Ontario Rescue Policies & Procedures Manual

Designed by VOA – Voice of Ontario Animals

Rescue legal name	
Version / date approved	
Next review date	
Manual owner (role)	

*This manual sets out how an Ontario animal rescue runs day to day: how animals come in, how they are cared for, how they leave, and how the people involved are protected. It links to the VOA forms (numbered 01–25, listed in Appendix A) used for each step. Each part ends with a **Legal basis** box. Replace anything in [square brackets] and delete what doesn't apply to your rescue. This is a template, not legal advice. Have a lawyer, paralegal or accountant review it before your board adopts it.*

How to use this manual

1. **Adopt it.** The board approves the manual and signs the approval page.
2. **Train on it.** Every director, staff member, foster and volunteer reads the parts that apply to their role and signs that they have read them.
3. **Follow it.** When a policy says "must", it is required. When it says "should", it is the expected practice, and any exception is recorded with the reason.
4. **Keep it current.** Review it at least once a year, and whenever Ontario law changes (Part E, Section 26).

Part A — Organization and Legal Compliance

1. Mission and Scope

Mission: [Rescue name] rescues, rehabilitates and rehomes [dogs / cats / other species] in [area], and works to reduce the number of homeless animals through spay/neuter, education and responsible adoption.

This manual applies to every director, staff member, foster, volunteer and transporter acting for the rescue.

Species we accept: [list]. **We do not accept:** wildlife (see Section 6), and [any others].

2. Governance

- [ ] The rescue is incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation [and/or registered as a charity with the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA)]. Registration number(s): _____
- [ ] A board of at least three directors oversees the rescue. Directors serve without pay.
- [ ] The board meets at least [quarterly] and keeps written minutes.
- [ ] The rescue keeps its by-laws, articles, registers of members and directors, and annual returns up to date.
- [ ] **Conflicts of interest:** a director, staff member or volunteer must say so if they, or a family member, could benefit from a decision (for example, adopting an animal, or a business supplying the rescue). They step out of that decision, and it is recorded in the minutes.
- [ ] Directors and coordinators may not adopt, foster or buy rescue property on better terms than the public without board approval.

3. Legal Compliance Overview

The rescue must follow these laws in everything it does. Each part of this manual explains how.

Area	Main law
Animal care and distress	PAWS Act, 2019 and O. Reg. 444/19 (standards of care)
Dog bites and the pit bull ban	Dog Owners' Liability Act
Rabies vaccination and bite reporting	Health Protection and Promotion Act, Regs. 567 and 557
Veterinary care	Veterinarians Act (see note in Section 8)
Wildlife	Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, 1997
Contracts and signatures	Age of Majority and Accountability Act; Electronic Commerce Act, 2000; common law

Area	Main law
Volunteers and fairness	Human Rights Code; Police Record Checks Reform Act, 2015
Driving and transport	Highway Traffic Act; Compulsory Automobile Insurance Act; Health of Animals Regulations (federal)
Corporation and charity	Not-for-Profit Corporations Act, 2010; Income Tax Act (federal)
Local rules	Municipal by-laws (licensing, pet limits, stray holding periods, microchips)

Municipal by-laws: Each city sets its own rules on pet licences, how many animals one home may keep, stray holding periods and, in some places, microchips. The rescue keeps a copy of the by-laws for every municipality where it has fosters, and checks them before placing animals.

> **Legal basis:** Not-for-Profit Corporations Act, 2010 (directors, records, conflicts of interest). Registered charities must follow the federal *Income Tax Act* and CRA rules. PAWS Act: every owner or custodian of an animal must meet the prescribed standards of care, and no one may cause or permit an animal to be in distress.

Part B — Animal Intake and Care

4. Intake Policy

1. The rescue accepts animals only when it has a **confirmed foster or kennel space**, and the funds to give basic vet care. A waitlist is kept when space is full.
2. **Priority** goes to: [animals in immediate danger / pound or shelter pulls / urgent surrenders / others].
3. Every animal gets an intake record and a rescue ID number on the day it arrives.
4. The rescue may decline an intake. When it does, it gives the person other options, such as other rescues, the local shelter or humane society, or 211.

