

How do you find responsible rescue?

If you're looking for a purebred, your best bet is breed rescue, not an all-breed rescue. All dogs are not alike and people who specialize in one breed know it backwards and forwards.

Do a Google search and prepare to do some serious checking. Here are a few things that do NOT necessarily mean a rescue organization is a good one. They don't really mean much one way or the other.

- ✓ A 501c status with the IRS. This is simply a matter of saying the right things, filing paperwork, and paying a fee. In some states it is now required for a rescue that takes animals from shelters, but it is not an indication of respectability. It just means the rescue organization is a nonprofit. Most of them are.
- ✓ Affiliation with the parent breed club. Parent breed clubs are the national organizations recognized by AKC as the "stewards of the breed." Every parent club must now have a rescue contact. However, the clubs take that responsibility with varying degrees of seriousness and just because someone is the rescue contact for the Flat Island Zorcher Club of America does not mean he or she follows any specific rules. AKC just says they have to have a contact; there are no performance guidelines.
- ✓ A name with "humane society" or "sanctuary" or any other word that generally gives you the warm fuzzies. A name is just a name and people pick the ones that appeal to them and suit their purposes. After all the Humane Society of the United States doesn't own a single shelter and very little of the contributions to it go towards shelters.
- ✓ A name with "Inc" at the end. Again, just a matter of paying a fee and filling out paperwork for incorporation. Mostly it means the board of directors can't be sued because of something done by a representative of the corporation or a dog placed by a representative.
- ✓ A set-up at one of the rescue fairs at the pet stores, community festivals or anywhere else. Some of these places (PetSmart is one) do screen the shelters and rescuers who are represented on their adoption days. Others don't. Before you rely on that as a credential, find out what rescuers have to do in order to set up there. Sometimes it just involves making a phone call and showing up with some crates.

The size of a rescue organization can vary from a one- or two-person operation to one with hundreds of volunteers. Neither is better, though obviously if you go to a larger group, there will be backup in case something happens and your original contact is not available. Also if you have a problem with the rescuer you're working with, there's someone else to contact.

On the negative side, large groups are sometimes bogged down in bureaucracy and regulation. They may be less able to make exceptions to rules or take special circumstances into consideration. It takes longer to get a decision from them. I knew of one that had to have a vote from the entire board of directors to authorize every veterinary visit for any dog taken in.

Regardless of size, there are some basic questions you can ask that will help you decide whether you want to work with a specific rescuer or organization in finding a dog.

1. How much experience (in years and in numbers of animals) have you had with this breed? With dogs in general? With dog rescue?

In the case of a mixed breed or all-breed rescue, only the last two questions would apply, but again, we recommend a breed-specific rescue if you know what breed you want. Someone who knows Pomeranians from A to Z may not know squat about German Shepherds, and in the case of what is and is not an acceptable temperament or behavior pattern for the breed, that matters a lot.

2. May I see the health records?

If you are not yet considering a specific dog, ask to see health records for any animal they are offering. This will tell you a lot about their organizational ability, attention to detail, and thoroughness. Dogs adopted from rescue should have had a recent physical exam from a vet, be current on vaccinations, be parasite free (internal and external, including heartworms), and be in good health or well on the way to it. Some dogs come into rescue with various health problems, but they should have been addressed by the time the dog is available for adoption. Finishing up a round of antibiotics is fine; "we're trying to figure out what's wrong with his eyes" is not.

3. Are your dogs spayed or neutered before going to new homes?

Only one answer is acceptable: Yes. Some rescuers will release puppies intact but with a contract requiring that they be sterilized as soon as they are old enough. The rescue organization should have a strict follow-up policy on that agreement.

4. What kind of follow-up do you do?

A good rescue calls, emails, or writes shortly after you take your new dog home, and likes to hear from you regularly or at least occasionally. You want to get the feeling that they will be there with advice if your dog suddenly forgets his housebreaking or decides to dismantle the living room.

5. How long has this dog been in foster care?

The right answer is in weeks, not days. Anyone experienced in dogs knows that a dog in a strange situation goes through a "honeymoon period." He's nervous and may be on his best behavior, just as you would be as a guest in a stranger's home. Or he's a basket case because of insecurity. Either way he's not acting the way he normally does. These behavior patterns will change after he settles in and the rescuer needs to know the "real dog" before matching him to a home.

I can't tell you the number of rescue dogs we have taken in and said to each other, "Why in the world was this dog in the shelter (or turned in to us)? She's perfect!" A month later we knew. The story of Maggie the Worst Collie in the World began that way and she turned out to be such a handful that she was unadoptable -- constant recreational barking and the tendency to destroy anything she could reach were only two of the reasons she was in the shelter! We kept her here and loved her dearly till we lost her to cancer, but she was certainly not the perfect pet she seemed to be for the first two weeks we had her! If we had placed her during that time, we would have found her tied to our door a few weeks later along with a nasty note.

It's sad that rescuers cannot take in all the worthy dogs, but by cutting corners on foster time to run more dogs through, they may do a lot of overall harm to the cause.

6. What kind of training do your dogs get in foster care?

Rescue dogs should go to new homes housebroken -- or at least well-started on it -- leash trained, and with basic house manners. Any behavioral issues should be identified and started to be addressed. The new owner should get a thorough explanation of the problems -- no sugarcoating! -- and the proposed program for solving them. Again, that's part of what you pay for with the difference between rescue and a shelter fee.

7. What if he doesn't work out?

Again, only one answer: You bring him back. As far as a refund of your payment, that may vary. For 48 hours or so, you should get a full refund...it simply wasn't meant to be. After that, it really is up to the rescue organization. They may have passed up another home for the dog in holding him for you and will now have the expense of keeping him longer. Some of that is simply their cost of doing business; they can't expect every placement to work out. But if you wait a month or so before deciding this just isn't the dog for you, don't expect to have your money refunded. And by the way, they shouldn't give you a bad time for bringing him back either. It doesn't mean you were a bad owner.

Asking questions works both ways. The rescue organization will be asking you lots of questions too. The purpose is to help make the best match, increasing the odds that this will be a forever home for the rescue dog. The rescue organization should ask for your references and request to do a home visit before finalizing the adoption.

Finally, nearly all rescuers are good people who want very much to help dogs. Some just go about it better than others. And there are a few exceptions to the goodhearted ones. There's a getup in the midwest that calls itself a rescue. You email or call them with your specifications for a dog, they go to the local shelters and look for one. When they find one, you send money for their fee, a crate, and shipping, and they'll send you a shelter dog. No one I know would call that a rescue organization, but they're not doing anything illegal.

There's another very large corporation in California that makes lots of money selling rescue dogs. (Remember that a nonprofit can still pay extremely generous salaries. The president of HSUS earns well over \$300,000 a year.) I have no idea what their adoption fees are, but they have a 5000 vet hospital with separate surgical building and a "kennel" described as "custom built doggie bungalows feature air conditioning, plush carpeting, sound proof insulation, giant doggie doors, huge elevated feeders, and automatic waterers." Nothing wrong with that either, but I don't think it's what most people have in mind when they think about adopting a rescue dog. (Sheesh, why would any dog want to leave that place to live with us??)

The point is that there are rescuers and there are rescuers. Don't assume they are all the same. Know whom you are dealing with.

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~~Please donate to your local animal shelter. Donations to the national humane organizations seldom go to actually help any dogs, but are used to further agendas you may not want to support. ~~



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