

The Service Gap

Austin Animal Services
After the Pandemic





Prepared by Hyperhound, a Texas nonprofit

Christopher McFall, Director

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This paper offers the perspective that, notwithstanding reported live-release rates, the senior management team in the Austin Animal Services Office has failed in their duty to fulfill the city’s vision for no-kill animal sheltering and to serve the animal-loving public of Austin. To make that case, this paper pulls together various sources of quantitative and qualitative information and considers the patterns of conduct, policymaking, and results that are present.

Introduction

In June 2022 the Austin Animal Advisory Commission approved a resolution of no confidence in the Chief Animal Services Officer Don Bland (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022a; KVUE 2022). In response, Chief Bland sidestepped the allegations of the resolution and simply said, “For us to maintain a 97% live-exit rate with all these factors going in, that is my take-away that we are doing a good job” (Spencer 2022).

At the August 2022 meeting, Commissioner Mitchell offered a frank assessment of the commission’s interplay with Animal Services management: “After hearing some of the comments that were made during the public comment and then hearing the shelter report, I feel like this is just completely surreal. I mean, we’ve got a whole set of comments coming in from the public that don’t at all match what we’re hearing in these reports, and just because we hit the save rate doesn’t show the whole picture” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022q).

The remark echoed a sentiment already rife within a segment of shelter staff, volunteers, rescue organizations, and advocates who care deeply about Austin’s homeless animals, that management’s claims and theories about deteriorating performance are not explanatory and that there is far more to the implementation of no-kill than a single number can represent.

No Confidence

The Animal Advisory Commission’s no-confidence resolution cited in sixteen specific clauses the following overall problems with the management of the Austin Animal Services Office:

- Reduced level of service to the public.
- Alienation of volunteers and partner organizations.
- Mismanagement of available funds through poor program and policy decisions.

- Refusal to accept help from or cooperate with other stakeholders.
- Loss of transparency from substandard reporting.
- Misinterpretation of the city’s stray-hold ordinance.
- Disregard for guidance provided by the commission.
- Failure to achieve and sustain the city’s no-kill goals.

In the year leading up to the declaration of no-confidence, senior management at the Animal Services Office had made a series of alarming misjudgments. In June 2021 they rolled out a new rescue-partner agreement that introduced a gag clause authorizing retribution against partners that said anything to “reflect adversely on the reputation or competence” of the Animal Services Office (Austin Animal Services 2021a). The following month, they delivered to the City Council a memorandum warning they might soon need to begin destroying animals with “behavioral concerns” who had been at the shelter for a long time (Austin Animal Services 2021b; Saldaña 2021). In September it came to light that they had allocated \$300,000 for the installation of artificial grass in dog play yards, even after being told by dog handlers that the plastic material would retain dangerous amounts of heat in summer and burn dogs’ feet (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2021a, 2022b). In January 2022, in spite of ongoing kennel space shortages, they closed the Animal Center to the public on Sundays, choosing to do away with service on a day when the public was free to adopt animals instead of on a day when the public was busy at work (Austin Animal Services 2022a).

The spring of 2022 saw a spate of public testimony to the commission by Animal Center volunteers and rescue partner organizations. The wide-ranging stories painted a picture of dedicated front-line volunteers and staff members doing their best to confront perverse management and to restrain a steady decline in animal care and shelter operations, what one veteran volunteer called a “dangerous downward spiral” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022c).

The commission’s no-confidence resolution was soon followed by a City Council resolution directing the City Auditor to audit the effectiveness of the Animal Services Office, with particular attention to the problems identified by the commission and to the strategy for “a successful, sustainable No Kill shelter,” a dictate that acknowledged the ever-growing gap between the attitudes and decisions of Animal Services management and the city’s longstanding commitment to no-kill (Austin City Council 2022).

The No Kill Gap

The audit resolution called attention to the city’s distinction as “a model for No Kill animal sheltering, with national and international municipal leaders traveling to Austin to learn.” A year earlier, when Animal Services management had suggested the destruction of long-stay animals might be necessary, Donna Tiemann, the Chief of Staff of Council Member Ann Kitchen, disagreed and cited the City of Austin’s no-kill policy goals, its “reputation as a leader” in no-kill implementation, and its “ability to be on the leading edge of so many municipal fronts.” She counseled: “It would be terrible for Austin to lose that distinction and have the policy stumble” (Tiemann 2021).

From the beginning, Austin has taken pride in the brand prestige of no-kill leadership. The mission statement in the 2010 No Kill Implementation Plan included the goal to “reposition Austin/Travis County as a recognized state and national leader in the field” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2010a). Over the succeeding years, Austin won multi-million-dollar grants (Maddie’s Fund 2014; 2017), was chronicled in a documentary film (No Kill Advocacy Center 2014), and was the subject of the well-known University of Denver impact study that concluded no-kill had brought a \$157 million benefit to Travis County’s economy (Hawes, et al. 2017; McGivern 2017). By many measures, Austin truly had become the national touchstone for municipal no-kill innovation and success.

Belief matters

Mike Martinez was the City Council Member who listened to local reformers and toiled for three lonely years building consensus around a municipal investment in no-kill to benefit the city. He has recounted, “The leadership of our animal shelter and our staff leadership at the city really didn’t care about no-kill and didn’t want to do it” (Hernandez 2016).

The 2010 No Kill Implementation Plan envisioned a future Animal Services that would be the “protector and safe harbor for lost and homeless animals in Austin” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2010a). To further drive home the concept, the authors added:

“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.”

In one sentence they captured the big idea that no-kill advocates carry in their hearts, that inspires passionate employees, enthusiastic volunteers, and devoted foster parents, and that attracts companies and people and money to a city of progress, the idea that a community can extend kindness and help to animals instead of killing them.

Re-reading the founding documents can be a bittersweet experience. It seems like the days are gone when Austin Animal Services might welcome visiting no-kill leaders expecting to learn something innovative, or might be the subject of a university case study on economic success, or might see a documentary film crew show up to record history unfolding. The atmosphere has changed.

In February of this year, Chief Bland sat down for an interview with KXAN and explained “A lot of people, when you talk about no-kill status, they think no-kill means zero kill,” elaborating that people think a dog might be able to live at the shelter for years until it dies its natural death. “We’re a municipal shelter, not a sanctuary,” he advised (Reader 2023).

Another Animal Services senior manager had offered the same talking point when interviewed the prior summer, saying, “We cannot operate as a sanctuary and must make some hard decisions,” invoking the code phrase for shelter killing (Ramkissoon 2022). A few months later, when the Animal Center closed regular animal intake, a news story reported another senior manager suggesting that without more adoptions and foster-matches in place the last resort would be to reconsider [no-kill] status (Searles 2022).

Before the pandemic arrived, Mayor Steve Adler had noted: “You can’t make people in other cities care about [no-kill] the same way our folks do, to the extent that they step out and volunteer and say we’re going to make this work” (McGivern 2017). Yet today the people who care about no-kill are facing an Animal Services Office under management that sometimes seems transplanted from over a decade ago. And the words of former Council Member Martinez resonate across the years.

Skill matters

Figure 1 shows a simple conceptual model of a traditional animal shelter. Animals flow in and out of the shelter through various channels. The shelter’s storage capacity is augmented by a foster home network that acts as a buffer and protects against bursts in inflow, for instance during kitten season, and smooths out non-uniformity in the time it takes to prepare animals for placement. The transfer

channel moves animals to other shelters or foster home networks so they can be adopted from there.

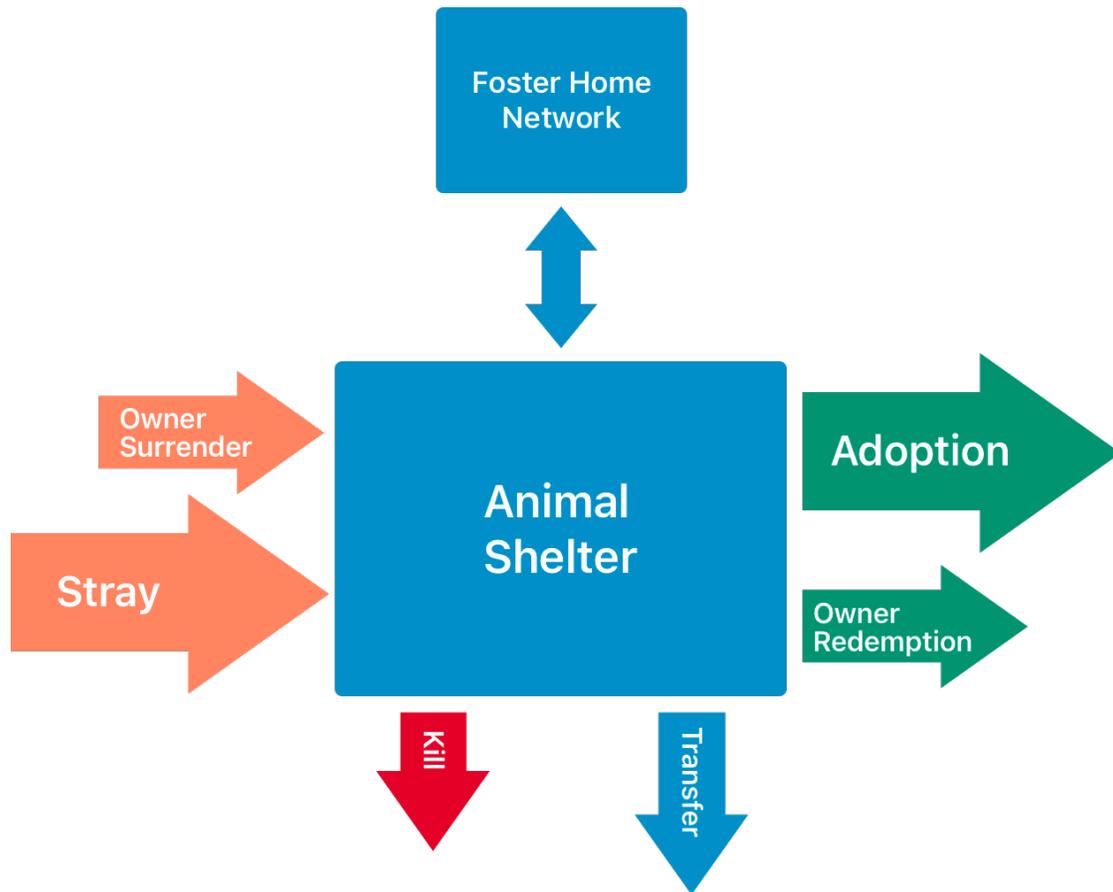


Figure 1. Conceptual flow model of an animal shelter with inflow and outflow channels. The foster home network buffers against bursts in inflow. The 2010 recommendations for no-kill implementation in Austin noted that one of the archetype cities at the time was fostering one animal for every 60 residents, which if hypothetically applied at the same scale to Austin would cover 11,500 animals. (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2010b). The transfer channel moves animals to another shelter or foster home network so they can be adopted from there. The kill channel is the pressure-release valve.

The red outflow channel labeled “Kill” is the pressure-release valve, borrowing terminology from fluid dynamics. When the system develops back pressure because animals are not flowing out in high enough volume, animals can be shunted through the pressure-release valve and simply killed. Doing so allows animals to continue to flow into the shelter and its foster home network, and prevents backflow and then flooding in the community.

For many animal shelter managers, having a pressure-release valve to fall back on is a source of great comfort. Yet progressive communities have grown to accept that

forcing death upon creatures who do not want to die is wrong, and those communities have sought to remake their relationship to animals.

The City of Austin's no-kill goal, reiterated in the City Council's audit resolution, is simple: "Ending the practice of euthanizing healthy and treatable animals entering the City's municipal animal shelter" (Austin City Council 2022). The visionary goal is to end, not moderate, the killing of shelter animals in Austin, to innovate and expand the notion of what is "treatable," and thereby to give each animal the outcome to that animal's greatest benefit. The goal is ambitious and forward-thinking and is a goal that most other large cities would not establish and could not achieve.

Under that clear mandate the running of the Austin Animal Center is very different and far more difficult than the running of a traditional shelter or even a low-volume no-kill shelter. Any unaccomplished administrator can yank on the pressure-relief valve and send a stream of animals to the lethal-injection room. Operating at high volume without access to the pressure-release valve takes real skill. The most important parts of the job become maintaining flow and continually monitoring trends in flow.

Flow is the target of most of the programs of the familiar No Kill Equation, which map directly onto and regulate the different inflow and outflow channels (No Kill Advocacy Center 2014; 2023). Flow was the first thing examined when the Animal Advisory Commission's Space Working Group launched into their work. They reported, "We talked about the different tracks that an animal could come into the shelter and the different tracks or ways out of the shelter...why there's not a fluid movement and why they're getting into a space crisis with intake as low as it's been" (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2021b).

In his reply to Chief of Staff Tiemann, Chief Bland pointed to animals who had been at the Animal Center "more than 600 days despite pleas to rescues, fosters, and adopters" (Tiemann 2021). On the day the response was sent, Animal Center records show there were fifteen animals who had been in custody for over 600 days (Austin Open Data 2023). Eventually they all found placement. Two cats and ten dogs were adopted and three dogs were transferred.

Senior management in Animal Services has been accused of saying they don't want to "kick the can down the road" when it comes to killing long-stay animals (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2023b). Yet what was in the best interest of these fifteen dogs and cats was a little more time and patience. A core concept in no-kill operation is that a subset of animals will consume a disproportionate amount of

resources. Efficient flow and sufficient buffering in the foster home network must be maintained so that the more resource-intensive animals can be helped too.

Campbell's law

Historically animal control departments and municipal shelters have had two duties to the public. First, to be bailees of turned-in animals, considered lost property. Second, to collect and impound dogs and other large animals running loose, which some states have mandated for their municipalities (California Penal Code § 597.1; Food and Agricultural Code § 31105; New Mexico § 77-1-12).

At a no-kill shelter the animals not reclaimed will be safe and will be placed into new homes. But at the same time, it is no less important to attend to the safety of abandoned, lost, and homeless animals in the community, to make sure they receive what help they need and are not just left to roam loose on their own.

The City of Austin budget report has for years described to the taxpaying public the daily mission of Animal Services: “to provide a safety net for lost and homeless pets” (City of Austin 2022; 2021; 2020).

On September 12, 2022 Austin Animal Center managers closed regular animal intake and put in place emergency rules to accept only animals who were sick, injured, or a public-safety risk. On that day they abandoned Austin's safety net for most lost or homeless animals. The memorandum announcing the change characterized it as “temporary” (Austin Animal Services 2022b; 2022c) and Chief Bland explained to local news media: “When all animals in our care can be placed in regular kennels instead of relying on temporary pop-up crates, we can fully open again” (Austin Animal Center 2022a).

Eight months later the “temporary” measure is looking noticeably more permanent. In October 2022 the Animal Center rolled out a graphical meter on their web site to indicate whether intake was open for cats or for dogs, to “help the public better understand our capacity limits” (Jones 2022). The intake meters for dogs have been continually pegged at “emergencies only.”

Two months after the closing of regular intake, Ellen Jefferson, the CEO of Austin Pets Alive, appeared before the Animal Advisory Commission and reminded them of the thinking behind the City Council's 95% live-release-rate resolution (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022d). She said it was a threshold intended to promote creativity and innovation year after year. Then she cited Campbell's Law, that when a measure becomes a target it stops being a meaningful measure and instead distorts and corrupts the process being measured, an allusion to Animal

Service's maintenance of a 95% live-release rate by closing the door on most of Austin's lost and homeless animals.

Seemingly the very idea of no-kill in Austin, the nature of its implementation, and the measurement of its success are being steadily remolded, not to fit the city's vision for no-kill or to best serve the public, but to fit the beliefs and capabilities of the senior management team.

Where we wish to go

Fifty years ago and one city away, President John F. Kennedy stood at a podium on the campus of Rice University and spoke of setting sail on the new sea of outer space. He spoke of the inspiring progress being made, of incredible new satellites circling the earth, of the Mariner spacecraft on its way to Venus, and of the decision to go to the moon, saying we do these things "not because they are easy, but because they are hard." Kennedy was not suggesting we should do things the hard way instead of the easy way. He was saying we should choose the path that goes where we wish to go, even though it may be difficult and demand much more from us than the easy path that takes us nowhere of benefit.

Thirteen years ago Austin decided to adopt no-kill because it is the policy path that fulfills our values and takes us where we wish to go. The catch is that it is hard. It demands from the leaders of Animal Services both belief in the policy and skill in the execution. When those things are absent, the deficit will eventually manifest as a deterioration in service to the animal-loving public.

The Service Gap

The intake gap

For the past three years, intake to the Animal Center has been dramatically lower, even though Austin has grown (Figure 2). An Animal Center employee hired in the past three years has no frame of reference for understanding what the normal intake volume to the shelter would be. Chief Bland has no context for understanding it, as he was hired months before the pandemic arrived and has never served through a complete annual cycle at full intake volume (Arredondo 2019). The shelter previously managed by the chief had annual intake volume less than one third the historical annual intake of the Animal Center (Humane Society of Central Texas 2019).

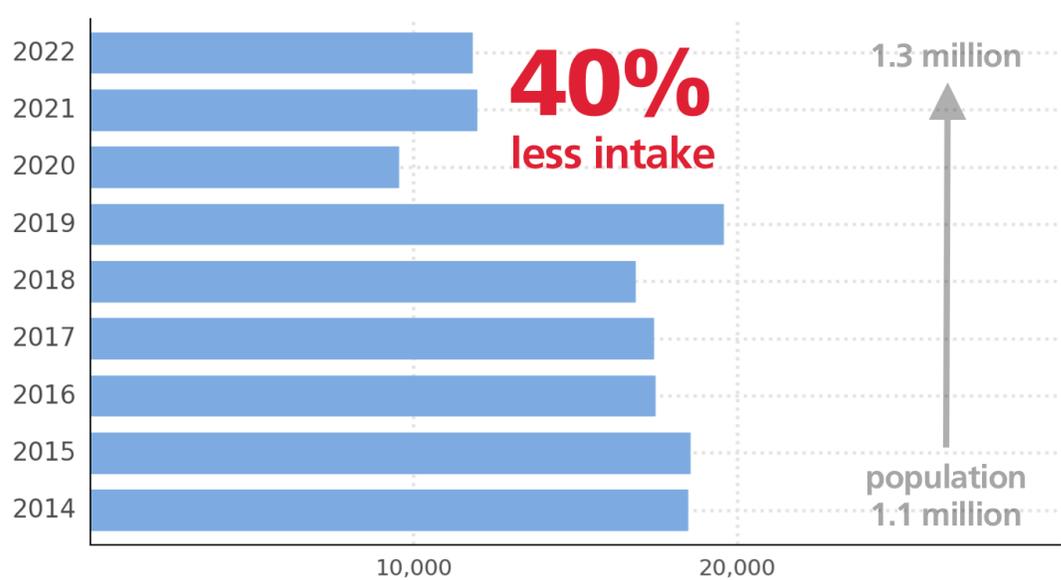


Figure 2. Histogram of annual intake to the Austin Animal Center annotated by the population of Travis County. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)(US Census 2019; 2022).

In the summer of 2021, during the first wave of space problems at the Animal Center, Chief Bland declared to the Animal Advisory Commission that the Center was “getting [animals] in at a record pre-pandemic number,” when intake at that point was less than half of the normal expected volume (Encarnacion 2021).