5. Intake Procedures by Type

Type	Steps	Forms
Owner surrender	Counselling first to see if the animal can stay home → confirm the person owns the animal and is 18+ → collect records → signed transfer of ownership	12 Surrender Counselling, 13 Owner Surrender
Stray	Record where and when found → scan for microchip and look for tags → report to municipal animal services → hold for the municipal holding period before rehoming	14 Stray Intake
Transfer from another rescue or shelter	Signed transfer agreement → written health and bite disclosures → records received at handover	24 Inter-Rescue Transfer, 23 Animal Transport
Private rehoming help	Owner keeps the animal until a new home is found; ownership passes directly to the new owner	15 Ownership Transfer

Strays and ownership: A found animal still belongs to its owner. The rescue must make real efforts to find the owner, follow the municipality's holding period, and keep records of those efforts, before treating the animal as available for adoption.

Pit bulls: Ontario's Dog Owners' Liability Act bans transferring pit bulls. Before accepting or placing any dog that could be covered, the rescue gets legal advice.

6. Wildlife

The rescue **does not** take in or keep wildlife. When someone calls about injured, orphaned or sick wildlife, refer them to an authorized wildlife custodian (rehabilitator), or the Ministry's wildlife advice line: **1-888-574-6656**. Don't tell the public to keep wildlife, and don't keep it yourself.

> **Legal basis:** Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, 1997: keeping wildlife in captivity without authorization is generally not allowed. A person who finds sick, injured or orphaned wildlife must, in general, transfer it to an authorized wildlife custodian or a vet within 24 hours.

7. Intake Health Check and Quarantine

1. Within [24–48] hours of intake, every animal is checked by a vet or a trained coordinator, and booked for a full vet exam within [7] days.
2. Every new animal is **quarantined** for [14] days, kept apart from other animals, as the Quarantine and Isolation Policy sets out (form 22). Sick animals are **isolated**.
3. Each day of quarantine or isolation is recorded (form 21).
4. Any animal under a **public health rabies observation order** stays where public health directs, and isn't moved, adopted or vaccinated against rabies until public health releases it.

8. Veterinary and Medical Care

- [ ] Only a licensed veterinarian diagnoses illness, prescribes drugs, performs surgery or decides on treatment. Volunteers and fosters give care **only as the vet directs**.
- [ ] Every vaccine, test, medication and treatment is recorded (form 18).
- [ ] Cats, dogs and ferrets are vaccinated against rabies at 3 months of age or older, as the law requires.
- [ ] Fosters have signed medical release authority to take animals to an approved vet (form 16).
- [ ] Spending limits: coordinators may approve vet costs up to $[____]. Anything higher needs [director] approval, except in an emergency.
- [ ] Emergency vet: [clinic name / phone / address].

> **Legal basis:** Reg. 567 under the *Health Protection and Promotion Act* (rabies immunization of cats, dogs and ferrets 3 months or older). In Ontario, only a licensed veterinarian may practise veterinary medicine (Veterinarians Act). *Note: the Veterinary Professionals Act, 2024 is replacing the Veterinarians Act. Check which one is in force.*

9. Spay / Neuter

1. Every animal is spayed or neutered **before adoption**, unless a vet says it is unsafe because of age or health.
2. If an animal is adopted before it is old enough, the adoption agreement sets a deadline. The rescue follows up until it is done (form 19).
3. The rescue does not breed animals, and does not place animals for breeding.

10. Behaviour Assessment and Bite Protocol

1. Every dog [and cat] gets a behavioural assessment before it is listed for adoption, and again if new concerns come up (form 17).
2. **All known bite history is disclosed in writing** to fosters, adopters and receiving rescues.
3. **If an animal bites or scratches someone:**
   - Separate the animal and get first aid for the person. The person should see a doctor.
   - Tell the coordinator the same day, and write an incident report.
   - **Report to the local public health unit** where the bite may have exposed the person to rabies. Follow any observation or confinement order.
   - Review the animal's behaviour plan before it is placed again.
4. Animals with serious bite histories are placed only with a written behaviour plan, after a qualified trainer or behaviourist reviews them, or are not placed at all (see Section 12).

