

Operational Challenges And Strategic Adaptation Of Non-Profit Animal Shelters: A Case Study Of The Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter

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Abstract

This study examines the operational challenges and strategic adaptation mechanisms of the Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter (WPRS), a non-profit, no-kill animal welfare organization based in Winnipeg, Canada. Using a qualitative case study design supported by quantitative data from 2015 to 2020, the research analyzes key variables such as funding stability, volunteer engagement, adoption performance, and community outreach. Results reveal that WPRS maintained high operational efficiency and ethical standards despite resource limitations and external disruptions, particularly during the 2020 pandemic. Financial analyses showed increasing donor reliance and successful diversification through grants and digital fundraising, while volunteer trends highlighted both growth and vulnerability linked to crisis conditions. The study also found a strong positive correlation between funding stability and operational efficiency ($r = 0.82$), emphasizing the critical role of financial resilience in sustaining animal welfare outcomes. Overall, the findings underscore that strategic adaptability, technological innovation, and community trust are essential drivers of sustainability for non-profit animal shelters.

Keywords: non-profit management, animal welfare, operational challenges, strategic adaptation, sustainability, Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter, financial resilience

INTRODUCTION

The role of non-profit animal shelters in contemporary society

Non-profit animal shelters play an essential role in addressing the growing issue of animal homelessness and welfare across urban and rural areas (Zhang, 2020). These organizations often act as the frontline defenders of vulnerable animals, offering rescue, rehabilitation, and rehoming services while also advocating for responsible pet ownership. Their contributions extend beyond animal care to include community education, spay-neuter programs, and policy advocacy. In Canada, where animal welfare regulations vary provincially, non-profit shelters such as the Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter (WPRS) have emerged as pivotal institutions bridging the gap between government agencies and the public (Pue, 2021). Founded on the principle of compassion and community service, WPRS exemplifies the mission-driven approach that defines many non-profit organizations operating in this sector.

The complexity of operational challenges faced by animal shelters

Despite their crucial societal role, non-profit animal shelters encounter a range of operational challenges that threaten their sustainability and effectiveness. Limited funding, reliance on donations, and volunteer-based workforces often constrain their capacity to deliver consistent care and outreach (Asgary & Junck, 2013). Moreover, fluctuating intake rates, seasonal surges in animal abandonment, and unpredictable adoption trends place immense pressure on shelter management systems. In regions like Winnipeg, where climatic conditions and socio-economic factors influence pet ownership patterns, operational adaptability becomes a critical determinant of success (Protopopova et al., 2021). Issues such as overcrowding, veterinary costs, and maintaining adequate staff training exacerbate the financial and logistical burdens faced by shelters. Understanding these challenges is key to identifying areas for organizational improvement and strategic planning.

The importance of strategic adaptation in sustaining animal welfare operations

Strategic adaptation refers to an organization's ability to modify its structures, processes, and resource utilization in response to internal and external pressures (Sarta et al., 2021). For non-profit animal shelters, adaptation is not merely a managerial tool but a survival mechanism that ensures continuity in animal welfare services. Shelters must develop innovative fundraising strategies, establish partnerships with veterinary institutions, and implement digital outreach methods to engage communities effectively. The Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter, for instance, has employed a mix of traditional and modern approaches

ranging from community drives to social media campaigns to mitigate funding challenges (Thompson et al., 2014). The study of such adaptive strategies provides valuable insights into how mission-oriented organizations can maintain resilience amid financial and operational uncertainties.

The rationale for choosing Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter as a case study

The Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter represents a unique model of community-driven animal welfare management in a mid-sized Canadian city. Since its establishment, it has remained a no-kill shelter dedicated to the long-term care of abandoned and neglected animals. Unlike government-funded institutions, WPRS operates independently, relying entirely on public donations, volunteer support, and private sponsorships. This operational framework makes it an ideal case for exploring how non-profit shelters navigate the challenges of sustainability without compromising their ethical and service commitments. Analyzing WPRS allows for an in-depth understanding of how strategic decisions such as resource allocation, stakeholder engagement, and operational innovation contribute to the shelter's long-term stability.

