

Creating Animal Shelter Guidelines: Selecting Animals for Euthanasia

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is frequently asked for recommendations to create guidelines for selecting animals for euthanasia. Because animal populations, animal shelter resources, local laws, and trends in pet ownership vary, it is impossible for The HSUS to offer specific recommended guidelines that will meet the needs of all agencies. However, we can provide information on considerations that should be weighed when creating your agency's guidelines.

Selecting animals for euthanasia is considered one of the most stressful tasks animal shelter employees face. Staff entrusted with this responsibility often cite fears of "playing God" when having to choose which animals will be euthanized. However, the constant influx of animals into animal shelters makes euthanasia a necessary reality.

In order to minimize the stress associated with this task as well as the risk of inconsistencies, The HSUS recommends that animal care and control agencies have written guidelines in place to clearly designate the responsibilities of all staff involved. Although euthanasia decisions should never be *completely* without subjective opinions and the ability to make choices based on individual animals, written guidelines provide some parameters for employees to work within.

Implications for Staff

Staff who are responsible for selecting animals for euthanasia should be compassionate and caring and should have a thorough understanding of euthanasia—application, methods, procedures, etc. To avoid placing the burden of this task on one individual, some agencies (with adequate staff) utilize a committee of 2-3 people to make euthanasia selection decisions. The HSUS encourages agencies to investigate and make available options for stress relief such as support groups or counseling services.

Animal shelter staff, board members, government officials, volunteers, and members of the public should never be allowed to question, berate, or harass employees selecting animals for euthanasia about the choices they make. If it is truly believed that the person choosing animals for euthanasia has violated agency policy, the matter should be addressed with their supervisor.

Creating Guidelines for Your Agency

When formulating guidelines for your agency, many variables must be considered, including but not limited to, the number and type of animals you receive; the regional location of your agency; the capacity of your facility; your staffing level; the services you provide; the availability of a responsibly-operated foster program, etc. Your agency must be knowledgeable about the parameters that govern the services you can provide, recognize your strengths and weaknesses, and develop guidelines that consider the animals' best interests as well as the constraints of your resources.

It is important to solicit the input of all involved staff when creating selection guidelines: those who choose animals for euthanasia, euthanasia technicians, animal caretakers, field staff, veterinary staff (if available), and adoption counselors who see firsthand what types of animals prospective adopters in your area are seeking. Outside professionals may be consulted if needed.

Animal Characteristic Factors

Choosing which animals will be euthanized should encompass the considerations of all established guidelines relating to the following: the animal's age, behavior status, breed, health status, and species. In addition, in most agencies, space constraints will be a factor.

- **Age Issues**

There are some animal care and control agencies that receive so many animals that an animal's age may be used to determine whether or not he is euthanized. There are others whose resources allow them to provide extended care and find homes for the majority of animals, whether they are six-week old kittens or a thirteen-year old dog. The majority of animal care and control agencies fall somewhere in between.

Animals who are very young when they arrive at a shelter may not receive much needed developmental experiences and may not have the ability to fight off diseases that can exist in a multi-animal environment like a shelter. Animals who are very old may have health problems or may not adjust well to a new home. When creating euthanasia policies with regard to age, these factors should be considered.

- **Behavior Issues**

An animal shelter has a responsibility to protect not only the animals in their care but also the human members of their community. For liability as well as ethical reasons, most animal shelters euthanize any animal who exhibits aggressive or dangerous behavior.

Non-aggressive behaviors, such as fearful actions or demeanor, destructiveness, or housetraining difficulties, can be a barrier to an animal staying in a lifelong home. These behaviors should be diagnosed to determine severity and should be discussed with potential adopters if an attempt is made to place the animal. There is no benefit to adopting out an animal who will just be returned to the shelter or resigned to a worse fate (i.e. a cat put outside because he doesn't use the litterbox).

- **Breed Issues**

Numerous animal shelters have instituted policies regarding the availability of certain dog breeds, such as pit bulls and rottweilers. The HSUS recommends that animal shelters take great care when determining whether your agency should euthanize those breeds of dogs commonly associated with, but not known to have been involved in, dogfighting.

When determining adoption or euthanasia policies regarding certain breeds, it is important to evaluate your community for dogfighting-related activity and to ascertain which types of animals or breeds may be at risk for involvement. Some communities prohibit ownership of certain breeds and, in these areas, shelters do not offer these animals for adoption.

- **Health Issues**

The HSUS recommends that animal shelters take every measure possible to offer reasonably healthy animals for adoption to the public. However, we understand that many agencies do not employ veterinary staff or have the resources, and/or time to foster injured animals, perform diagnostic tests, or treat animals who fall ill while under the shelter's care. Additionally, while some shelters have separate areas to isolate sick or potentially sick animals, others do not and must euthanize these animals to protect the health of the general population. What health-related euthanasia policies your agency adopts will depend upon your own staff, resource, time, and facility restrictions.