> **Legal basis:** Reg. 557 (*Health Protection and Promotion Act*): animal bites that may expose a person to rabies must be reported to the medical officer of health. Dog Owners' Liability Act: a dog's owner is liable for bites and attacks, and a court can order precautions or destruction of a dog.

11. Microchipping

Every animal is microchipped before adoption, and the chip is registered to the rescue on intake. On adoption, the registration is transferred to the adopter, and the rescue is listed as a backup contact (form 20). Ontario has no provincial microchip law. Check your municipality's by-law.

12. End-of-Life Decisions

1. Euthanasia is considered **only** to relieve suffering that can't be treated, or where a qualified professional finds the animal poses a serious danger to people or other animals that can't be managed.
2. It is never done for space, cost alone, or convenience.
3. The decision is made by [two directors / the director and the vet] together, and recorded with the reasons.
4. Euthanasia is performed **only by a licensed veterinarian**, humanely.
5. The foster is told with care and, where possible, may be present.

> **Legal basis:** The PAWS Act and O. Reg. 444/19 require that an animal not be left in distress, and that euthanasia be done humanely.

Part C — Placement Programs

13. Foster Program

1. Every foster home completes an application, a reference check and a home check before taking an animal (form 06).
2. Fosters sign the Foster Care Agreement, and get the Foster Care Policy (forms 07 and 08).
3. **The rescue keeps ownership** of every animal in foster care. Fosters may not rehome, sell, give away or breed a foster animal.
4. The rescue pays approved vet costs. Fosters provide daily care, keep medication and behaviour records, and send updates by the dates the rescue sets.
5. A coordinator checks in with each foster at least [weekly] for the first two weeks, then [every two weeks].
6. The rescue may move an animal out of a foster home at any time, for the animal's welfare.
7. Fosters check their lease, condo rules and municipal pet limits before fostering.

14. Adoption Standards

Ready for adoption means the animal:

- [ ] has finished quarantine and has a vet exam on file,

- [ ] is vaccinated (including rabies if old enough), dewormed and treated for parasites,
- [ ] is spayed or neutered, or has a written deadline (Section 9),
- [ ] is microchipped,
- [ ] has a behavioural assessment on file, and
- [ ] has a written disclosure of all known health and behaviour issues.

Adoption steps:

Step	What happens	Form
1. Application	Adopter applies (18+), with ID and landlord permission if renting	01
2. Screening	References, vet reference, interview	01
3. Home visit	In person or virtual	05
4. Meet-and-greet	With all household members and pets	—
5. Agreement	Adopter reads and signs; fee paid; disclosures initialled	02, 03
6. Handover	Records, microchip transfer, care information	20
7. Follow-up	Check-ins at [2 weeks, 3 months, 1 year]	04

Fair screening: The rescue judges each application on the animal's needs and the home's ability to meet them. It does not turn down applicants because of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital or family status, or disability. Every reason for declining is recorded.

Fees: Adoption fees are set by the board, posted publicly, and help cover vet care. Fees: [list by species/age].

Returns: Adopters must return the animal to the rescue, not rehome it, if they can't keep it. Refunds follow the adoption agreement.

> **Legal basis:** The adoption agreement is a binding contract under Ontario common law. The adopter must be 18+ (Age of Majority and Accountability Act). The Human Rights Code protects people from discrimination in services. Under the Residential Tenancies Act, s. 14, a "no pets" clause in a lease is void, but condo rules may still restrict pets.

15. Ownership Transfers and Courtesy Listings

When the rescue helps a member of the public rehome an animal directly, the owner and new owner sign an Ownership Transfer Agreement (form 15). The rescue makes clear in writing that it does not own, inspect or guarantee the animal.

16. Inter-Rescue Transfers

Animals are sent to, or taken from, other rescues only under a signed Inter-Rescue Transfer Agreement (form 24). The agreement records who owns the animal, the written health and bite disclosures, who pays, and when responsibility passes.

