OFFICE OF THE CITY AUDITOR

M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Corrie Stokes, City Auditor
Office of the City Auditor

DATE: September 29, 2023

SUBJECT: **Resolution No. 20220728-098 - Staff Response**

On July 28, Council passed Resolution No. 20220728-098 directing the City Auditor to perform an audit of Animal Service Office effectiveness and to identify an external animal sheltering expert knowledgeable in No Kill policies and practices to assist identifying strategies and recommendations for improved flow of operations, quality care for animals, and a successful, sustainable No Kill Shelter. On September 27, the City Auditor presented this audit to the Audit and Finance Committee, as directed in the Council resolution. With issuance of this report, we consider our part of the resolution and corresponding CIUR completed.

Please contact Corrie Stokes if you have further questions.

Thank you.

CC:

Stephanie Hayden-Howard, Assistant City Manager
Don Bland, Chief Animal Services Officer

AUDIT REPORT

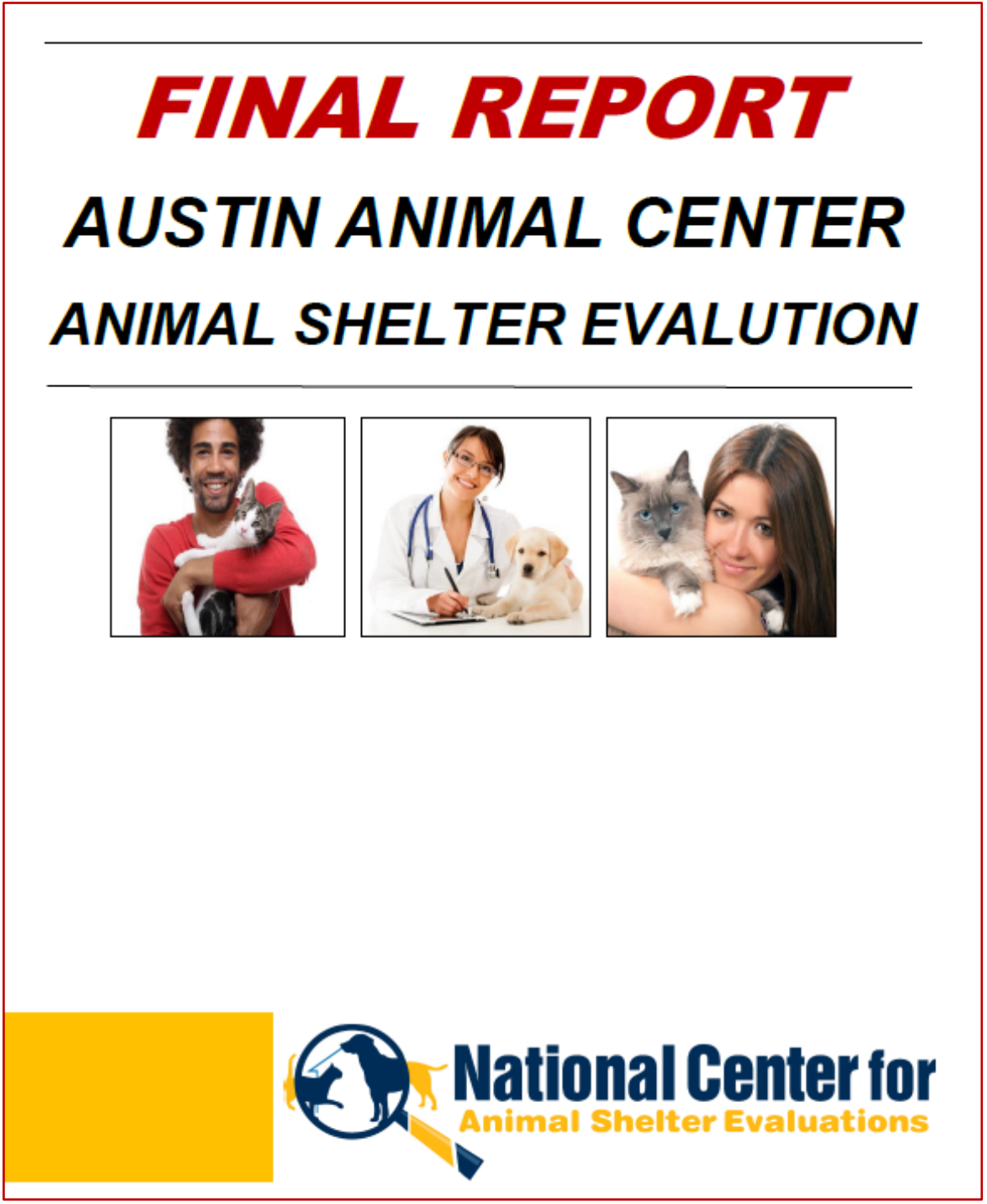
Austin Animal Center

OFFICE OF THE CITY AUDITOR

SEPTEMBER 27, 2023

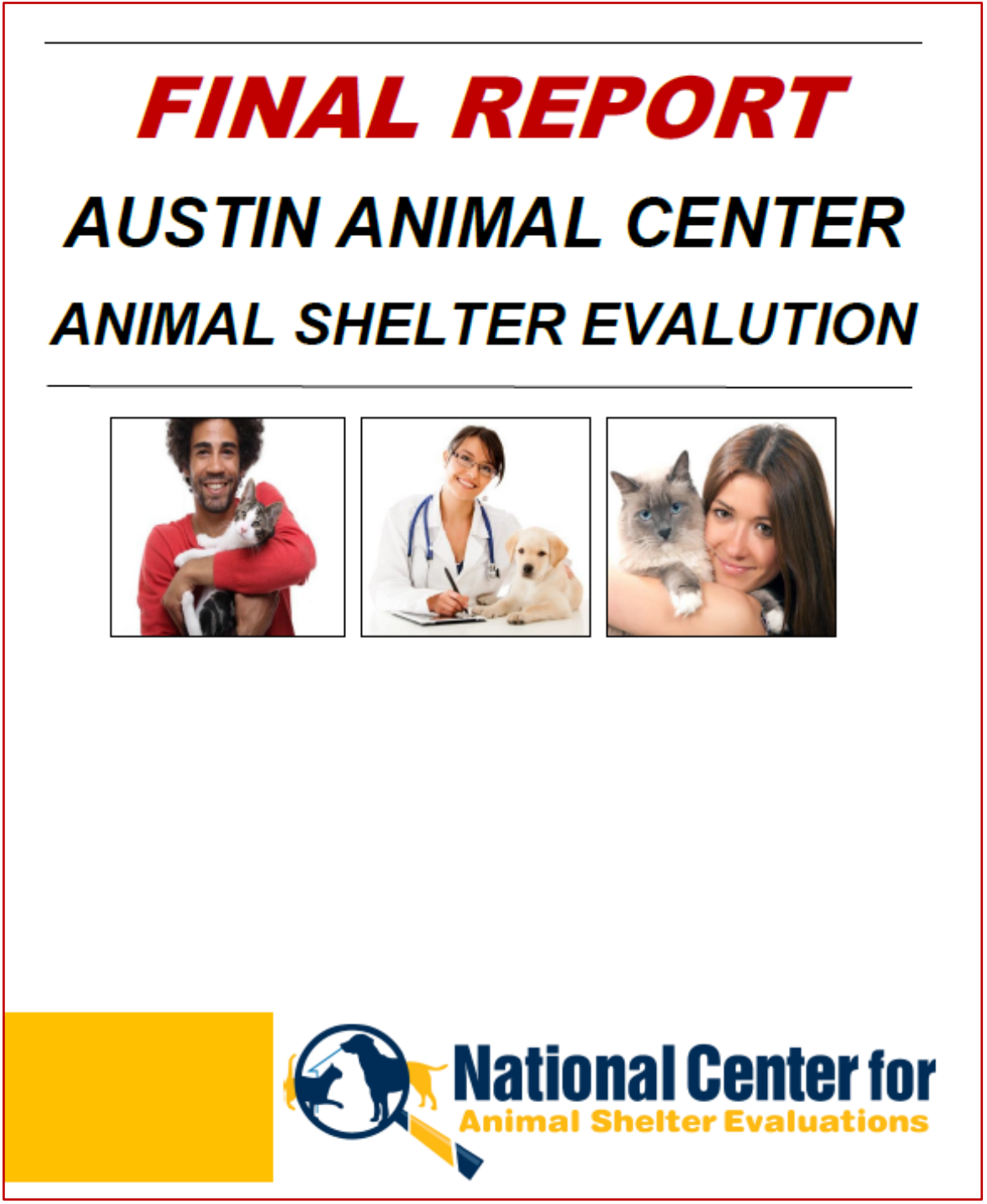
About Austin Animal Center

- Serve as a safety net for lost and homeless animals in the community
- Find forever homes for all its adoptable animals
- No-kill status since 2011