- **Space Issues**

Choosing animals for euthanasia because of space constraints can be the most difficult decision involved in the euthanasia process. When making these decisions, however, other outlined policies based on age, behavior and health issues should provide some guidance. Staff should also consider the effects of long-term housing on shelter animals and take in account an animal's ability to maintain a condition of physical and emotional well-being while staying at the shelter.

- **Species Issues**

Many animal shelters accept not only cats, dogs and other companion animals but also any other type of animal which requires haven. Consequently, shelters are often faced with decisions regarding the disposition of these animals who cannot, and usually should not, be adopted as pets. For example, reptiles may pose a serious health risk to humans. Wildlife and hybrid animals (canine or feline hybrids) are not companion animals and, in some states, it is illegal to keep them as pets. These animals should not be placed for adoption to the public.

Developing Adoption/Euthanasia Determination Criteria

Animal care and control agencies should develop criteria that will clearly document the reasons for and numbers of animals being euthanized. Agencies can consider using the following categories when establishing protocols to determine an animal's potential for adoption/euthanasia.

Category	Status	Euthanasia...
Adoption Potential	Animals who, given the space, time, staff, money or availability of an appropriate home could live well in a new home.	...is most often due to a lack of resources and/or appropriate homes.
Medical-Treatable	Animals in good physical condition with treatable, non-contagious medical conditions such as skin problems, bad flea or mite infestations, a broken limb, abscess, or problems that could be fixed with treatment and/or time.	...is most often a result of lack of resources, space or time to treat the animal.

Medical-Contagious	Animals in good physical condition with a medical condition such as an upper respiratory infection, kennel cough, ringworm, or a less severe case of mange that may be very treatable but highly contagious in a shelter environment.	...is most often not only because of the symptoms of the illness, but also to prevent contamination of others.
Physical Condition	Animals in general poor overall condition and/or health, (for example, old, thin, weak).	...is often the eventual result as these animals are generally poor candidates for adoption placement due to extensive medical rehabilitation necessary.
Unweaned-Too Young	Animals who are too young to survive on their own or in a shelter setting, needing extensive care and socialization.	...is often the result due to the labor-intensive nature of care and lack of foster homes.
Breed	Animals of breeds who are banned or at an increased risk in a community (such as areas where dogfighting occurs).	...may be performed if no other options (for example, transfer to another community's shelter) are available.
Behavior Problems	Animals with behavior problems such as chewing, inappropriate urination, separation anxiety, timidity, destructiveness, lack of socialization.	...is generally due to a lack of an appropriate placement that will provide a commitment to adequate training, socialization, and the proper environment.
Kennel-Stress	Animals with a marked change in behavior due to stress as a result of an extended stay in the shelter.	...is generally performed to prevent further suffering.
Space	Animals who would continue to make good adoption candidates but whose cage space is needed for other animals.	...is generally necessary when space in the shelter or adoption areas is unavailable and room is needed for other animals needing housing and care.
Inappropriate for Adoption	Animals with a serious condition (for example, feline leukemia) that is not suitable for rehabilitation.	...is appropriate even if the resources (space, time, money, staff, isolation, and a potential home) are available.
Species	Animals who are not appropriate as companion animals (i.e. canine or feline hybrids, exotics, etc).	...is performed if no other options (for example, placement in a sanctuary) are available or acceptable.
Medical-Untreatable	Animals with a terminal illness or injury, severe chronic illness, or other serious medical conditions.	...is appropriate to eliminate ongoing suffering for the animal.
Temperament	Animals who are extremely shy, timid, high-strung, stressed, or distressed.	...is generally necessary due to an unlikely chance for successful adoption and/or adjustment into a new home.
Aggressiveness	Animals who are showing signs of aggression, have attacked another animal or person, or have a history of aggression.	...is generally appropriate for humane, safety, ethical, and liability reasons.
Feral or Unsocialized	Animals who have not and cannot be handled and do not adjust to the shelter setting.	...is generally appropriate for animals with no hope of socialization.
Court Order	Animals who have been ordered for euthanasia at the direction of a judge, hearing officer, or other public official with such authority.	...is performed to comply with this ruling.

Euthanasia is currently an integral part of shelter population management in animal shelters across the country, but agencies must continue to strive to offer programs that work to reduce the number of animals who become unwanted or displaced. Effectively enforced animal control laws, public education efforts, strong adoption programs, the availability of affordable spay/neuter services, and programs that assist pet owners with animal training or behavior issues are all part of the solution.

However, it is not animal shelters alone who must battle this problem. Communities, not shelters, generate unwanted animals and efforts to decrease companion animal overpopulation should be developed and supported by community members in conjunction with animal shelters, veterinarians, pet supply stores, breeders, animal trainers, etc. The HSUS encourages cooperation between agencies, organizations, and individuals who work on behalf of animals.

Prepared by the Companion Animals Staff of The Humane Society of the United States.

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