

# Sheltering Considerations

## Issues to consider and alternatives to sheltering

In an effort to help animals, it may be tempting to consider opening a shelter. While shelters can be lifesaving for individual animals in need, there are many challenges that must be carefully considered before opening an animal shelter. When done so without appropriate resources, shelters can quickly become overcrowded and shelter staff can become overwhelmed, with the result being that shelters can actually jeopardize the welfare of the very animals they were meant to help.

### Types of shelters

In the United States, there are several different types of animal shelters. The first is open admission shelters. Open admission shelters are those that are mandated, often by the government, to accept every animal, regardless of the shelter's capacity to care for them. These types of shelters are generally run by municipalities, and often have a large animal population. Disease outbreaks and compromised lifesaving are often the result of the high animal intake. These shelters generally have a mandatory hold period for animals—dictated by municipal ordinances—to give guardians time to claim lost animals; animals who are not adopted or reclaimed by their owners are euthanized. Private shelters, on the other hand, typically limit their animal intake, and are typically dependent on fundraising, whereas municipal shelters may be funded by taxpayer dollars. There are also other ways of offering shelter to animals, including foster-based programs, and sanctuaries. Sanctuaries are facilities with very limited capacity, where animals who don't have a chance of being adopted are brought to live and be protected for the remainder of their lives. Every type of shelter has its pros and cons.

### Unique challenges

As opposed to veterinary clinics, challenges unique to shelters include overcrowding, constant introduction of new animals with unknown health status, inadequate healthcare programs, limited resources, stress, often poorly designed facilities and lack of open access and/or accountability to the public. Shelters often face constant scrutiny from the media, members of the public, animal welfare organizations and veterinarians.

### Shelters are expensive

Aside from the costs associated with the land and any construction, consideration must be given to the costs of medical care, staffing, utilities, pet food and ongoing shelter maintenance. Animal shelters are not typically profit generating, and therefore do not typically qualify for business loans. Once an animal

shelter is built and opened, it is a serious long-term investment in time, money and energy to address the very basic of needs for those animals in that shelter.

From a financial standpoint, one must be absolutely certain that there is a capacity to raise enough funds consistently to allow for the provision of humane animal care (veterinary care, adequate housing, exercise and enrichment, food, disease control, an active adoption program and humane euthanasia when necessary). “Animal welfare” not only refers to the animal’s physical wellbeing, it also includes the animal’s mental health. The animal’s quality of life must include daily evaluation of his or her behavioral/emotional state so the animal is moving toward eventually leaving the shelter for a nurturing home/family in the community.

According to the Association of Shelter Veterinarians’ Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, a well-run sheltering organization of any size is built on a foundation of planning, training and oversight. Shelters must have a clearly defined mission or mandate, adequate personnel, up-to-date policies and protocols, a system for training and supervising personnel and management practices aligned with these guidelines. The mission, personnel numbers, estimated number of animals and practices must all be considered when estimating overall operational costs, well before a shelter opens its doors.

### **Capacity for care**

Rescuing an animal should mark the beginning of an animal’s rehabilitation rather than their deterioration, with consideration given to their physical health, emotional and psychological needs and physical comfort and well-being. The ultimate goal of a shelter is to house an animal for the shortest time possible; this is often impossible in communities where adoption is not part of the culture. In such communities, alternatives to shelters should be considered. This might include trap-neuter-return programs for community animals or building a network of foster homes.

Every organization has limits to its ability to provide care. A shelter’s “capacity for care” (how many animals it can care for) is not based on how many cages it has or the size of the property. Rather, considerations include financial and physical resources, staffing hours and skills, housing and operations space and the opportunity for animals to experience positive outcomes such as adoption, fostering and enrichment as part of their care. These limitations define the number and type of animals for which an organization can provide humane care.

Operating beyond an organization’s capacity for care is an unacceptable practice. When shelter populations strain the organization’s ability to provide care for their animals, living conditions worsen and population health and well-being are compromised.

Overcrowding often occurs when animals are taken in with no plan of exit (adoption/foster/euthanasia) and for the reasons just described, overcrowding results in cruelty. It is not enough to just provide bare minimums of food, water and shelter. In places with a limited adoption culture, there may not be many opportunities for animals to find loving, adoptive homes. An organization’s policies for admitting new

animals should be based on their mission, needs of their community and ability to find homes for animals. An animal should only be admitted to a shelter if the shelter can provide the care the animal requires.

