

Recommendation to Reduce Overcrowding at Austin Animal Center

Introduction

For the last two years, the Austin Animal Center (AAC) has experienced chronic overcrowding, particularly with large dogs. To deal with the overflow, large dogs have been living in small wire pop-up crates, temporary holding kennels, and buildings inaccessible to adopters.

Being chronically overcapacity has caused tremendous stress and strain on staff, volunteers, and the animals. Staff and volunteers are being stretched unimaginably thin, which is causing burnout and makes it difficult to retain quality staff and volunteers. Dogs living in crates 24 hours a day are developing behavior problems, making them harder to adopt.

In December 2017, a new large dog kennel building was constructed at a cost of 3.1 million dollars. This building provided a temporary break from the space crisis, but after several months, the overcrowding resumed.

Rather than spend millions constructing more buildings to deal with chronic overcrowding, it is recommended that the focus be on prevention by decreasing shelter intake and increasing outcomes. Applicable here is the old adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”.

A 2017 study from the University of Denver (1) has found that Austin has benefited economically from being a No Kill city. According to the study, “the majority of the positive economic impacts result from increased employment within animal services as well as the increased use of pet care and pet retail services”. This study also determined that an additional economic benefit was derived from attracting new business and new growth to the Austin area. Overall, it was found that the total economic impact realized between 2010-2016 as a result of passing the No Kill ordinance was \$157,452,503.

Since Austin has received an economic benefit from being No Kill, it is recommended that the City of Austin increase support for AAC by giving it the resources it needs and by investing in efforts to reduce overcrowding. This investment will ultimately pay off by reducing staff burnout and costly staff turnover, as well as reduce the need for more building construction.

Additionally, it will create a healthier and happier environment for AAC staff, volunteers, and animals.

Recommended Solutions

Increase public education, awareness and marketing to decrease intake, increase outcomes, and to promote animal health and welfare

More public education and awareness is needed on the following topics: where the shelter is located, the availability of free microchipping and tags, rabies clinics, the PASS program, the benefits of spay/neuter and it's free and low-cost availability, heartworm prevention, fencing

assistance, the importance of adopting animals rather than shopping, responsible pet ownership, the need for fosters/volunteers/adopters, promoting long-stay animals for adoption/foster, the SNR program, and how to humanely handle lost and free-roaming animals (and know alternatives to bringing them to the shelter).

Free and low-cost avenues to increase public education and awareness should be pursued. For example, educational information could be included in City of Austin electric bills and the City's online employee newsletter. If possible, free and low-cost billboard, bus, social media, TV, and radio advertising could be employed, and local advertising companies may consider donating marketing expertise. Current "Pet of the Week" TV spots could include more educational content focused on decreasing intake.

Create a partnership between AAC and the Austin Fire Department to equip fire stations with microchip scanners to help reconnect lost pets with their owners

This partnership could be modeled on a recent initiative between El Paso Animal Services and Fire Department. All 34 fire stations in El Paso are equipped to scan animals for microchips. Fire Department personnel are trained to properly scan for a chip, and residents can visit the fire stations to use the scanners. A pilot program could be conducted in Austin's highest-intake areas.

Provide Austin Lost and Found volunteers with more microchip scanners

Increase foster outcomes by strengthening and expanding AAC's foster program

At present, AAC has 1.5 full-time foster coordinators. Given that current shelter intake is 18,000 animals, and that the foster program averages 450-500 animals, this program is severely under-resourced. It is recommended that 2 full-time foster coordinators be added. This addition would improve the current program, help more long-stay dogs get in to foster, allow for foster base expansion and for the creation of a robust behavioral program to support animals with behavior challenges.

Increase spay and neuter and trap-neuter-return (TNR) efforts in targeted high-intake areas

Studies show (2,3) that targeted TNR efforts are extremely effective in reducing shelter cat intake. In areas of highest cat intake in Austin, better targeted and coordinated TNR is needed. It is recommended that 1 full-time employee be added to the Community Cats Program to accomplish this.

Additionally, due to limited space on Emancipet mobile clinic units, customers are sometimes turned away from spay/neuter services due to long wait lines. More funding for AAC/Emancipet would help alleviate this problem.

Permanently staff AAC's Neighborhood Level Program (NLP)

The NLP is a grant-funded pilot program which works to increase return-to owner rates in high-intake areas. NLP staff work directly within the community by addressing barriers to pet retention and connecting citizens with resources that will enable them to keep their pets. Since its inception, NLP's "Missing My People" campaign has achieved a 4% increase in return-to-owner rate. Permanently staffing this program will allow for continued success in decreasing shelter intake.

Increase support for AAC's Pet Resource Center (PRC)

The PRC has an engagement-based approach which helps to reduce intake. Rather than simply taking in animals (as was previously done), the PRC engages the community to help keep animals out of the shelter. This is accomplished by providing needed resources to prevent owner surrender, and by encouraging citizens to be Pet Heroes and Lifesavers. Pet Heroes agree to transport lost/found animals to their owners after PRC staff have facilitated reunification, and Lifesavers agree to keep lost/found animals in their care while attempts at reunification are made.

