



DATA

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What Open Data is Doing for Denver Dogs

A new Twitter bot gathers up doggie data from the Denver Animal Shelter's website and works to find potential adopters.

BY JASON SHUEH ([HTTP://WWW.GOVTECH.COM/AUTHORS/JASON-SHUEH.HTML](http://www.govtech.com/authors/jason-shueh.html)) / MAY 8, 2014



STINKDOG PHOTOS ([HTTP://WWW.STINKDOGPHTOS.COM/](http://www.stinkdogphotos.com/))



The “Cuties in Denver (<https://twitter.com/CutiesInDenver>)” Twitter account is a scrolling list of shaggy headshots and canine salutations: “Hey! I’m Juna,” a post starts, “I’m a spayed female, tan and white, terrier mix...”

“They call me Nigel,” another reads. “I am a neutered male, brown Dachshund...”

“Hello! I am Banjo,” says the next, “I am a neutered male, red and tan Australian Cattle Dog...”

And the posts continue.

“I’m Charlie..., HI! I’m Harold..., They call me Lady Di...¡Hola! Me llamo Hector..., Hey, I’m Cashew...”

The tweets belong to the Denver Animal Shelter

([http://www.denvergov.org/Default.aspx?](http://www.denvergov.org/Default.aspx?alias=www.denvergov.org/DenverAnimalShelter)

[alias=www.denvergov.org/DenverAnimalShelter](http://www.denvergov.org/DenverAnimalShelter)), and each links back to a shelter dog.

The posts are the latest incarnation of a civic hacking fellowship coordinated by Code for America (CfA), a national nonprofit that harnesses tech to answer community needs.

Like the dogs, the entity managing the account isn't human -- it's a Twitter bot that's hopped inside the shelter's website, gathering up doggie data and works to find potential adopters.

"There's a lot of challenges with keeping animals in shelters; the longer they're there, the less adoptable they become," said Drew Wilson, one of the CfA fellows behind Cuties in Denver.



As part of CfA's year-long 2014 fellowship with the city of Denver,

(<http://codeforamerica.org/cities/denver/>)

Wilson said the Twitter account's intent is to expedite animal stays by increasing adoptions.

Time spent in shelters can be harrowing for animals even in the best conditions, he said.

Even though they receive quality care, their mental and physical conditions deteriorate with

the stress of a captive environment. It's a fact that staff at the Denver Animal Shelter emphasized when Wilson visited the city for possible project leads in February — along with CfA fellows Becky Boone and Kavi Harshawat.

Shelter Director Alice Nightengale was the group's tour guide, escorting the team through Denver's animal shelter, from room to room and kennel to kennel. The team was greeted with a lineup of nudging noses, paws propped up on enclosures, and dozens upon dozens of those puppy-dog eyes.

"When we went to the adoption room, there were all these adorable puppies and kittens who needed help, and the question that, for me, came up was, 'How do we help her get these animals into homes?'" Wilson said.

The answer came once Nightengale led the team into the shelter's intake room, where the animals are received before they're housed in the facility. Wilson observed that as dogs and cats were processed, staff would take photos, conduct a quick assessment and then type up a brief description for each. The procedures prompted a small but noteworthy revelation.

"Being a tech person, my first question was, 'Where does all that information go?'" said Wilson.

When the team discovered the photos and descriptions went to the shelter's website, another thought struck.

"We said, 'Why don't we turn the model around. Instead of making someone go to a government website and look at all the adoptable animals, what if there was a way to take the information about adoptables and put in a place where people already are?'" Wilson said.

For the team, this meant using Twitter, a social network that would allow residents to easily share and discuss animal adoptions. Once agreed, Wilson said most of Twitter bot code was written on a flight home from Denver to San Francisco. The project was designed to be a lightweight but engaging tool that would show the possibilities of what open data can do for Denver -- and potentially other interested shelters across the U.S.

"Having seen this Twitter bot, it has opened my eyes to the opportunities for how the public might want to use this data," Nightengale said. "I think any exposure we can get

to having animals adopted or bringing the public's eye to what the Denver Animal Shelter is doing is great.”

Cuties in Denver, however, is just the beginning of CfA's plan. As 2014 draws on, the goal is to craft a fully integrated API for the shelter's data that acts as a data foundation for numerous apps and Web projects.

David Viramontes, a CfA developer supporting the Denver fellows in CfA's Denver Brigade, said scaling the project upward has always been part of the impetus. There's already been a request to include the shelter's cats, he said, and to harness the shelter data to create a new project that allows for animal adoption searches. Beyond this, coding is being done so the API and programs can be used by multiple cities and shelters nationwide. As for the Cuties in Denver Twitter bot, Viramontes said two other cities have already expressed interest: Mesa, Ariz., and a private shelter in New York City.

"That's what kind of appealed to me about Drew's idea," Viramontes said. "He was thinking of providing not just a solution for Denver, but a solution that could potentially help other cities with the same type of infrastructure."

Considering other data sets and applications, Nightengale said shelter data could also highlight animal control citation incidents by location, support public education on pet ownership, and shed light on lost and found animal statistics. While the Denver shelter has an above-average live release rate at more than 90 percent — the percentage of animals received and then leaving the shelter without being euthanized — Nightengale said the situation can always be improved considering the 8,000 or so lost and abandoned pets they receive each year.

"The best place for an animal is in the home; shelters should be short-term solutions," she said. "The biggest need is to have greater public awareness about spaying and neutering your animals so that we don't have an overpopulation issue and we don't have unwanted animals."



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Jason Shueh is a former staff writer for *Government Technology* magazine.

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