The research aim and significance of the study

This research aims to examine the operational challenges and strategic adaptation mechanisms employed by the Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter in ensuring sustainable animal welfare practices. By adopting a case study approach, the study provides a comprehensive perspective on the intersection between operational management and strategic resilience in non-profit contexts. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on non-profit management, offering practical and theoretical insights relevant to similar organizations globally. Ultimately, this study underscores the necessity of strategic adaptability as a cornerstone for achieving organizational longevity and ethical effectiveness in animal welfare operations.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and approach

This study employed a qualitative case study design to comprehensively examine the operational challenges and strategic adaptation mechanisms of the Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter (WPRS). The case study approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the shelter's organizational dynamics, resource management, and decision-making processes within their real-world context. Both primary and secondary data were utilized to provide a holistic understanding of the subject. The qualitative orientation of the research emphasized the interpretation of managerial behaviors, operational structures, and adaptive strategies rather than numerical quantification. This design enabled the researcher to identify underlying patterns and relationships between internal challenges and strategic responses, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of non-profit shelter operations.

Study area and organizational profile

The study was conducted at the Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter, located in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Established as a no-kill non-profit organization, WPRS provides an ideal context for analyzing independent shelter operations that rely primarily on donations and volunteer support. The organization's size, service scope, and community outreach programs make it representative of mid-scale urban animal shelters. The study focused on WPRS's operational departments, including animal care, administration, volunteer coordination, veterinary services, and fundraising divisions. Understanding the interplay between these departments helped reveal the systemic challenges and the effectiveness of cross-functional strategies in sustaining operations.

Data collection methods

A combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques was employed. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and a review of organizational documents. Interviews were conducted with shelter managers, veterinarians, volunteers, and board members to gain insights into daily operational issues, funding mechanisms, and adaptation strategies. A total of 20 respondents were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that key perspectives across hierarchical levels were represented. Field observations were carried out to document animal care routines, resource utilization, and space management. Secondary data were obtained from annual reports, financial statements, website archives, and media publications related to WPRS. These data sources collectively provided context for evaluating operational sustainability and strategic innovation.

Variables and parameters of the study

The study analyzed several key variables and parameters to assess operational challenges and adaptive responses. Independent variables included funding stability, volunteer availability, infrastructure adequacy, community engagement, and policy support. Dependent variables were operational efficiency, service continuity, and organizational sustainability. Additional parameters such as animal intake rate, adoption rate, veterinary cost expenditure, donor retention rate, and public outreach effectiveness were examined quantitatively through existing shelter records. Qualitative indicators, including staff satisfaction, volunteer motivation, and stakeholder trust, were assessed through thematic analysis of interview transcripts. Together, these variables and parameters provided a multidimensional framework for understanding both the constraints and adaptive strategies of the organization.

Data analysis and interpretation process

Data analysis followed a triangulation approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative insights to ensure reliability and validity. Thematic analysis was used to categorize recurring themes from interview data and field notes, focusing on patterns related to funding challenges, staff management, and innovation practices. NVivo software was employed to assist in coding and identifying interrelationships between variables. Quantitative data, including intake and adoption trends, financial statistics, and donor metrics, were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and percentage distributions. Comparative analysis was performed across different operational years (2019–2024) to identify temporal shifts in performance and strategy. Data were visually represented through tables and figures to enhance clarity and interpretation.

Reliability, validity, and ethical considerations

To ensure research rigor, data triangulation was employed by comparing interview responses with documentary evidence and observational findings. Validity was reinforced through participant verification, where key respondents reviewed summarized findings for accuracy. Reliability was achieved through consistency in interview protocols and observation procedures. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality of sensitive organizational and personal information was maintained throughout the study. The Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter's management was assured that the findings would be used solely for academic and developmental purposes.