17. Transport

1. Only approved drivers who have signed the Transport Volunteer Waiver may transport animals (form 25).
2. Every trip is recorded on an Animal Transport Form, with the chain-of-custody signatures (form 23).
3. Animals are always crated, and never left alone in a vehicle.
4. Moves across provincial or national borders follow CFIA rules.

> **Legal basis:** PAWS Act and O. Reg. 444/19 (standards of care in transit). *Health of Animals Regulations*, Part XII (transport), CFIA. Highway Traffic Act.

Part D — People and Safety

18. Volunteers

1. Every volunteer completes an application, is 18+ (or [16+] with a parent or guardian's written consent, for roles without animal handling risk), and signs the Volunteer Agreement and Code of Conduct (forms 09, 10, 11).

2. Volunteers get training for their role before starting, and are supervised until signed off.
3. **Police record checks** are asked for only where the role needs it, such as home visits, handling money or working with children, and only at the level the role needs. The volunteer consents in writing.
4. Volunteers are not paid. If the rescue later hires staff, Ontario employment and workplace safety laws apply to them.
5. The rescue keeps a record of each volunteer's role, training and signed forms.
6. A volunteer may be removed for breaking the Code of Conduct. The reason is recorded.

> **Legal basis:** Police Record Checks Reform Act, 2015 (written consent, and only the level of check the role needs). Human Rights Code (fair treatment in volunteer selection).

19. Code of Conduct (summary)

Everyone acting for the rescue must:

- [ ] Treat animals humanely. **No hitting, yelling, or harsh training tools**, such as prong, choke or shock collars.
- [ ] Treat adopters, fosters, volunteers and the public with respect, including online.
- [ ] Keep personal information confidential (Section 21).
- [ ] Never take animals, supplies or money for personal use.
- [ ] Never work with animals while impaired.
- [ ] Report animal welfare concerns, injuries and incidents right away.
- [ ] Speak publicly for the rescue only with permission (Section 23).

The full Code is form 10.

20. Health and Safety

1. **Zoonotic diseases:** Wash hands after handling animals. Wear gloves for cleaning and sick animals. People who are pregnant, or have weakened immune systems, should avoid cleaning litter boxes and handling sick animals.
2. **Bites and scratches:** Follow the bite protocol (Section 10). Volunteers are encouraged to keep their tetanus shots up to date. Those with high exposure, such as handling unvaccinated strays, should ask their doctor about rabies pre-exposure vaccination.

3. **Safe handling:** Use leashes, crates and two-person handling for fearful or large animals. Never put your face near an unknown animal.
4. **First aid:** Keep a first aid kit at every site and in transport vehicles.
5. **Home visits:** Go in pairs, or tell the coordinator where you are going and when you'll be back. Leave if you feel unsafe.
6. **Children:** Anyone who suspects a child is being harmed or neglected must report it directly to a children's aid society.
7. **Domestic violence:** If a person surrendering or fostering an animal discloses abuse, give them the **Assaulted Women's Helpline: 1-866-863-0511** (TTY 1-866-863-7868), and treat their information with extra care.

> **Legal basis:** Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017, s. 125: anyone who has reasonable grounds to suspect a child needs protection must report it directly to a children's aid society. PAWS Act (prohibits causing or permitting distress).

Part E — Operations and Emergency Protocols

21. Records and Privacy

1. **Animal records** (intake, vet, behaviour, foster, adoption and transfer) are kept for each animal, for at least [7] years after it leaves the rescue.
2. **Financial records** are kept for at least 6 years, as CRA requires for registered charities.
3. **Personal information** of adopters, fosters, volunteers, surrendering owners and finders is collected only for a clear purpose, used only for that purpose, and stored securely (locked files, password-protected accounts, limited access).
4. Personal information is never posted online, or shared outside the rescue, without the person's consent, except where the law requires it, such as public health bite reports.
5. A person may ask to see the information the rescue holds about them.
6. If personal information is lost or wrongly shared, the coordinator tells the board right away, and the affected people are told.

> **Legal basis:** Federal *Income Tax Act* (record keeping by registered charities). The federal privacy law PIPEDA applies to personal information collected in commercial activity. Many rescues are not covered by it for all activities, but following its fair information principles is best practice.

