

In response to Commissioner Smagula's questions about the City of Austin's use of cooling centers during extreme heat events, Bill Wilson, Emergency Management Manager, City of Austin's Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM), and Mark Sloat, Animal Services Office (ASO), shared the following:

Bill Wilson, City of Austin's Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM):

Only service animals are permitted in cooling centers per City ordinance No. 20190307-014 relating to recreation centers and Council approved Library Use Rules. It is the recommendation of the Parks and Recreation Department (PARC) and Austin Public Library (APL) that pets, which include all small animals, continue to not be permitted in those respective facilities to mitigate safety and sanitation risks. Regularly scheduled activities continue during cooling center activations putting all guests at risk when pets are present in a facility not designed for accommodating a variety of small animals.

HSEM coordinates with the Austin Animal Center (AAC) during emergencies and can mobilize cooling trucks for pets as needed and if trucks and staff are available. Advertising the resource is not advisable because AAC is burdened by overcrowding, which means fulfilling requests for additional services further strains their already tight resources. Cooling center staff are aware of the resource and can request the service when they observe the need. Fortunately, AAC has been able to accommodate on the few occasions a cooling truck has been requested for on-site service. AAC also regularly performs outreach by checking on pets and providing direct assistance to pets and their owners experiencing homelessness.

I also noticed that you are asking about services during an emergency shelter, but the subject for the email relates to cooling centers. I wanted to take a moment to differentiate between the two. Emergency Shelters will operate on a 24-hour basis and provide food, sleep accommodations, and other services for those that need the use of the shelter. Cooling Centers are locations that people can go to during the heat of the day to cool down. While there are times that snacks and water are provided, they are not open overnight and therefore do not provide sleeping accommodations, other services, or 24-hour access. We do work to provide accommodations for pets during both sheltering and cooling center operations.

Mark Sloat, Program Manager, Animal Services Office (ASO):

"We had no issues during the summer with any animals that needed cooling. During the very hot days, ASO Public Health Educator Brendon Gemmel was in the camps and on the streets, informing those experiencing homelessness about the cooling centers. No one with pets was turned away that we are aware of. We also had staff on stand-by in case we needed more trucks than those that were already working. I think over all we were more than prepared to handle any need that came up. I was on every heat related planning call all summer so there was very good communication with the entire team across the city. Overall, I think the City handled the hot days very well."