

This excerpt has been edited for length and clarity.

Senior dogs spend longer in shelters than their younger counterparts and are euthanized at disproportionate rates. Lack of shelter capacity and training around marketing senior dogs for adoption are key contributors to this issue. Our local conditions and firsthand experience support the findings of various researchers, and our proposed program directly addresses these key issues.

Not surprisingly, senior dogs often have medical conditions at intake. Hawes, Kerrigan, and Morris (2018) found that over a 12-month period at a Texas shelter, senior dogs in poorer medical condition upon intake were more likely to be euthanized. The finding that medical conditions put seniors at risk confirms what we see on a local level. At Long Beach Animal Care Services (LBACS), senior dogs were euthanized at almost twice the rate (15.1%) as adult and younger dogs (8.2%, 2018 LBACS Intake and Outcome Data). Senior dogs faced higher euthanasia rates than younger dogs for all levels of illness (mild, moderate, and severe). We receive requests from LBACS at least once per week to rescue dogs who need medical services such as dental care, surgery, or even relief from minor conditions such as kennel cough. This level of care is currently beyond the capacity of our municipal shelter, yet treating these conditions would be considered typical senior care in a family home. Fortunately, we have built a strong community of fosters who are able to care for senior dogs with medical issues. As a result, our main barrier to saving more of these senior pups is funding for medical care to ensure these pups can be healed and made adoptable.

Research also suggests that senior dogs face longer length of stay in shelters and rescues before an adoption is finalized. Hawes et al. (2018) found that over a 12-month period, senior animals faced significantly longer shelter stays than younger adoptable pets. This is also the case at LBACS. Of 34 dogs currently available for adoption, 6 (17%) are seniors. These senior pups have been in the shelter for an average of 61 days, versus 42 days for the young and adult dogs. That means seniors have spent almost 1.5 times as long in a kennel than younger dogs. Longer stays can be stressful, which exacerbates some medical issues and can cause behaviors that make dogs appear to be less adoptable.

Even when senior dogs are healthy, lack of information about effective marketing strategies can be a barrier to getting seniors adopted. For example, it is common to see adoption profiles for senior pets that imply seniors are mainly sleepy, grumpy, or just looking for a quiet corner to live out the rest of their life in peace and quiet. However, research suggests there are more effective ways to market senior dogs. For example, Purina (2019) recently conducted a study with 600 potential adopters to identify the most effective ways to market senior pets online. They found that profiles generated more interest when they focused on senior pets' strengths, including perceived loyalty and devotion, cuddliness, and positive personality characteristics. The least attractive profiles used grandparent analogies and directly or indirectly highlighted how little time the animal had left (such as talking about the "Golden Years"). Thus, it is important to generate marketing strategies and materials that highlight the fun, active, and engaging side of senior dogs.

With the support of our 2018 and 2019 Grey Muzzle Grants, we have been able to expand our senior dog intake. Before our first Grey Muzzle grant, we rescued 12 senior dogs from July 2017 to June 2018. During our first Grey Muzzle grant (July 2018-June 2019), we rescued 20 senior dogs. With more than three months remaining in our second grant period, we have rescued 31 senior dogs from July 2019 through today. During the 2020 grant period, we aim to bring an additional 16 senior dogs into rescue as Grey Muzzle dogs.

With your partnership, Live Love Animal Rescue is the go-to rescue in our community for senior dogs

with medical needs that cannot be met by the shelter. This includes Grey Muzzle grant recipient Gloria, who we rescued from Long Beach Animal Care Services in July of 2019. Gloria was estimated to be 17 years old when she came into the shelter, and with some obvious (but treatable) medical issues, she wasn't getting much interest from adopters. With a full checkup and x-rays supported by our Grey Muzzle grant, we learned that Gloria would be able to thrive after a dental and mass removal. She healed in a foster home, and we promoted Gloria for adoption with adorable photos of her 4th of July celebration. After a few meet-and-greets that didn't pan out, Gloria was adopted by none other than the director of LBACS! She is now living the life of a very loved and very spoiled family dog. A 2020 Grey Muzzle grant would allow us to help 16 more dogs like Gloria who need more time, support, and patience to become adoptable and find their forever families.

We also aim to dedicate a portion of our proposed 2020 grant funds to promoting senior dogs for adoption. This investment will reduce the amount of time that seniors spend in rescue. It also benefits the next dog that we rescue by opening up a foster home and funds for another senior pup sooner. We plan to use evidence-based practices for marketing adoptable senior dogs. In particular, we will highlight the fun and engaging side of senior dogs' personalities by taking them for fun outings. These outings will include a handler and a photographer/videographer so that we are able to generate content for adoption profiles, social media posts, and newsletter stories about adoptable senior dogs. Grant funds will cover purchases of "Adopt Me" gear, costs of activities, and printing of business cards and flyers that can be distributed while senior dogs are out and about.

Grant funding for our Senior Dog Rescue Program would allow us to respond quickly when we receive requests to assist medically needy senior dogs. Knowing that we have dedicated resources available allows our team to say "yes" as soon as we have a foster in place. With your help, we can focus on fundraising for supplementary dollars and ongoing medical costs after ensuring the dog is safe and receiving high-quality medical care. The proposed grant structure would also help us increase our adoption marketing efforts for seniors in order to reduce length of stay in rescue. This will indirectly help us rescue more senior dogs by opening up funds and foster homes more quickly. Dedicated grant funds would be instrumental in helping us to experiment with new strategies for marketing adoptable senior dogs effectively.

In order to support an increasing number of dogs, we work hard to build strong structure and communication among our team. Our foster committee oversees a network of 75 foster homes, many of which are prepared to welcome our senior rescue dogs. We continually recruit new fosters through community outreach, including our short-term Foster the 4th program that engaged over 50 new foster families last July. Many of these families have gone on to foster again on an ongoing basis.

Our adoption committee supports senior dog adoptions by posting profiles on an array of adoption websites, providing foster families with flyers and business cards about their foster dog, coordinating a monthly adoption event, advertising senior dogs on social media, and utilizing partnerships with local and national organizations. With a grant from Maddie's Fund in 2018, we initiated the Woof Agents program to create innovative marketing campaigns that help our longer-term residents, harder to adopt dogs, and senior dogs. This has included half-priced adoptions, professionally produced videos, and special outings to generate photos and stories about adoptable dogs. With the current proposal, we hope to draw upon our Woof Agents team to run an adoption campaign for our senior dogs. Woof Agents will take senior dogs on outings and compile photos, videos, and anecdotes that highlight their fun personalities. We will distribute these materials widely with the goal of inspiring more people to adopt senior dogs.