

Two-Year Roadmap

A Report to the Community



A Message from the Director

In January 2024, the Seattle Animal Shelter (SAS) shared a bold two-year roadmap outlining how the shelter would transform into a more community-focused, equitable, and innovative organization. Like animal shelters across the country, SAS was navigating overcrowding, limited resources, and evolving community needs—challenges magnified by the pandemic.

The roadmap offered an opportunity for SAS to pause, listen, and partner with employees, volunteers, community members, and national animal welfare experts to critically examine where the shelter had been—and where it needed to go next.

Two years later, we're proud to provide an update on our progress. Over 245 action items from the roadmap have been implemented, ensuring that we can better fulfill our mission and serve **every animal—every time**.

The work accomplished over the past two years has helped create a stronger foundation for a shelter that is more community-centered, equitable, and responsive to the needs of both people and pets.

The roadmap was never intended to be an endpoint, however. It's a starting place to get us where we want to go. As we look ahead, the focus shifts to sustaining what has been built, learning from what this process has revealed, and continuing to improve. That means strengthening systems, addressing pain points, and staying open to feedback as the shelter evolves.

Seattle's pets and the people who care for them are at the heart of this work. Thank you for being part of the journey—and for helping shape what comes next.

Sincerely,
Ashley

Ashley Harrington
Division Director
Seattle Animal Shelter



Serving every animal—every time.

The Seattle Animal Shelter (SAS) is a community-powered, public shelter that delivers high-quality, compassionate care to animals in every neighborhood of Seattle. As an open-admission shelter, we never turn an animal away because of species, age, behavior, or medical condition. At SAS, every animal matters, and every person deserves support in keeping the animals they love.

About the Roadmap

The two-year roadmap is an organizational plan aimed at moving SAS to a more community-focused sheltering model. The plan combined recommendations SAS received following close consultation with three different animal welfare experts and firms that conducted a top-to-bottom evaluation of our foster and shelter programs, as well as from input from staff and volunteers.

- Performance Dimensions Group began their work with the shelter in April 2022 and focused on organizational development, like leadership coaching, mission/vision/values identification, team charter development, and more. They provided the shelter with four recommendations focused primarily on organizational culture.
- Dr. Sheila Segurson from Maddie’s Fund completed an assessment that included a survey about shelter programs; review of documents, Standard Operating Procedures, shelter data, and animal records; as well as a three-day site visit. The assessment was done on all cat and dog programs. The results of the assessment were provided to the shelter in a 21-page document in May 2023.
- Rachel Jones, from Rachel at the Shelter, assessed our foster program and advised on program redesign

using our strengths and national best practices. She did this by conducting pre-visit research, on-site research, and post-visit collaboration and reporting.

From this work, the shelter produced a two-year roadmap that outlined key opportunities and over 245 specific recommended action items for implementation. Some of the action items were technical changes that the shelter was able to operationalize more quickly. Other action items are transformational changes that relate to organizational culture and will be ongoing, well after this roadmap.

The consultant work and surveys helped the shelter identify five areas of improvement to focus on from January 2024 through January 2026. The areas were:

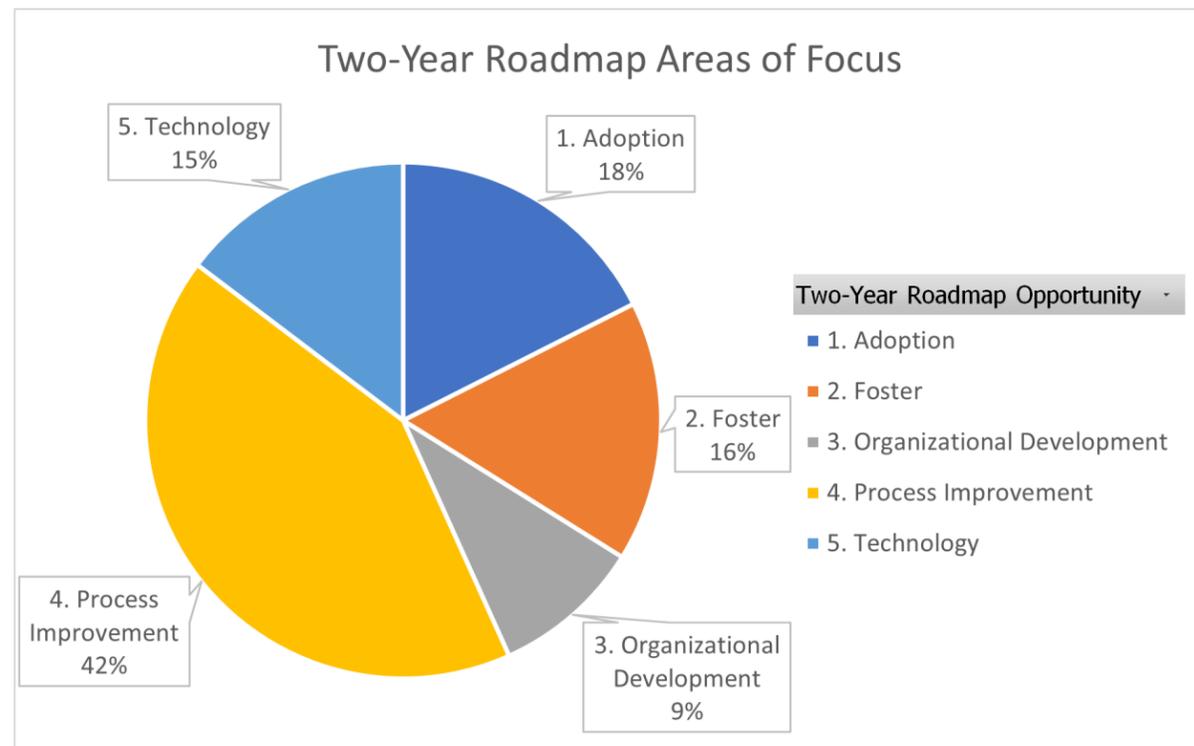
- Improving the animal adoption process and experience
- Enhancing the foster experience
- Advancing organizational development
- Creating process improvements
- Leveraging technology to improve information sharing and processes

