPFL seminars and the implementation of playgroups in shelters while analyzing constructive feedback that allows us to refine our offerings to actualize our mission. Survey questions asked for shelter statistics as well as information on shelter conditions, experience with playgroups, health and safety, personnel, and organizational and dog-specific benefits.

This report compiles responses from our pre-seminar survey and three versions of our post-seminar surveys. The original post-seminar survey, first distributed in 2016, was created by DPFL staff in conjunction with Dr. Amie Burling of the University of Florida, who added questions pertaining to medical protocols associated with the implementation of playgroups. This survey was created using Survey Monkey and was administered via email to all shelters that had hosted a DPFL seminar from 2009 to 2016. For shelters that were served after January 2016, DPFL staff provided the survey four to six weeks after the seminar. If a shelter did not respond to the survey request, DPFL staff followed up with a phone call and/or additional emails.

An updated version of the original survey was created by DPFL staff in late 2017 using Google Forms. Distributed via email to shelters between 3 and 6 months after a DPFL seminar, this survey asked for current data which were compared to data supplied by each shelter prior to their seminar to analyze changes over time.

A third iteration of the post-seminar survey, created by DPFL staff in mid-2020, closely resembled the previous version, but was split in two in order to glean the most accurate information in the most efficient way. Respondents now receive one “Playgroup Survey” at three and 12 months post-seminar, and one “Shelter Statistics Survey” at six and 12 months post-seminar (both surveys are distributed annually thereafter), which contains the questions requiring the use of respondents’ shelter software in an effort to save shelters time and provide them the option to delegate each survey to the individual best suited to provide the requested information.

Response rates vary by question as some questions have been added in later survey versions. All told, 92 percent of shelters responded to the pre-seminar survey (a prerequisite to a DPFL seminar starting in 2018 except under special circumstances), and 60 percent of shelters responded to the post-seminar survey. We request data from shelters on an ongoing basis, so depending on the time that has passed since their seminar, a shelter may have filled out one or multiple post-seminar surveys. Where shelters have submitted multiple responses, only the most recent was included for analysis in this report.