

## Greenhounds and other Non GAP programs

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The industry funded greyhound adoption program (GAP) model was implemented relatively recently, given the inception of greyhound racing in Australia almost 100 years ago. Undoubtedly GAP was created from a genuine desire to find homes for retired greyhounds that would make suitable family pets. Arguably it was also a means of addressing increasing public concerns and scrutiny regarding the welfare of racing animals and their apparent over supply.

There is no doubt that GAP has done much good work in promoting the greyhound as a pet, but in doing so has perhaps highlighted how many don't get that chance. A shifting attitude amongst the general public towards unwanted racing animals has gained significant momentum in recent years. Having been a foster carer for several years prior to actually running the Queensland GAP, I have the (unenviable) benefit of firsthand experience and insight into some of the challenges faced. I believe this unique view is worth sharing; otherwise the emotional roller coaster of that particular year may well have been in vain.

Whilst some states have been quite progressive in the implementation of a range of animal welfare initiatives, others have not. Overall, most strategies have focused on the welfare of the dog whilst on the track. Indeed, the only semblance of reference to animal welfare on the Greyhounds Australasia website is a link to the various industry funded adoption programs.

Of major concern is the number of dogs still being surrendered annually to pounds or the care of various independent welfare groups. At any one time there are in excess of 500 greyhounds being advertised for adoption or giveaway, with conservatively much less than 50% of these being via GAP. During this time of uncertainty regarding the sustainability of racing in general, it would be short sighted not give due regard to the importance and indeed relevance of current welfare initiatives such as GAP, both their intended objectives and their outcomes. In short, are they providing good value for money?

A review of the structure, function and objectives of the industry funded adoption program model is timely. In many states around Australia, GAP is still only a part-time initiative largely supported by an army of volunteer foster carers without an industry background. Some programs provide all of the food for the dogs in their care, others do not. Most expect foster carers to drive the dogs back and forth to the programs kennel facility, the veterinary clinic or the next foster home. Many rely heavily on their volunteers to undertake specific tasks such as home visits and even finalising adoptions! From an industry that generates millions of dollars in revenue each year, this expectation of a largely anti-racing or racing neutral group of volunteers is rather perplexing, if not a little audacious.

So who is a typical foster carer? They are usually passionate about caring for and helping animals in need. They want to make a difference, and they want to help *abandoned and unwanted* animals. No doubt there are many industry participants who share this sentiment, but by and large seem most reticent to volunteer their services to help GAP.

So is the current model still meeting its intended objectives? Does the collective industry even have a firm idea of what that is? Does it even care? If the main objective was to address public concerns regarding over supply, then statistically it can be argued it is not.

Mainstream public opinion seems to regard GAP as merely a public relations exercise for the greyhound racing industry. Despite the best efforts of those involved this could prove difficult to dispute, given the statistically insignificant number of dogs that pass through the program on an annual basis. Nationally GAP is catering for considerably less than 10% of the dogs whelped each year. This is at significant cost, particularly when averaged out per successful adoption. Individual programs operate without national cohesion. Some offer all care and compassion for the fortunate few that make it into the program. Others operate with a more pragmatic approach. What about the dogs that do not get into GAP though? Whether due to extensive wait times, owner apathy or behavioural problems, what duty of care is owed to them?

The current all or nothing approach is overdue for review. Without a national approach to guide it the program risks operating at best, with a lack of understanding of key industry issues. At worst it may be unsympathetic, albeit at great expense.

The challenge of optimising successful greyhound adoption programs should be ongoing. A national approach to understand and implement the identified main drivers is crucial. With limited resources, critical evaluation of the program's success or otherwise would help to determine where the biggest gains could be made, not only to the rate of adoption, but also the success of GAP overall.

In doing so, consideration must be given to those involved. Staff are often exposed to the full brunt of negativity from within the industry, the general public and not infrequently their own co-workers. A clear national directive would be beneficial, with consideration being given to:

- Adoption criteria, particularly with regard to temperament testing, health, age and rehabilitation potential
- Gauging adoption success, not based purely on the rate, i.e. length of time in foster care, number of returns, incidents etc
- Time frame for retention of an individual within the program
- Risks associated with pre-assessment and resultant rejection from the program
- Consistent approach for the dogs deemed unsuitable for re-homing
- Expectations regarding program numbers
- Green collar muzzling exemption

Indeed GAP faces the same conundrum as do other shelters with limited resources and this is largely dependent on their programs' unique philosophy. If resources are allowed to be tied up with animals with significant behavioural problems, intake numbers are low and waiting times to enter the program are prolonged. In this scenario, failure rates may be low but so are adoptions. Paradoxically, these programs are constantly recruiting new foster carers and return rates are high. In summary, the program could be criticised for not being productive enough. In addition, the ensuing prolonged waiting times perpetuate the problem of dogs being disposed of through pounds or via other means.



