

Breaking Down Stereotypes



Stereotypes about people get in the way of our work for animals and pet families. They leave us with many wrong assumptions, which cause real harm. Our best work depends on replacing stereotypes with accurate, fair ideas, and we need better messaging to make this change. (See SPARC’s full guide here - [Messaging with Dignity: Stereotypes](#))

Stereotype Thinking	Why This Hurts	Seeing Individuals	Why This Helps
 <p>I know their type and I know how this is going to go.</p>	<p>Assumptions undermine our ability to be fair in our interactions, policies, and programs. We end up pushing away caring, helpful people and the animals connected to them.</p>	 <p>I'll get to know them and their realities.</p>	<p>We build better programs and policies when we understand the realities that people and pets face. Understanding individuals creates opportunities to build relationships and collaborate.</p>

Four Ways to Counter Stereotypes

- **Share Individual Stories:** Share real stories that challenge stereotypes.
- **Expand the Story:** Add context about people’s realities.
- **Highlight Assets:** Lead with someone’s strengths.
- **Share a New Perspective:** See the situation from another angle.

Share Individual Stories

We Hear	We Say	Why this Helps
<p><i>“I can’t take it with these people who keep missing their appointments. They don’t care about the work we put into this or respect us enough to let us know they can’t come. If you really cared, you would find a way to get here.”</i></p> <p>The Stereotype: People who don’t show up don’t care about us or their animals.</p>	<p>“Remember Rebecca and her cat, Toledo? She missed her first appointment because the bus wouldn’t allow her cat carrier. Then she missed the second when the friend who promised to let her borrow her car never showed up. I really feel for her. She loves that cat so much. A lot of our clients deal with these kinds of issues.”</p>	<p>Real stories are memorable. When they don’t fit stereotypes, they break down oversimplified ideas and help us overcome assumptions and judgments.</p>

Expand the Story

See [Systems Framing for Animal Care and Well-being](#)

We Hear	We Say	Why this Helps
<p><i>“People in <that neighborhood> don’t take care of their pets. It’s horrible.”</i></p> <p>The Stereotype: “That” part of town is full of people who aren’t good to animals.</p>	<p><i>“There is not a single veterinary clinic or pet supply store there, when other parts of town have tons of options for pet owners. It’s not fair that access to pet care is so lopsided and it makes it impossible for a lot of caring people to provide for their animals the way they want to.”</i></p>	<p>We can expand how we see a situation by adding more context. When we include the realities and barriers people face - like unequal access to care - we see that outcomes aren’t just about individual choices.</p>

Highlight Assets

We Hear	We Say	Why this Helps
<p><i>“Simon is homeless and living on the streets with his dogs Chino and Rex. As a recovering drug addict, he depends on his dogs for support and love. He can’t get a job and that’s made it hard to feed his dogs .”</i></p> <p>The Stereotype: People experiencing homelessness shouldn’t have pets.</p>	<p><i>“Simon is a devoted owner to his dogs Chino and Rex, who he calls his “angels”. He’s avoided the men’s shelter because he doesn’t want to be separated from them. He’s actively looking for a stable housing situation. In the meantime, getting a regular supply of dog food has been a challenge.”</i></p>	<p>When we focus only on someone’s struggles, we miss the full person and may judge them as unworthy. Highlighting strengths helps us see people more fairly and accurately. This approach is known as “asset framing.” *</p> <p><i>*Asset Framing was created by Trabian Shorters.</i></p>

Share a New Perspective

We Hear	We Say	Why this Helps
<p><i>“Don’t take the dog to the shelter, they’re just going to kill it.”</i></p> <p>The Stereotype: Animal shelters are likely to euthanize the animals that come in.</p>	<p><i>“I can’t imagine how hard it would be to work at a place where there are so many animals coming in and not enough resources to care for them all. People who work at shelters are up against a lot, including situations where some pets cannot be rehomed due to serious health and safety issues. Shelter staff are some of the most hard-working, compassionate people I’ve ever met. It’s good to call first to see what their policies and options are.”</i></p>	<p>Seeing a situation from another side helps build empathy. It allows us to better understand what someone may be feeling or experiencing, and to question our assumptions.</p>