- Live release rate of 95% or greater



About this Audit

- Council resolution asked us to hire an independent outside expert in no-kill practices and shelter operations
- Tim Crum with the National Center for Animal Shelter Evaluations



About this Audit

- Council resolution asked us to hire an independent outside expert in no-kill practices and shelter operations
- Tim Crum with the National Center for Animal Shelter Evaluations
- 3 community engagement sessions
- Community engagement survey
- Multiple announced and unannounced site visits

Objective: Is the City effectively managing its animal population and providing animals in its shelter with necessary and humane care?

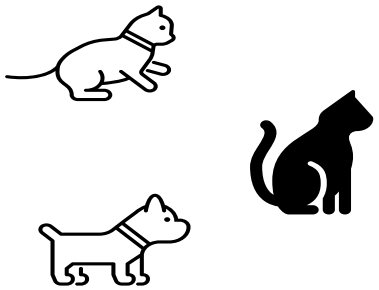
WHY ARE THERE SPACE ISSUES

NECESSARY AND HUMANE CARE

SUSTAINABLE LIVE RELEASE RATE

Finding 1: The City of Austin's animal welfare priorities conflict with each other, contributing to AAC's inability to achieve stated goals.

Serve as an open-intake shelter

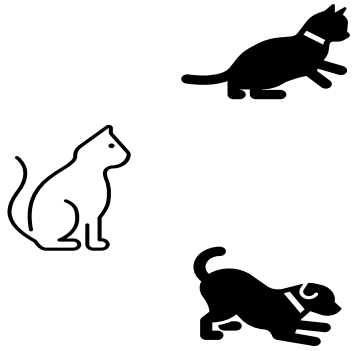


Shelter 16,000 animals

Provide humane care to its animals

Stay at the shelter

Maintain a 95% live release rate



Find forever homes for its animals

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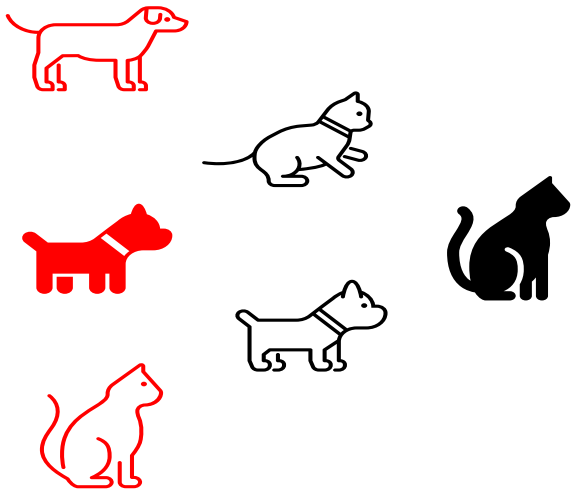

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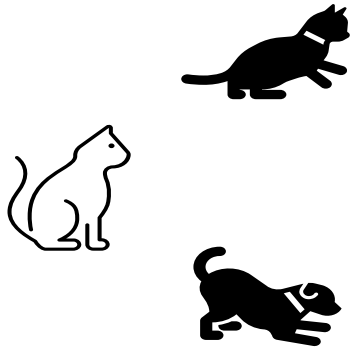