Conversely, a focus on the well adjusted, easy to re-home dog ensures healthy adoption rates via efficient placement and positive endorsement by new owners. Relinquishment rates post adoption will be low. In this scenario, the program is at risk of being criticised for a high failure or euthanasia rate. This is usually without due regard to the overall adoption rate, which is consistently higher than that achievable by the aforementioned approach.

Put simply, long waiting times for industry funded programs ensure that by default they are catering for dogs whose owners/trainers have the resources to care for their dogs post-racing, and who in all likelihood could play a more active role in the re-homing process of their own dog. It does however neglect the most vulnerable.

These are difficult and complex issues which require further analysis. Given the emotive nature, financial burden and not insignificantly, the seriousness of the outcome for the dogs and people involved, a nationally endorsed approach derived from both internal and external discussion is worthy of consideration.

### **Green Collar Legislation Review**

Currently in operation within several Australian states, allowing some greyhounds to be muzzle free in public following a behavioural assessment. Is it achieving its intended objective? This is especially relevant given the few remaining states are currently negotiating or considering the implementation of similar legislation (Western Australia and Tasmania). Logically in the interest of public safety, it makes sense to re-home sociable, well adjusted and above all safe dogs that have undergone a thorough behavioural assessment; however the legislation has proved itself to be a dual edged sword.

In all participating states, with the exception being NSW and ACT, the industry funded GAP is the only program legally able to assess whether a greyhound can go muzzle free in public. This clearly has the potential to be a conflict of interest for a variety of reasons. Understandably, public opinion regarding industry funded programs assessing (perhaps rather harshly) dogs of their own making is one expected to be fraught with suspicion and distrust.

Inconsistencies between the states are confusing and illogical. For example in Queensland, once greyhounds are "decommissioned" they are deemed to be a "regular" dog. They are allowed to be off leash and un-muzzled in a public place.

This is an alarmingly unattainable standard for a significant number of greyhounds, particularly early in their retirement and certainly not within the time frame of a 4-6 week foster care period. Even the word "decommissioning" conjures up images of an ability to deprogram years of selective breeding in a few short weeks. Indeed the GAP QLD website states that: "Only greyhounds that pass the GAP Behavioural Assessment will be offered for adoption through GAP". Those that do not pass are presumably euthanased or returned to their original owner. A percentage of these dogs are then being offered for *adoption through other agencies*, with at times disastrous results.

So what would you do if faced with this challenge? Technically speaking, you are breaking the law if you manipulate the assessment in favour of the dog, yet heavily criticised if you put public safety ahead of the greyhound. These are very real, everyday life or death decisions for those on the front

line. They need support, education and above all a clear direction from experts both within and external to the industry.

Despite best intentions, there will always be a percentage of dogs that are unsuitable for re-homing. A mute argument perhaps given there are not enough homes for those that actually are. However, valuable information should be obtained from these assessments, such as why are the dogs failing and what if anything, can be done to address the recurrent themes?

The green collar legislation invariably requires dogs to remain in foster care for an extended period of time, to ensure they have the appropriate behavioural and temperament qualities to qualify. Well intentioned, yet only serves to increase the burden on already scant resources, not to mention program waiting times.

Based on my own personal experience, of most concern is the public misconception regarding the green collar assessment and the false sense of security it gives the novice greyhound adopter.

### **GRNSW Greenhounds Program**

The recently introduced NSW Greenhounds Program administered by GRNSW goes some way towards addressing many of these concerns. Non-racing, de-sexed (unless registered as a show dog) greyhounds are eligible to apply for muzzling exemption. The program is more inclusive and acknowledges the involvement of other re-homing groups in 2 distinct categories:

#### **1. Assessment by an Authorised Greenhounds Assessor:**

Greyhounds in existing pet homes can undertake a 6 week self administered, in home re-training program. On completion, the greyhound can undertake a GAP National Temperament Test (GAPNTT) by a Greenhounds Authorised Assessor.