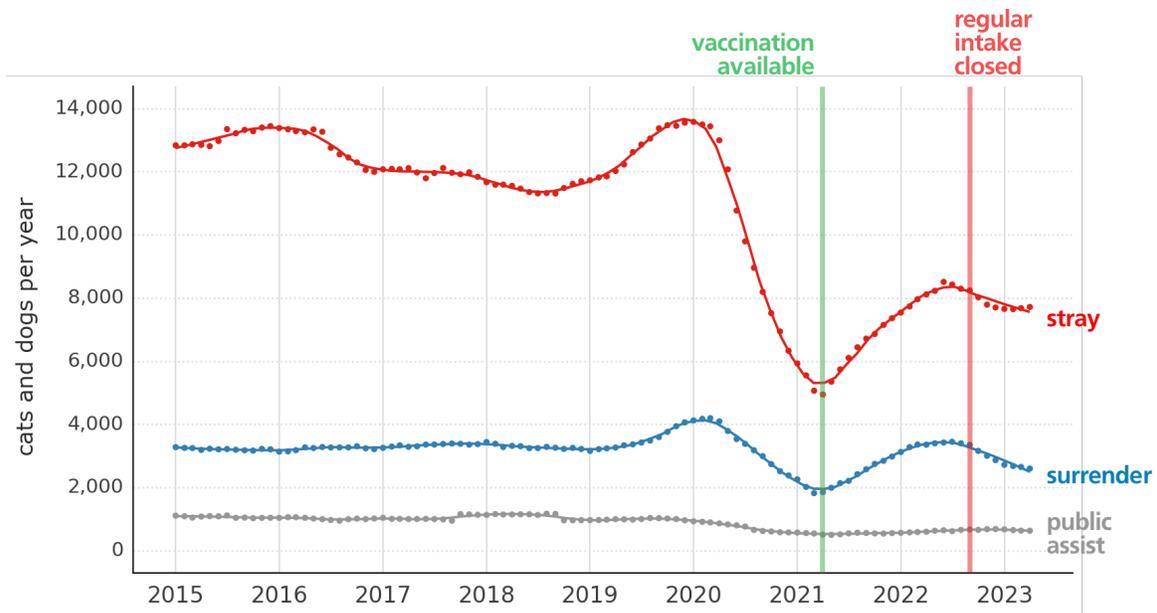


Figure 3. Twelve-month moving average of the number of cats and dogs taken in to the Animal Center by category. Green line is when vaccination for COVID-19 became available to the general public, a marker of when the community was starting to open up. Red line is when Animal Center management closed regular intake and instituted emergency-only intake. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

That was shortly after intake had begun to rise as widespread public vaccination against COVID-19 became available and the stay-at-home epoch ended (Texas Health and Human Services 2021)(Figure 3). Almost immediately the Animal Center was in trouble, and management sent out the memorandum warning of the impending need to kill long-stay animals. Stray intake has never reached anywhere near historical volume.

The estimated intake gap between 2019 and now is 4,393 dogs and 2,965 cats per year that are being left in the community (at the intake rates defined by the most recently completed twelve-month cycle, adjusted to account for multiple impounds of the same animals)(Figures 4, 5) Of those 971 are puppies and a startling 2,143 are kittens.

An incidental negative factor associated with leaving dogs unassisted in the community is that the share of intact dogs entering the Animal Center has been going up. At present, 86% of stray dogs taken in to the Animal Center and 59% of owner-surrendered dogs are intact (Figure 6).

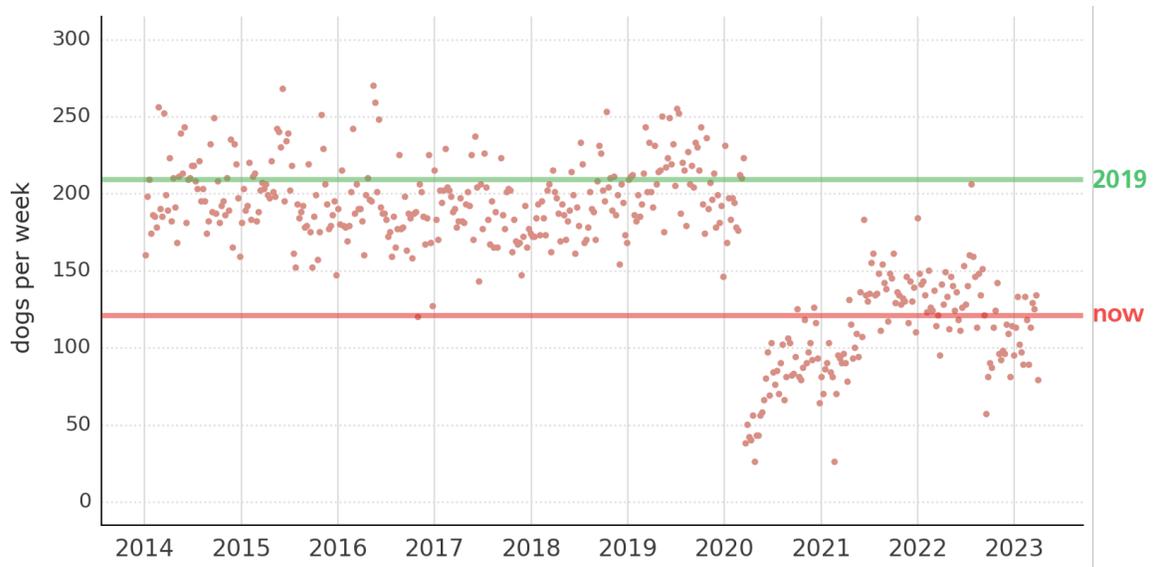


Figure 4. Number of dogs taken in to the Animal Center each week. Dog intake dropped precipitously when the pandemic arrived in March 2020. Green line is the average dog intake per week for 2019 (208). Red line is the average dog intake per week for the past twelve months (April 2022 to March 2023) (118). Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

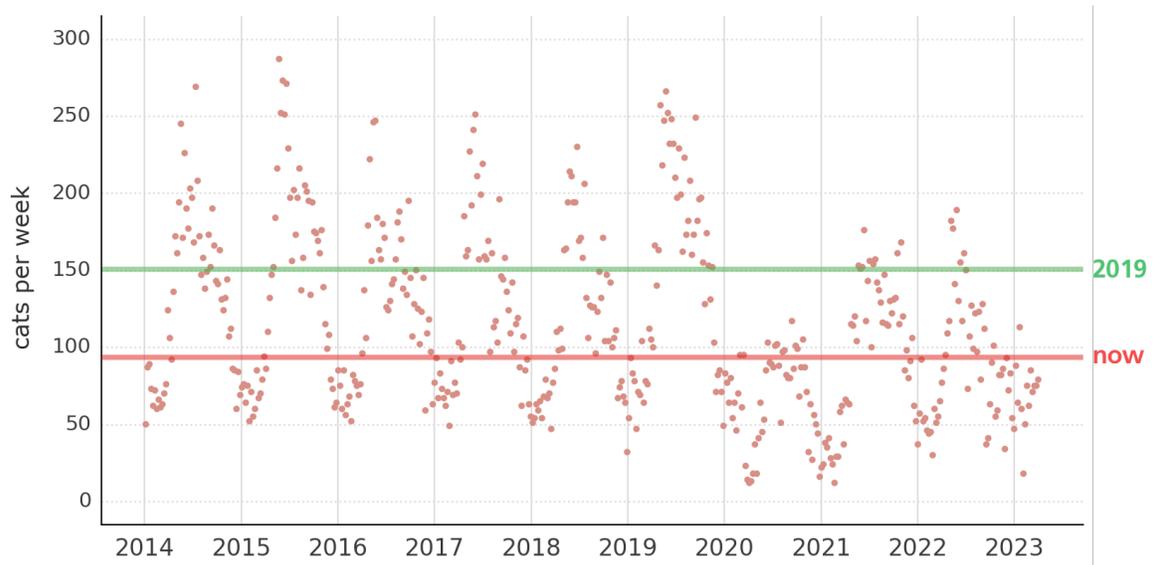


Figure 5. Number of cats taken in to the Animal Center each week. Cat intake also dropped precipitously when the pandemic arrived in March 2020. Cat intake is seasonal and exhibits the familiar sinusoidal shape. Kitten season intake has remained extremely low. Green line is the average cat intake per week for 2019 (152). Red line is the average cat intake per week for the past twelve months (April 2022 to March 2023) (94). Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

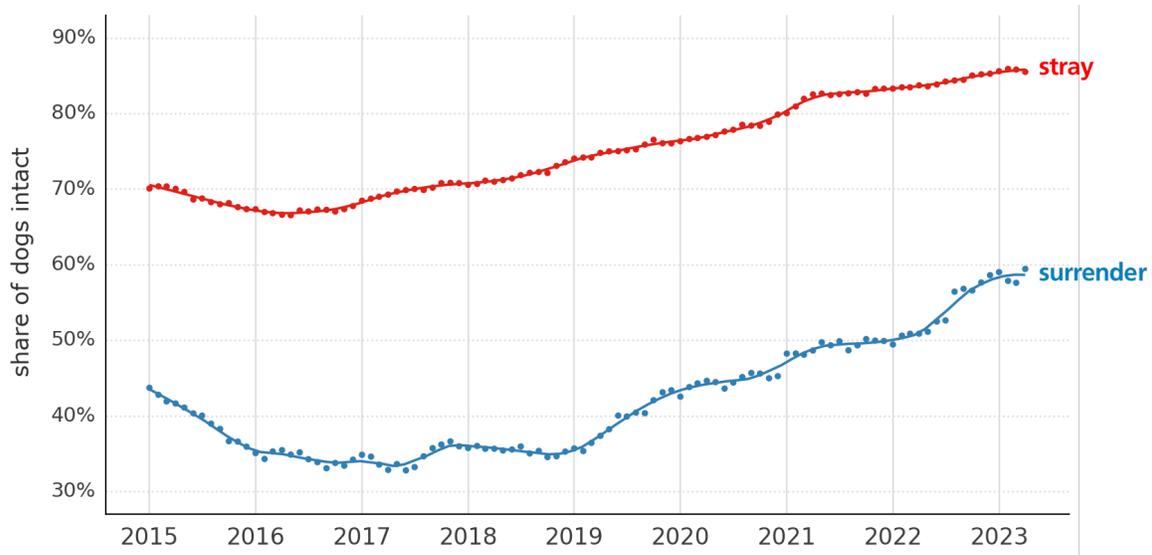


Figure 6. Twelve-month moving average of the share of dogs per intake category who enter the Animal Center intact. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

Occam’s razor

When talking to KXAN News in early 2023, Chief Bland attributed low shelter intake to “getting the citizens to help and keep animals out of the shelter” (Reader 2023). He continued, “And so I think that’s where you’ve seen a lot of intake down around the nation.”

Yet intake to the Animal Center is plainly down because management has dramatically regulated and then closed normal intake. There is no evidence that thousands of cats and dogs per year are being efficiently and effectively looked after by the community at large, and there is a growing body of evidence that the community is simply being flooded with animals because of inadequate flow through the Animal Center and its foster home network.

According to Austin 311 service requests, as the pandemic has receded loose dog reports have increased and found animal reports have decreased, which seems logical as the Animal Center has maintained restricted intake and people have increasingly returned to the office, no longer at home during the day to report or care for a found animal (Figure 7).

At the onset of the pandemic, when Animal Services first imposed emergency-only intake, a representative of Austin Lost and Found Pets, the local nonprofit with a decade of experience helping lost stray animals, warned of the implications: “They are telling you to take care of it personally, financially, or to leave that animal to

essentially die. They don't say that, but they're saying, 'leave it where it is.' And that animal will die if it's not taken care of" (Kendall 2020).

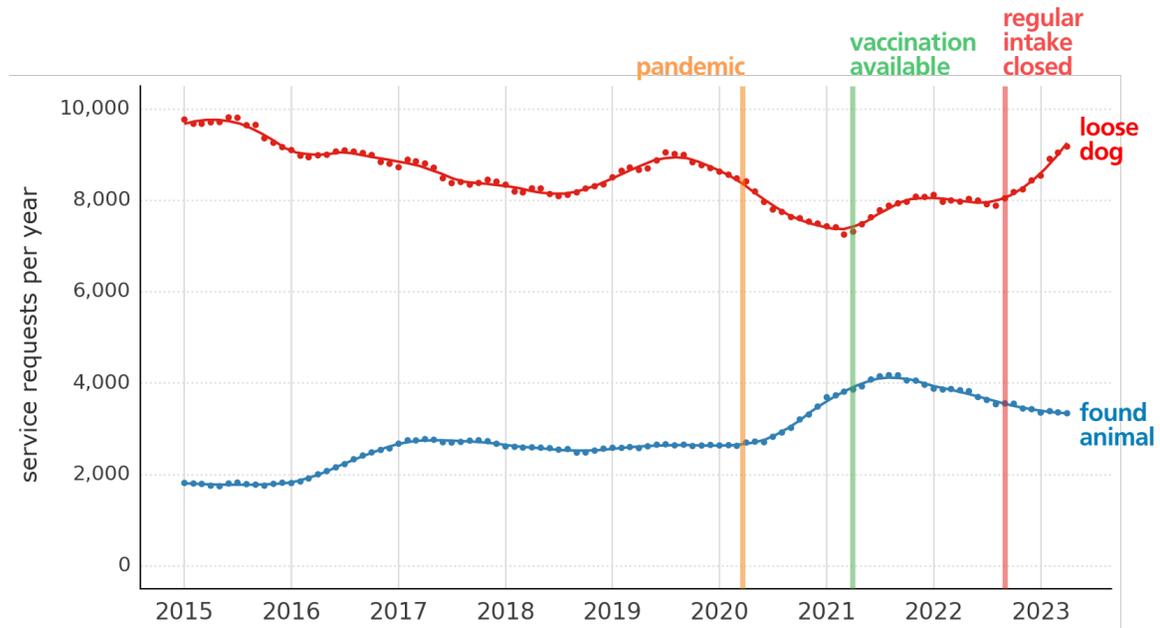


Figure 7. Twelve-month moving average of Austin 311 service requests for loose dogs and found animals. The orange line is when the Texas stay-at-home order went into effect. Found-animal requests are those explicitly for “found” animals and not generally for “assistance.” Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

Three years later the Animal Center finds itself relapsed into seemingly endless emergency-only intake. When local news recently reported on the rising number of abandoned stray dogs in the environs of the city, Animal Services management acknowledged, “With the current overcapacity issue at the shelter we have no kennel availability for the animals that are waiting to come to the center” (Travis 2023).

We have never

Not long ago, Misty Valenta, the director of the Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter, the open-intake municipal shelter serving an adjoining county, appeared before the Animal Advisory Commission to report that Austin residents were increasingly turning to her shelter seeking aid for animals whom Austin Animal Services declined to help (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022e).

She offered to collaborate with the Animal Center to open up service to the public, and she recounted her attempts to communicate with Austin Animal Services management only to receive a “dismissive” response from Chief Bland, who

lectured: “Misty, please know that we are not closed but have restricted intake. We have never full shut down services like they did back in 2016.”

Local news media and the city’s own press release made much of the fact that only on three prior occasions had the Animal Center closed regular intake: when the pandemic arrived and twice in 2016 (Girtman 2022; Ruiz 2022a; Austin Animal Center 2022a). The 2016 closings were in May and October of that year, the first in response to an outbreak of severe storms that displaced many animals (Christensen 2016; Officer 2016; FOX7 2016). Each closing lasted four days.

The Animal Advisory Commission raised questions at the time of the October 2016 closing, and Deputy Chief Kristen Hassen informed them that even during emergency operations the Animal Center was taking in twenty-five animals per day (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2016).

Animal Center records bear out that claim and also show that the momentary closings in 2016 were nothing like the chronic, extreme, and ongoing intake restrictions put in place by current management (Figure 8). Prior to the arrival of the current chief there were only nine times when ten or fewer animals were taken in to the Animal Center on any single day. Eight of those were Christmas or Thanksgiving Day and one was the Fourth of July under an interim chief in 2019. In the past three years, such days have become ordinary.

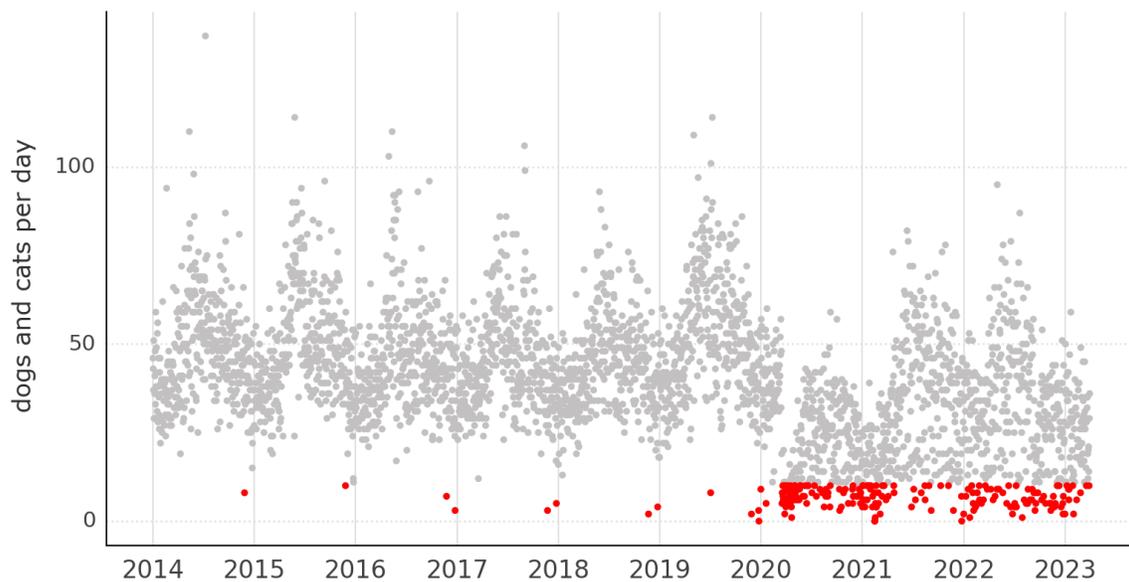


Figure 8. Number of dogs and cats taken in to the Animal Center each day, with days where ten or fewer were taken in highlighted in red. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

Travis County

The City of Austin has an inter-local agreement with Travis County for the provision of animal services, worth approximately \$3.1 million in the current year.

The taking up of dogs from Travis County has actually increased since the closing of regular intake to the Animal Center, rising by about 11% (Figure 9). By contrast, intake of dogs from City of Austin has fallen by about 21%, or 19 dogs per week (988 dogs per year) (Figure 10). The city has borne the greater burden resulting from the closing.

Because of sharply restricted intake and rising annual budget, the cost per intake to the Animal Center has doubled. The current cost per intake to the Animal Center is \$1,278, up by \$175 per intake since the time of the closing (Figure 11). For Travis County animals billed against the value of the inter-local agreement, the cost has not increased since the closing.