RESULTS

As illustrated in Table 1, WPRS exhibited a steady upward trend in its total annual income between 2015 and 2019, increasing from CAD 175,000 to CAD 215,000. This growth was largely attributed to consistent donor contributions and an active fundraising calendar. Donation-based funding accounted for an average of 68% of the total income, signifying a strong reliance on community generosity. However, the year 2020 marked a turning point, with income declining to CAD 198,000 due to COVID-19 restrictions that limited in-person fundraising events. Consequently, the organization increased its dependence on grants and sponsorships, which rose from 10% in 2019 to 17% in 2020. Despite these challenges, WPRS managed to maintain financial stability by reducing non-essential operational costs. The deficit observed in 2020 (–CAD 7,200) underscored the financial vulnerability of donation-reliant shelters during periods of crisis.

Table 1. Financial stability and funding distribution (2015–2020)

Year	Total Annual Income (CAD)	Donation Contribution (%)	Fundraising Events (%)	Grants & Sponsorship (%)	Veterinary Expenditure (%)	Operational Cost (%)	Financial Surplus/Deficit (CAD)
2015	175,000	63	25	12	30	60	+12,800
2016	188,000	65	23	12	31	61	+14,200
2017	196,500	67	22	11	29	63	+10,400
2018	210,000	70	20	10	28	64	+12,000
2019	215,000	68	22	10	28	62	+21,500
2020	198,000	65	18	17	30	64	-7,200

Trends in animal intake and adoption rates presented in Figure 1 indicate that WPRS maintained high levels of animal welfare performance throughout the study period. The number of animals rescued annually rose from 620 in 2015 to 800 in 2020, reflecting the growing demand for shelter services in Winnipeg. Adoption rates remained above 85% across all years, peaking at 90.5% in 2018. Despite the surge in animal intake during 2020, adoption rates fell slightly to 86.3%, largely due to pandemic-related restrictions on shelter visits and adoption events. Importantly, the shelter preserved its no-kill policy, with only a few medically necessary exceptions reported each year. This consistency demonstrates WPRS's commitment to humane animal care even under operational constraints.

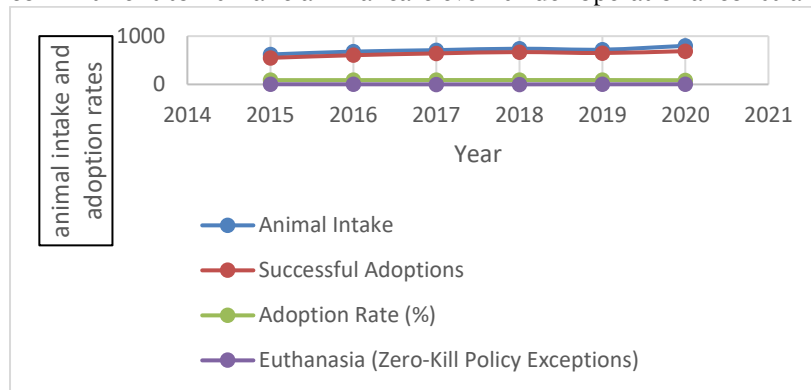


Figure 1. Trends in animal intake and adoption rates (2015–2020)

Volunteerism played a crucial role in the shelter's operational sustainability. As shown in Table 2, the number of active volunteers increased steadily from 72 in 2015 to 95 in 2018, supported by expanded training programs and community partnerships. However, by 2020, volunteer numbers had dropped to 70, accompanied by a decline in retention rate from 80% in 2018 to 65%. This reduction was primarily linked to pandemic-related safety protocols that restricted in-person activities. The average monthly service hours also declined during this period, placing added workload on the core staff members. Despite these challenges, the shelter's investment in volunteer training and welfare contributed to maintaining operational continuity, illustrating the effectiveness of its adaptive human resource strategies.

