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**Just Labs** – Simply the best magazine ever for those who live with and love Labrador retrievers!

Pass-Along JL  
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## Lab Rescue Organization Success Strategies Part I

by Tracy Granzyk Wetzel

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Labrador retriever rescue organizations all strive to find forever homes for Labs who have been surrendered to their care. From puppies to geriatrics, all are given a second, sometimes third or fourth, chance at finding a family that will supply the love and attention we know they deserve.

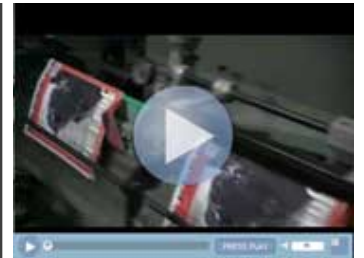


While these organizations provide much-needed services to Labs and those who love them, the services come with both financial and human costs to the organization. Those who volunteer their time, energy, and resources to run a Lab rescue know that this commitment is often an unpaid, full time job. And like any business, the road to success is most often attained intentionally, with foresight and planning. Board members from rescue organizations across

the U.S. reported many similar business issues and very openly shared a variety of creative solutions that allowed thousands of lonely Labs to find homes in 2010.

### Decision-Making

One common challenge for rescue organizations is balancing the desire to save every Lab with the need to stay in business. "We are all in this because we are passionate about our dogs," says Patty Ilg, founder of Great Lakes Lab Rescue ([www.greatlakeslabrescue.org](http://www.greatlakeslabrescue.org)) based out of Illinois and servicing Indiana and southern Wisconsin as well. "But we have to manage the costs as a business." Ilg shares that special needs dogs -- Labs who need ACL surgery, or who come to them heartworm positive -- can cost the organization \$3,000



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or more. The number of special needs dogs an organization takes in has to be closely monitored. "You have to think with your mind and not your heart sometimes, which is hard," says Ilg.

Ilg suggests having a variety of personalities sit on the board of directors helps makes the tough decisions easier. By recruiting people with business, medical, and Labrador expertise, a more accurate assessment of whether or not a dog should be brought into the organization can be achieved.

"It's hard not to get attached to the pictures sent across your desk every day," says Ilg. "You want to do everything you can but sometimes you have to walk away and say we can't do it right now. You make up for it in other ways in the future."

The painful dilemma of having to turn dogs away in order to make the prudent business decisions resonates with Julie Bauer, Vice President of L.E.A.R.N (Labrador Education and Rescue Network- [www.labadoption.org](http://www.labadoption.org)), servicing northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. "We have had dogs that cost \$6,000, and we have to balance this. We cannot take in cases like this all the time."

Even as a business-savvy board member, Bauer understands that emotions can get the better of you in this business. She shared a story about Mocha, a chocolate Lab with a bad knee who ended up in a shelter. When the call came in that Mocha was going to be put down, Bauer reluctantly went to look at her. Reluctantly, because as a board member she knew funds were tight and another dog requiring expensive surgery was not in the organization's best interest.

"If we don't have money in the bank and we can't help them," says Bauer, "then don't send me to look at them!" A very grateful Mocha is now awaiting adoption and in the care of a L.E.A.R.N. foster family, and L.E.A.R.N. successfully absorbed the cost of her care because of the forward-thinking way in which they manage finances.

In the San Francisco area, Golden Gate Lab Rescue ([www.labrescue.org](http://www.labrescue.org)) saves over 300 Labs a year and is able to accomplish this because they have built strategy around making the tough decisions. "It has to be run like a business on the operations end," says a Golden Gate spokeswoman. "This is the challenge -- there is a surplus of big hearts and a deficit on bigger picture needs at times." All vet expenses for Golden Gate are now run through the treasurer to ensure funds are available up front. In the past, individuals within the organization were making one-off medical decisions, leaving vet bills they were unaware they had.

## Funding: Donations, Operating Capitol, Fundraising, and Events

The economic downturn has had an impact on people, pets, and businesses. Some Lab rescue organizations have seen an increase in dogs surrendered as owners lose their jobs while at the same time watching donations decrease. Donations, the lifeblood of rescue organizations, cover the costs incurred by providing veterinary care, operating expenses, insurance, and also provide fundraising capitol. Successful rescue organizations have established fundraising practices and regular events to raise awareness and educate the public on their efforts, both methods ensure that donations continuously flow into the organization.



Bauer shares that while L.E.A.R.N.'s working capitol is down 30 percent this year, they

have been around for 11 years and never operate at zero, keeping a reserve fund in place. “The reduction in working capitol has given us pause this year,” says Bauer. “We immediately look to what we can do next.”

Their group responded by capitalizing on the improvements made to their recordkeeping over time, targeting previous contributors of \$50 or more with a mailing asking for 2010 donations. The donation letter shared stories of Labs they have helped throughout the year, along with the costs attributable to their care. Bauer believes having the reserve fund has helped sustain the organization through the past few years as donors have tightened their belts.

Many organizations are also raising awareness through monthly meet and greets at local pet stores, taking along one of their most “adoptable” Labs as their best advertising. Staying in front of the public through these local events, educating on the costs and challenges faced in the care and fostering of a rescue Lab, helps the public understand where their donations go and fosters a positive reputation in the community.

Our Golden retriever-loving cousins are setting the bar for rescue organizations. GRRoW, Golden Retriever Rescue of Wisconsin based in Madison ([www.grrow.org](http://www.grrow.org)), takes public education to a new level by sharing x-rays of before and after an ACL repair at a fundraising event as tail-wagging proof dollars have been well spent.

In addition to a yearly fundraising Dog Walk open to the public, GRRoW leaves donation canisters with pet shop owners year-round, sometimes adding an additional \$1K/store/canister/year to the coffers. The group also participates in bookstore gift-wraps and department store coupon sales that share 100 percent of proceeds with the rescue organization.

“We have a good fundraising team and volunteers who bust their tails to make sure money is coming in,” says Deb Lukasik, seven-year president of GRRoW. “We try to keep money in reserve, and we have a general fund and a special needs fund that is used for abnormal vet expenses, such as chemotherapy or orthopedic surgeries.” The group also hosts training seminars for all-comer rescue organization members, hiring professional behaviorists, trainers, and medical experts as guest speakers. The fee to attendees is low, and GRRoW’s profit on this event is minimal, but Lukasik and her team feel these programs are of great value to the rescue community. 🍗

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