

Community-Supported Animal Sheltering Policy Platform

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly altered the way many municipalities and communities operate on a day-to-day basis. Across the country, animal shelters and animal care/services workers were deemed essential as emergency orders took effect. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, most shelters and animal care workers limited services and changed their operations to maintain physical distancing. Anticipating a shortage of staff and limited operations, shelters called on their communities for support, and those communities stepped up to help on an unprecedented level. For example, many shelters saw significant increases in the number of foster volunteers, allowing them to move most animals out of shelter during the crisis. Some of these COVID-related changes resulted in increased positive outcomes for animals, prompting many in the animal sheltering sector to suggest these changes become permanent. The following document, based on and inspired by a policy platform first written by **National Animal Care and Control Association** and **Best Friends Animal Society**, outlines suggested policies and practices for shelters, humane societies, SPCAs, communities, and governments to implement that would enable them to maintain and enhance the gains made during the pandemic and rethink animal welfare and sheltering in a post-COVID world.

Invest in prevention programs that keep pets and families together

Investments in pet homelessness prevention programs and resources that keep pets with their families, such as low-cost veterinary care or low-interest loans for care, pet food pantries, and behavioural consultation services, should be made. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many shelters implemented *managed intake*¹ policies, including requiring appointments for owner-surrenders, which allow shelters to better serve their community and identify opportunities to keep pets with their families. Intake policies and procedures, along with general policies and legislation, should be addressed to support a shelter's ability to manage intake.

Governments should re-allocate and invest in community-based services

Animal services are integral to a healthy community and are valued by Canadians. As such, they should be adequately funded. Governments should re-allocate and invest in community-based services that address the root causes of pet homelessness and build community trust through collaborative relationships that reduce barriers to positive outcomes for animals and the community. Models for animal services that incentivize unnecessarily impounding animals and separating families from their pets should be avoided. There are a variety of possible budget models that move away from strictly intake-based fees.

¹ "Managed intake refers to a thoughtful process whereby admission to the shelter is scheduled based on the shelter's capacity to provide care and, in some cases, assure a live outcome for each animal admitted."

UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program (2015). *Length of Stay*. Retrieved from <https://www.sheltermedicine.com/library/resources/?r=length-of-stay-los#Managed>

Support a multi-faceted approach to community cat management

A large body of peer-reviewed research indicates that trap and remove policies for cats are ineffective and that stray cats stand a better chance of making their way home if left in place, rather than being brought to a shelter. Government and organizational policies should support a multi-faceted approach to community cat management, including the ability to leave healthy and safe stray cats out of the shelter population; community fostering as an alternative to shelter housing; and trap-neuter-vaccinate-return (TNVR) programs for feral cats. Progressive policy development should support research into practices that could lead to better outcomes for cats, including managed intake and return-to-field programs in specific circumstances. Governments should promote public education and awareness about community cats and when they should be left where they are.

Utilize breed neutral policies

Breed discriminatory policies are not only ineffective at ensuring public safety, but also costly and labour-intensive to enforce. Canine aggression is more likely to result from a lack of knowledge of behaviour, poor socialization and training, or a history of abuse than from the breed of the dog. Communities can make better use of resources by advocating for breed-neutral, comprehensive dangerous dog laws that penalize negligent or reckless owners.

Mandate pet-inclusive housing, especially for owners and operators who receive subsidies

The majority of Canadians own pets and consider them to be members of their family. However, across the country, housing-related issues are one of the top reasons animals end up in shelters.² Pet-inclusive housing policies can prevent families from being separated while reducing an unnecessary burden on local animal shelters by eliminating the intake of pets that become victims of restrictive housing policies. Governments should ensure that publicly-funded housing is pet-inclusive and encourage privately-funded housing to also have pet-inclusive policies.