All together, the five areas of focus identified over 245 action items, the majority of which focused on process improvements.



The work was split among shelter workgroups, each bringing their own unique experience and expertise, to the improvement area. Teams met regularly to strategize, assess and ensure progress was being met toward each objective. As shown below, 64 action items were completed in the first six months of the roadmap’s

initiation. Larger, more complex action items—like deploying new technology—required sign off and partnership with the City’s IT department and third party vendors, and were not finalized until the final 18-24 months.



OPPORTUNITY 1

Improving the animal adoption process and experience

SAS focused on removing barriers and improving the adoption experience for animals and people alike—recognizing that successful adoptions depend on thoughtful systems, clear information, and strong support.

Supporting animal well-being

- We strengthened enrichment, behavior support, and placement processes to reduce length of stay and improve well-being. This includes implementing daily quiet hours, regular playgroups, and increased enrichment and interaction for dogs with lengths of stay two weeks or longer.
- We updated and standardized intake, behavioral assessment, and documentation practices so animals' needs and histories are more clearly understood. As part of this, behavior staff provide detailed adoption counseling for any dog with a bite history.
- We improved pathways to move animals more quickly into foster or adoptive homes. This includes weekly plea e-mails by SAS' foster coordinator for high priority needs animals that need immediate foster care.

Supporting volunteers and staff

- We worked together to clarify volunteer and foster roles in the adoption process, and developed a comprehensive guide to inform and empower fosters on what to expect, how to support pets in their care, and shepherd them through the adoption process.
- We created shared tools and resources so staff and volunteers have consistent, up-to-date information about animals. This includes the launch of a new volunteer management platform in 2025 that provides improved scheduling, a central hub for information-sharing, and resources such as training guides and links to SAS policies.
- We expanded training and orientation related to adoption counseling, policies, and expectations. This includes training on adoption counseling for animals with challenging behaviors and updated training for volunteer dog walkers.



Supporting community

- We improved public access by expanding shelter hours, sharing clearer adoption information, more transparent counseling, and moving to paperless adoptions.
- We reviewed and revised surrender and adoption processes to identify and remove unnecessary barriers by simplifying surrender forms, conducting adoption follow-up, and recommending pet adopters use a free, post-adoption app, Petsel, for resources on pet parenthood.

OPPORTUNITY 2

Enhancing the foster experience

The shelter's footprint has not changed since it opened in 1982, despite an increase in Seattle's pet population. Given this, fostering is essential to SAS's lifesaving work. The roadmap included detailed actions to strengthen foster onboarding, structure, and visibility.

Supporting foster volunteers

- We developed and utilized a training plan for fosters caring for dogs and cats with medical or behavioral needs. Fosters are now provided clearer guidance for medical fosters and easier access to medical supplies as well as additional support with behavioral issues via trained volunteer and/or professional trainers.
- We finalized a foster onboarding process to ensure fosters are better equipped from the start. The new process enables them to book appointments for foster pick-ups and ensures easy access to documents with detailed guidance and support.

Improving organizational structure

- We established clearer roles, responsibilities, and communication pathways for foster volunteers

by creating an organizational chart for the foster program and clarifying the foster care coordinator as the program lead.

- We implemented regular foster check-ins and created criteria for which animals are prioritized for foster and when a behaviorist is needed for pre-foster counseling.
- We strengthened follow-up processes to better support animals and caregivers throughout foster placements.