22. Finances and Fundraising

- [ ] Two people count and record cash donations and adoption fees.
- [ ] Every spending over $[____] needs approval from [two signing officers].
- [ ] Tax receipts are issued only by a **registered charity**, and only for gifts that qualify under CRA rules. Adoption fees are not donations.
- [ ] Raffles and 50/50 draws need a lottery licence from the municipality or the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO).
- [ ] Donations given for a specific purpose, such as one animal's surgery, are used for that purpose, or the donor is asked.
- [ ] The board reviews a financial statement at least [quarterly], and approves the annual financial statements.

23. Communications and Social Media

1. Only [named roles] post for the rescue or speak to the media.
2. Animal listings are honest: they include known health and behaviour issues, and never promise an animal is "perfect" or "guaranteed".
3. Photos of people, and their addresses or vehicles, are posted only with consent.
4. Use only photos and music the rescue owns, or has permission to use.
5. Respond to criticism calmly and briefly, and take disputes offline.

24. Complaints, Concerns and Animal Welfare Reports

1. **Complaints** from the public, adopters or volunteers go to [role / email]. They are acknowledged within [5] days, looked into, and answered in writing. If the complaint is about a coordinator, it goes to the board.
2. **Anyone may raise a concern** about how an animal is being treated, by the rescue or by a foster or adopter, without fear of being punished.
3. If an animal may be in distress, call the **Ontario Animal Protection Call Centre: 1-833-9-ANIMAL (1-833-926-4625)**. If an animal is in immediate danger, call 911.

4. The rescue cooperates fully with PAWS inspectors, and keeps a record of every inspection.

25. Emergency Protocols

Key emergency numbers (fill in and post at every site):

Emergency	Contact
Police, fire, ambulance	911
Emergency vet (24 hr)	
Rescue on-call coordinator	
Animal distress	1-833-9-ANIMAL (1-833-926-4625)
Local public health unit (bites)	
Municipal animal services	
Poison control (pets)	

A. Animal emergency (injury, poisoning, sudden illness)

1. Keep yourself safe. Muzzle or wrap the animal if it may bite.
2. Call the emergency vet, then the on-call coordinator.
3. Take the animal to the vet. Approval for costs follows Section 8.
4. Write an incident report within 24 hours.

B. Lost or escaped animal

1. Tell the on-call coordinator **immediately**.
2. Search the area right away. Don't chase the animal; use food, a familiar person or a humane trap.
3. Report it to municipal animal services, nearby shelters and vets, and the microchip registry.
4. Post lost-animal notices within [2] hours, with the coordinator's approval.
5. Keep searching and record every sighting until the animal is found.

C. Disease outbreak

1. Isolate sick animals at once, and stop all intakes, adoptions and transfers from the affected home or site.
2. Get vet direction on testing, treatment and cleaning.
3. Tell everyone who may have been exposed, including adopters and receiving rescues.
4. Report any **CFIA reportable disease** as the vet directs.
5. Restart only when the vet clears it.

D. Fire, flood, power loss or evacuation

1. People first. Get out, and call 911.
2. Every foster home keeps a **go-kit**: carriers, leashes, 3 days of food and water, medications, and copies of records.
3. Each foster has a backup foster or boarding plan, and a way to reach the rescue.
4. The rescue keeps a current list of every animal's location, with its foster's contact information.
5. Account for every animal, and tell the coordinator when all are safe.

E. Serious bite or attack

Follow Section 10, report to public health, and keep the animal confined as directed. The board reviews every serious incident.

F. Death of an animal in care

Tell the coordinator the same day. Ask the vet whether a necropsy is needed. Record the cause of death, and tell the foster and any pending adopter with care.

G. Threat to people (harassment, violence, unsafe home visit)

Leave right away. Call 911 if anyone is in danger. Report it to the coordinator. The rescue doesn't place or leave animals in a home where people are unsafe.

26. Policy Review

1. The board reviews this manual **at least once a year**, and after any serious incident, inspection or change in law.
2. Changes are recorded in the change log below, and shared with everyone affected.
3. Laws change. Check Ontario e-Laws, CFIA and your municipality's by-laws before relying on any section.