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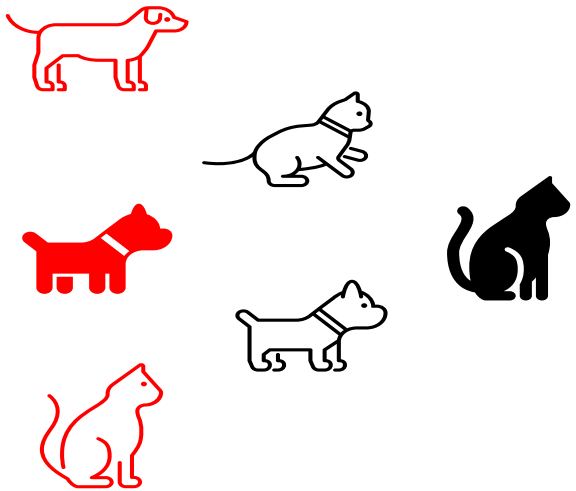
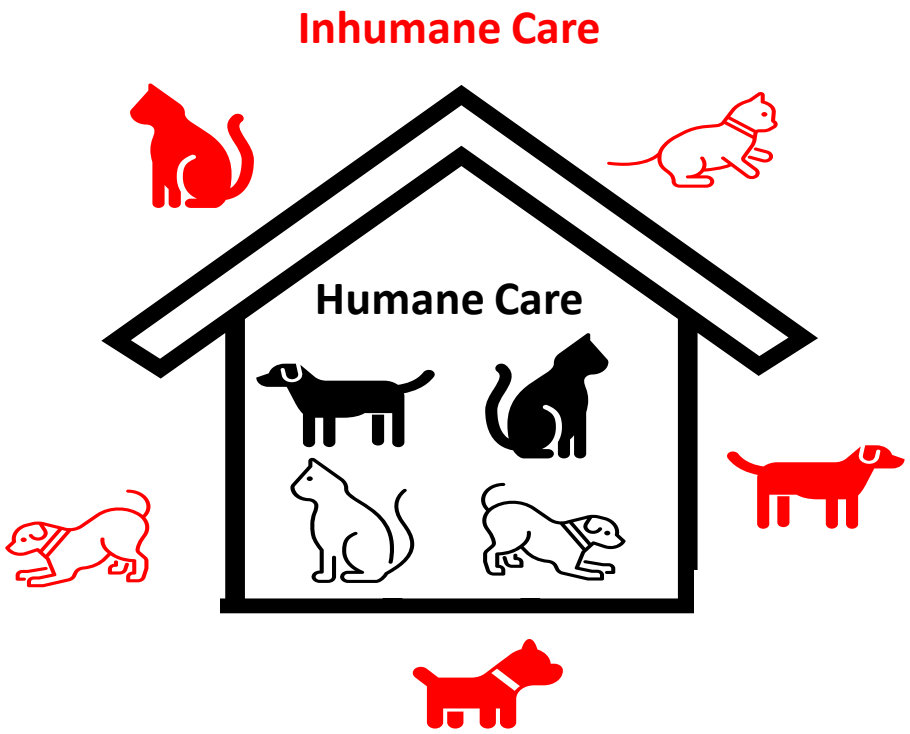
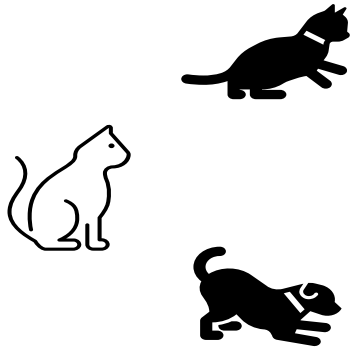






Shelter 16,000 animals

Stay at the shelter

Find forever homes for its animals

AAC does not have a strategy or clear direction for how to operate when they are unable to meet all these goals.

Serve as an open-intake shelter

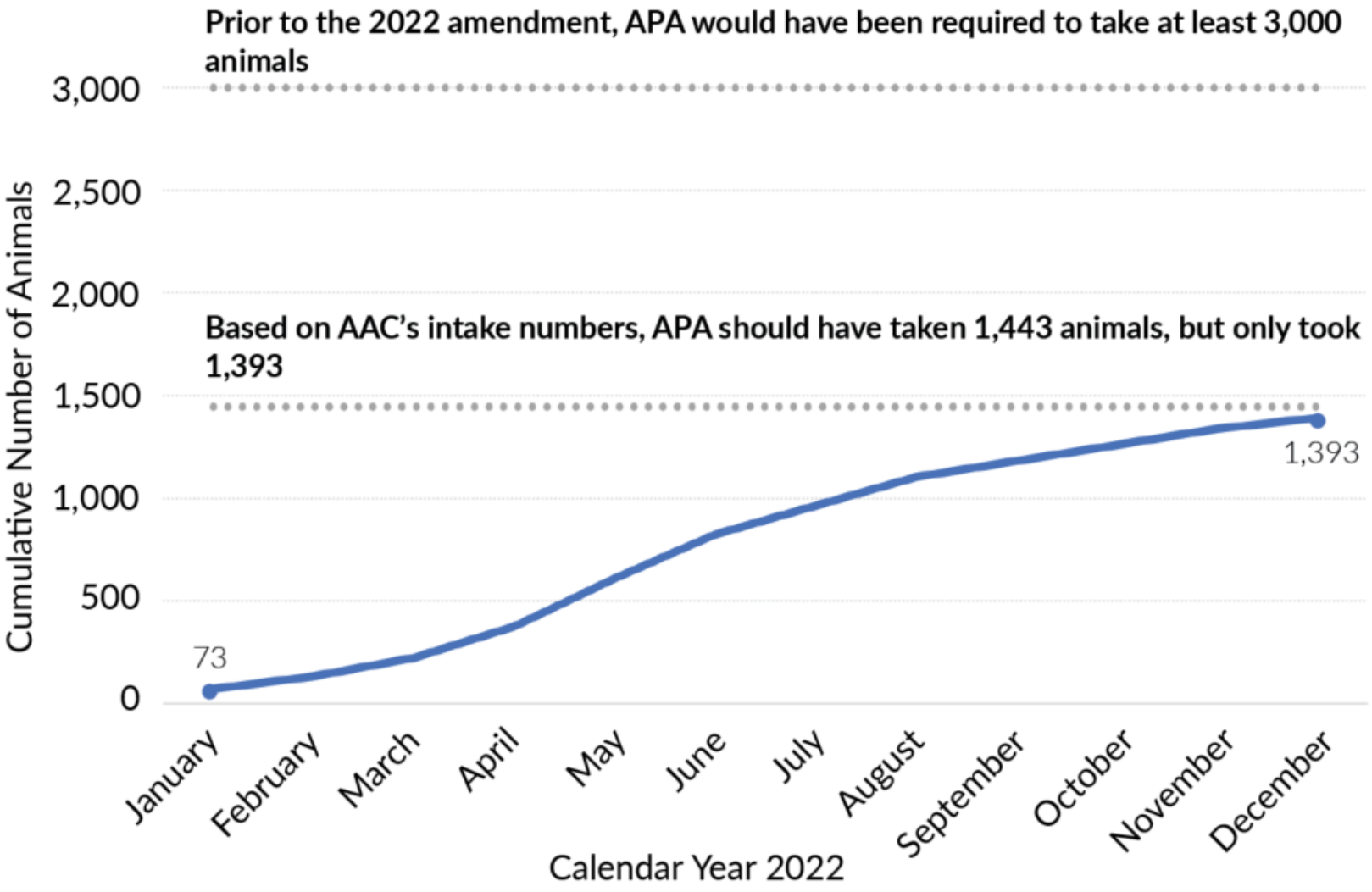
Provide humane care to its animals

Maintain a 95% live release rate

Finding 2: AAC is not finding enough homes for its animals and is overcrowded.

