

Expanding the Circle of Care: How Vets and Adoption Organizations Can Partner to Improve Parrots' Lives

As an avian vet, your face time with clients and patients is limited. An office visit is primarily spent addressing health concerns (whether acute or chronic), evaluating patients' symptoms, and ensuring that the proper tests are run. Sometimes, clients need more information about how to live successfully with their challenging and intelligent companions, but you do not have the time to educate them. Clients may also ask your office to help find a home for their bird. Even worse, a client may let your office know that they'll be selling or giving the bird away soon. This new owner may also be ill-informed, and the cycle of poor care continues. Birds suffer. What can vets do? Adoption organizations are one solution, and a great resource for vets and caregivers alike.

What is a Parrot Adoption Organization?

Adoption organizations place birds who are well loved and well cared for in homes that are prepared to meet their needs. Foster homes with informed caregivers get birds ready for adoption. Adoption coordinators work with families so that a good match can be found. These organizations may require a completed application, class attendance and a home visit before the parrot goes to its new home. A successful placement is usually based on the individual bird, and not the species. These organizations can steer potential owners clear of birds that won't work for their families – whether it's the apartment dweller looking for a cockatoo, or the parents of a three year old who want an African grey that their child can snuggle.

Most importantly, a responsible adoption organization offers ongoing educational support to families, and continued learning opportunities for the community, by holding classes and communicating directly with foster and adopting families.

Frank Rutowski, DVM, of Animal Care Hospital of Matthews, Matthews, NC (<http://www.achom.biz>), says, “Hundreds of birds have been placed in new homes as a result of the work of these groups, and more importantly, these birds' lives have been incredibly enriched both mentally and physically. Diets have been corrected, behavioral problems addressed, illnesses treated and environments enriched. I have seen these birds thrive once they were on a nutritionally sound diet and living in a stimulating and challenging environment.”

The care does not end there. Reputable adoption organizations have a process in place to track the progress of parrots in adopting homes, and to rehome birds when necessary. Most parrots will need multiple homes throughout their lives, for the same reason that parrots are relinquished in the first place.

Why Parrots are Relinquished

Most parrots who come to adoption organizations were not “rescues,” a term that implies abuse and neglect, but instead were relinquished by responsible caregivers, looking for a new home for their parrot with people who understand how to care for it. As difficult as it is to give up a beloved companion, relinquishers who seek out adoption organizations, rather than selling the bird or giving it away, are acting in the birds' best interest, and should always be commended.

Parrot care is time consuming, and it is for this reason that many birds are relinquished. Caretakers realize that the clean-up, socialization, feeding and enrichment items that are necessary to keep a bird healthy are too demanding for their schedules. Often, life changes such as divorce, job loss, the birth of a child, or the care of an elderly relative make meeting a parrot's complex needs too difficult.

Long lifespan is another reason birds are relinquished. Many birds outlive their owner's ability to care for them.

Any parrot, no matter where it comes from, can learn behaviors such as biting and screaming that owners do not have the time or expertise to correct.

How Vets and Adoption Organizations can Work Together

Offering Classes and Information

Allowing the use of a room or area in your office where adoption organizations can hold classes is important, as is distributing materials about proper parrot care that these groups produce.

Dr. Rutowski says, “The most critical part of this whole picture, and a part that the groups I work with do extremely well, is to provide education to the community and to prospective adopters, so that proper care of these birds will continue once the birds are in their new homes. I feel as if these birds are hatching out of their shells into a new and better life, and I am extremely proud to play a small role in that process.”

Spreading the Word

When clients mention expanding their flock, let them know of the adoption option. Many people are unaware that birds need new homes just as dogs and cats do, and that the problem of homeless parrots is continuing to grow.

If a client seeks a new home for their bird, let that client know about adoption organizations. These groups may be able to help the owner correct behavior problems, allowing the bird to keep its home, or can place the parrot with a family that's prepared to care for it.

Offering Discounted Services

Responsible adoption organizations should be non-profit and 501(c)(3) certified. Funds are limited, and any discount you can offer allows the group to help more birds. The group should put a process in place that makes it easy for your office to verify that patients are under that organization's care.

What's in it For Your Office?

“Working with adoption organizations is a vital part of our avian practice,” says Scott J Stahl, DVM DABVP-Avian, of Stahl Exotic Animal Veterinary Services, in Fairfax, VA (www.seavs.com). “All birds deserve the best of veterinary care and we want to be part of the team that helps these birds in need. I feel our involvement also ties us into the avian community and helps our avian practice to grow.”

Responsible adoption organization pay for vet services for foster homes, and emphasize the need for annual well-bird checkups to all caregivers. They promote healthy environments to reduce the occurrence of chronic disease, tell owners the signs to look for in a sick bird, refer clients to your practice, and promote the idea that only avian vets are properly trained to treat birds.

"From a business standpoint, we get many referrals from these adoption organizations, so any effort I put forth working with these groups, and any money lost by discounting services, is paid back by new clients generated. To me, though, the personal satisfaction I get by helping these birds to flourish is the best paycheck I can ask for," says Dr. Rutowski.

Consider expanding your circle of care by working with responsible, sustainable adoption organizations in your community. Your clients, and the birds, will truly benefit.