The PRC has approximately 75 customer conversations a day, and provides help 7 days a week. Due to limited staffing, customers often face considerable wait times. Given how essential the PRC is to reducing intake, and in an effort to reduce customer wait times, it is recommended that 3 full-time staff members be added.

Inform the Austin community of the AAC Donations fund If more Austin citizens and businesses knew how under-resourced AAC was, many would consider giving to this fund to help supplement shelter needs.

Increase the medical voucher fund This would allow more citizens to keep from surrendering their pets, increase adoptions, and facilitate more rescue transfers.

Expand collaboration with rescue partners to increase rescue transfers At present AAC only has 1 full-time rescue coordinator. Adding 1 full or part-time coordinator would allow for expansion.

Create a partnership between AAC and the Austin Independent School District to offer pet education and responsible pet ownership classes in elementary schools

Teaching children to be responsible pet owners is an investment in Austin's future and will decrease intake down the road. Particular emphasis should be placed on providing classes in high-intake areas.

Increase adoptions by expanding matchmaking opportunities to help customers meet animals within the shelter

At present, due to lack of resources and staff, animal buildings are often left unattended. Customers often find themselves on their own without assistance, and adoption opportunities are missed since they leave the shelter empty handed. In order to facilitate matchmaking and promote animal welfare, it is recommended that 6 full-time animal care employees be added.

Currently, there are 19.5 full-time animal care employees at AAC, and 500-800 animals in care every day. In comparison, the Dallas municipal animal shelter has 35 animal care employees and 450-700 animals in care daily. The Animal Advisory Commission's Feb 2010 No Kill Implementation Plan (section 1, A, 5) states that "every animal should be treated as if it is the most important animal in our shelter system, receiving the care and outcome that is to that animal's greatest benefit". Given how severely understaffed AAC's animal care department is, this simply is not possible.

The benefits of adding 6 full-time animal care employees would be:

- A) Increased adoptions and matchmaking opportunities. Since the animal care staff (in collaboration with the behavior team) know the animals best, they are most equipped to make the best matches. Better matches mean less returns. Priority should be placed on getting long-stay animals adopted.
- B) Cleaner and more hygienic kennels and cages, which are more inviting for customers and more humane for the animals
- C) Increased safety at the shelter by having more staff supervision of customers. Customers frequently don't read safety signs or follow safe procedures. This is particularly problematic with behaviorally challenged large dogs, and preventable bites sometimes occur. In addition to providing more safety, having more staff supervision in and near the animal buildings would help prevent animal theft.
- D) Help giving dogs enrichment and kennel breaks to provide exercise, socialization, and potty breaks. This would create happier, calmer and more adoptable dogs.
- E) Animal care staff would be able to provide an average of 5 minutes per animal per day for feeding and cleaning. (The Association of Shelter Veterinarians recommends 15 minutes per animal per day).

Proactively address breed and weight restrictions preventing dog ownership

It is recommended that new City of Austin owned housing refrain from having pet dog restrictions based on breed and weight. For private housing associations and apartment complexes with current dog breed restrictions, an exemption should be considered for dogs who have graduated from APA's Top Dog and Canine Good Citizen programs. This exemption would allow for dogs to be evaluated based on temperament, not breed.

Ensure that vaccinations and spay/neuter surgeries be done in a timely manner by strengthening and expanding AAC's Veterinary Services department

In 2019, there has been a 20% increase in animal intake at AAC. Additionally, the shelter has had more emergency cases than in previous years. With current staffing levels and additional intake, it simply isn't possible to get animals vaccinated in a timely manner, and spay/neuter surgeries fall behind. Increased staffing would allow for quicker spay/neuter turnaround time so that animals could leave the shelter sooner, thereby maximizing kennel space. It is recommended that 2 full-time Animal Health Technicians (Vet Techs) be added to accomplish this goal.

Provide educational workshops to surrounding communities to help them reduce their animal intake and increase shelter adoptions

Since Austin is considered a safe haven for unwanted and lost animals, sometimes animals from surrounding communities are unknowingly coming in to AAC. Teaching other communities to make improvements would decrease the likelihood of animals coming in to Austin.

Reduce length of stay for medium/large dogs

At any given time, there are approximately 25-36 medium/large dogs living at the shelter for 120 days or more. An increased effort to reduce length of stay will maximize kennel space, reduce overcrowding, and promote animal welfare. The above recommendations for increased public awareness/marketing and augmenting the animal care and foster coordinator staff will promote reducing length of stay.

References

1. Hawes, Sloane; Ikizler, Devrim; Loughney, Katy; Tedeschi, Philip; and Morris, Kevin. (2017). "Legislating Components of a Humane City: The Economic Impacts of the Austin, Texas "No Kill" Resolution (City of Austin Resolution 20091105-040)". *Animal Law and Legislation Collection*. 1.
2. Levy, J.K, Isaza N.M, Scott K.C. (2014). Effect of high-impact targeted trap-neuter-return and adoption of community cats on cat intake to a shelter. *The Veterinary Journal*. 201, 269-274.
3. Spehar, Daniel D., Wolf, Peter J. (2019). Integrated return-to-field and targeted trap-neuter-vaccinate-return programs result in reductions of feline intake and euthanasia at six municipal animal shelters. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*. 6:77.

