

# Paws for Change: Strategies to Enhance Adoptability and Well-being in Shelter Dogs – A Comprehensive Case Study

Mavery Grattan and Dr. Julie Murphree

## Introduction

From the moment a dog is brought into a shelter, to their behavior and medical assessments, to the final time they are shown to an adopter, their personalized care is of the utmost priority. In order to create thriving temporary and permanent homes, behavioral health should be prioritized. The purpose of this research is to better understand how behavioral assessments improve a dog's care and increase their chances of being adopted. The overarching objective is to elevate the adoption experience for all animals and share these invaluable insights with other shelters and collaborative partners.



## Sonic's Story

Sonic, a young Mastiff-mix, came to the shelter in July with no prior behavioral concerns. Certain issues emerged during his stay, resulting in his adoption and subsequent return a week later due to "mouthy" tendencies toward the owner's hands. This behavior and tendency to guard resources within his kennel progressed, leading to Sonic being categorized as a "blue dot" dog. Following his return, ongoing behavior changes prompted the staff to implement behavior modification plans to address his handling and care. Sonic now remains on the adoption floor, and his goofy personality and puppy eyes are primed for meeting his future forever family.



## Methods and Materials

After approaching the leadership at AAWL to receive research approval, Sonic was chosen as an investigative case study. He has resided at the shelter for 5 months, was adopted and returned, and has been labeled a "blue dot" dog. To conduct a well-rounded study, detailed behavior and medical notes, interviews with volunteers and staff, and additional literature were reviewed. Sonic's behavior evaluation and his behavioral modification process were analyzed. Lastly, statistical analysis through the shelter's adoption and return rates allude to the importance of behavioral elements and their relationship to an animal's adoptability.



## ● What is a "Blue Dot" Dog? ●

Blue Dot Status in a shelter typically indicates that a dog may require extra attention or has specific behavioral considerations. It serves as a visual marker, often in the form of a blue dot or a blue-colored kennel card, to alert shelter staff and potential adopters that the dog may have certain behaviors or needs that should be taken into account. These could include behavioral challenges, specific training requirements, or other considerations that potential adopters should be aware of before deciding to adopt the dog. Examples include high energy, resource guarding, dog or people socialization, leash reactivity, and mouthiness. The blue dot designation helps ensure that the dog is placed in a suitable home where its unique needs can be met, promoting a successful and lasting adoption.

## Conclusion

Animal shelters are now able to go above and beyond the need for respite relief for homeless dogs. Specifically, behavior teams are a growing factor in ensuring a high quality of holistic care for every animal, no matter their past trauma. Behavioral assessments, viewed as a valuable tool rather than a rigid formula, play a pivotal role in tailoring care strategies. Sonic's case underscores that fearful behaviors don't render a dog unadoptable, challenging stereotypes. Though behavior dogs have a limited adoption pool, statistics support that his adoption will be successful in the future.

Understanding different perspectives from AAWL volunteers, staff, and leadership led to interesting findings. His excellent memory and intelligence led to bonds with specific staff and volunteers, while it built distrust with others. Exercise and mental stimulation are recommended due to his sensitivity, large size, intelligence level, and lack of kennel stamina. Thanks to understanding the root causes of Sonic's reactivity, behavior modifications make a difference in his overall health and happiness within the shelter.

## Literature Cited

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