Animal Outcomes	2022 Actual	2022 Goal
Adopted	7,091	7,700
Transferred	2,738	4,500
Returned to Owner	1,334	3,000
Fostered	2,866	n/a
Percent Euthanized	1.98%	Less than 2%

Changes to the City's agreement with Austin Pets Alive decreased AAC's number of transfers:



Costs associated with low turnover and euthanasia rates:

- Animals with prolonged stays may develop mental and physical problems
- AAC may be encouraged to adopt or transfer dangerous animals
- Less room for animals in need
- With more animals at the shelter, each animal gets less space and attention

“Operating beyond an organization’s capacity of care is an unacceptable practice.”

-Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters

“The use of cages or crates intended for short-term, temporary confinement or travel is… unacceptable as primary enclosures.”

“Enclosure needs to be large enough to accommodate the necessary set-up without impeding the animal’s ability to move or stretch.”

“The primary enclosure must allow animals to sit, sleep, and eat away from areas of their enclosures where they defecate and urinate... and maintain distance from roommates when they choose to do so.”

Algae in outdoor play pools and water bowls.

Structural Issues at AAC

- Temperatures exceeded the recommended range of 60°F - 80°F
- Temperature of an artificial play lawn was 176°F
- Inadequate drainage for outdoor kennels
- Damaged baseboards that had accumulated animal waste
- Inadequate sound buffering in outdoor kennels

austintexas.gov 3-1-1 Translate

MENU

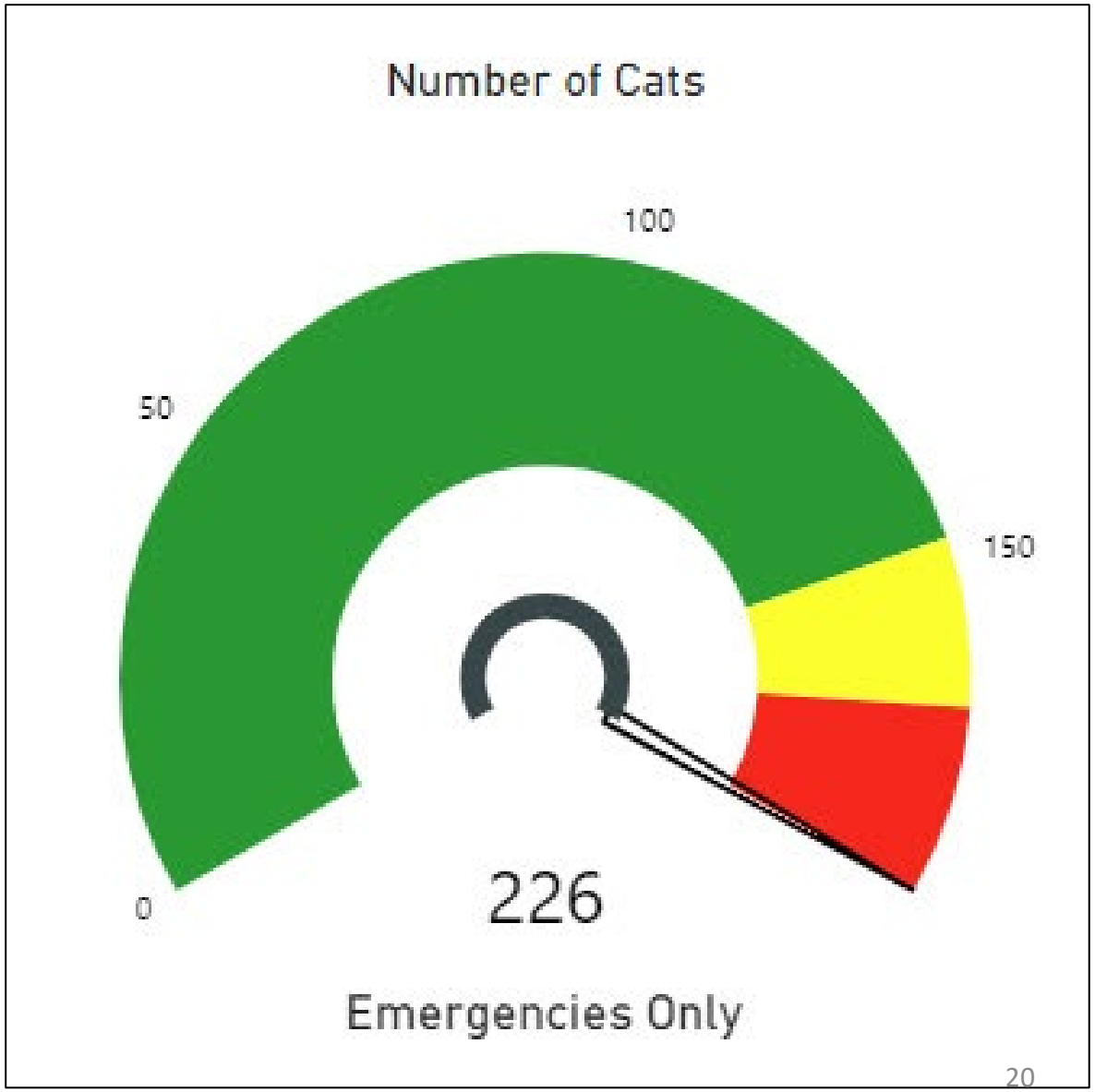
AUSTIN ANIMAL CENTER

Distemper Notice

The shelter is experiencing an increase in distemper cases. Distemper is a highly contagious virus that affects unvaccinated dogs. Intake continues to be restricted to allow us to create space to isolate sick dogs and protect incoming vulnerable dogs. **Learn more about canine distemper**

September 2023

Intake of new animals is regularly restricted or closed.



Intake of new animals is regularly restricted or closed.