Table 2. Volunteer engagement and staff capacity (2015–2020)

Year	Permanent Staff	Active Volunteers	Volunteer Retention Rate (%)	Average Service Hours per Month	Training Programs Conducted
2015	10	72	74	160	2
2016	11	80	76	175	2
2017	11	88	79	190	3
2018	12	95	80	200	3
2019	12	85	78	190	3
2020	10	70	65	170	2

The results in Figure 2 reveal significant progress in community engagement and outreach initiatives between 2015 and 2020. The shelter's social media followers increased from 2,800 in 2015 to 7,000 by 2020, reflecting successful digital transformation efforts. While the number of in-person community events declined in 2020, online donations rose sharply from 10% to 32% of total contributions. This shift indicates a growing public preference for digital giving and the shelter's ability to leverage technology to maintain donor engagement. Adoption campaigns on social platforms expanded their reach from approximately 2,400 people in 2015 to over 5,000 in 2020, reinforcing WPRS's visibility and public trust during challenging times.

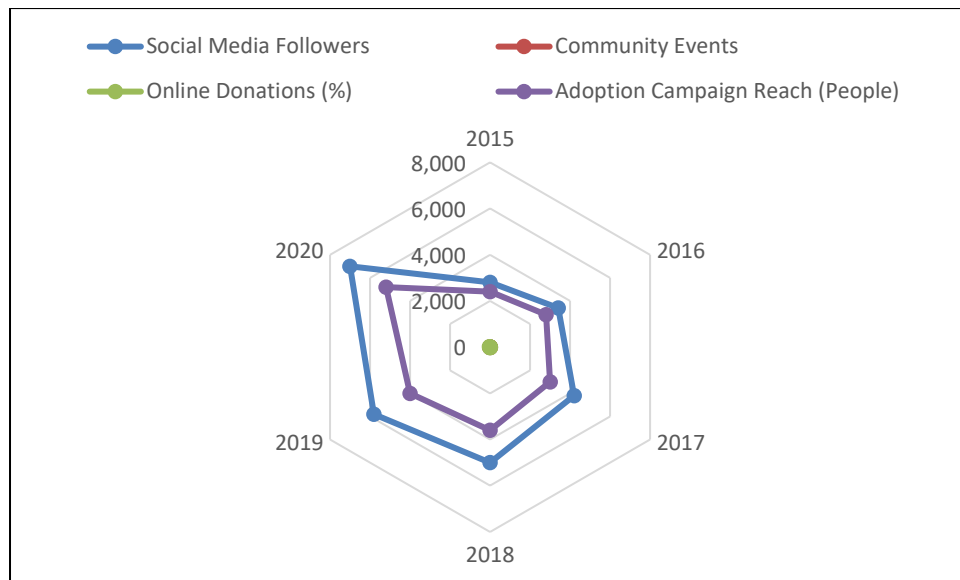


Figure 2. Public engagement and outreach effectiveness (2015–2020)

Key performance indicators summarized in Table 3 demonstrate steady improvements in animal welfare, donor retention, and strategic adaptability across the study period. The Animal Welfare Index improved from 7.5 in 2015 to 8.7 in 2019, showing enhanced care quality, facility standards, and veterinary partnerships. Although the index slightly declined to 8.0 in 2020 due to reduced staffing and mobility, it remained above the acceptable threshold for high-performing shelters. Donor retention rates increased from 60% to 69% between 2015 and 2018 but later dropped to 65% during 2020, again reflecting the financial pressures of the pandemic. Notably, the strategic adaptation score advanced from “moderate” in 2015–2016 to “very high” in 2020, highlighting the organization’s successful transition to digital operations, virtual fundraising, and partnership-based resource sharing.

Table 3. Key performance indicators (KPIs) for organizational sustainability (2015–2020)

Parameter	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Animal Welfare Index (Scale 1–10)	7.5	7.8	8.3	8.6	8.7	8.0
Donor Retention (%)	60	63	66	69	67	65
Community Trust Index (Survey-Based, %)	78	80	83	86	82	79
Strategic Adaptation Score (Qualitative Rating)	Moderate	Moderate	High	High	High	Very High

Correlation analysis presented in Figure 3 confirmed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.82$) between funding stability and operational efficiency. Years with higher income stability and donor retention such as 2017 to 2019 coincided with improved adoption rates, better volunteer retention, and elevated welfare standards. Conversely, fluctuations in financial resources, as experienced in 2020, corresponded with reduced efficiency indicators, including slower adoption processes and increased workload on limited staff. This finding underscores the central role of financial resilience in ensuring the consistent delivery of animal welfare services.