Work with the community to get pets home

Once a tool used only to prevent and control rabies, shelters are now relied upon as the go-to resource to reunite lost pets with owners. An emerging body of research shows that “lost” dogs and cats are often found close to their homes, which leads to questioning the value in taking these animals further away to be impounded in shelters. Animal services should empower finders of lost animals and animal control officers to attempt to locate the animal’s owners and reunite the animal in the field, rather than impounding the animal in the shelter and requiring owners to travel to the shelter to be reunited. Similarly, shelters can invite finders to foster the animal in their home while the shelter aids in locating the owners virtually. Such an approach is likely more effective and may

² Humane Canada (The Canadian Federation of Humane Societies) (2017). *Cats in Canada: A Five-Year Review of Cat Overpopulation*. Retrieved from https://humaneCanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Cats_In_Canada_ENGLISH.pdf

result in cost savings. Any regulations that require found animals to be automatically impounded in shelters should be repealed.

Maintain and expand telemedicine

Telemedicine allows shelter animals and owned pets to receive veterinary care to the extent possible while practicing physical distancing and provides a good option when physically bringing the animal to the shelter or veterinarian is unrealistic or unnecessary. The use of telemedicine technologies (with the legal authority to fully utilize their capabilities) has been implemented in some provinces during the COVID crisis with very positive results and should be maintained. Expansion of telemedicine, including allowing a veterinarian-client-patient-relationship to be established via telemedicine, would allow for shelter animals and owned pets alike to receive care in a variety of circumstances.

Remove barriers to foster care and adoptions

During COVID-19, many shelters and rescues called on their communities for help, and Canadians stepped up in a major way. This was particularly evident with an unparalleled increase in the number of people volunteering to provide foster homes for animals. National data shows that during the height of the COVID-19 crisis, shelters saw a 17% increase in dogs in foster care and a 26% increase in cats in foster care, compared to 2019.³ Foster care has been and will increasingly be critical to sustaining life-saving operations in a post-COVID world. Any policies or regulations (e.g. home inspections, pet limits, background checks, or licensing schemes) should remove barriers to fostering or adoptions and should support responsible pet ownership and good animal welfare practices.

Ensure animal services have a seat at the table

Municipalities and provinces may form various community task forces comprised of local agencies and partners that provide essential services, including emergency management. It makes sense to include animal services in provincial or local planning task forces in order to best meet the needs of community members with pets. Such participation will foster greater collaboration with government leaders on a variety of matters.

Intersectionality with other social services

Delivering effective animal services does not happen in a vacuum. The needs of people with animals exist within the complexities of a wide variety of human needs and environments. Human social services agencies, rescue groups, and other community partners should work closely with animal services organizations, recognizing people and their pets as a family unit.

³ Pethealth Inc. data for the week of March 28, 2020.

Broaden the role of animal field services

The engagement of citizens to resolve animal-related issues in the community has been used by some municipalities for many years and is gaining wider popularity. This approach has been used for decades in traditional policing with great success. Field officers who engage the community successfully resolve common issues involving animals. Under this model, the public is recruited to assist field services in maintaining a watchful eye on community animals and wildlife, as well as vulnerable community members to assist them in caring for their pets. This model fosters goodwill in the community and allows for resources to be deployed in the areas of greatest need for public health and safety. Governments should support policies and laws that give animal field services the ability to serve this kind of role in the community, rather than simple mandates to impound all free-roaming animals.

Conclusion

Recent changes made as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have proven that there are different ways of successfully delivering animal care and services. Some of these approaches have already resulted in better outcomes for animals and people in the community. It is important that the learnings and advances regarding organizational roles and procedures be maintained and barriers not be reinstated, to ensure the best care for animals and the communities they live in.

ABOUT HUMANE CANADA™

As the federation of Humane Societies and SPCAs, Humane Canada™ convenes and represents the largest animal welfare community in the country. Together with our 65 Members and Associates in every province, we advance the welfare of animals with a strong national voice, promoting animal welfare interests and concerns to government, policymakers, industry, and the public.

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