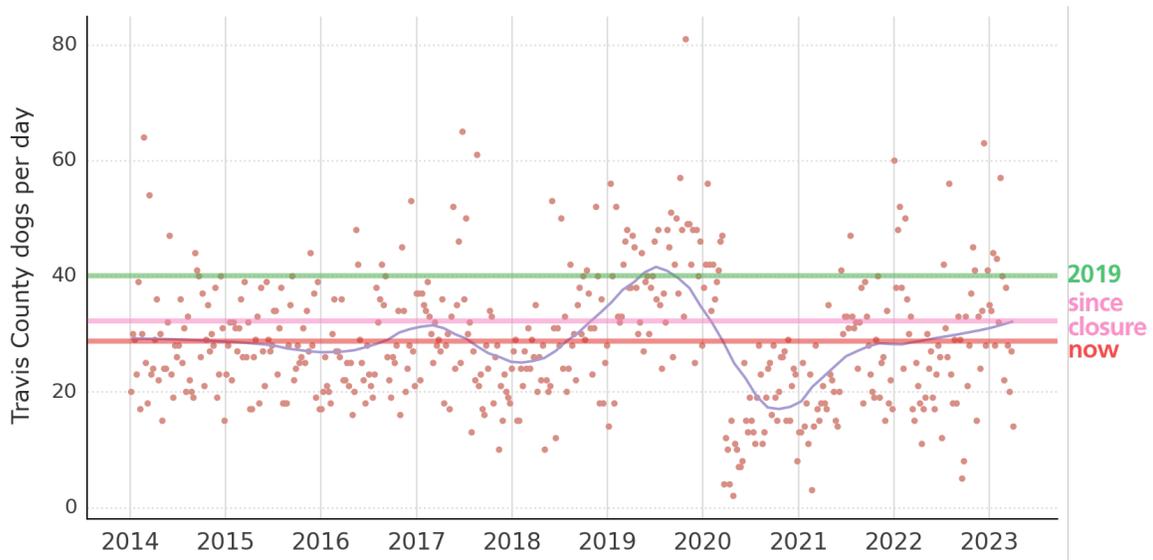


Figure 9. Number of dogs taken in to the Animal Center each week from Travis County cities and unincorporated area. Green line is the average dog intake per week for 2019 (40). Red line is the average dog intake per week for the past twelve months (April 2022 to March 2023) (29). Pink line is the average dog intake per week since the closing of regular intake (September 13, 2022 to March 2023) (32). Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

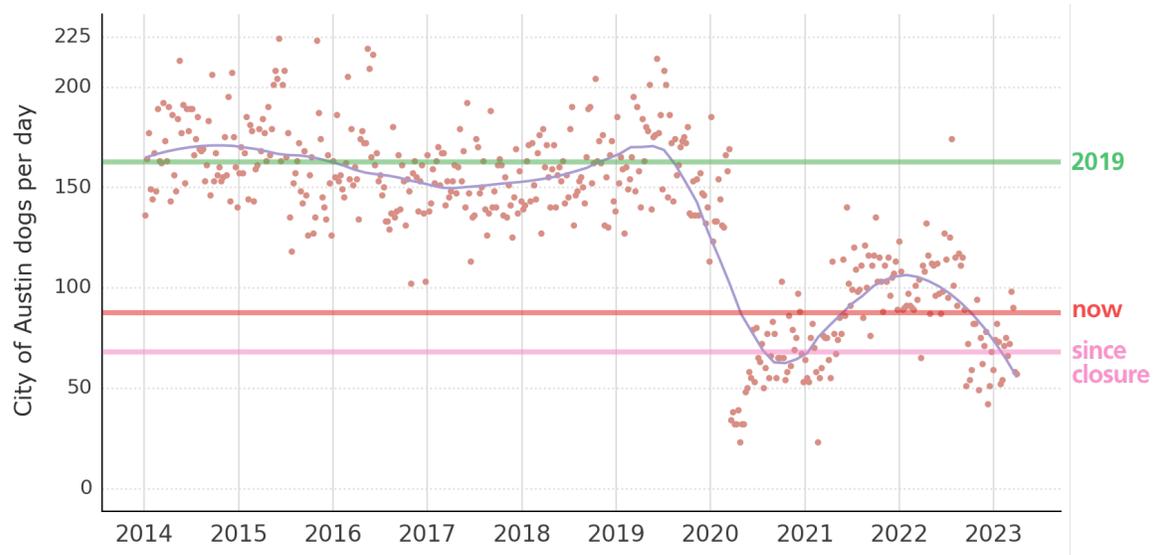


Figure 10. Number of dogs taken in to the Animal Center each week from City of Austin. Green line is the average dog intake per week for 2019 (163). Red line is the average dog intake per week for the past twelve months (April 2022 to March 2023) (88). Pink line is the average dog intake per week since the closing of regular intake (September 13, 2022 to March 2023) (69). Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

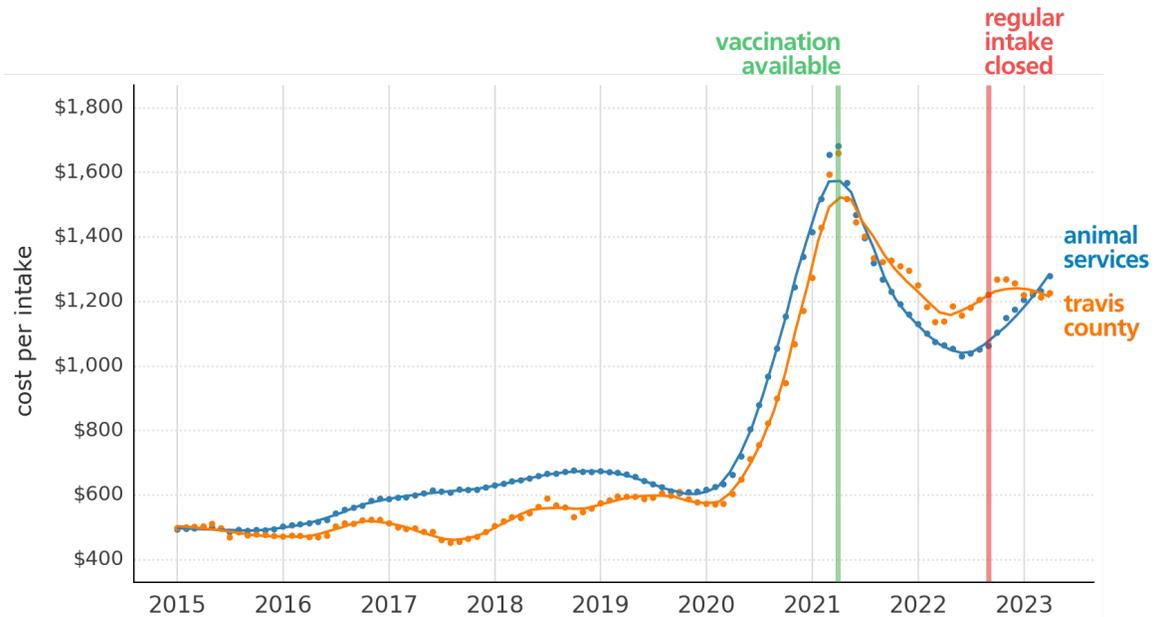


Figure 11. Twelve-month moving average of cost per intake of all animals to the Animal Center with respect to the animal services budget and for intake of only Travis County animals with respect to the value of the inter-local agreement. The cost of safety or field services has been factored out to better represent the actual cost of care for the animals taken in. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)(City of Austin 2014-2021a; 2022a)(City of Austin 2021b; 2022b)

Falling behind

A core objective of no-kill has always been to reduce shelter intake. No-kill programs for proactive redemption, pet retention, microchipping, and high-volume low-cost spay-neuter are all geared to reduce shelter intake. Indeed, a per-capita intake target has sometimes appeared as an explicit goal in the Austin Animal Services annual mission statement (City of Austin 2018).

Even so, a community will always generate a certain level of intake demand. In the normal course of life animals will become lost and homeless.

Armed with six years of data on pre-pandemic operations, Austin has a very good idea of what that demand looks like. So as the community returns to normal in the wake of the pandemic, the Animal Center must keep pace in order to continue serving the community.

The redemption gap

The share of stray dogs returned to their owners (RTO) has been shrinking since 2018 and now stands at 15%, half of what it once was. During the current management team's tenure (beginning in late 2019), the Animal Center's stray dog RTO rate has fallen ten percentage points, while the national rate has dropped three points (Pethealth 2023)(Figure 12). The Animal Center's stray dog RTO rate now stands fifteen points below the national average.

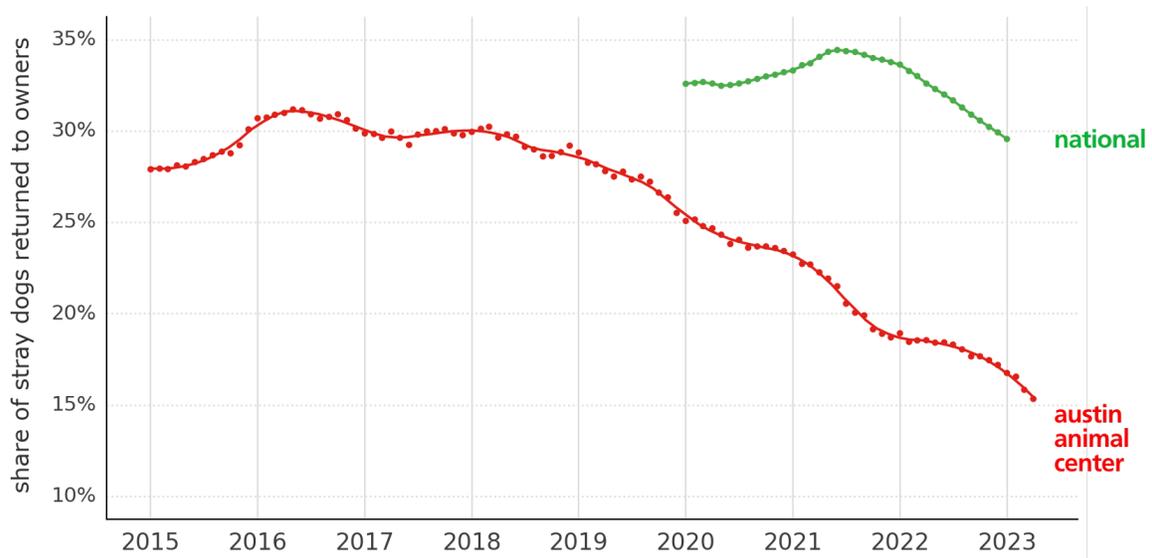


Figure 12. Twelve-month moving average of the share of stray dogs that are returned to their owners by Austin Animal Center and nationally (for years 2019 to 2022). Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)(Pethealth 2023)

The estimated redemption gap between 2019 and now is 1,273 lost dogs per year who are not reunited with their families. Compared to 2016 performance (and to the current national average), the gap is 1,734 dogs per year.

During the 2021 controversy over the possible killing of long-stay animals, Chief Bland wrote: “Cities that have mandatory microchipping programs have a 33-34 percent return rate from the animals brought into their shelters compared to our high of 14 percent” (Bland 2021). Yet 30% is simply the national average, and regions exist that enjoy impressive stray dog RTO performance without instituting mandatory microchipping for pets. In 2019 the Shelter Animals Count nonprofit singled out Rhode Island as the leading state whose shelters had reported a collective stray dog RTO rate of 63% (Shelter Animals Count 2019). Moreover, most shelters contributing to the national average rate, which is significantly higher than Austin’s, are not in localities that mandate microchipping. These qualitative observations do not, of course, diminish the importance and benefit of widespread microchipping, but they do say the absence of mandated microchipping is not by itself explanatory of poor stray dog RTO performance.

Just as for intake, a contributing negative factor is that the share of intact dogs exiting the Animal Center has been going up. At present, 72% of dogs transferred to partner organizations and 51% of dogs returned to owners are intact (Figure 13).

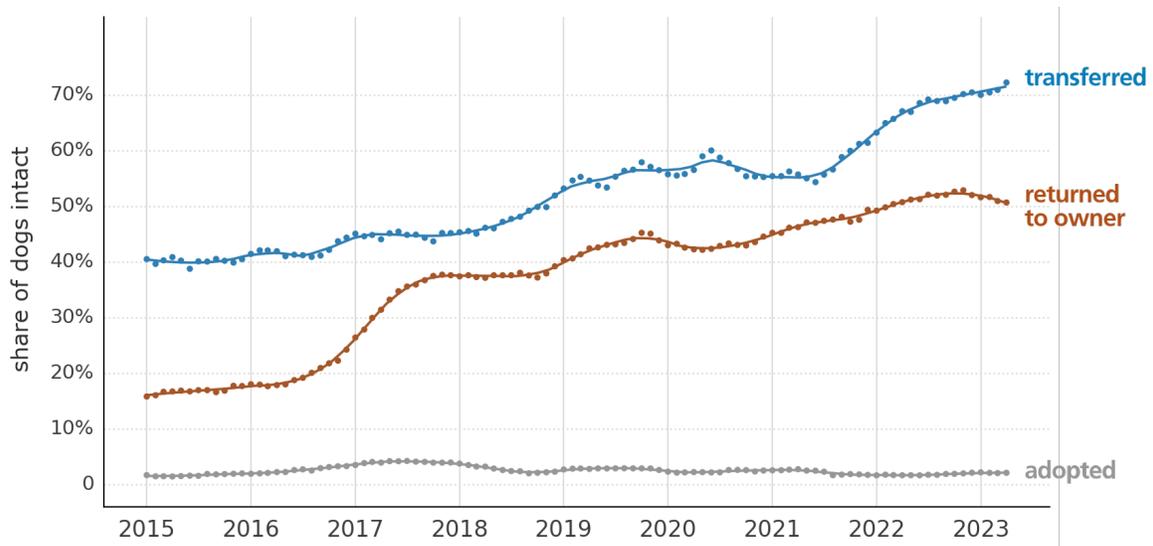


Figure 13. Twelve-month moving average of the share of dogs per outcome category who leave the Animal Center intact. Transferred dogs are those transferred to partner organizations and does not include dogs transported out of state. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)

False belief

Senior management in Animal Services has regularly promoted the idea that most stray dogs are near their homes, despite push-back from highly experienced rescue groups like Austin Lost and Found Pets, whose representative said, “They’re saying that [stray dogs] are usually within 1,000 feet of their home, but I know from experience over the past four years that’s not true” (Kendall 2020).

Right before Independence Day 2022, Animal Services and the Fire Department teamed up in a public-information campaign that claimed, “DYK that most lost animals in Austin aren’t really lost at all?” and included a poster saying, “Most found pets in Austin are found just 0.2 miles from home” (Austin Fire Department 2022a, 2022b). The prior summer another senior manager had told KXAN News, “Generally an animal is less than 500 feet from their home when they get picked up” (Winkle 2021).

Just recently when local media drew attention to the abandoned stray dog problem reported by residents, senior management responded, “Local and national data shows that loose dogs are picked up very close to home; intervening may prevent that animal from being reunited with its family” (Travis 2023).

The belief that most stray dogs are near home seems to have arisen from two places. First, from published research findings that Animal Services senior management had misconstrued, since the actual research did not establish that stray dogs were near home (Appendix F). Second, from private data assembled by Animal Services.

At the time of the first space crisis at the Animal Center, Chief Bland offered Chief of Staff Tiemann an anecdote about a resident who upon seeing a loose dog while driving through a neighborhood, picked up the dog and drove to the Animal Center where the microchip trace revealed the dog had been standing in its own front yard. He expounded, “Loose dogs are typically picked up within 1,000 feet from where they live, and that the shelter is seen as the last resort rather than the first option [sic]. ASO data provided by Animal Protection Officers shows that 80 percent of the animals that they encounter are within 50 feet of their home and of the 80 percent, 42 percent of the animals considered ‘lost’ are found in their own yards” (Bland 2021).

Yet if it were even remotely true that most stray animals picked up by Animal Protection Officers or by residents were within fifty feet (the length of three parking spaces) of their homes, that knowledge would be the magic ingredient for returning most stray dogs at the Animal Center to their owners. Knowing the pick-up location would essentially mean knowing the home address.

The broader point is that the policies and recommendations of a municipal agency should arise from wisdom and a solid apprehension of evidence, not from false beliefs, anecdotes, or superstitions. The flawed notion that most stray dogs are near home helps to legitimize the closing of regular intake, since it suggests stray dogs seldom face danger being loose on their own.

But even if the best research actually did confirm the hypothesis that most stray dogs are near home (which it does not), the mission of Animal Services is still to provide a safety net for Austin's lost and homeless animals. Research that finds *most* stray dogs near home and safe from harm does not justify removing the safety net any more than research that finds *most* people know how to swim justifies removing lifeguards from public beaches.

The adoption gap

The estimated adoption gap between 2019 and now is 2,153 fewer dogs and 568 fewer cats adopted per year into Austin homes. Of the dogs 657 are puppies and of the cats 523 are kittens.

The cat adoption gap is relatively small because most cats and kittens are not adopted out of the Animal Center but are transferred to partner organizations. The transfer gap stands at 2,126 cats fewer per year and 1,417 dogs fewer. Of those 446 are puppies and 1,485 are kittens.

The 2010 No Kill Implementation Plan called for a comprehensive adoption program, including off-site adoptions, in-house behavioral programs, and a large-scale foster home network to absorb animal intake for subsequent adoption (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2010a). The plan outlined an adoption program that targeted “high-traffic areas” with widespread availability “seven days a week,” and deemed adoption “a core lifesaving program of highest importance,” since adoption and preparation for adoption are competencies that predict the success of a no-kill shelter.

An obvious subtext in the plan was the importance of making adoption convenient, by pursuing potential adopters and by being open for business when potential adopters are likely to come looking. Before the pandemic, Saturday and Sunday were the highest adoption volume days for dogs at the Animal Center* (Figure 14), and, in general, weekends are sacrosanct at no-kill animal shelters because that is when potential adopters and people searching for their lost pets are able to pay a visit.

* Adoption transactions as recorded in the City of Austin open data feed (Austin Open Data 2023).

In pre-pandemic times, an average of 35.6 dogs were adopted each weekend, 17.7 dogs on each Sunday (1,851 dogs per year; 920 on Sundays)(Figure 15). The Petco Foundation weekend event in February 2017 found homes for 106 dogs (Austin Animal Services 2017).

In January 2022, as dog intake was continuing to accelerate, Animal Services senior management decided to close the Animal Center to the public on Sundays, explaining “Sunday was chosen based on intake-outcome data as well as the ability to redistribute staffing to assist members of the public throughout the rest of the week” (Austin Animal Services 2022a; FOX7 2022). Yet historical data say that to support flow through the shelter Sunday was the most pivotal day to stay open, because of its high value for dog adoption and because of its synergy as one of two weekend days to draw in the public. The Animal Center remained closed to the public on Sundays for seven months.

Between the adoption gap, the redemption gap, and the transfer gap, the gulf between historic and current live-outflow performance is too large, and the result is back pressure that leaves over seven-thousand animals per year in the community, largely without assistance. Live-outflow volume is simply insufficient to adequately serve the public or to satisfy the no-kill policy of the city.

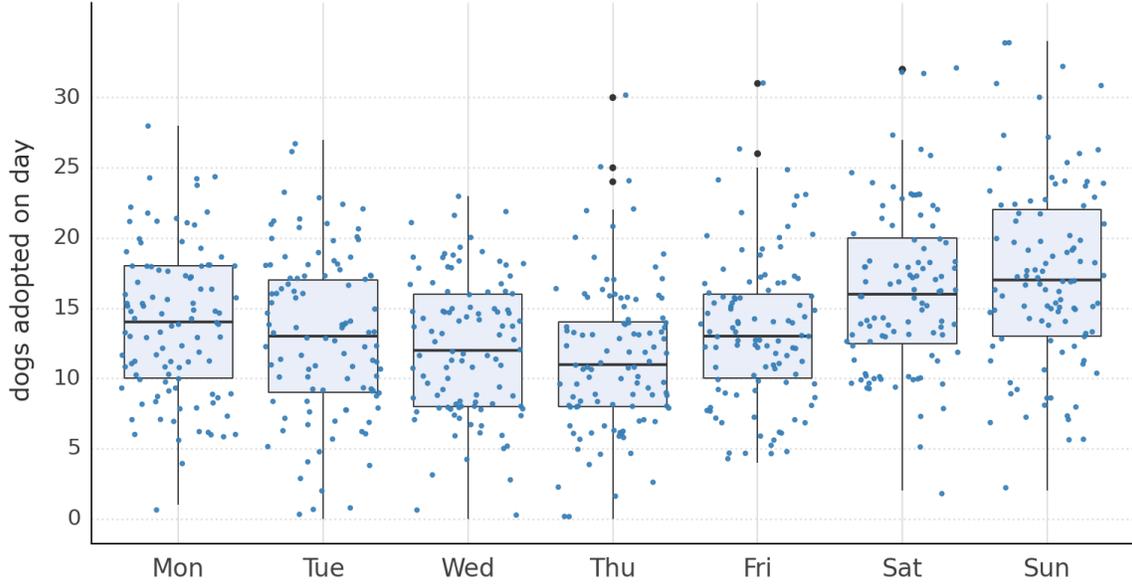


Figure 14. Box plot showing the distribution of adoption volume by day of the week for 2018-2019. Averages are Monday (14.1), Tuesday (13.0), Wednesday (12.0), Thursday (11.5), Friday (13.7), Saturday (17.9), Sunday (17.7). Saturday has more high outliers from special adoption events. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)

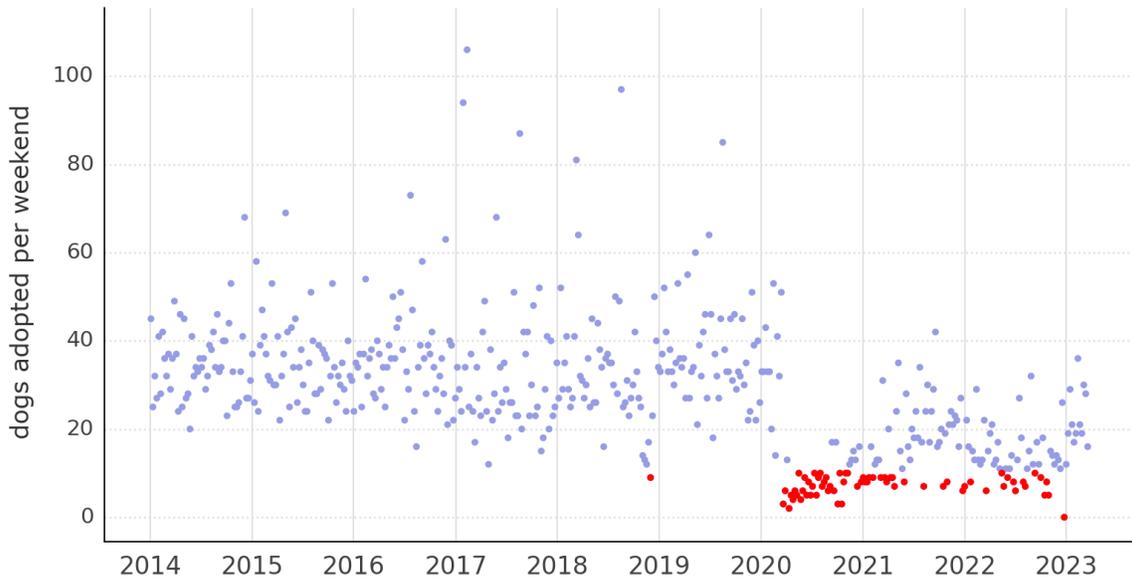


Figure 15. Number of dogs adopted from the Animal Center on weekends. Weekends highlighted in red are those on which ten or fewer dogs were recorded adopted. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)

The Leadership Gap

Toxic culture

When the City of Austin 2021 Listening to the Workforce survey results became available, KXAN News published an article drawing attention to the extraordinarily low approval ratings given by employees of the Austin Police Department (Barer 2022). KXAN reached out to the mayor, who said, “Our city needs to constantly be trying to improve working conditions and general morale.” A spokesperson for the city promised the survey results would be used to “shape policy.”