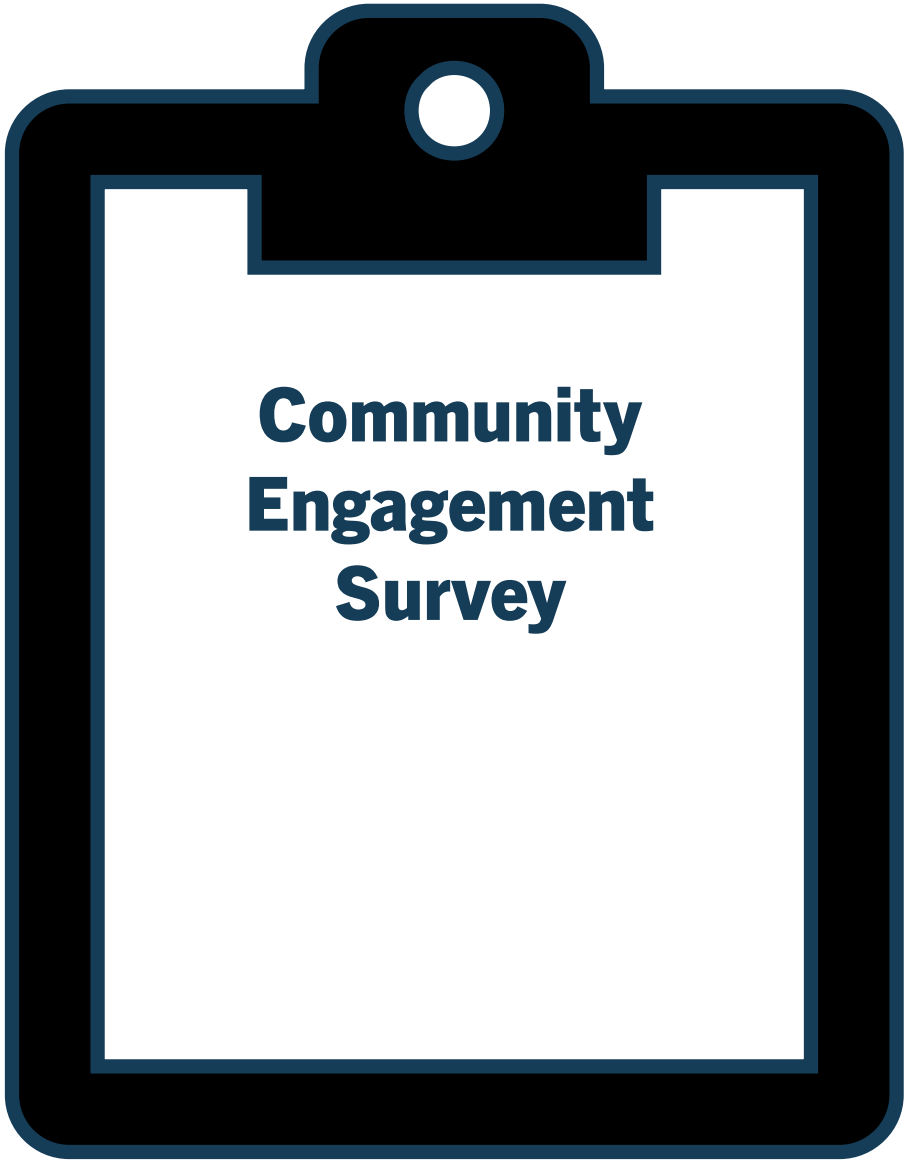
Restricted or closed intake creates hardships for residents and animals:

- Long wait times to surrender an animal
- Financial costs to residents
- Stray, homeless, and abandoned animals are exposed to weather, cars, and predators
- Unowned animals may be a danger to other people and pets

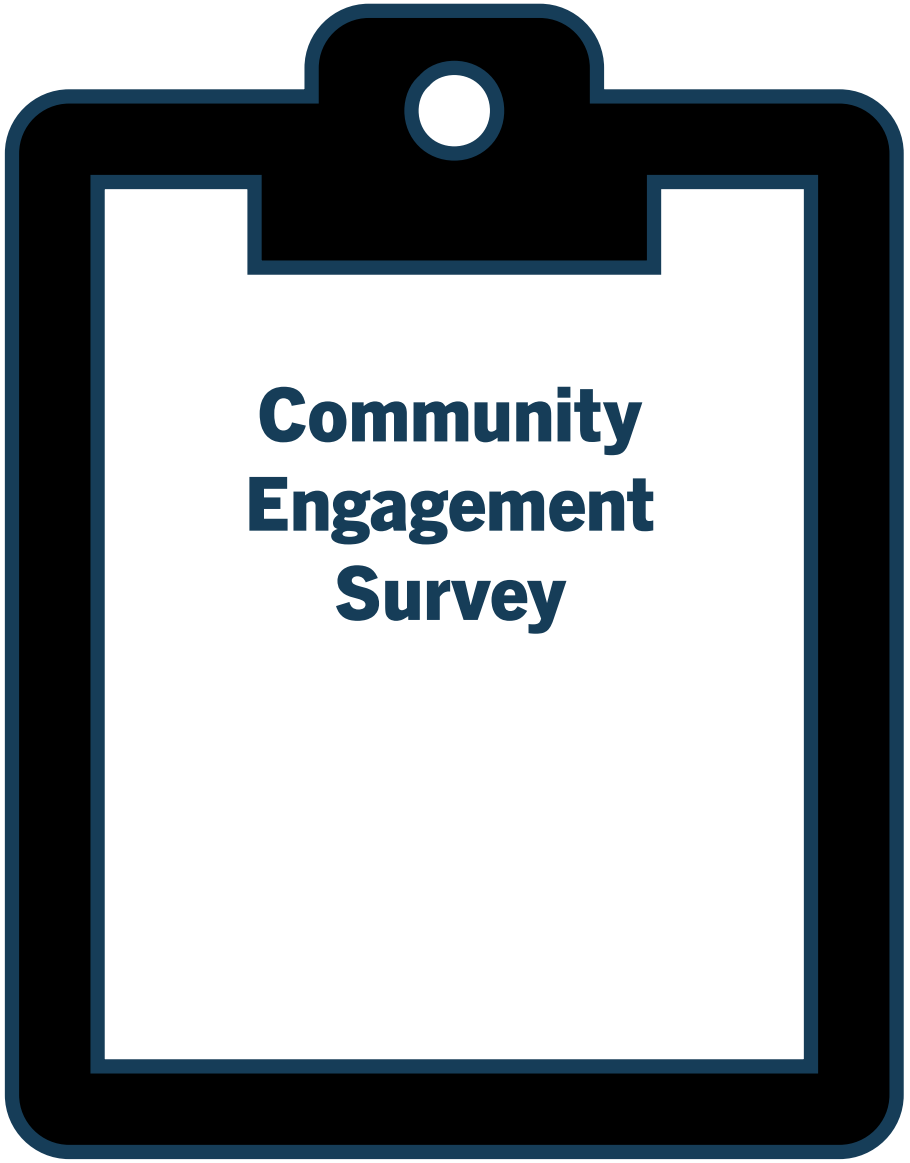
Finding 3: Relationships between key stakeholders and within AAC are strained.