Increasing promotion of foster opportunities

- We updated foster-related website content to be clearer and developed resources foster volunteers can access in one location.
- We expanded promotion of foster animals and opportunities through communications between staff and volunteers and with social media.
- We leveraged technology to launch a foster plea board that helps alert fosters to high-priority animals.

The Impact:

Adoption now aims to be more transparent, supportive, and accessible — with the goal of helping animals find homes faster while supporting successful, lasting placements.

1,500 pets were connected with forever homes in 2025.

The Impact:

This work strives to ensure foster volunteers are better prepared, better supported, and more connected—allowing more animals to thrive in home environments and reducing strain on the shelter's capacity.

1,986 pets were placed into foster in 2025.



OPPORTUNITY 3

Advancing organizational development

Meaningful, lasting change depends on strong internal culture, clear processes, and relationships with the community. Advancing organizational development is essential to supporting staff and volunteers while improving how we serve Seattle residents and their pets.

Prioritizing organizational culture

- We provided training on and implemented the use of a trauma-informed approach to better support SAS teams and strengthen how the shelter serves the public.
- We clarified expectations and improved teamwork with a workplace culture agreement for staff and volunteers with support from human resources and labor partners.
- We developed and refined internal processes to

promote consistency, accountability, and clarity by reviewing and updating standard operating procedures about fee waivers and pet owner support.

Building bridges with community

- We assessed field services provided in the community to identify and implement opportunities for animal control officers to support pet owners.
- We established relationships between field services and social service providers to deepen engagement with pet-owning community members through outreach and collaboration.

Impact:
This work will help strengthen relationships within the community and among shelter teams.



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OPPORTUNITY 4

Creating process improvements

The two-year roadmap gave the shelter an opportunity to conduct a bottom-to-top review of its processes. The roadmap emphasized the importance of clear, safe, and consistent operations in a complex shelter environment.

Prioritizing health and safety

- We developed and implemented the use of a flow chart, or pathway tool, to guide decision-making on the medical and behavioral concerns of an animal in the shelter's care to determine if the shelter has the capability to safely meet the animal's needs.
- We created a process to request a behavior needs assessment of animals displaying signs of fear, anxiety, and/or stress to ensure early intervention and make behavior plans that mitigate these behaviors during their shelter stay.
- We provide customized training for staff and monthly training options for volunteers who walk excitable and/or reactive dogs to ensure they can safely interact with them.

Reviewing onboarding and training processes

- We reviewed and updated the volunteer application and onboarding processes, including a change in volunteer management software, to improve accessibility and remove barriers so as many people as possible can volunteer at the shelter.
- We invested in volunteer management software to ensure volunteers can access relevant information for their service at the shelter in one location.

Clarifying roles and responsibilities

- We created and/or modified standard operating procedures for cat and dog enrichment to ensure consistency among Animal Care staff and use when onboarding new employees and volunteers.
- We created job descriptions for multiple volunteer positions to clarify roles and responsibilities between staff and volunteers, improve volunteer onboarding, and support teamwork between staff and volunteers.



Impact:
Day-to-day operations are now clearer and more consistent, helping teams focus their energy on care, service, and community connection.

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OPPORTUNITY 5

Leveraging technology to improve information sharing and processes

Technology plays a critical role in modern, inclusive public service. SAS invested in tools that make information easier to find and services easier to use.

Utilizing technology to improve foster and volunteer visibility

- We built a foster plea board for volunteers to use in selecting their next foster pet and communicating individual animal medical and behavioral needs for foster opportunities.
- We identified volunteer leadership positions and created standardized e-mail addresses to effectively support the work of the volunteer and foster programs.

Overhauling public-facing website and collateral

- We developed an advocacy board to better promote and explain prioritized animals for moving out of the shelter and how volunteers can get involved.
- We revised the public-facing website to share information about behavior and training, housing rights and resources, low-cost services and support, and temporary crisis care to enhance support for community members and their pets.

Modernizing and streamlining processes

- We launched a queue management system to effectively serve the public during the shelter's open hours and give potential adopters easier access to view adoptable animals while they wait.
- We utilized technology to streamline appointment scheduling so foster volunteers can arrange pick-up for their foster pet, ensure they stayed current on their vaccines, and set up adoptions of their foster pet.



Impact:

Community members can more easily find information, engage with the shelter, and take meaningful action—whether adopting, fostering, volunteering, or seeking support.

Looking Ahead

Seattle's pets and the people who love them depend on this work. Now that the shelter's has implemented the 245-plus action items identified through its Two-Year Roadmap, we're in the process of evaluating the changes, adjusting as needed, and identifying continued areas of growth to ensure the shelter is accessible, responsive, reflective of the communities we serve, and providing the best care possible for pets in our care.

The work continues. And it will require continued partnership from our incredible staff, volunteers, partners, and residents who help make transformation possible—and who continue to shape the future of animal welfare in our city.

We thank you for being a part of it.



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