Humane World for Animals

Formerly called
Humane Society International

Sheltering Considerations

Issues to consider and alternatives to sheltering

In an effort to help animals, opening a shelter may seem like a natural solution. While shelters can be lifesaving for individual animals in need, they also come with significant challenges that must be carefully considered before opening an animal shelter. Without adequate resources, shelters can quickly become overcrowded, placing immense strain on staff and compromising animal welfare. In some cases, this can ultimately harm the very animals they were meant to help.

Types of shelters

In the United States, animal shelters may be funded by municipalities, privately funded by supporters or a combination of both. Some accept any animal in need from the communities they serve while others may manage the flow of animals into their care based on their available resources. While many organizations operate under the [Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters](#) recommended by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians, others may struggle with disease outbreaks and challenges in lifesaving efforts. They also typically have mandatory hold periods for animals—dictated by municipal ordinances—to allow guardians time to reclaim lost pets. Animals who are not adopted or reclaimed by their owners may be euthanized.

Other models of animal care include foster-based programs, where animals are housed in temporary homes, and sanctuaries, which provide lifelong care for animals with little chance of adoption but operate with very limited capacity.

Each community has its own needs and evaluating those needs will help determine whether a physical animal shelter should be the primary response.

Unique challenges

Unlike veterinary clinics, shelters face unique challenges such as overcrowding, the continuous introduction of new animals with unknown health status, difficulty obtaining a veterinary team to assist with healthcare programs, limited resources, and high levels of stress. Many shelters also operate in poorly designed facilities and may lack transparency or accountability to the public. Additionally, they are often under constant scrutiny from the media, the public, animal welfare organizations and veterinarians.

Shelters are expensive

Aside from the costs of land and construction, operating an animal shelter requires ongoing funding for

medical care, staffing, utilities, pet food and facility maintenance. Unlike traditional businesses, shelters do not typically generate profits and often do not qualify for business loans. Once established, a shelter becomes a long-term commitment of time, money and energy, dedicated to meeting the most basic needs of the animals in its care.

From a financial standpoint, it is essential to ensure a sustainable source of funding to provide humane animal care. This includes veterinary services, adequate housing, exercise and enrichment, proper nutrition, disease control, an active adoption program and humane euthanasia when necessary.

Animal welfare encompasses more than just physical wellbeing, it also includes the animal's mental health. Ensuring a good quality of life means regularly assessing each animal's behavioral and emotional state, with the ultimate goal of preparing them for placement in a nurturing home within 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 staff, up-to-date policies and protocols, a system for training and supervising personnel and management practices aligned with these guidelines. The mission, staff 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 be the start of their rehabilitation, not their decline. It's essential to consider not only their physical health but also their emotional and psychological well-being, along with their overall comfort and well-being. The ultimate goal of a shelter is to house animals for the shortest time possible, but this can be challenging in communities where adoption is not a common practice. 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 the care it can provide. A shelter's "capacity for care" is not based on the number of cages or the size of the property but by factors like financial and physical resources, staffing hours and skills, housing and operations space and the ability to offer positive outcomes for animal, including adoption, fostering and enrichment. These factors ultimately define the number and type of animals an organization can responsibly and humanely care for.

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 the animals' health and well-being are compromised.

Overcrowding often occurs when animals are taken in without a clear plan for their exit (adoption/foster/euthanasia). As a result, overcrowding can lead to cruelty as shelters struggle to meet even basic welfare standards. Simply providing food, water, and shelter is not enough. Animals also require proper medical care, enrichment and opportunities for a positive outcome.

In communities with a limited adoption culture, finding loving homes can be especially challenging. Therefore, an organization's intake policies should align with its mission, needs of their community and ability to find homes for animals. Animals should only be admitted if the shelter can meet their physical and emotional needs, ensuring their well-being rather than contributing to their suffering.

Facility design

The shelter facility plays a critical role in ensuring proper care for animals. Poor housing is one of the most significant shortcomings in shelters and has a negative impact on animal health and welfare. Simply "warehousing" animals into a fenced area or building is inhumane—and can perpetuate disease transmission, fighting among animals who are group- or co-housed, behavioral deterioration and lead to unwanted litters if animals are unsterilized.

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 settings. 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 the risk of escape.

Staff training

While shelter medicine has been evolving as a veterinary specialty over the past decade, proper training in humane shelter medicine remains scarce. 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 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 within their community, and research shows that many free-roaming animals have a home and family that cares for them. Removing these animals from their environment is detrimental to their wellbeing. For animals that are sterilized and vaccinated, their removal can affect the health of other animals and humans in that community. Before intervening, always consider whether the animal is truly in distress or facing life-threatening issues that require intervention.

In areas with large free-roaming animal populations, adoptive homes are often scarce, leaving shelters with two difficult options: euthanizing animals or providing lifelong care. 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 an instinctive response to the suffering of animals on the street. In some locations, there may be a desire to protect free-roaming animals from government culling (killing) programs. 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, Humane World for Animals advocates investing resources in effective and humane population management through affordable and accessible spay/neuter programs. 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, incorporating multiple strategies 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. When combined with community engagement and education on responsible pet care, this holistic approach addresses the root causes of animal overpopulation and abandonment, creating a proactive, rather than reactive, solution.

Animal protection legislation

For locations where governments practice inhumane methods of population control and/or there is a lack of animal protection legislation or enforcement of existing legislation, having laws in place is the first step towards any improvements in animal welfare. While working on building acceptance of the concept of animal protection among the public, any organized effort should include lobbying the government to pass and enforce animal welfare legislation.

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 most effective solution to a complex issue. Without complementary efforts such as humane education, access to affordable veterinary care and targeted spay/neuter, operating a shelter is akin to running on a treadmill—constant effort with no real progress. In other words, it addresses the symptoms of the problem (animals in need of a shelter) rather than tackling its root causes. Sustainable solutions must focus on prevention to reduce the number of animals requiring shelter in the first place.

Resources

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

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.

World Animal Net provides resources to assist with drafting and lobbying for animal welfare laws.