In that survey the Animal Services Office was in close kinship with the Police Department. Animal Services ranked at the bottom of all departments when averaging the scores on all measures (Appendix B). Half of all Animal Services employees participated in the survey. Only the Police Department ranked lower.

Free-form comments from Animal Services employees were mostly about senior management and were often quite harsh, pinpointing a few thematic problems with management (City of Austin 2022e):

- Detachment from the front-line work and the animals in the care of the center.
 - “I have been with the City of Austin for many years, but never have I had a leadership that is so terrifying for their lack of knowledge and caring.”*
 - “[Leadership] often makes our work harder and do not offer support.”*
 - “Don Bland does nothing to support staff or animals in our care.”*
 - “Leadership [are] the ones not here on busy or understaffed days.”*
 - “We are understaffed, overworked, unheard and neglected by upper management.”*
- Failure to listen to or communicate with the people who work with the animals.
 - “If we speak up [leadership] takes it as complaining and don’t do anything to make things better.”*
 - “Even though we work directly with the animals, we are not entitled to have an opinion on what goes on.”*
 - “Even if we try to explain why we disagree we get passive-aggressively patronized.”*
 - “People are hired for their expertise then ignored.”*
 - “Leadership in general is very much closed off, we know better than everyone else, shut down anyone who disagrees...”*

- Retaliation against workers who speak out.

“We cannot innovate when we are scared to speak up every day.”

“Everyone is afraid to speak their mind for fear of reprisals.”

“I am afraid to submit this even though it is supposed to be anonymous.”

“I don’t want to face reprisals for talking back.”

“People in upper management are under-qualified, show rampant favoritism, and retaliate against regular staff.”

- No sincere appreciation of front-line workers.

“Don Bland walks past us like we’re furniture in the lobby.”

“I still after two years have never had a personal conversation with my director.”

“The current leadership at AAC has driven so many dedicated people away.”

“This leadership is the most unpredictable and callous we have had in my entire time here and that has caused many great people to finally give up and leave.”

“Employee morale is very low in part due to not feeling appreciated or acknowledged by the director and deputy director.”

In marked contrast, comments many times spoke brightly about loving the jobs or about appreciating other front-line workers, as in “My opinion counts with my team, not leadership;” “My team makes me feel valued, but leadership does not;” “My team is great; they motivate me and support me;” “I love working with the animals and I love my team of coworkers;” and “I’m inspired to do my best every day simply because I care about the animals.”

The condemnation of senior management by employees was so troubling that Animal Center volunteers read quite a few of the remarks into the record at the July 2022 meeting of the Animal Advisory Commission (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022f). The commission had already heard much outcry from Animal Center volunteers, who had reported many of the same observations about management while at the same time praising other volunteers and front-line staff.

One new volunteer noted, “The boots on the ground staff here are some of the most hardworking, dedicated people I’ve ever met from Animal Care to Customer Service. These staff are busting their butts every day and doing double or sometimes triple duty to keep the shelter afloat. They deserve all the respect and recognition in the world” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022j).

Long-time volunteers echoed the criticisms of senior management voiced by employees. A twelve-year volunteer spoke about senior management's efforts to gain permission to kill long-stay dogs, accusing management of purposefully wearing down volunteers and staff fighting against such a move, saying, "Where else could this possibly be headed? Why else would a group of people with all the power choose to do nothing, accept help from no one, and become more and more insular" (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022m). Others lamented, "Instead of plans and communications and actions, we get nothing from this management team, nothing at all," and "So many of us have tried to influence change and advocate for our shelter animals through the proper channels only to have our concerns ignored or dismissed" (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022l, 2022k).

The commission had also listened to the account of the beleaguered Behavior Team supervisor, an eight-year employee who said, "Trying to change things from the inside has been entirely ineffective," and warned: "Either we reinstate Austin's commitment to animal welfare or the mass exodus of everyone who cares will continue and everything we've built over the last ten years will continue to crumble" (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022g).

The Listening to the Workforce survey documented a mean-spirited version of a traditional command-and-control management structure, in which privilege and power are granted only to senior management and front-line workers are treated as a fungible commodity and a means to an end. In modern times, such autocratic management frameworks have been highly criticized as suppressing innovation and destroying flexibility. Forbes magazine has referred to the style as "dinosaur" management (Ryan 2016).

A key problem is that workers won't be creative, innovative, energized, and responsive when they feel depreciated or distrusted, and high performers will leave. McKinsey and Company reported that the top three reasons employees quit their jobs were not feeling valued by their organizations (54%), by their managers (52%), or because they didn't feel a sense of belonging at work (51%) (De Smet 2021). Likewise, the 2023 Achievers Workforce Institute engagement and retention study found that employees with a strong sense of belonging are 21% less likely to job hunt, and an incredible 79% of employees would rather stay in a job where they feel valued than leave for a job that paid 30% more (Achievers Workforce Institute 2023).

Most alarming of all is that Animal Services senior management has been frequently accused of using threats and retaliation as a tactic for controlling the speech and

ensuring the conformity of front-line workers, creating what some staff and volunteers have described as a “culture of fear” (City of Austin 2022e; Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022h; Ramkissoon 2022). The Austin Chronicle’s recent front-page exposé on local animal sheltering said this about the Animal Center: “All shelter workers the Chronicle spoke with wished to remain anonymous out of fear of retaliation” (Fisher 2022).

Volunteers who appeared before the Animal Advisory Commission echoed the sentiments of employees and often referred to their fear of being “fired” from volunteer work with the animals, or some other retribution. One said, “The second I finish speaking to you, I will immediately begin running through the dogs I am most attached to, now terrified of what management will do to them to retaliate against me for speaking up” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022n).

Earlier this year the commission heard from a two-year contract dog walker at the Animal Center whose former supervisor said was “one of the hardest-working, most compassionate, and most skilled walkers on the team.” She told her story of being terminated in the middle of her shift, her contract severed immediately, and escorted off the property on a day when she says there were over one-hundred dogs who had received no exercise the day before, many housed in pop-up crates. She alleged, “I have since learned that part of the reason for my dismissal was due to my repeated questions about the inhumane treatment of many of the dogs that are struggling. The culture that management is actively promoting is if you fall in line you’ll be rewarded...Don’t question anything and do not hold leadership accountable” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2023a).

Run with the herd

Time and again, in media appearances and in memoranda to City Council and the Animal Advisory Commission, Animal Services senior management has explained the declining performance of the Animal Center in terms of national or regional trends, saying “Shelters throughout the southern united states are experiencing the same challenges,” or “One of the things that we’ve seen nationwide” (Austin Animal Services 2021b, 2021c; Jones 2021; Remadna 2021; Jones 2022; Reader 2023).

The Pethealth ShelterWatch reporting dashboard gives access to four years of data from animal shelters across the country, which enables a coarse comparison of pre-pandemic and post-pandemic annual performance by taking 2019 as a baseline year and then computing the percentage change of subsequent years (Pethealth 2023).

By 2022 national dog intake volume had returned to 82% of pre-pandemic and regional had returned to 85%. By contrast, dog intake volume at Austin Animal Center had returned only to 59%. Had the Animal Center performed at average national level it would have taken in an additional 2,470 dogs in 2022.

National and regional dog adoption volume in 2022 was down by 20%. When Chief Bland recently said to KXAN News, “All shelters across the United States are seeing less adoptions,” he was stating a fact (Reader 2023). Left unsaid, though, was that the Animal Center’s dog adoption performance has been far worse than the national average, by 18 percentage points (Figure 17). Had the Animal Center performed at average national level, it would have adopted out an additional 1,036 dogs in 2022.

The same pattern holds for dog redemption, where the Animal Center again has shown worse performance than the national average, by a stunning 44 percentage points (Figure 18). Had the Animal Center performed at average national level, it would have returned more than twice as many dogs to their owners in 2022.

The shelters submitting data to Pethealth are no doubt a mixed bag, especially in Texas and regionally. Many will be shelters that kill a large number of dogs who are

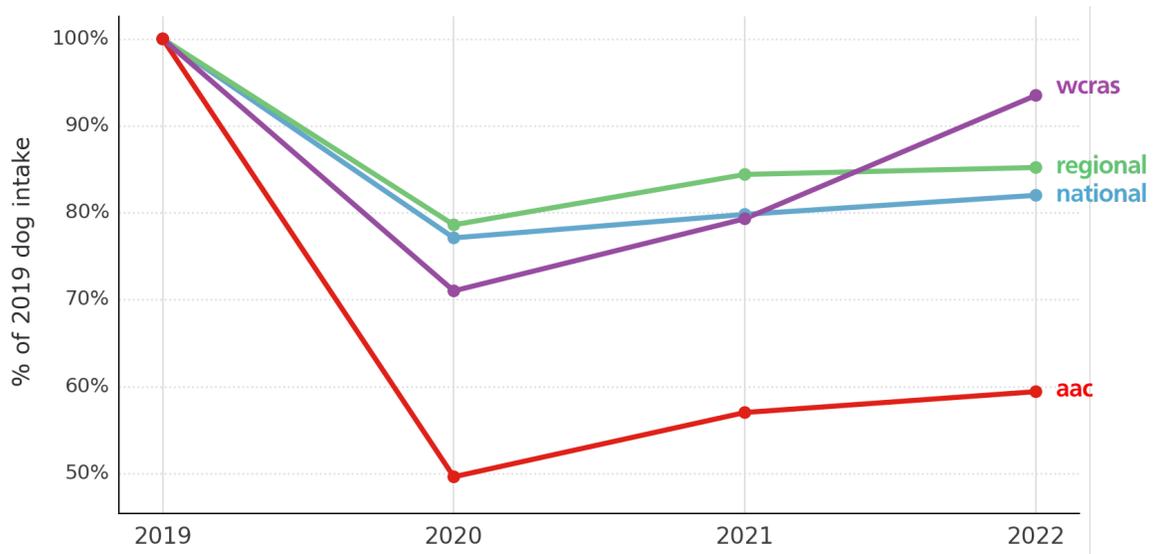


Figure 16. Percentage of 2019’s dog intake by year nationally, regionally, at Austin Animal Center, and at Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter. The blue line is the aggregate of 1,020 shelters across the country. The green line is the aggregate of 158 shelters in the South West South Central census region, comprising Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. The purple line is another Texas open-admission municipal shelter, the Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter. The red line is Austin Animal Center. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)(Pethealth 2023) (WCRAS 2023)

not reclaimed and can therefore absorb higher intake volume in a business-as-usual fashion, and their adoption volume represents the dogs left over who find new homes. As well, some shelters in the aggregate cohorts will have instituted policies, like appointment-only adoption, that artificially suppress live-outflow opportunities (Hicks 2023; Sforza 2023). The comparison of that group to the Austin Animal Center, with its history as one of the largest, most progressive, and most successful no-kill shelters in the country, is by nature irregular, like comparing a miscellaneous bunch of community colleges to a suddenly failing Harvard.

A better comparison might be to the nearby Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter (WCRAS), which stands out as a large no-kill open-admission municipal shelter that has remained open to the public and has continued to provide a safety net to the lost and homeless animals in that county. The Williamson County shelter has no high-volume transfer partner like Austin Pets Alive and recently has had around \$418 to spend per animal taken in versus the Animal Center's \$1,278.

By 2022 WCRAS had returned to 93% of its pre-pandemic dog intake volume, outpacing the Animal Center by 34 points. Dog adoption volume was 24 points better than the Animal Center and dog redemption volume was 44 points better.

Animal services senior management has sometimes blamed outside forces beyond their control for the worsening performance of the Animal Center. Speaking to KXAN News, Chief Bland said, "I think locally some of the reasons that we see our adoptions being less... a lot of it's housing issues. There's a lot of restrictions on weight and I can't have a dog over twenty pounds, over thirty pounds. Well that eliminates a lot of animals. And what do we have mostly in shelters is medium to large breed dogs." However, just this year Zillow named Austin the top pet-friendly city in the country for renters (Zillow 2023), and a snapshot of rental properties available on Zillow showed that Travis County was not significantly different from Williamson County when it came to rental restrictions on dogs (Appendix C).

About the space problems at the Animal Center, senior management voiced to FOX7 News their belief that "increase in intakes and lack of adoptions could be tied back to Austin's growing population and higher cost of living" (Ruiz 2022b). But cost-of-living has risen in great part because the city has prospered, and prosperity is not necessarily bad for shelter adoptions. The Austin Chamber of Commerce reports the current cost-of-living index is one-percent higher than the national average, which means it still remains much below the cost-of-living in many of the places where workers migrating to Austin have originated, like cities in California and New York (Austin Chamber of Commerce 2023; Ramser 2022).

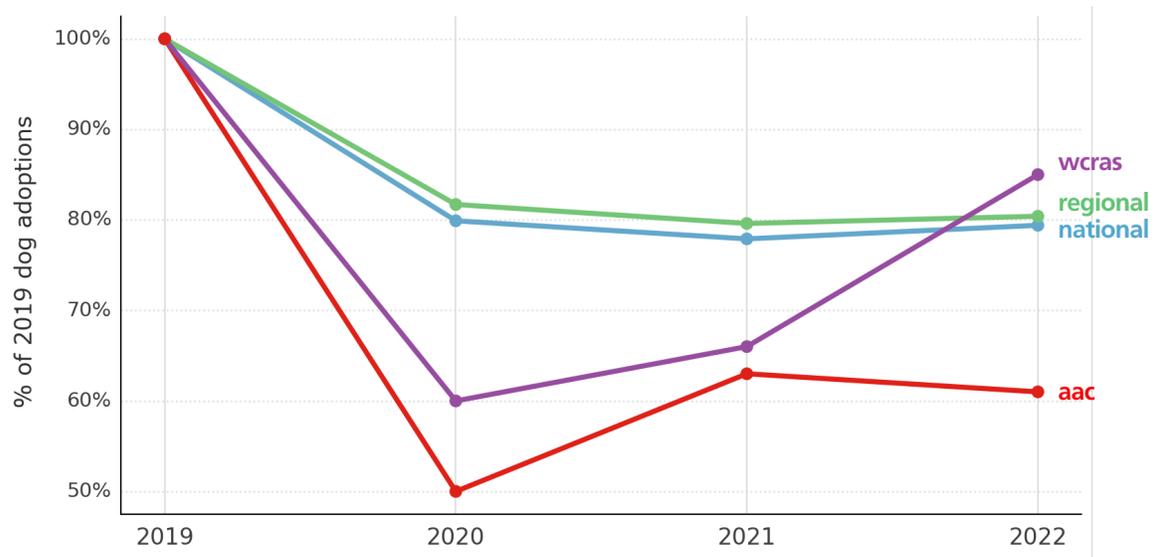


Figure 17. Percentage of 2019's dog adoptions by year nationally, regionally, at Austin Animal Center, and at Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)(Pethealth 2023)(WCRAS 2023)

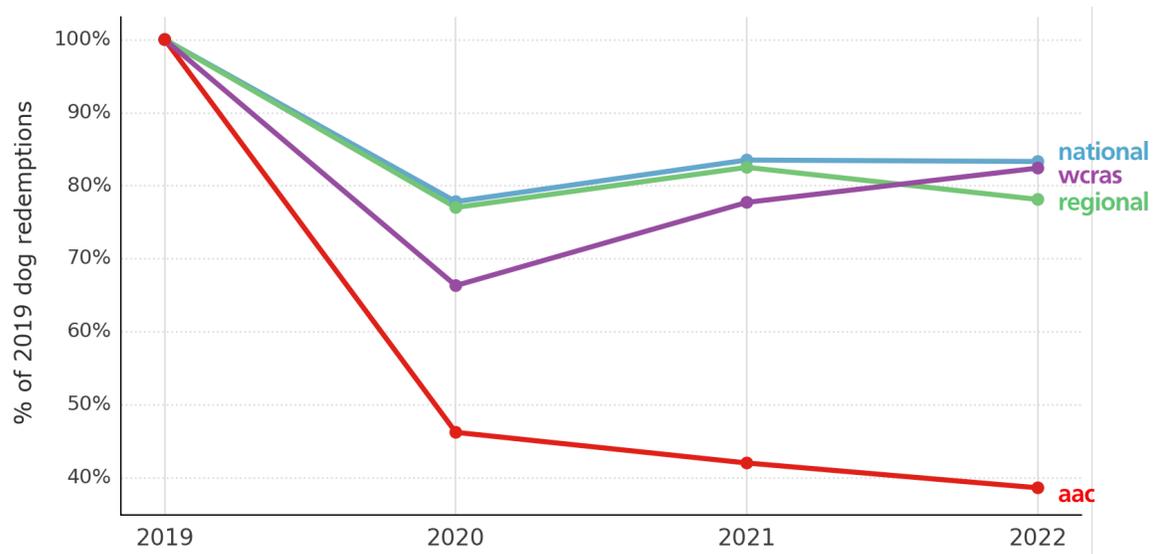


Figure 18. Percentage of 2019's dog redemptions by year nationally, regionally, at Austin Animal Center, and at Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter. Williamson County has doubled its transfer volume from 2019, which has made up for the incomplete return to pre-pandemic adoption and RTO volumes. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)(Pethealth 2023)(WCRAS 2023)

By other measures, the economic picture for Austin is good compared to the rest of the country. In 2022 Austin ranked second in the nation in metropolitan-area gross domestic product (GDP) growth, fueled by the transformation of the local labor market from low-tech to high-tech (Kenan Institute 2022; St. Louis Federal Reserve 2022). During that same year, twenty-three large corporations created new offices in Austin, including SpaceX, TikTok, and CelLink (Austin Chamber of Commerce 2022). The Wall Street Journal and Moody Analytics recently named Austin the second hottest job market in the country (Cambon 2023). The business-cycle index (BCI) has continued to climb and unemployment and eviction rates have simply returned to pre-pandemic rates (Dallas Federal Reserve 2023; Eviction Lab 2023).

Moreover, hand-wavy explanations involving economic forces fail to account for the performance gap between the Animal Center and national, regional, and local benchmarks, all of which are subject to the many of the same forces and worse.

When Chief Bland says “Shelters nationwide are struggling with capacity,” as he did to KXAN News at the time when regular intake was closed, the implication is that there is a great herd of animal shelters all losing ground together at the mercy of inescapable external forces, and Austin Animal Center is simply in the middle of that herd (Jones 2022). But the data available say the Animal Center is substantially underperforming and is falling short for reasons that go beyond mere recuperation from the impact of the pandemic.

The 2022 Austin Animal Center annual report began with a letter from the director (Austin Animal Center 2022b). Chief Bland excused the poor performance for the year, saying in familiar fashion “It was a rough year for medium/large dogs across the U.S. nationally, average lengths of stay increased and adoption rates decreased.” The closing of regular intake to the Animal Center could not be ignored, and the chief said only that it was a “difficult decision” precipitated by having more than sixty dogs housed in crates on the truck port.

Almost as if in another world, the 2022 Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter annual report also began with a letter from the director (WCRAS 2022). Director Valenta had no intake closing to defend to the public. Instead she spoke of the challenges her shelter and others faced returning to equilibrium in the wake of the pandemic and their commitment to keep the shelter open, to continue serving the community’s animals. She said, “I believe our lobby doors should be open. And, the more full the shelter, the wider that lobby door, the deeper the connection to the community should be.” She spoke about the importance of first impressions with the community, of keeping the animals’ needs in focus, and how

they had “met the community at our threshold and said, ‘Welcome. We are here to help you and we thank you for your help.’”