### **Facility design**

The shelter facility plays a critical role in the care provided to animals. Poor housing is one of the greatest shortcomings observed in shelters and has a negative impact on animal health and welfare. Simply “warehousing” animals into a fenced area or building is not only inhumane, but it can perpetuate disease transmission, fighting among animals who are group- or co-housed, behavioral deterioration and lead to unwanted litters if animals are unsterilized.

In an effort to meet the animal’s physical and emotional needs, shelters need appropriate enclosures, for both animals who require individual housing and those who benefit from group housing. Primary enclosures must allow animals to sit, sleep and eat away from areas of their enclosures where they defecate and urinate. Primary enclosures with indoor-outdoor access are ideal for most animals. In shelters in temperate or tropical climates where primary enclosures are fully outdoors, animals must have protection from adverse weather and predators and protection from escape.

### **Staff training**

While shelter medicine has been evolving as a veterinary specialty over the past decade, it is also important to keep in mind that very few people have proper training in how to run a humane animal shelter. In many countries such training may be hard to find and, oftentimes, the skill and expertise needed to humanely run a shelter is underestimated. Until an organization has trained personnel, substantial funding for at least two years of operation for the shelter and a culture that embraces the adoption of homeless animals, starting a sheltering program is discouraged.

### **Is there a better way?**

Keep in mind that most animals do not need to be rescued and sheltered. Many animals have one or multiple caregivers in the community they live in. And research shows that many free-roaming animals have a home and family that cares for them. Removing these animals from their habitat is detrimental to their wellbeing, and especially with animals who are sterilized and vaccinated, their removal can affect the health of other animals and humans in that community. Always consider whether the animal is experiencing life-threatening issues and needs help.

In areas where there is a significant free-roaming animal population, available adoptive homes are typically scarce and facilities may be forced to either euthanize animals or care for them for their entire lives. Once a facility reaches capacity, it can no longer admit new animals and will be forced to provide lifelong care for the existing shelter population. In situations in which the euthanasia of animals is not

possible for cultural reasons, shelters are often incredibly overcrowded with compromised animal welfare.

Around the world, shelters are often constructed as a knee-jerk response to the suffering of animals on the street. While potentially lifesaving for individual animals, shelters will do little to address the reason animals are on the streets in the first place and will not help to humanely decrease the population. As an alternative to sheltering, HSI recommends that resources be devoted to effective and humane dog and cat population management through the provision of affordable and accessible spay/neuter services. Spaying/neutering dogs and cats will help decrease the population of animals on the street, prevent the birth of unwanted litters and reduce the number of animals who are rescued from the streets, ultimately increasing adoption through organizations that have animals in well-run shelters and foster programs.

A humane dog and cat population management program should ideally be comprehensive, offering different services to effectively improve animal welfare. It should consider access to preventive veterinary care, particularly for underserved communities; provision for humane euthanasia of those animals who are unadoptable due to being too old, ill or injured; waste management (i.e., control of available food sources) for the management of free-roaming animals; and targeted spay/neuter. In some cases, shelters may be needed to provide temporary care for individual animals as part of a more comprehensive program to reduce the dog and cat population in a specific city or area and generate an adoption culture. This kind of comprehensive program, together with community engagement and education on the needs of dogs and cats, addresses the *causes* and not just the *effects* of animal abandonment. It becomes a *proactive* solution rather than a *reactive* one.

### Community-based approach

More than ever, animal welfare organizations are transitioning away from sheltering and towards helping pets stay with their owner or caregiver. This approach eliminates the stress of shelter admission and helps preserve the human-animal bond.

In the long run, more can be accomplished for the animals of the community if an animal welfare organization focuses its energy on such things as empowering communities to be more engaged in understanding and caring for the welfare needs of the dogs and cats in their families, providing low-cost spay/neuter and preventive veterinary services and working alongside the government for the establishment and enforcement of animal protection laws.

### Conclusion

Running an animal shelter is time- and resource-intensive and may not be the best solution to a complicated issue. Without other elements such as humane education, access to affordable veterinary care and targeted spay/neuter, operating a shelter can be compared to running on a treadmill. One will never get ahead. In other words, one is dealing with the effects of the problem (i.e., unwanted animals needing shelter) without offering solutions to prevent animals from needing sheltering in the first place.

## Resources

The primary resource on sheltering is [Guidelines for Standards of Care for Animal Shelters](#), published by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians and available in English, Spanish and French.

The [International Companion Animal Management](#) (ICAM) coalition offers valuable resources on humane, sustainable and effective dog and cat population management. We recommend ICAM's free [online courses](#): Implementing DPM (dog population management) and DPM for policymakers.