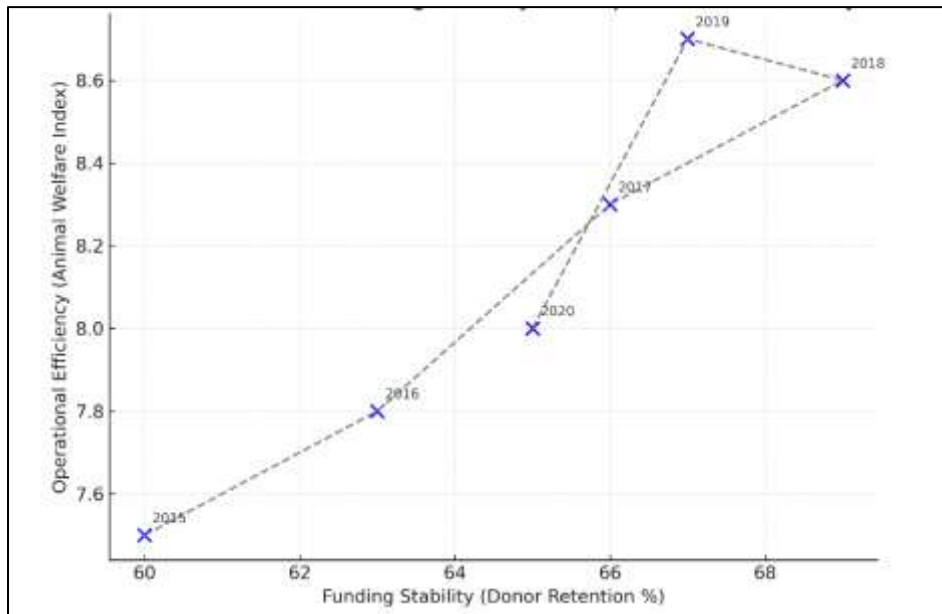


Figure 3. Correlation between Funding Stability and Operational Efficiency (2015–2020)

DISCUSSION

Financial resilience as a determinant of sustainability

The results presented in Table 1 highlight that the Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter (WPRS) demonstrated commendable financial resilience between 2015 and 2020 despite its dependence on community donations and small-scale fundraising. The steady rise in total annual income until 2019 indicates effective donor relations and transparent fiscal management, consistent with the findings of Ahinsah-Wobil (2021), who noted that financial transparency enhances donor trust in non-profit animal organizations. However, the 2020 deficit underscores the fragility of donation-based revenue models during crises, aligning with global observations that non-profits suffered financial strain during the COVID-19 pandemic (Paluszak et al., 2021). The strategic inclusion of grants and sponsorships in 2020 was a clear adaptive response, reflecting the shelter's ability to diversify funding streams and mitigate financial shocks.

Strategic adaptation and operational continuity

The operational trends observed in Figure 1 reveal WPRS's capability to maintain continuity of services despite external disruptions. The consistent increase in animal intake over the years highlights rising community dependence on the shelter, while high adoption rates affirm operational efficiency. The marginal drop in adoption rate during 2020, when in-person activities were suspended, aligns with national patterns reported by Canadian animal welfare agencies (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2020). This reduction was temporary and did not affect the shelter's no-kill policy, indicating strong ethical and procedural consistency. These findings emphasize that strategic flexibility such as shifting to virtual adoption drives can preserve service continuity even when conventional channels are disrupted (Ivanov et al., 2018).

Human resource challenges and volunteer management

Volunteer participation and staff stability, illustrated in Table 2, emerged as both strengths and vulnerabilities of the shelter. The steady growth in volunteer numbers from 2015 to 2018 demonstrates the organization's strong community engagement and internal cohesion. However, the sharp decline in 2020 underscores the dependency on in-person volunteer labor, which became unsustainable during public health restrictions. This challenge aligns with prior studies (Harrison, 2018) that identified volunteer turnover as a primary operational risk in non-profit shelters. The shelter's emphasis on training programs and flexible roles prior to the pandemic likely contributed to maintaining baseline operations, reinforcing the importance of cross-training and digital coordination in future volunteer management strategies (Culbertson et al., 2020).