Crossing the Rubicon

When interviewed by Fortune magazine in 2011, Apple CEO Steve Jobs described the talk he would have with every person newly appointed to Vice President (Lashinsky 2011). He would tell the fictional story of noticing that the trash was not being emptied from the bin in his office. When he asked the cleaning staff why, the answer was that the locks had been changed and they no longer had a key. This was an acceptable excuse coming from front-line employees, and the solution to get them a new key was obvious and simple. The front line gets to explain why something went wrong, Jobs would say, “Reasons matter.” But somewhere between the front-line employee and the chief executive reasons stop mattering, and Jobs would inform the new leader: “that Rubicon is crossed when you become a VP.”

The job of senior management is to deliver on the goals of the organization, to find a path forward regardless of the obstacles. In the civic setting, that means delivering on the policy goals of the municipality. Results matter and reasons do not. The actions or inactions of others, the presence or absence of outside forces, do not matter. Results matter. The surest sign of a low-performing organization is a culture in which excuses from senior management are accepted as interchangeable with expected results.

Hopes unmet

When the City of Austin hired an executive recruitment firm to find the next Chief Animal Services Officer, the job announcement put into words the hopes for the new chief, the hopes for the senior management team the chief would put in place, and the hopes for the organizational culture that would arise from that leadership.

The city said it was looking for a dynamic leader to “expand on the City’s nationally recognized successful efforts,” invoking the city’s proud brand identity as a national no-kill leader (Voorhees 2019).

The job announcement spelled out “The next Chief Animal Services Officer will lead the Animal Services Office at a critical time. The animal services community faces a constant influx of animals in need due to the population growth in the Austin region and have resources that are often at capacity to meet these service demands.” The challenge to manage flow through the shelter was clear: people relocating to Austin would mean more pet animals, but at the same time would mean more adoptive homes, particularly since a key demographic in relocation has

been Millennials and Gen Z, the generations that constitute the largest dog-owning market segment (APPA 2020; Hawes, et al. 2017). Yet the Animal Services management team has answered the challenge by shutting down service to the public and by testing the water on killing more animals, both actions antithetical to no-kill principles and to what the public expects.

The job announcement celebrated the Animal Center volunteers, saying Animal Services was “supported by the dedicated work of hundreds of volunteers who are committed to animal welfare and provide highly valued service to the Animal Services Office.” Yet the Animal Services management team has overseen a work environment regarded by many volunteers and employees as abusive and that has reportedly driven out experienced, dedicated, committed volunteers who care deeply about animal welfare, exactly those praised in the job announcement. A long-serving volunteer appearing before the Animal Advisory Commission put it this way, “For a management team that regularly claims they don’t have enough resources they sure get quick to get rid of the free labor that shows up every day and fills gaps by cleaning kennels, feeding animals, walking dogs, providing enrichment, counseling fosters and adopters, the list goes on” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022o).

In the 2022 Animal Center annual report Chief Bland chose to highlight that the center had received the Austin Chronicle’s Best Volunteer Experience Award. Yet the volunteer who nominated the Animal Center for the award appeared at the September 2022 meeting of the Animal Advisory Commission to tell the rest of the story: “I want to say on the record that although I personally am having a good volunteer experience, I do somewhat regret having nominated the program due to some of the leadership’s lack of care for volunteers and learning of the volunteers who have been fired that are incredibly dedicated to this program” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022i).

The job announcement said leadership should be “committed to pursuing state-of-the-art approaches in the animal welfare field, always striving to be a leader in the provision of these important services.” Yet there is little innovation in closing the doors of the shelter and nothing at all state-of-the-art in contriving justifications for killing the more challenging animals instead of originating new ways to help them. Even ordinary services have broken down. In January of this year it surfaced that adoption applications for long-stay dogs had sometimes been sitting unread for six months or more (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2023c).

The job announcement called for experience in the “development and utilization of performance measures, data, and metrics to effectively measure the success of the animal welfare programs and services.” Yet a recurring complaint from the Animal

Advisory Commission is that the documentation, reports, and metrics provided by Animal Services fail to provide a clear picture that can be used, by them or by the public, to understand performance or to guide assistance. At one point, Commissioner Dulzaides, who had been lobbying for reports that plainly showed trends, said in frustration, “[The data report] is very hard for people to read... This is not good reporting for a public agency. It is hard to make decisions with this. It kind of feels like we’re getting information that you just shoot out to say, ‘hey, we gave you this,’ but this is not good” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022p).

The job announcement said candidates must be “skilled in leading employees and volunteers in a high-stress environment,” and predicted: “an approachable, collaborative, and engaged leadership and management style is essential to success in this position.” Yet much of the voiced dissatisfaction with senior management is that they are often unapproachable, uncooperative, and disengaged from the animals and the front-line work helping the animals. Instead of encouraging virtuous cycles arising from genuine collaboration, senior management is viewed by many as the architects of vicious cycles, like a toxic work culture that undermines the ability to hire and retain dedicated no-kill workers and volunteers, or like a high-handed and dismissive stance toward rescue partners that undermines the ability to flow animals through the Animal Center. As one rescue partner expressed it, “It’s never been easy to work with AAC” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022t).

As more and more evidence piles up, it seems the city has gotten little of what it was hoping for in the leadership or the organizational culture of the Animal Services Office. When the director of the Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter spoke to the Animal Advisory Commission, she related, “We now have individuals showing up at our door for help without even contacting Austin Animal Center first, because of the reputation that their needs will not be met” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022e). Many have come to know Austin Animal Services for qualities that do not represent no-kill principles, do not represent the policy of the city, and do not represent the public’s expectations for animal services in a humane community.

The Time Ahead

“My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there.”

– Charles Kettering



This paper has presented the perspective that the senior management of Austin Animal Services has failed in their duty to fulfill the city’s vision for no-kill and to serve the animal-loving public of Austin. Live-release rate is a meaningless measure of performance when the full demands of the city are not being met, when the doors of the Animal Center are not open to all, when many residents seeking help and many animals needing assistance are simply left out.

Smokescreen

Speaking to KXAN News a few months ago, Chief Bland said, “The City of Austin and the community said we want to be saving more lives back years and years ago. A lot of things were put in place. And back then they had really low live-exit rates and really high euthanasia rates. So it was not just the animals that we put medical care in to save, but it was a lot of space issues. And if you look back at the numbers—which I’ll share them with you—go back to like 2015, having space

issues, like we're having now, the only difference is they were euthanizing 75% more animals back then than we are now" (Reader 2023).

In 2015 the Animal Center saw a live-release rate of 94.3%. Well over seventeen-thousand animals were taken in and 1,465 were killed by lethal injection. In 2015 the Animal Center was ending the lives of over twice as many animals as in 2019. No one should be yearning for a return to 2015. Much of the trend data presented in this paper tell the story of an Animal Center that, until recent times, had continually improved and learned how to succeed.

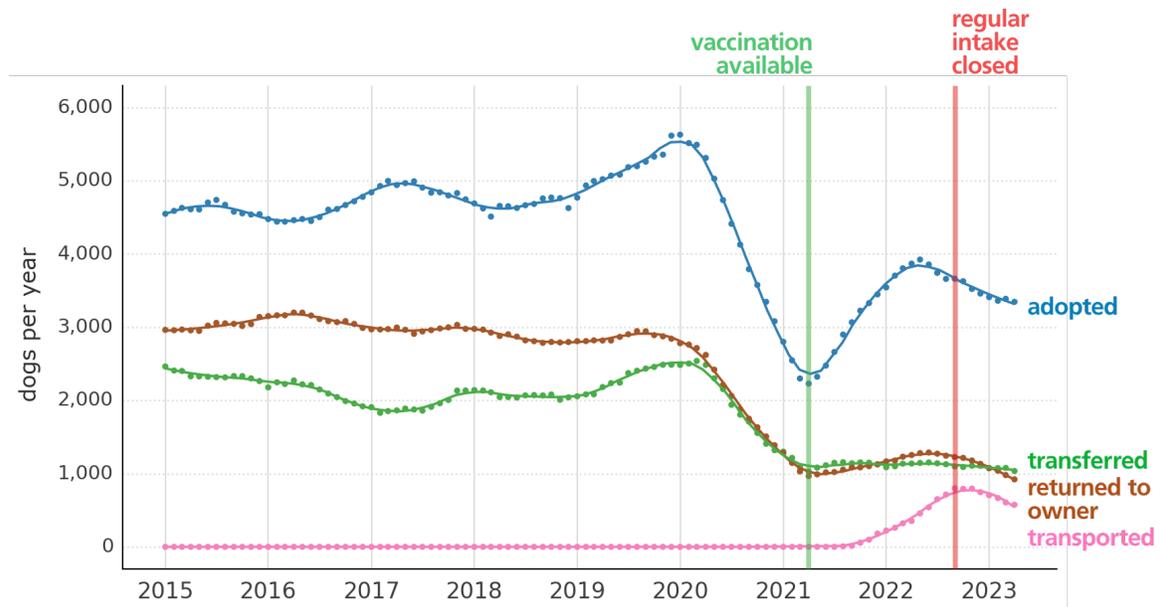


Figure 19. Twelve-month moving average of the number of dogs exiting the Animal Center alive by category. The last dog transport was in November 2022. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

The intake volume in 2015 was 1.6 times greater than in the most recent annual cycle and the live-outflow volume was 6,191 more animals. Had today's Animal Center processed the same intake volume at its recent annual live-outflow rates, there would be a surplus of approximately six thousand animals with nowhere to go. If they were simply killed (shunted through the pressure-release valve) then the live-release rate of the Animal Center would drop to around 65%.

Which reveals a crucial facet of the current situation. Even if the 95% City Council resolution were relaxed to the outdated threshold of 90%, the Animal Center at its current level of live-outflow performance still could not meet the standard and would continue failing by a considerable margin.

Live outflow of dogs in the most recent annual cycle looked like this: 59% of pre-pandemic adoption volume, 33% of pre-pandemic redemption volume, and 65% of pre-pandemic transfer volume (Figure 19).

When Animal Services senior management says, for instance as they did in two recent media appearances, “We know nationwide that since the pandemic adoption rates are down,” or “This is due to low reclaim and adoption rates as well as higher lengths of stay for medium/large dogs. This has been documented as a national issue,” they speak as if adoption, redemption, and transfer rates are something external, something that has happened to them, that they are the victims of, instead of an aspect of shelter operations they are expected, as executive leaders, to comprehend and manage (Reader 2023; Travis 2023).

At the time when COVID-19 swept the globe, the Animal Center had operated for years with high intake volume (in the 17,000 animal range) and high live-release rate (in the 97% range). The pandemic instantly upended many aspects of normal life, including the way animal shelters functioned. With so much change in such a short time, communities experienced reorientation and a general willingness to accept policies and results that previously would have been called into question for being out of the norm. The pandemic birthed an environment that demanded new approaches to old problems, but at the same time acted like a smokescreen capable of hiding the warning signs of low performance against those problems.

As the pandemic has retreated, it has become increasingly clear that Animal Services is not performing at the level necessary to fulfill the no-kill policy, and the issues are not just the lingering aftereffects of the worldwide crisis. That question has been answered.

The question yet to be answered is what will change. Will the no-kill policy be abandoned and expectations lowered to fit the level of performance the senior management team is able to provide, or will the senior management team be replaced by one with the belief and skills necessary to fulfill the no-kill policy? The situation has provoked a civic crisis out of which a de facto decision will emerge about who really controls city policy: the City Council or department leaders.

Mission

The apocryphal story of the bricklayers is a commentary on the power of cause and purpose. A visitor to a construction site asks one bricklayer “What are you doing?” and they look down at their trowel and mortar and reply “I am laying bricks.” The visitor asks a second bricklayer the same question and they look up at the sky and say, “I am building a cathedral.”

The second worker sees themselves as part of something much larger and far-reaching than their own efforts. They are connected not just to what they are doing but to a greater mission, to a vision of a different tomorrow.

Good leaders instill that mission. They build trust around common values and they create a picture of the future that attracts anyone who believes the same thing, who will bring their talent and energy not because they have to but because they want to, and who will work not to satisfy the leader but to fulfill themselves and to be part of something incredible, as Steve Jobs used to say, “To make a dent in the universe” (Isaacson 2011).

What stands out about Austin’s no-kill founding documents is the hopefulness of the conception, filled with anticipation for constant improvement, which over time would lead to ever-higher levels of proficiency and success. Similarly hopeful, the Chief Animal Services Officer job announcement paints in words the vivid picture of a dynamic modern organization that is the pathfinder, creating new answers, leading by example, and inspiring a broad coalition of individuals and rescue partners to band together and realize Austin’s progressive no-kill policy.

The average Austin resident is likewise full of optimism and confidence when they simply believe “no kill” means an animal placed in the care of the Animal Center will be safe and will be given all the attention and help they need.

At the founding of no-kill in Austin, the Animal Advisory Commission recognized the danger that the city’s new, hopeful undertaking would be subverted. They recommended, “Any employee of the shelter who rejects the Council’s directives, either through disagreement or lack of effort, should be removed or reassigned” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2010b).

Dedicated volunteers speaking before the Animal Advisory Commission sometimes said they had “everything to lose” when facing retaliation from management. One volunteer summed up the feeling: “I recognize that to many, and likely to this management team, it seems dramatic to call being ‘fired’ from an unpaid volunteer role — where you often leave covered in poop, exhausted and sweaty — ‘losing everything,’ but what they can’t grasp is that for many volunteers all of your free time is spent with the animals, both literally and figuratively. If you’re not physically with them, you’re thinking about what their ideal home is. You’re agonizing over whether or not they’ll be transferred. Did they destroy the new bed you just put in their kennel? Does that mean they’re sleeping on hard concrete?” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022o).

Another volunteer who feared for the future of the animals at the Animal Center said, “They are not just inventory. They are living creatures who feel joy and fear, elation and grief” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022r).

A long-serving volunteer recalled her introduction to the Animal Center eleven years ago: “I remember starting out as a new volunteer, so excited to be at the forefront of the no-kill movement, volunteering at a brand-new shelter, full of hope and a shining example for other cities to follow” (Austin Animal Advisory Commission 2022s).

Clearly these volunteers believe in the no-kill promise. They are devoted to the homeless animals of Austin, and are invested in the guiding principle of Austin’s no-kill implementation, that each animal will be treated as the most important one.

Their words reveal the authentic mission, and cry out for an Animal Center with leadership that has recaptured that sense of mission, where the question is always “How do we help this animal,” not “Is this animal worth helping”; where rescue partners save animals “with” the shelter, not “from” the shelter; where policy decisions arise from wisdom and evidence and in the interest of the animals, not from anecdotes and superstition and in the interest of administration; where 5% euthanasia is a standard to be decimated through innovation, not a standard to be expanded as an authorized killing budget; where the no-kill policy documents are important prescriptions filled with meaning, not just cynical government papers filled with words; and where the very best employee or volunteer is not the fully round peg who is unquestioning and dutiful to management, but the somewhat square peg who speaks out in defense of the animals and is sometimes late for meetings because a dog fell asleep in their lap (Apple 1997).

Appendix A – Additional Charts

Inflow

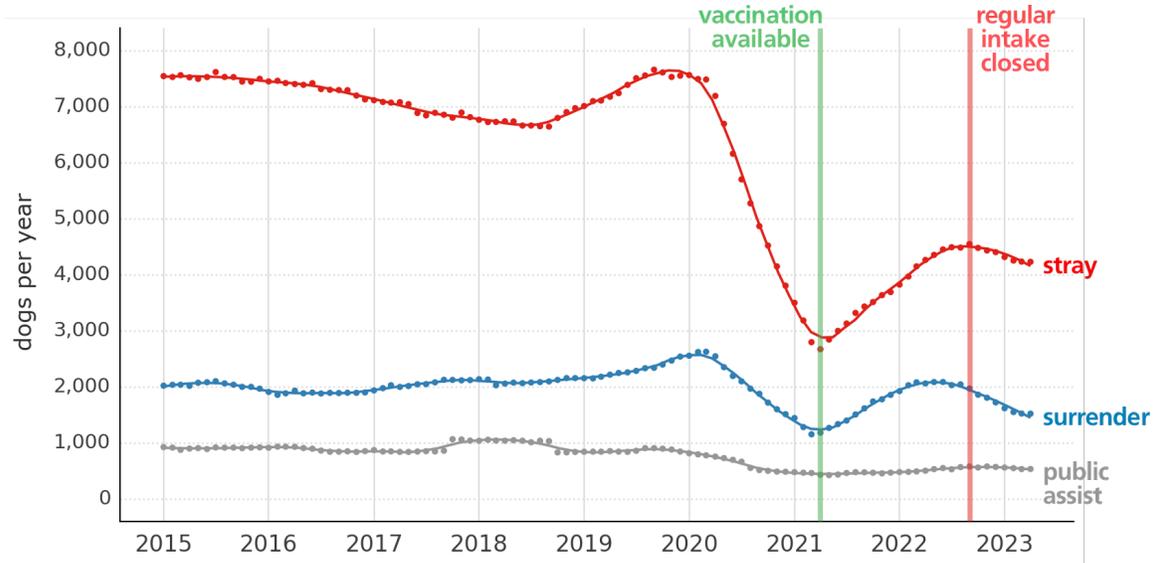


Figure A1. Twelve-month moving average of the number of dogs taken in to the Animal Center by category. Green line is when vaccination for COVID-19 became available to the general public, a marker of when the community was starting to open up. Red line is when Animal Center management closed regular intake and instituted emergency-only intake. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

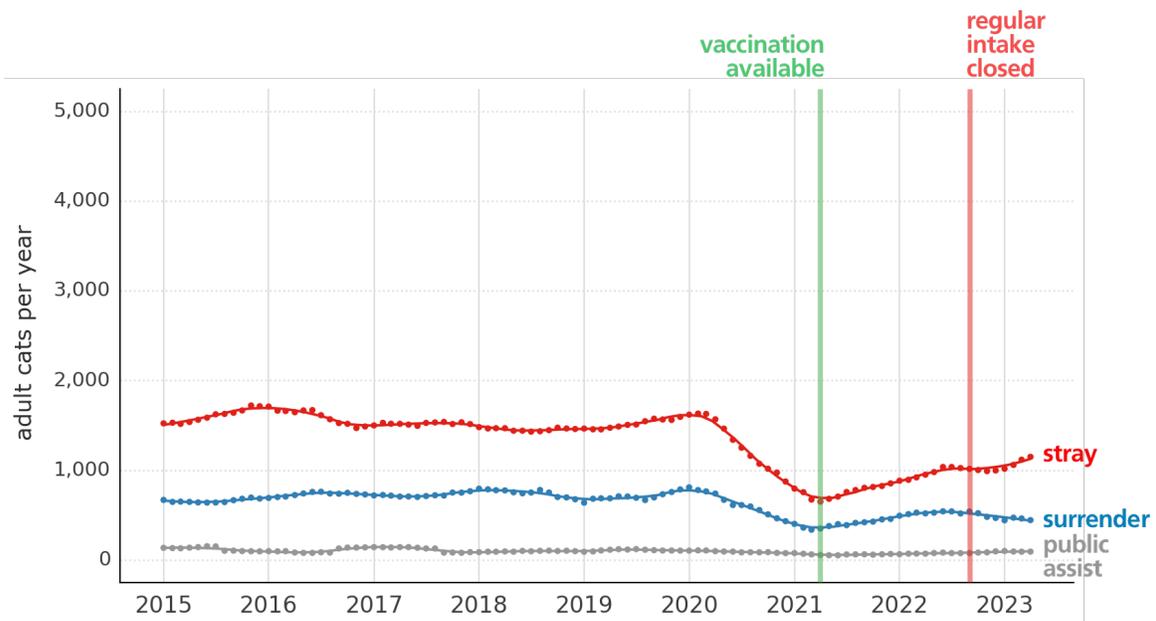


Figure A2. Twelve-month moving average of the number of adult cats (older than nine months) taken in to the Animal Center by category. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