- Partner organizations help adopt, treat, and save animals
- Community members foster pets and volunteer at the shelter
- Animal Advisory Commission promotes collaboration between the City and interested parties
- AAC staff care for the shelter and its animals

Community Engagement Survey



The commission meetings I've recently witnessed have been upsetting and I don't believe all of the representatives have the best interests of AAC in mind.



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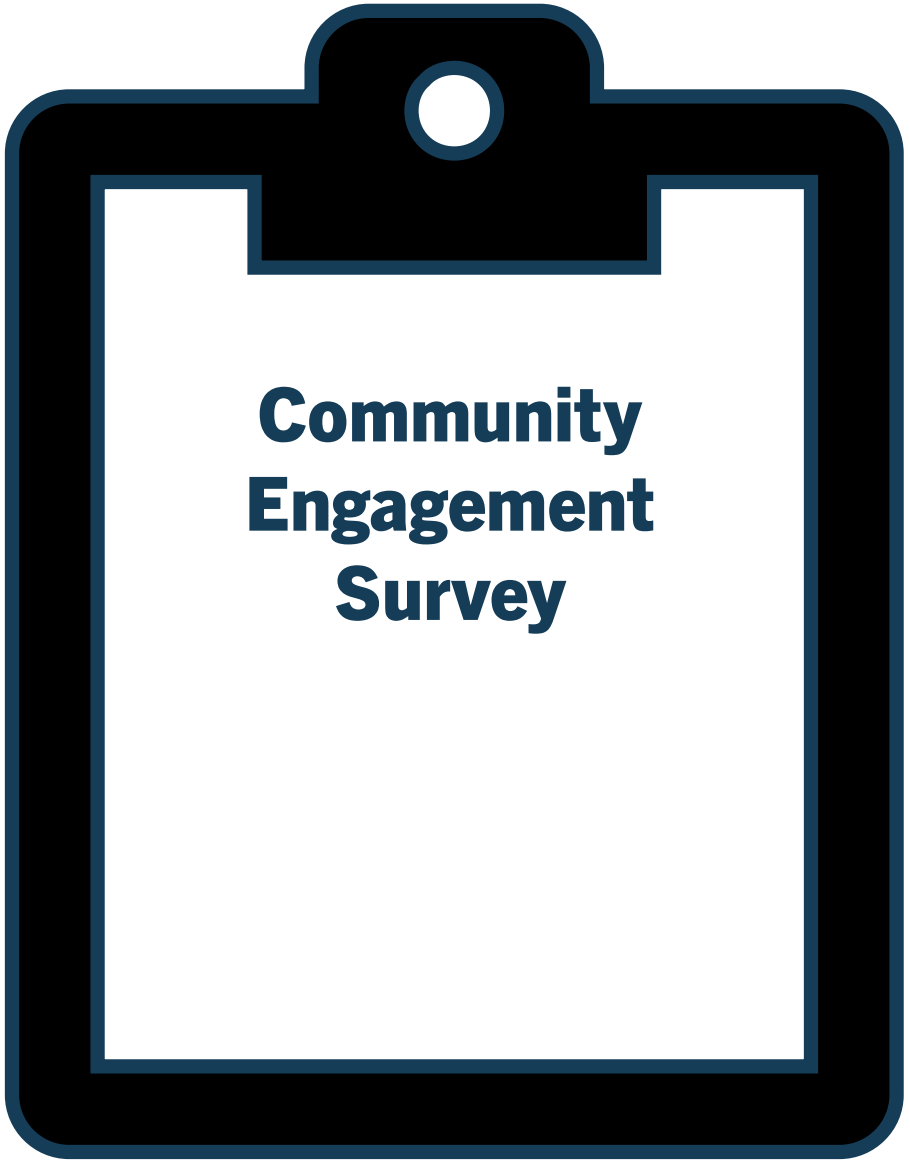

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The shelter has been very unwilling/unable to provide key data, measurable stats, operational insights, and in general has been uncooperative with animal advisory commission.

Community Engagement Survey

The commission meetings I've recently witnessed have been upsetting and I don't believe all of the representatives have the best interests of AAC in mind.