Date	Section changed	Summary	Approved by

> **Legal basis:** PAWS Act (inspections and distress). *Health of Animals Act* (federal): certain diseases must be reported to the CFIA. Lottery licences for raffles are issued under the federal *Criminal Code* and Ontario's licensing system (AGCO).

Board Approval

This Policies and Procedures Manual was approved by the board of directors of [Rescue legal name] on _____ (date), and takes effect on _____.

	Rescue (Executive Director / Coordinator)	Board Chair	Witness
Signature			
Printed name			
Date			

Acknowledgement (each director, staff member, foster and volunteer)

I have read the parts of this manual that apply to my role, and I agree to follow them.

Name	Role	Parts read	Signature	Date

Appendix A — VOA Forms Index

#	Form	Used in
01	Adoption Application	Sec. 14
02	Adoption Agreement	Sec. 14
03	Adoption Law Information Sheet	Sec. 14
04	Adoption Follow-Up Forms	Sec. 14
05	Adoption Home Visit Checklist	Sec. 14
06	Foster Care Application	Sec. 13
07	Foster Care Policy	Sec. 13
08	Foster Care Agreement and Forms	Sec. 13
09	Volunteer Application	Sec. 18
10	Volunteer Code of Conduct	Sec. 18, 19
11	Volunteer Agreement	Sec. 18
12	Surrender Counselling Form	Sec. 5
13	Owner Surrender Form	Sec. 5
14	Stray Intake Form	Sec. 5
15	Ownership Transfer Agreement	Sec. 5, 15
16	Pet Medical Release	Sec. 8
17	Behavioural Assessment Form	Sec. 10
18	Vaccine and Treatment Log	Sec. 8
19	Spay / Neuter Tracker (spreadsheet)	Sec. 9
20	Microchip Registration Checklist	Sec. 11, 14
21	Isolation and Quarantine Log	Sec. 7
22	Quarantine and Isolation Policy	Sec. 7
23	Animal Transport Form	Sec. 16, 17

#	Form	Used in
24	Inter-Rescue Transfer Agreement	Sec. 5, 16
25	Transport Volunteer Waiver	Sec. 17

Appendix B — Laws Referenced

Law	Sections
Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act, 2019	3, 12, 17, 20, 24, 26
O. Reg. 444/19: Standards of Care	3, 12, 17
Dog Owners' Liability Act	3, 5, 10
Health Protection and Promotion Act, Reg. 567 (rabies immunization)	7, 8
Health Protection and Promotion Act, Reg. 557 (bite reporting)	7, 10
Veterinarians Act / Veterinary Professionals Act, 2024	8, 12
Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, 1997	6
Not-for-Profit Corporations Act, 2010	2
Income Tax Act (federal) and CRA charity rules	2, 21, 22
Age of Majority and Accountability Act	14, 18
Human Rights Code	14, 18
Residential Tenancies Act, 2006, s. 14	14
Police Record Checks Reform Act, 2015	18
Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017, s. 125	20
Highway Traffic Act	17
Health of Animals Act and Regulations (federal, CFIA)	17, 25

Law	Sections
PIPEDA (federal privacy)	21
Criminal Code (federal) and AGCO lottery licensing	22
Municipal by-laws	3, 5, 11, 13
Ontario common law (contract, negligence, property)	5, 14

Appendix C — Helplines and Contacts

Service	Number
Ontario Animal Protection Call Centre	1-833-9-ANIMAL (1-833-926-4625)
Ministry wildlife advice line	1-888-574-6656
Assaulted Women's Helpline	1-866-863-0511 (TTY 1-866-863-7868)
Suicide Crisis Helpline	9-8-8
Community and social services	2-1-1
Local public health unit	
Municipal animal services	
Emergency vet (24 hr)	

Laws change. Check the current version on Ontario e-Laws, CFIA and your municipality before relying on any section. Current as of November 2026.

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*Rescue Policies & Procedures Manual designed by **VOA – Voice of Ontario Animals**. Free to use and adapt for animal rescues in Ontario.*