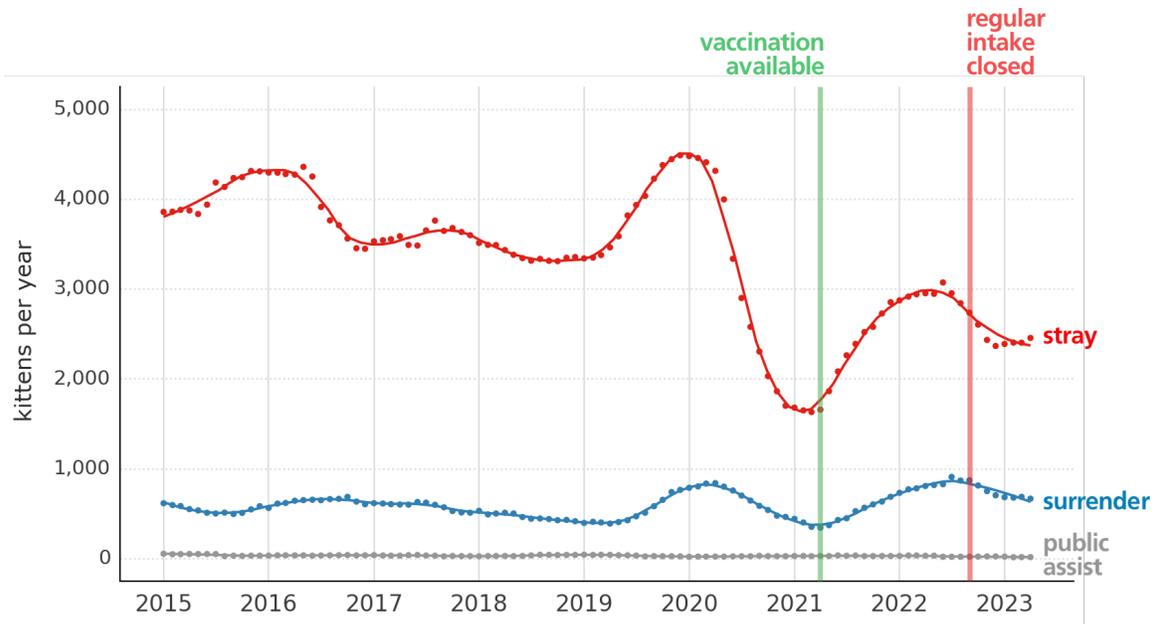


Figure A3. Twelve-month moving average of the number of kittens (nine months or younger) taken in to the Animal Center by category. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

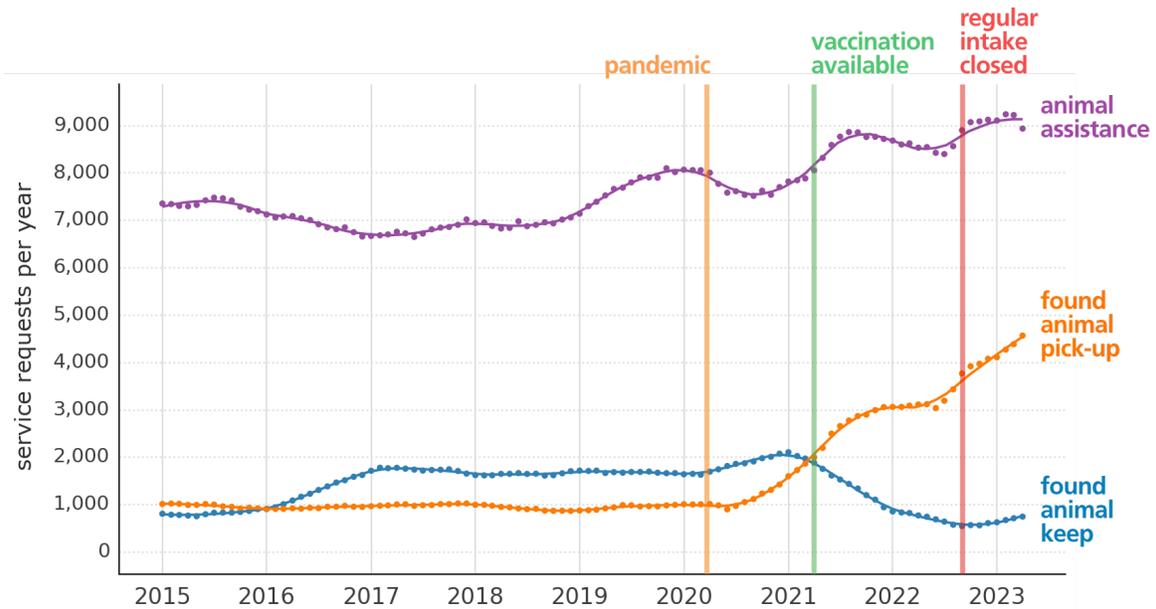


Figure A4. Twelve-month moving average of Austin 311 service requests reporting found animals categorized by whether the finder would keep the animal until the owner could be identified or Animal Services would pick up the animal. The trend curve labeled “assistance” combines found animal pick-up requests with requests to Animal Protection for animal “assistance.” Orange line is the date of the Texas stay-at-home order. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

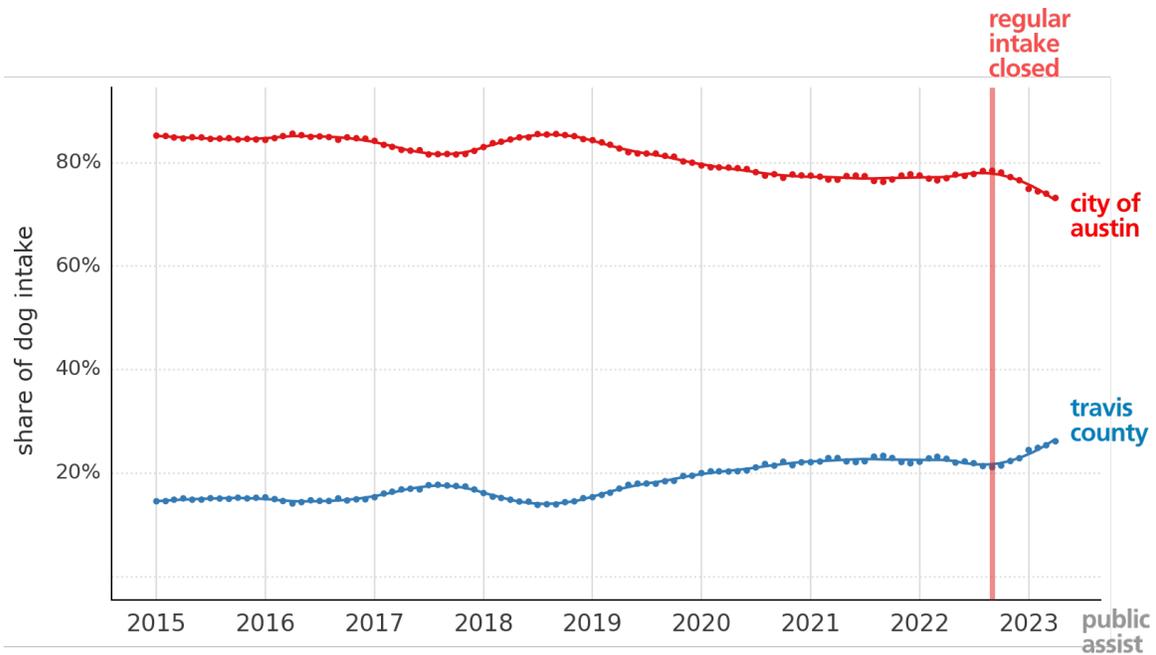


Figure A5. Twelve-month moving average of the share of dog intake to the Animal Center from City of Austin and from Travis County cities and unincorporated area. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

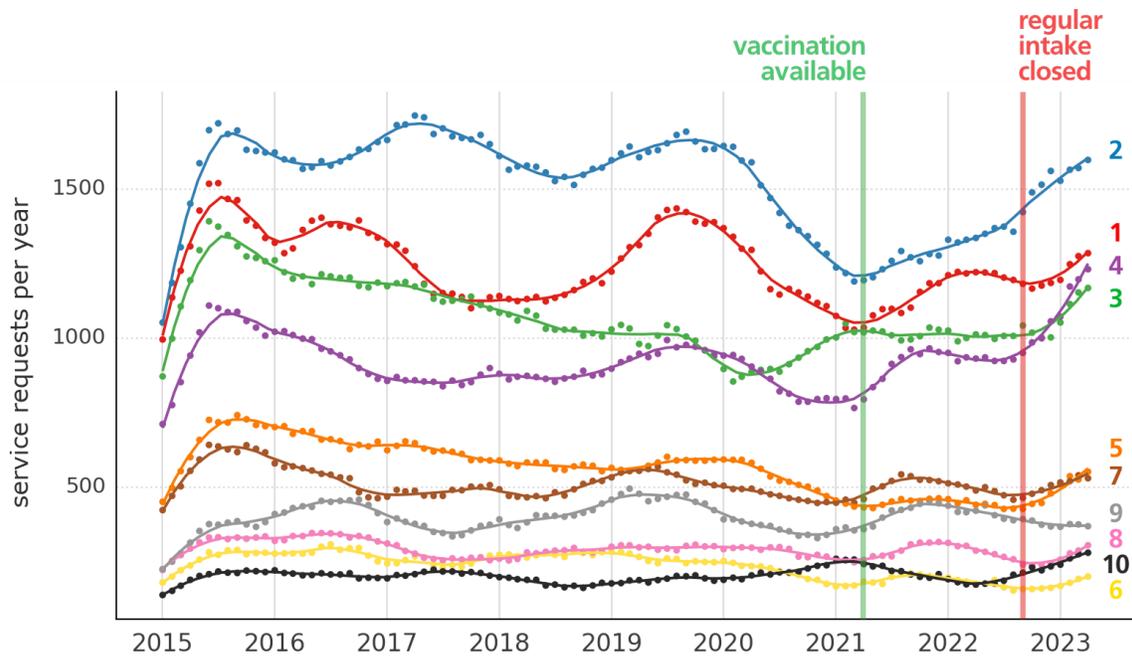


Figure A6. Twelve-month moving average of Austin 311 service requests reporting loose dogs by district. The districts form three clusters (for loose dogs and found animals), along socio-economic bounds: (1) Districts 1, 2, 3, 4 (median household income \$52K to \$69K); (2) Districts 5, 7, 9 (median household income \$77K to \$84K); (3) Districts 6, 8, 10 (median household income \$92K to \$115K). Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)(Austin Demographics Hub 2023).

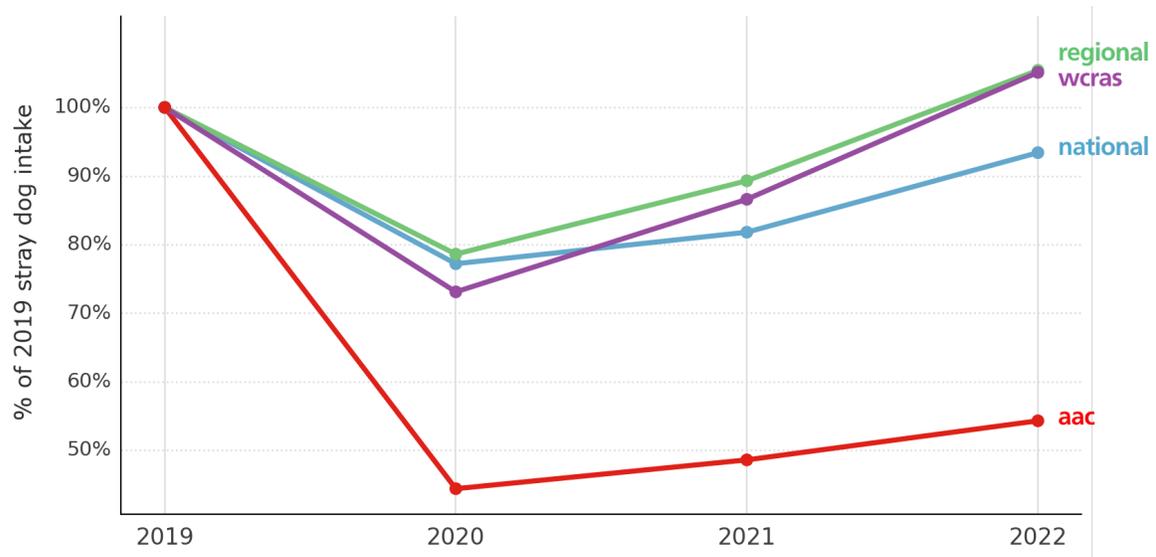


Figure A7. Percentage of 2019's stray dog intake by year nationally, regionally, at Austin Animal Center, and at Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)(Pethealth 2023)(WCRAS 2023)

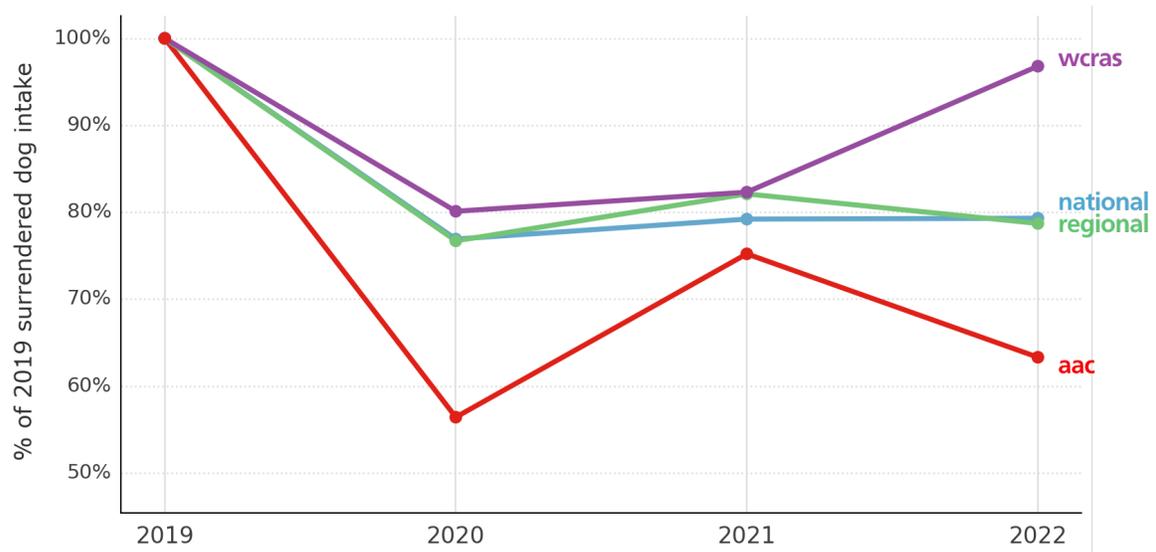


Figure A8. Percentage of 2019's owner-surrendered dog intake by year nationally, regionally, at Austin Animal Center, and at Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter. Williamson County had lower dog seizure intake (public assist) in 2022, which when combined with stray and owner-surrendered dog intake lowered their overall percentage of total dog intake to 93% relative to 2019 (Figure 16). Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)(Pethealth 2023)(WCRAS 2023)

Outflow

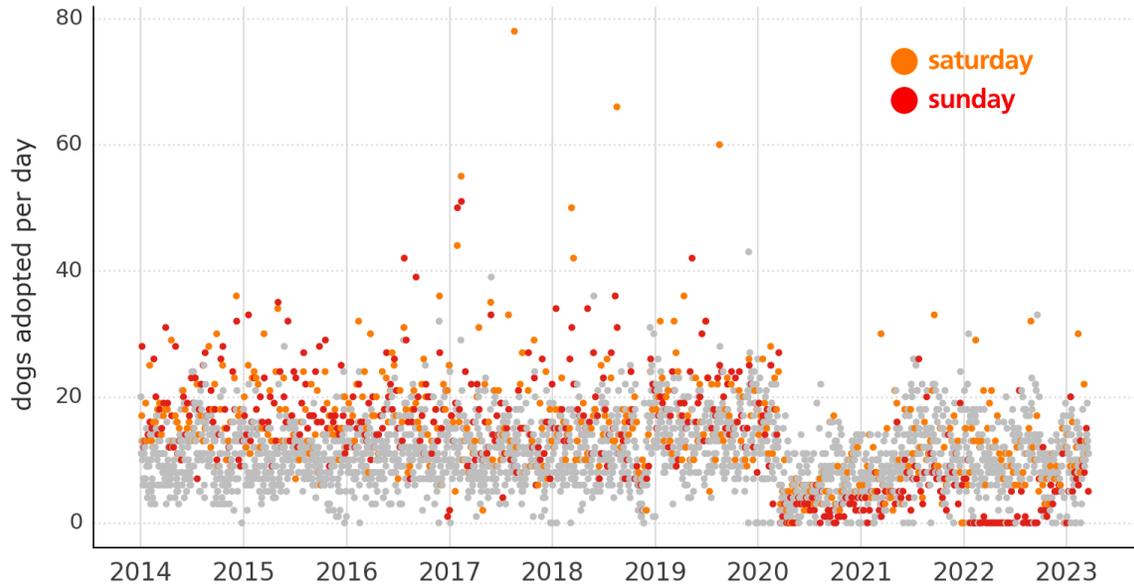


Figure A9. Number of dogs recorded adopted from the Animal Center per day with Saturdays and Sundays highlighted. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

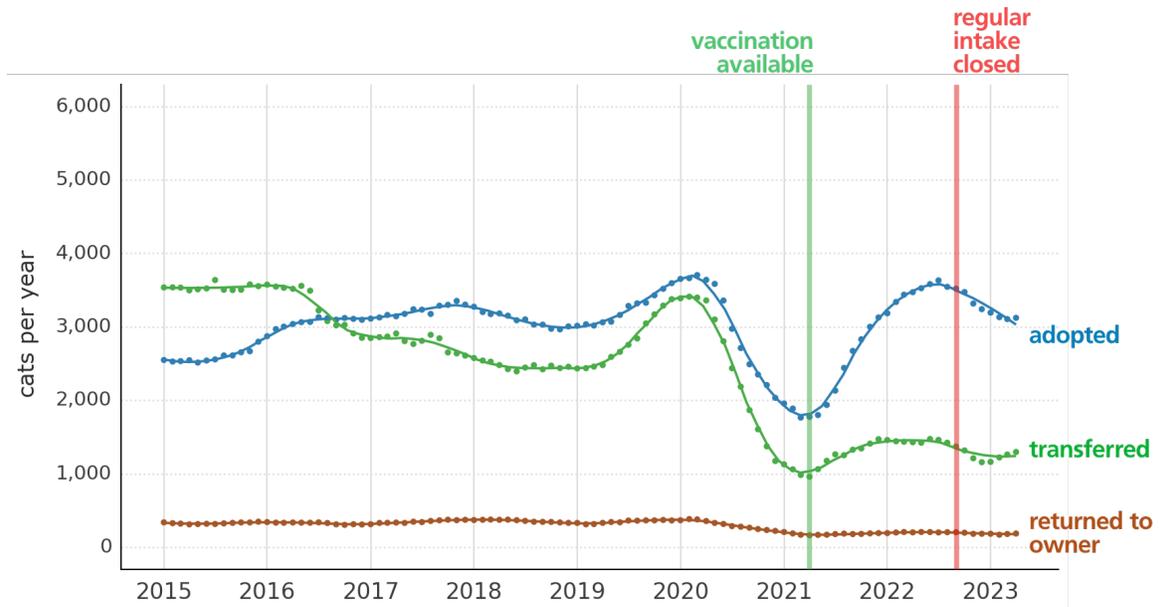


Figure A10. Twelve-month moving average of the number of cats exiting the Animal Center alive by category. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).