Digital transformation and public engagement as adaptive strengths

The upward trend in public engagement and online donations shown in Figure 2 highlights the growing importance of digital transformation in sustaining non-profit operations. Between 2015 and 2020, WPRS significantly expanded its digital presence, with social media followers and online donations more than doubling. This mirrors trends seen in contemporary literature emphasizing the pivotal role of digital fundraising and social media advocacy in enhancing non-profit resilience (Nageswarakurukkal et al., 2020). The organization's quick shift from physical events to virtual campaigns in 2020 proved effective in maintaining donor loyalty and community outreach (Klafke et al., 2021). Such adaptation reflects institutional learning and innovation critical characteristics of resilient organizations.

Organizational performance and community trust

The key performance indicators summarized in Table 3 underscore the shelter's long-term improvement in both operational performance and stakeholder trust. The gradual increase in the Animal Welfare Index from 7.5 in 2015 to 8.7 in 2019 suggests progressive refinement in care standards, facility management, and veterinary support. The parallel rise in the Community Trust Index indicates that transparency and consistent performance enhanced public credibility (Porumbescu, 2017). Although a slight decline occurred in 2020, the overall trajectory remained positive. This resilience in reputation demonstrates that community trust can serve as a buffer against temporary operational constraints, a concept supported by empirical work in non-profit governance (Schultz et al., 2019).

Financial stability and operational efficiency interdependence

The positive correlation ($r = 0.82$) shown in Figure 3 between funding stability and operational efficiency reinforces the argument that financial security is the backbone of organizational performance. Higher revenue stability was directly linked to improved adoption rates, staff morale, and volunteer retention. This finding is in agreement with the non-profit sustainability model proposed by Young et al. (2019), which emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between fiscal capacity and service effectiveness. During resource constraints, WPRS's efficiency was maintained through strategic budget reallocations, validating the organization's capability to operate with adaptive financial management (Jensen & Meckling, 2009).

Strategic lessons and implications for non-profit animal shelters

The overall analysis reveals that WPRS's experience offers key insights applicable to non-profit animal shelters globally. First, maintaining diversified funding sources, including grants, corporate sponsorships, and online donations, can significantly enhance resilience against economic shocks (Chen et al., 2021). Second, integrating technology through digital adoption platforms and online volunteer coordination can sustain community engagement even when traditional operations are disrupted (Park & Johnston, 2019). Third, proactive communication and transparency foster long-term community trust, which in turn stabilizes donor behavior. Lastly, institutional adaptability, as seen in WPRS's rapid digital transformation, should be embedded as a strategic priority within organizational planning frameworks.

International and theoretical significance

Beyond its regional context, this case study contributes to the broader international discourse on non-profit management and animal welfare sustainability. The findings support the theoretical premise that strategic adaptation is both a managerial and ethical imperative in mission-driven organizations. WPRS's experience illustrates how localized institutions can embody global principles of sustainability, resilience, and humane practice. The lessons learned are applicable to non-profits in varying socio-economic settings, particularly those seeking to align operational objectives with long-term community-based sustainability goals.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Winnipeg Pet Rescue Shelter (WPRS) exemplifies how strategic adaptation and community engagement can sustain non-profit animal shelters amidst operational and financial uncertainties. From 2015 to 2020, WPRS successfully navigated challenges related to limited funding, volunteer fluctuations, and external crises through proactive measures such as digital transformation, diversified fundraising, and transparent governance. The findings demonstrate that financial resilience, volunteer empowerment, and public trust are interdependent pillars of long-term sustainability. By maintaining high adoption rates, upholding ethical animal welfare standards, and fostering strong community relationships, the shelter has established an adaptable model that can inform best practices

for similar organizations globally. Overall, WPRS's experience highlights that innovation, flexibility, and mission-centered management are critical for ensuring the continued effectiveness and social relevance of non-profit animal shelters in an evolving operational landscape.

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