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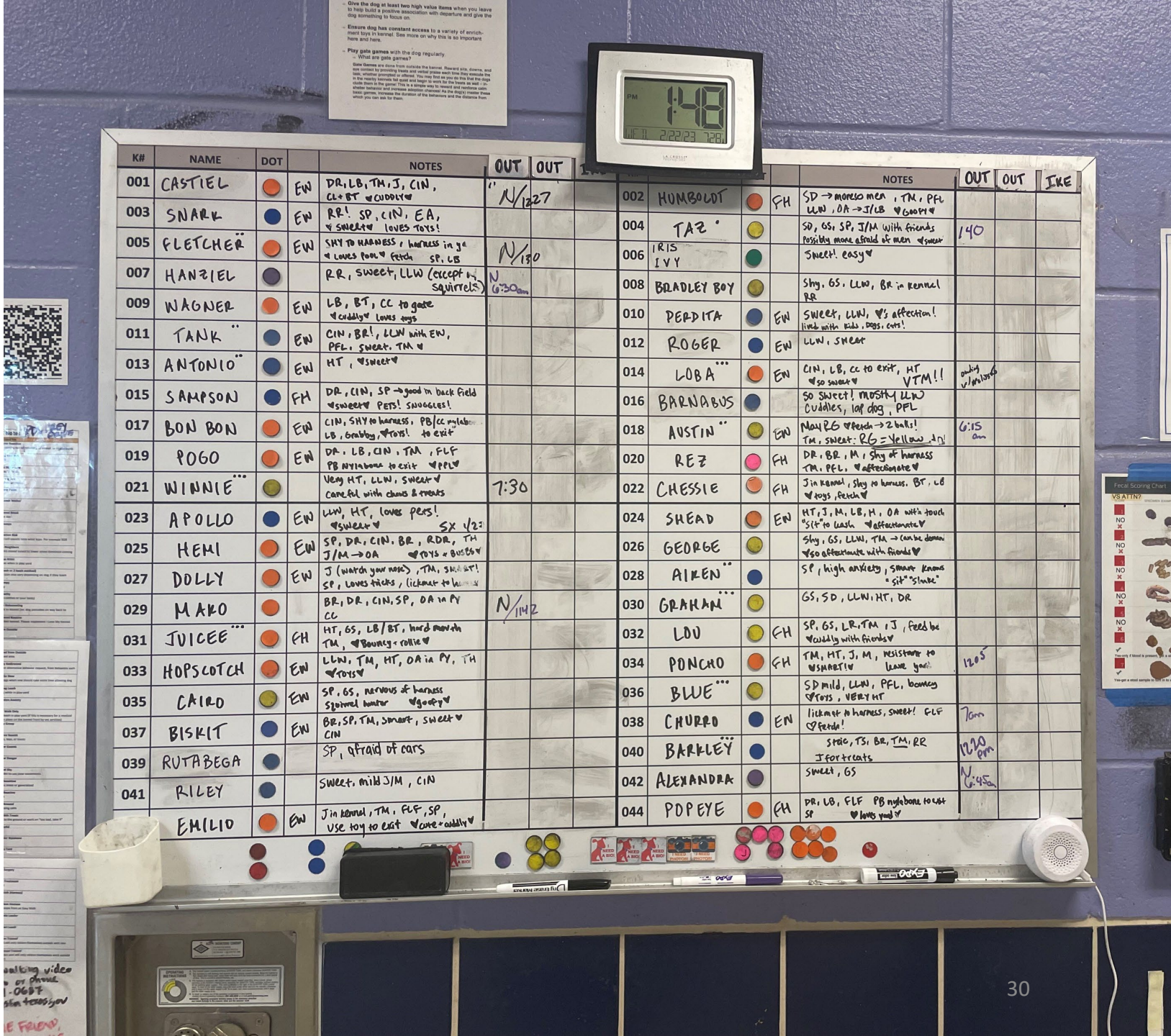
AAC is expected to be everything to everyone but with no support.

Tenure of AAC Directors

Name	Employment Period	Length of Time
Bruce Mills (Interim)	2010 – 2011	No more than 24 months
Felipe Gecic (Interim)	2011	No more than 12 months
Abigail Smith	2011 – 2014	46 months
Chris Nobles (Interim)	2014 – 2015	No more than 24 months
Tawny Hammond	2016 – 2017	No more than 24 months
Lee Ann Shenefiel (Interim)	2017 – 2018	No more than 24 months
Kimberly McNeeley (Interim)	2019	10 months
Don Bland	2019 – Present	Over 48 months

The City has not assigned anybody the responsibility of rebuilding these relationships or addressing common concerns.

Finding 4: AAC does not have complete and accurate data, and not all data is tracked in a way that will allow management to access it in a user-friendly format.



Some data varies significantly: Number of spay and neuter operations conducted at AAC by source:

Fiscal Year (FY)	Raw Data	External AAC Dashboard	External City Dashboard
FY 2018	7,992	4,425	5,621
FY 2019	8,839	6,028	6,723
FY 2020	6,292	4,642	4,979
FY 2021	6,140	4,916	6,118
FY 2022	7,029	6,080	6,199

AAC consistently meets and exceeds its goal live release rate for cats and dogs.

Month and Year	AAC's Reported Live Release Rate (Only Includes Cats and Dogs)	Auditor-Calculated Live Release Rate for All Animals Including Wildlife
February 2022	97.30%	93.29%
March	96.70%	90.68%
April	97.40%	92.58%
May	96.76%	93.22%
June	96.28%	93.05%
July	96.73%	92.66%
August	97.63%	96.13%
September	97.68%	95.18%
October	97.86%	94.84%
November	98.49%	95.28%
December	97.25%	95.49%
January 2023	98.81%	95.00%
February	98.40%	95.57%

Recommendations for City Manager

- Work with Council, AAC, and key stakeholders to establish a policy that balances the City's no-kill goals, the community's intake needs, and the humane treatment of its animals
- Work with an independent third party to facilitate engagement sessions with key shelter stakeholders

Recommendations for the Chief Animal Services Officer:

- Develop a strategic plan for the shelter
- Create a plan to keep both indoor and outdoors areas clean and sanitary
- Identify resources needed to address structural issues and address these issues if possible
- Ensure staff and volunteers are trained and monitored
- Periodically verify data to ensure that it is accurate, complete, and consistent

Discussion

B4
Name: Cheeky-Lou
ID: A873803
CK TCSO
Intake Date: Tue, 1/31/2023 5:47:00PM
Available Date: Sat, 2/4/2023
Sex: Intact Female
Age: 2.05 years
Color: Brown/Black
Weight: 11.75 lbs
Lab Result: Heartworm Negative 2/1/2023
I'M NOT AVAILABLE
STAFF USE
Intake Type: Public Assist
RV Tag: N/A
Chip: 982091065922438
Surgery Date: Currently Intact
Print Date: 2/19/23
AUSTIN ANIMAL CENTER
Cerrarán algunas farmacias CVS

City of Austin
Office of the City Auditor

Audit Report

To meet the Council-mandated live release goal, the City has compromised parts of the Austin Animal Center's mission and failed to provide appropriate care to all of its animals

September 2023

We found the City's animal welfare priorities conflict with each other. Under the current conditions, the Austin Animal Center (AAC) is not able to serve as an open-intake shelter for the community while providing humane care for the animals in its possession and maintaining its goal live release rate. While AAC has consistently met and exceeded its goal live release rate for cats and dogs, these successes have come at the expense of animal care, and AAC has had to close its intake of new animals due to overcrowding. AAC does not have a strategic plan that balances these priorities. This audit also found other issues including strained relationships with partners and data reliability.

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Cover: Auditor site visit, March 2023

Objective

The purpose of this audit was to determine whether the City was effectively managing its animal population and providing animals in its shelter with necessary and humane care. Specifically, we wanted to determine:

- Why the Austin Animal Center has been overcrowded and animal intake has been restricted.
- If animals in the shelter's possession receive necessary care and humane treatment.
- If the City's live release goal of 95% is sustainable at the shelter's current level of support.