Figure A11. Twelve-month moving average of the number of dogs killed at the Animal Center for behavior-related reasons (behavior or court case). The number killed has been rising since the departure of Chief Shenefiel in January 2019, when fewer than one dog was killed per month on average. Now three are killed. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

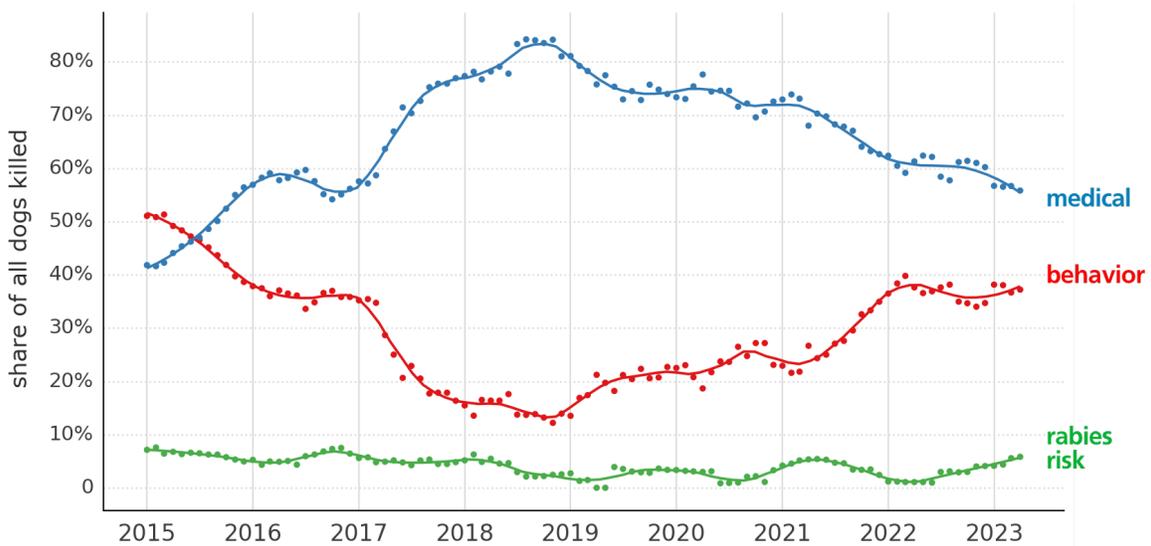


Figure A12. Twelve-month moving average of the share of dogs killed for different reasons. The share of dogs killed for behavior-related reasons has been increasing since the departure of Chief Shenefiel in January 2019, from 12% then to 37% now. Dogs killed for rabies risk is also on the rise, despite no change in the prevalence of rabies incidents in Texas (Texas Health and Human Services 2023). Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

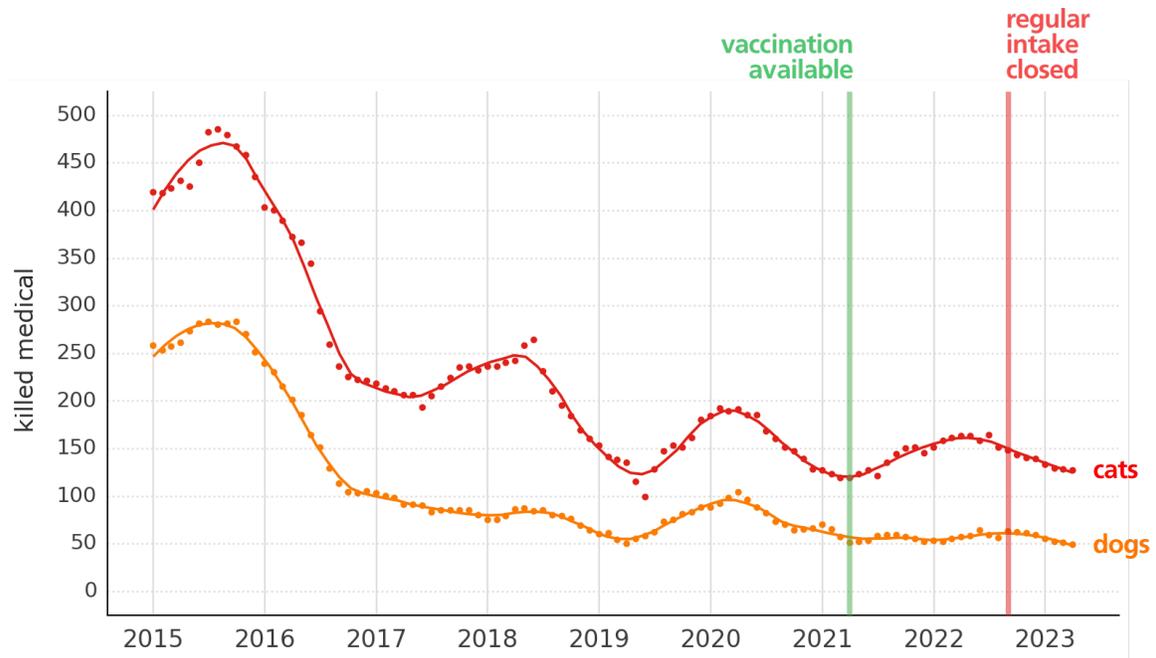


Figure A13. Twelve-month moving average of the number of cats and dogs killed at the Animal Center for medical-related reasons. The minimum number killed relative to intake volume was several months after the departure of Chief Shenefiel in January 2019. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

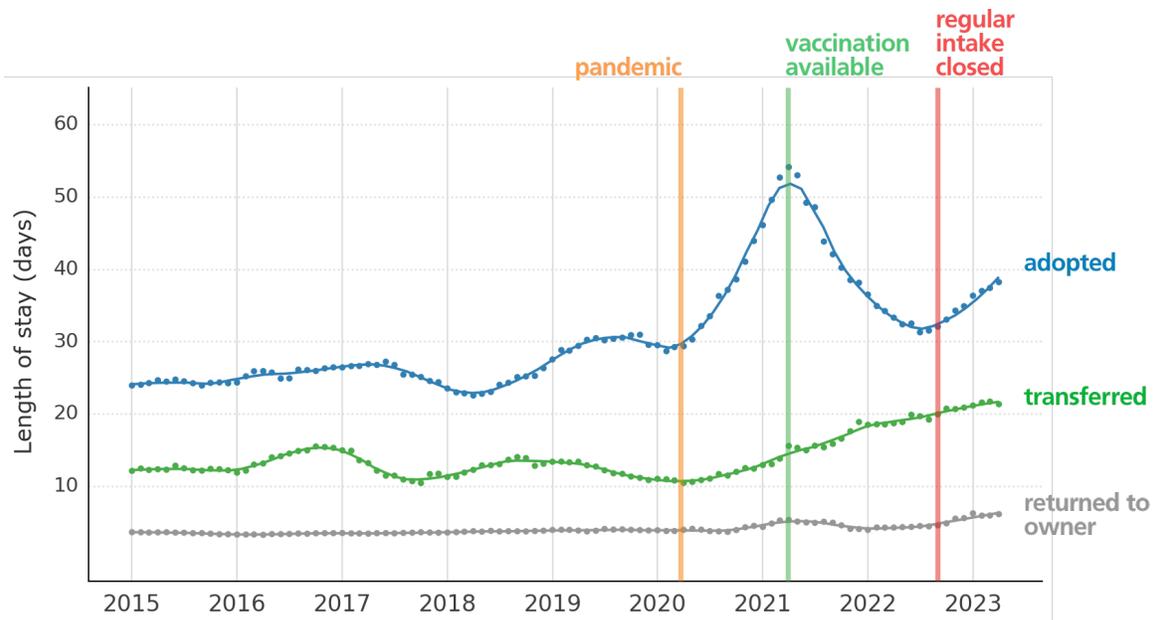


Figure A14. Twelve-month moving average of dog length of stay at the Animal Center in days before outcome. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

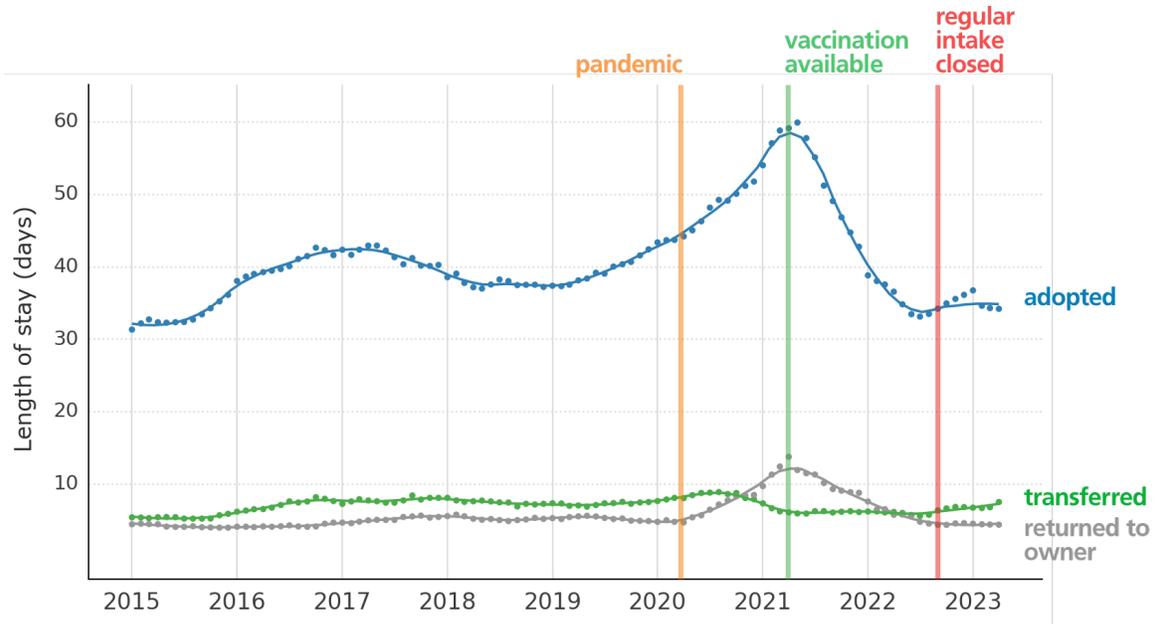


Figure A15. Twelve-month moving average of cat length of stay in days at the Animal Center before outcome. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

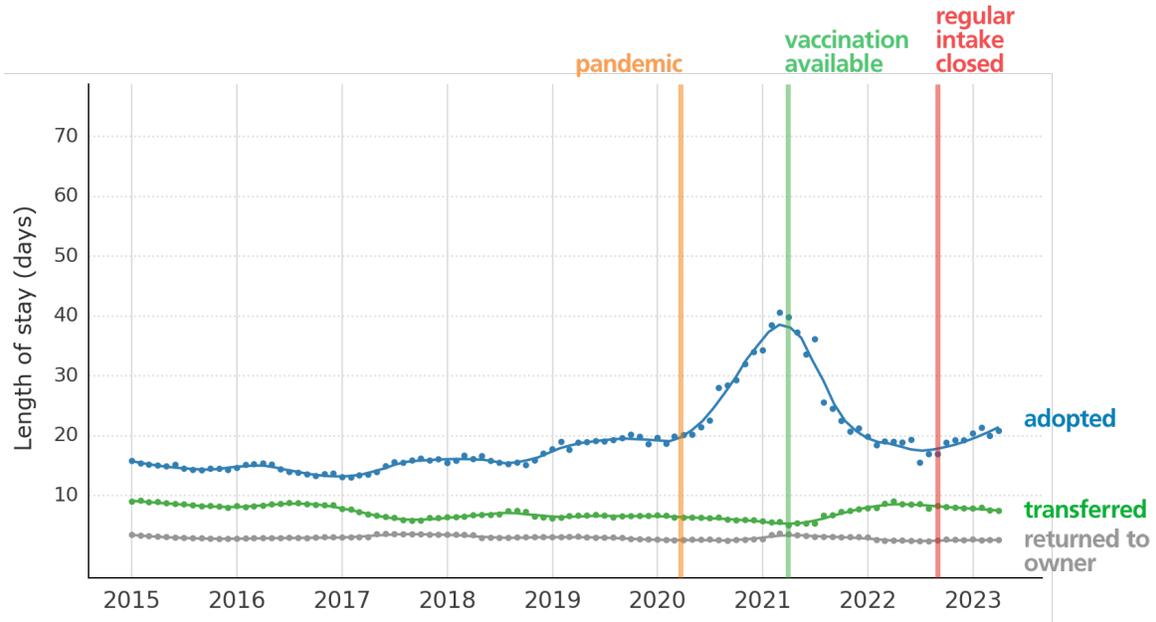


Figure A16. Twelve-month moving average of small-breed adult dog length of stay at the Animal Center in days before outcome. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

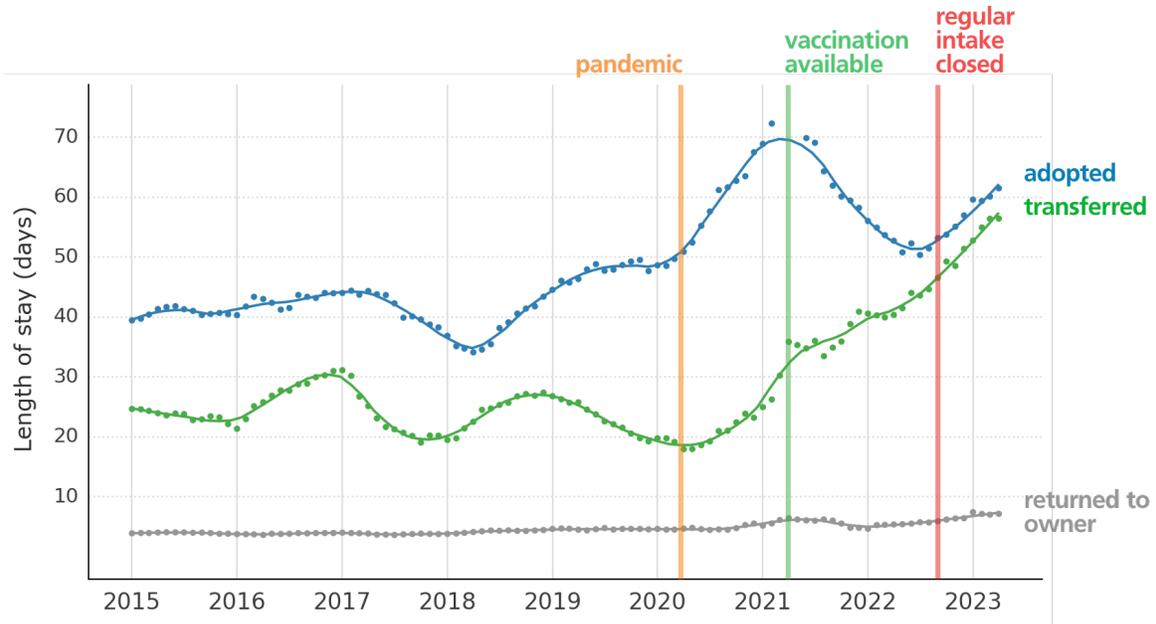


Figure A17. Twelve-month moving average of medium/large-breed adult dog length of stay at the Animal Center in days before outcome. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023).

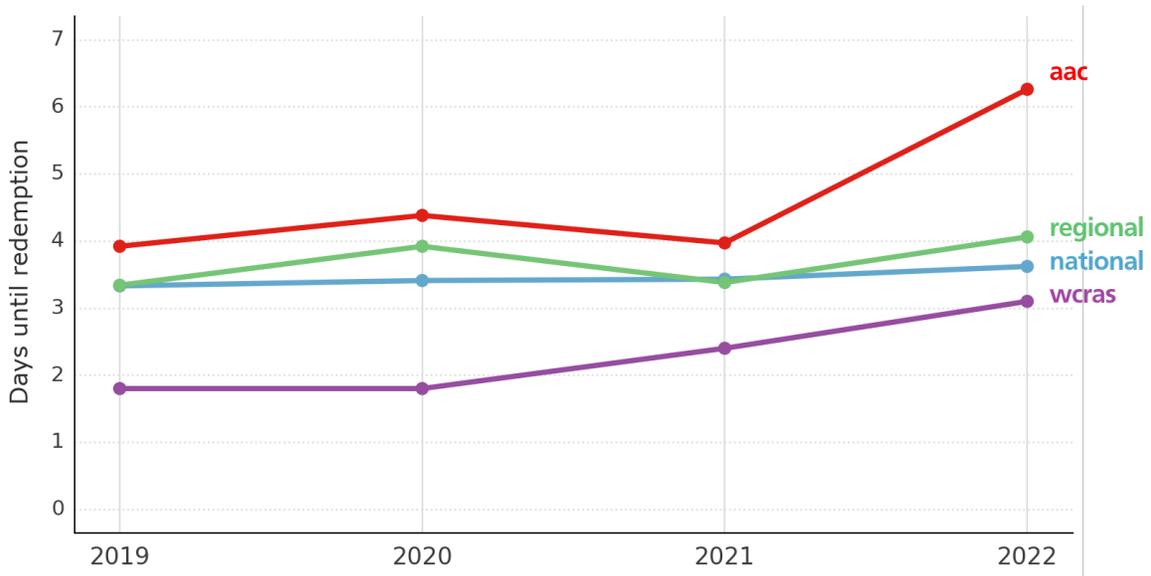


Figure A18. Length of stay in days before owner redemption nationally, regionally, at Austin Animal Center, and at Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)(Pethealth 2023)(WCRAS 2023)

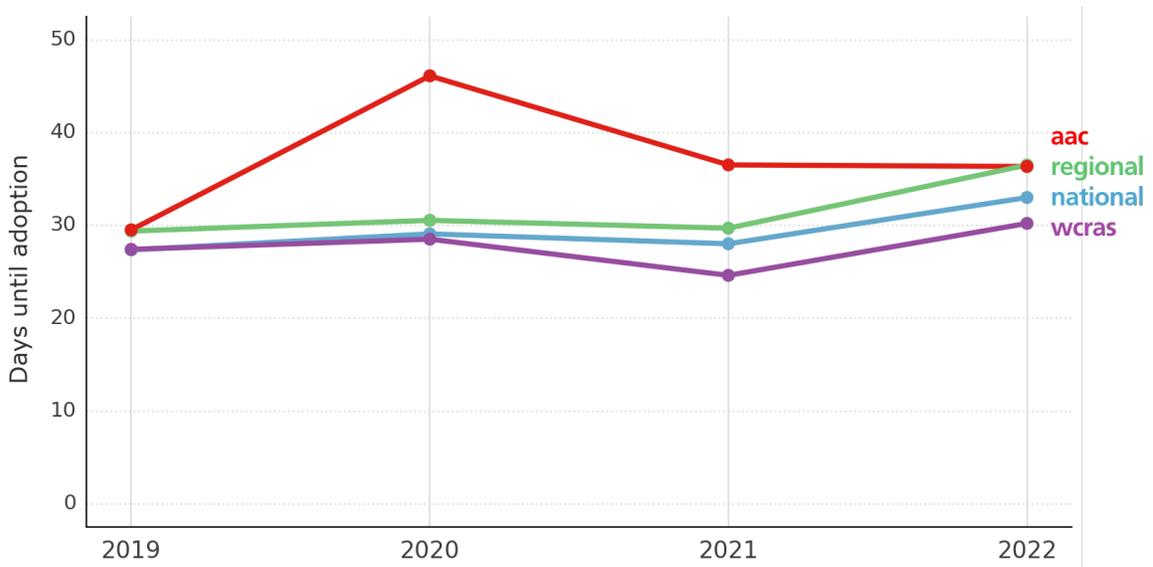


Figure A19. Length of stay in days before adoption nationally, regionally, at Austin Animal Center, and at Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023) (Pethealth 2023)(WCRAS 2023)

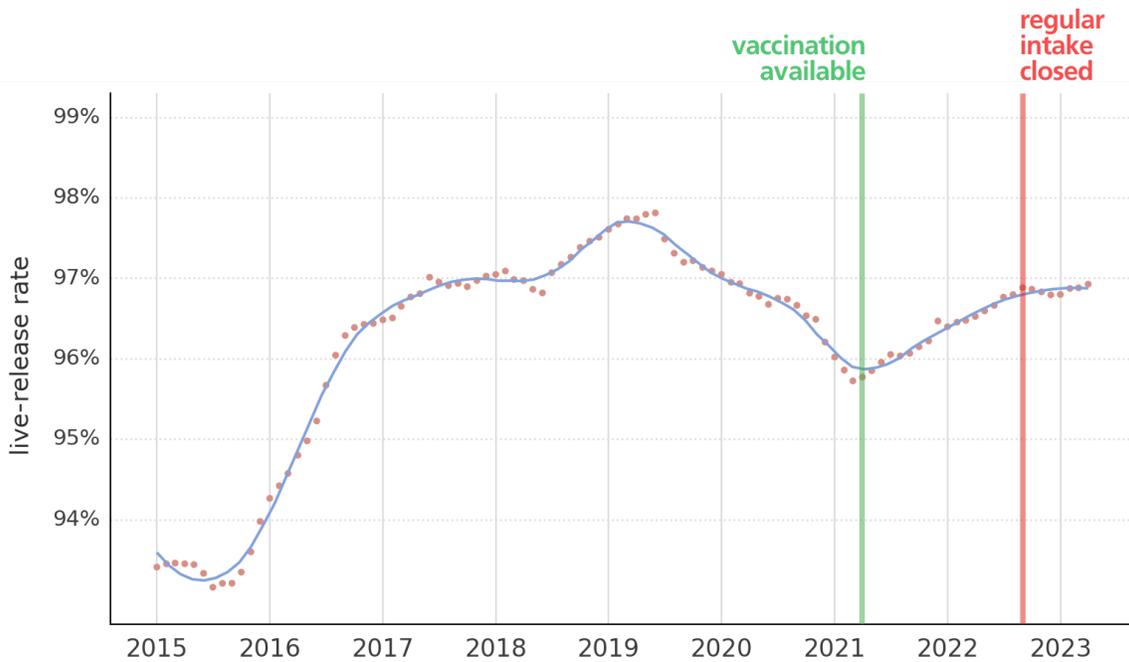


Figure A20. Twelve-month moving average of cat and dog live-release rate, which is the share of cats and dogs exiting the Animal Center alive out of all cats and dogs exiting. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)