A Greenhounds authorised Assessor is someone who is suitably qualified (i.e. is a registered veterinarian or holds a Certificate IV in Companion Animal Services) and has undertaken a compulsory greyhound behavioural assessment training short course. (ACMACR403A – Identify and respond to animal behaviour – Greyhound). The course is conducted over 2 days and includes practical assessment.

#### **2. Adoption via a Greenhounds Approved Re-Training Program**

Greyhounds accepted into an approved *re-training* program may be adopted out with a Greenhounds collar providing “*they have been in a foster home for not less than 6 weeks to provide appropriate behavioural adjustment*”

Greyhounds must undergo temperament testing before and after the compulsory 6 week foster period. In addition, they must also have facilities that comply with NSW Animal Welfare Code of Practice for boarding establishments.

Not surprisingly, the only currently approved Greenhounds program is the “Greyhounds As Pets program”, administered by GRNSW.

Similar then to other GAP’s, adopting dogs out with Greenhound collars offers a significant point of difference for families when choosing from which program to obtain their dog. However it does



little to address the aforementioned public concerns regarding temperament testing and failure rates. The compulsory 6 week foster period could prove a drain on resources and will prolong program entry wait times. It also means the adoptive family has had all of the hard work finding out about their greyhound done for them by a third party foster carer, who may or may not have the vested interest of public safety in mind.

In reality, a practical solution to some of the existing issues faced by the industry funded programs lies somewhere between the various extremes currently in place. In essence, the industry is promoting the adoption of a predatory animal, whilst in principle via the GAPNTT failing any that actually are. Ostensibly it would be more realistic to accept that it is a part of what they are and therefore take appropriate steps to minimise the risk to other people and their much loved family pets.

If every greyhound, regardless of origin was re-homed on a level playing field, i.e. with muzzling requirement in situ, many of these issues could be reliably addressed via:

- A resultant reduction in compulsory foster time
- Allowing greyhounds identified by GAPNTT to be of *sound temperament but with low/moderate prey drive* to be re-homed via GAP. (Please note: the current GAP behavioural assessment fails dogs for prey drive, skewing the adoption population towards anxious dogs with little to no prey drive).
- Reducing the heavy emotional toll on staff that has the unenviable task of deciding a dog's fate vs. public safety vs. public opinion vs. industry opinion.

New owners could then apply *at their leisure* to a nationally authorised independent assessor for muzzling exemption, in a similar manner to the Greenhounds Program. New owners are not placed under any false sense of security regarding the safety or otherwise of their dog. In order to obtain a green collar they must be actively involved in the learning process.

The current stigma associated with GAP "cherry picking" the best dogs would also be diminished. Of greatest significance perhaps is that more dogs are likely to pass the assessment, given it would be taken after a much longer period of adjustment in a pet home. If they don't pass assessment, well they can just continue life wearing a muzzle. However, the experience has provided the adoptive family a great opportunity to learn more about their dog, including the inherent risks.

In an industry not known to embrace change, a quantum shift in acceptance is required, but the long term benefits cannot be understated. It would not be onerous to implement these changes on a national level; the infrastructure is already largely in place.

#### **What about the rest?**

With more dogs than ever being surrendered to pounds and non industry rescue agencies, thought must be given to addressing the issue of how to effectively and efficiently offer practical assistance to a broader group of dogs.

Given that each dog costs conservatively in the region of \$2000 - \$3000 to put through GAP, consideration should be given to the creation of at least one (rudimentary) surgical facility in each major centre. For a comparatively small upfront establishment cost, and a nominal fee for a

veterinary surgeon for the day, (or indeed the control bodies own veterinarians) you could realistically neuter upwards of 200 dogs for the same cost as putting one dog through GAP!

The introduction of a national and holistic approach, combined with ongoing education at all levels could see GAP become a more cohesive and functional part of an overall animal welfare strategy rather than just *being* the animal welfare strategy.

Shifting the focus from a relatively small percentage of dogs to the creation of a program that can offer a broader range of services such as neutering, basic health care and behavioural advice for dogs being re-homed privately or waiting to enter GAP or other programs is an achievable objective.

Given the level of funding some of these programs receive, increasing productivity and efficiency is not an unrealistic expectation. A much higher number of dogs should be expected to pass through GAP, rather than euthanasia without even being given the chance of an assessment.

In summary, nobody is claiming to have all of the answers regarding this difficult issue. However clearly what is needed as a matter of urgency is open discussion and further debate.

In doing so, consideration should be given to the creation and endorsement of an integrated national approach for industry funded programs, combined with a more inclusive, rather than totalitarian ownership of the greyhound welfare movement.