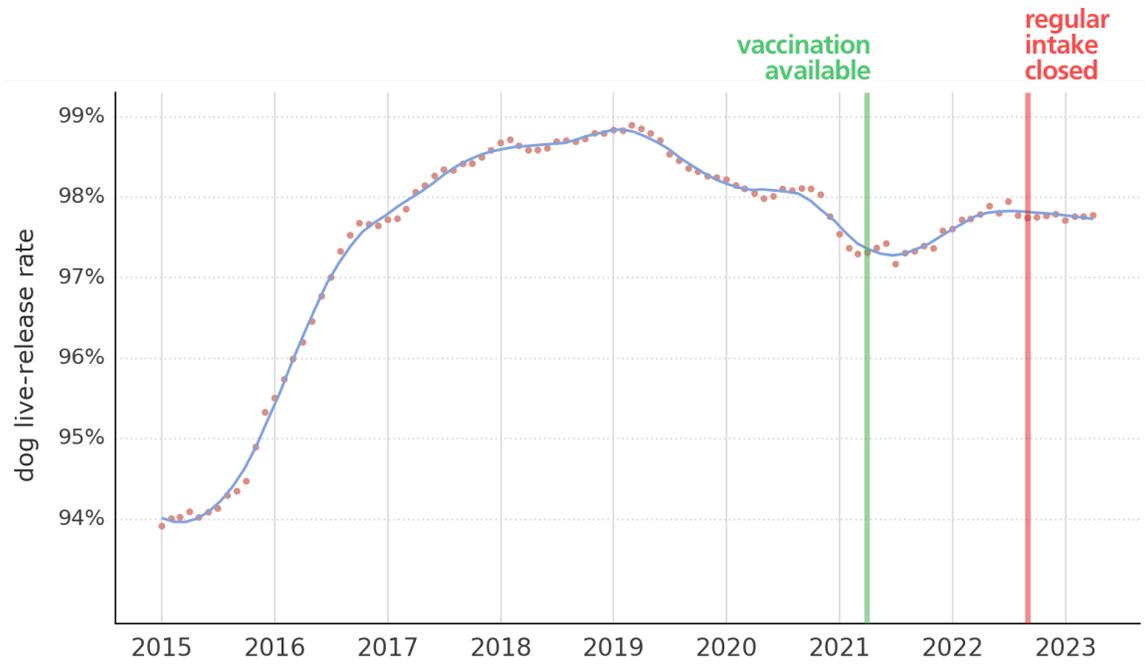


Figure A21. Twelve-month moving average of dog live-release rate, which is the share of dogs exiting the Animal Center alive out of all dogs exiting. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)

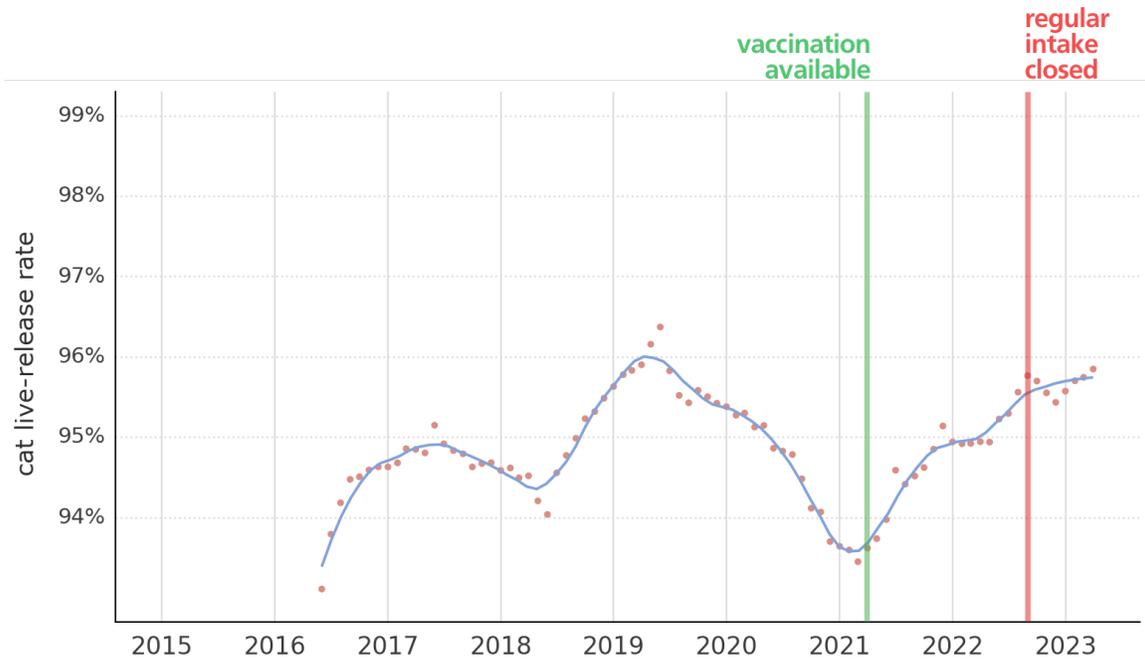


Figure A22. Twelve-month moving average of cat live-release rate, which is the share of cats exiting the Animal Center alive out of all cats exiting. Data source: (Austin Open Data 2023)

Appendix B – Listening to the Workforce Survey Ranking

The Listening to the Workforce 2021 survey comprised 28 questions, each scored by percentage of respondents indicating “agree” or “strongly agree” or “good” or “very good,” depending on the question. The score tallied here is the average of the scores for each of the 28 questions. Questions were of the nature: “I feel that my department is managed well” or “I receive appropriate recognition when I do good work,” so a positive response reflected good morale and a favorable sentiment within the workforce.

	Score
Community Court	85.48
Information and Security	75.36
Law Department	75.20
Municipal Court	72.83
City Auditor	72.63
City Clerk	66.62
Mayor and Council Staff	68.45
Public Health	68.44
Watershed Protection	68.18
Economic Development	67.53
Human Resources	66.66
Building Services	66.47
Public Works	66.44
Housing and Planning	65.65
Small and Minority Business Resources	65.46
Financial Services	64.96
Austin Code	64.18
Public Information Office	63.95

	Score
Management Services	63.79
Transportation	61.89
Austin Energy	61.45
Fire Department	61.33
Parks and Recreation	59.99
Communications and Technology	59.89
Austin Water	59.10
Real Estate Services	57.17
Convention Center	54.70
Public Library	54.19
Resource Recovery	52.64
Aviation	52.42
Fleet Services	50.67
Development Services	50.53
Emergency Medical Services	43.88
Animal Services	43.03
Police Department	31.48

Appendix C – Rental Snapshot

Snapshot of Travis County and Williamson County rental properties listed on zillow.com on May 3, 2023.

	Travis County houses townhomes	Travis County apartments	Williamson County houses townhomes	Williamson County apartments
total	1,569	1,661	892	397
welcome cats	65% (1,013)	79% (1,315)	70% (627)	84% (335)
welcome small dogs	82% (1,289)	84% (1,402)	87% (774)	87% (346)
welcome large dogs	46% (717)	40% (672)	44% (390)	40% (159)

Appendix D – Austin Animal Center Flow 2019 and 2022

Inflow

	2019	2022	number fewer	percent fewer
Stray dogs	7,560	4,315	3,245	43%
cats	6,143	3,436	2,707	44%
Surrendered dogs	2,555	1,617	938	37%
cats	1,612	1,130	482	30%
Public assist dogs	940	680	260	28%
cats	126	121	5	4%
total	18,936	11,299	7,637	40%

Outflow

	2019	2022	number fewer	percent fewer
Adopted dogs	5,629	3,410	2,219	39%
cats	3,652	3,194	458	13%
Redeemed dogs	2,782	1,074	1,708	61%
cats	367	183	184	50%
Transferred dogs	2,484	1,782	702	28%
cats	3,389	1,176	2,213	65%
Killed dogs	120	97	23	19%
cats	192	142	50	26%
total	18,615	11,058	7,557	41%

Appendix E – Whither Adoption

Four years ago researchers associated with Austin Pets Alive put together a paper analyzing the effect of imported dogs on Travis County adoption capacity (Moon 2019). Part of that analysis was a simple econometric estimate of the demand for shelter dog adoption based only on the replacement of pet dogs that have died, not considering at all households that would acquire a first dog or add another dog. The demand generated by the number of Travis County households in 2018 for replacement pet dogs that would be acquired from an animal shelter was estimated at 5,479 dogs. The demand for replacement pet dogs from any source, not just animal shelters, was estimated at 15,219 (reckoning dog acquisitions from animal shelters at 36% of all acquisitions).

The annual survey conducted by the American Pet Products Association has reported dogs are the number one pet type of pet owners, and Millennials and Gen Z are the predominant dog owners, exactly the type of workers identified by the University of Denver’s research into the economic impact of Austin’s no-kill resolution as a “key labor demographic (the young, mobile, highly educated, and innovative professional)” that are influenced by Austin’s humane-city brand equity when choosing the city where they wish to live and work (APPA 2020; Hawes, et al. 2017; Ramser 2022).

There is no specific evidence that the bottom has fallen out of the shelter dog adoption market in Austin. Instead, it seems more possible that dog acquisition behavior has shifted and the Animal Center has lost touch with it, not unlike some other animal shelters, but perhaps in a more pronounced way because of other actions like closing to the public on Sundays and putting out messaging around “emergency-only” operation and “bringing a lost healthy pet to the Austin Animal Center should be your last resort,” fostering the image of a closed and unwelcoming government agency (Ruiz 2022). A data scientist at Pethealth has already warned: “we are losing the next generation of pet parents to other sources. Finding new ways to engage the public and bring them into the fold needs to be the center of solving the crisis. This problem will not correct itself” (Zeidman 2022).

Appendix F – Stray Dogs

Just before Independence Day 2022, the Austin Fire Department put out a poster in partnership with the Austin Animal Center. The poster advised what to do about a found stray animal, and said this: “Most found pets are found just 0.2 miles from home” (Austin Fire Department 2022b).

When asked about this claim, the Austin Fire Department said they received the information from Austin Animal Center. In turn, Austin Animal Center pointed to a blog article published by Human Animal Support Services (HASS). The blog, which was titled, “New study: Most lost dogs are found less than a mile from their homes,” recounted incorrect claims made in a 2021 study sponsored by HASS (Greenwood 2021).

That study described a relatively simple web application that allowed animal shelters to upload a file containing their data and then see various statistics and visualizations (Kremer 2021). Dallas Animal Services was used as a case-study to demonstrate the web-based tool.

The study reported the following findings.

In fiscal year 2019, Dallas Animal Services took in 20,968 stray dogs. Of those dogs, 10,035 were reunited with their owners (48%). Of the dogs reunited with their owners, 5,228 had information in their record about where they were found and where their homes were located.

Notice that there is a winnowing process going on, from the population of stray dogs entering the shelter, to the population of stray dogs reunited with their owners, to the population of reunited stray dogs about which location information was available, starting with twenty-thousand stray dogs entering the shelter and ending with only the five-thousand about which there was good information.

Of the studied dogs, the researcher determined that 70% (3,659 dogs) were found within one mile of their homes, and 42%, (2,196 dogs) were found within one city block of their homes. That amounts to 17% and 10%, respectively, of the stray dogs taken in by the shelter.

A considerable fly in the ointment, though, was the additional finding that the distance from home varied across the city. Stray dogs found in the northern half of the city were often found farther than one mile from their homes and also were less likely to be reunited with their owners. The median distance from home by zip

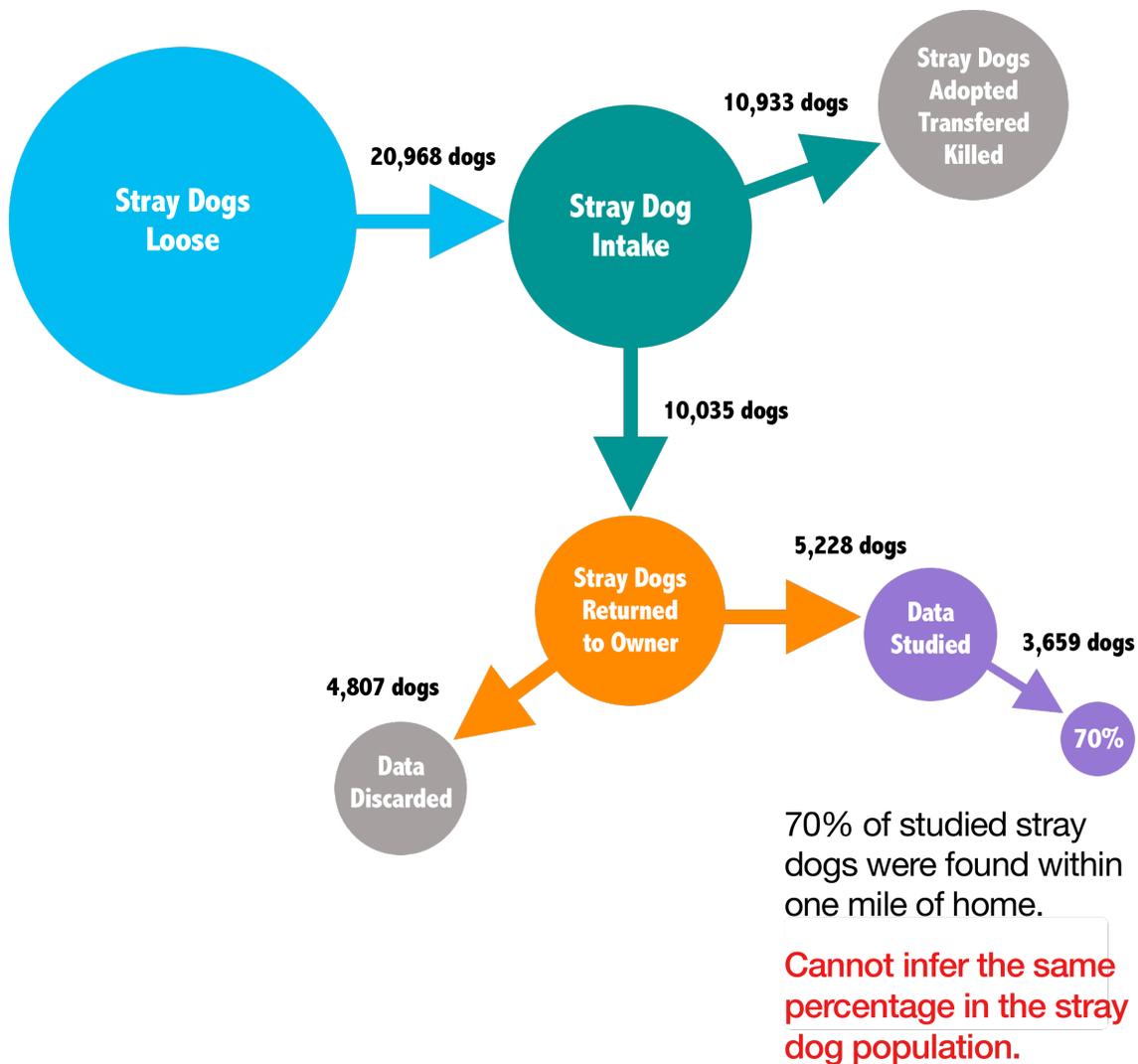


Figure A13. Starting with the population of all stray dogs running loose, the selection of sub-populations with the likelihood of selection effects.

code was between 1.5 and 2.5 miles, meaning that half the stray dogs found and reunited had traveled farther than that. This variance by location suggests the finding should not be generalized to other settings without more research.

What the study could say with authority is that of the stray dogs taken in by Dallas Animal Services in 2019, 17% are known to have been found within one mile of their homes and 10% are known to have been found within one city block of their homes.

In order to infer anything about all stray dogs from the dogs studied, the collection of dogs studied would have to be representative of the population of all stray dogs. But remember the winnowing process. The first cull happened when stray dogs

were either reunited with their owners or not. The second cull happened when records about reunited dogs had to be thrown out because Dallas Animal Services had kept poor account of where those dogs were found or lived. Nearly half of all the records of reunited stray dogs (4,807 out of 10,035) were unusable, either because Animal Control Officers or other staff had entered the “found” location as the shelter’s address or the address of the owner, or for other reasons, such as the owner’s home address being outside of Texas.

In neither of these culls did each stray dog have an equal chance of being selected. Instead, almost certainly bias was introduced by selection effects, making it utterly unsound to generalize inferences about the final collection of reunited stray dogs back to the general population of stray dogs.

The body of the paper covering methods and results is actually pretty candid and careful about presenting the findings just outlined, but the concluding discussion section makes two claims that are just not supported by the rest of the paper. First, “[...Stray] dogs rarely went far from home,” which cannot be concluded from the research results. Second, “Of all strays, 70% were found up to one mile away from home and 42% were found within a block’s range,” which incorrectly applies the findings for the studied collection of reunited stray dogs back to the general population of all stray dogs.

Huang, et al.

Another study sometimes cited as proof that stray cats are near their homes looked into where missing cats were found and what methods were used to search for them (Huang, et al. 2018). This study gathered data from an online survey that respondents self-selected to take. Self-selection is known to introduce bias in estimates, in this case the danger being that respondents with good news to report about lost cats would be more likely to want to take the survey (Bethlehem 2008; Khazaal 2014).

The study collected 1,210 survey responses about lost cats. Seventeen reported the cat was found dead, 602 reported the cat was found alive, and 591 reported the cat was never found. For 477 of the cats found alive the distance from home to where the cat was found was known. The median distance was 50 meters (164 feet). The maximum distance was 25 kilometers (15.5 miles). The 75 percentile was 500 meters (0.31 miles). The lost cats studied amounted to 39% of the survey responses.

This study is sometimes referenced to say that 75% of stray cats are within one-third of a mile of home, but that conclusion is wrong and was never made by the researchers. This is the same mistake of applying what the study reported true for a

non-representative sample, the group of lost cats found alive for which distance information was known, back to the original population of all lost cats.

Weiss, et al.

Another study sometimes held up to show that stray pets are near their homes investigated how often cats and dogs go missing and what methods are used to look for them (Weiss, et al. 2012). This study collected responses to a random digit dialing telephone survey. Of the 1,014 households that agreed to participate when randomly dialed, 15% (152) had lost a cat or a dog. Of the lost pets (184), 93% of dogs were reported recovered (102) and 75% of cats (56). The researchers noted the survey did not define or identify under what conditions the respondent might consider the pet “lost.”

This study is sometimes referenced to say that stray animals are usually near home and are found by their owners, but no data was collected about how far from home a pet was when it was recovered. As well, only seven recovered dogs and two recovered cats had any involvement with Animal Services or with law enforcement. Consequently, this study had little to say about stray animals picked up by Animal Control or stray animals brought to an animal shelter by residents.

Representative samples

A key concept in inference is that the sample being used to make an inference is actually representative of the population of interest. A fictional analogy might help illuminate the mistake sometimes seen in animal-shelter logic.

Say the population of interest is barbecue lovers in Texas (i.e., stray dogs in an animal shelter). You select all the barbecue lovers who are older men (i.e., you select all the stray dogs that the shelter is able to return to their owners). You find that 70% of the older men listen exclusively to 1980’s Hair Metal bands (i.e., you find that 70% of the RTO dogs were near their homes when picked up). You conclude that 70% of barbecue lovers in Texas listen exclusively to 1980’s Hair Metal bands (i.e., you conclude that 70% of stray dogs in an animal shelter were near their homes when picked up).

Where things go wrong is in the non-random selection of older men, and in the corresponding non-random selection of stray dogs that can be returned to their owners, both of which create biased samples not representative of the populations of interest. Consequently, observations about the samples are not reliable inferences about the populations of interest.

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