Background

Austin Animal Center

The Animal Services Office (ASO) oversees the Austin Animal Center (AAC), which serves lost and surrendered animals from Austin and Travis County. AAC had a Fiscal Year 2023 budget of approximately $17.9 million and 121 full-time employees. In 2022, AAC provided shelter to more than 15,000 animals. In addition to housing animals, AAC provides in-house veterinary care to its animals, community spay and neuter clinics, free microchips and pet tags, and other services.

AAC's goal is to place all adoptable animals in forever homes through adoption, foster care, or partnerships with other rescue groups. Its mission is to provide:

- Public service and a safety net for lost and homeless animals in the community
- Placement services that will assist lost, homeless, or sheltered animals to their homes or find new homes, when necessary, to provide live outcomes for at least 95% of sheltered animals
- Enforce animal regulations and assist the public with animal-related concerns
- Animal services to the public to educate and prevent animal homelessness and promote humane, compassionate treatment of animals and responsible pet ownership

AAC prides itself on being the largest "no-kill" shelter in the country. This began in 2010 when the City Council voted to make Austin a no-kill city and set a goal live release rate of at least 90%. AAC first met this goal for cats and dogs in 2011, and it has met or exceeded it ever since. In 2019,

Council raised the goal live release rate to 95% or greater. Since then, AAC has met or exceeded this goal, as well. While AAC has been able to maintain a high live release rate, it has been consistently at or beyond capacity and has faced criticism from community members and the media.

About this audit

In June 2022, the City Council asked our office to conduct an audit of the Austin Animal Center that looked at the causes of kennel space shortages, among other concerns. This resolution asked us to hire an external animal sheltering expert to help with our work. We hired Tim Crum with the National Center for Animal Shelter Evaluations. Mr. Crum produced an independent analysis of the shelter that is available on our website.

To understand the perspectives of key stakeholders, we solicited feedback related to AAC in two in-person community outreach events, one virtual event, and through an online survey. In total, approximately 100 people attended the events and over 400 people responded to our survey.

What We Found

Summary

We found the City's animal welfare priorities conflict with each other. Under the current conditions, the Austin Animal Center (AAC) is not able to serve as an open-intake shelter for the community while providing humane care for the animals in its possession and maintaining its goal live release rate. While AAC has consistently met and exceeded its goal live release rate for cats and dogs, these successes have come at the expense of animal care, and AAC has had to close its intake of new animals due to overcrowding. AAC does not have a strategic plan that balances these priorities. This audit also found other issues including strained relationships with partners and data reliability.

As a part of this audit, we hired an external expert to conduct an independent evaluation of the shelter. The expert's report is available to read and download on our website.

Finding 1

The City of Austin's animal welfare priorities conflict with each other, contributing to AAC's inability to achieve stated goals. Serving as an open-intake shelter for the community, providing humane care to the animals in its possession, and maintaining a live release rate of 95% do not appear to be achievable simultaneously given animal populations and the effectiveness of current programs.

Exhibit 1: AAC closed animal intake in June 2023

Source: Auditor site visit, July 2023

AAC has a goal of caring for at least 16,000 animals each year, ensuring that they receive humane and compassionate care while at the shelter, and making sure that at least 95% of these animals leave the shelter alive. AAC does not have a strategy or clear direction for how to operate when it is unable to meet all these goals. Given current animal populations and program effectiveness, these goals do not all appear to be achievable simultaneously. Currently, AAC is only achieving its live outcome goal.

All three of these goals are related. As detailed in Finding 2, AAC's ability to care for its animals is directly tied to the number of animals it has. When there are fewer animals at the shelter, each animal can have more space and receive more time and attention from staff. When the shelter is operating beyond its capacity, as is currently the case, not all animals receive sufficient care. The Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters published by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians state, "compromising the welfare of animals and personnel is not an acceptable strategy for meeting the increased care demands of unpredicted intakes." AAC could control the number of animals in its care by restricting its intake of new animals or by increasing the number of animals that exit the shelter's care.

However, there are challenges with restricting animal intake and/or increasing the number of animals that exit the shelter. When AAC limits its intake, residents who find stray animals or no longer can or want to care for their pet are unable to rely on the shelter to take them. This may create hardship for animals and residents. For example, strays and animals experiencing homelessness could be exposed to dangerous weather, cars, predators, and other threats. Likewise, stray and homeless animals could themselves pose a public health risk to other animals and to people.

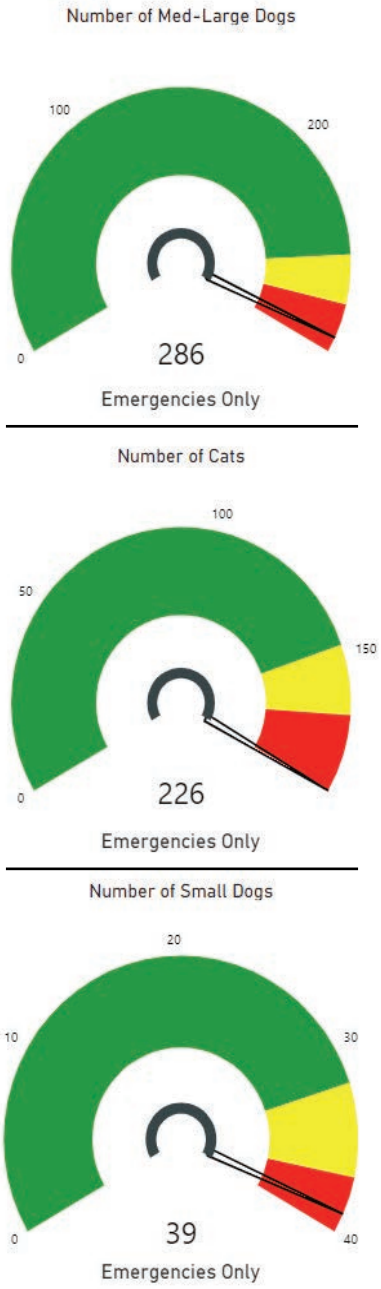
Throughout this audit, AAC's intake of new animals has either been closed or restricted. When intake is closed, AAC will only take animals that are in extreme need, including if their owner is imprisoned or evicted and cannot house them. When intake is restricted, AAC will accept animals for other reasons, but staff informed us that residents were generally asked to wait 4 to 6 weeks before AAC could take their animal.

Broadly, there are only five ways for an animal to leave the shelter. An animal can:

- Be returned to its owner, if it had one.
- Be adopted into a forever home.
- Be transferred to a partner shelter or rescue organization.
- Be temporarily placed in a foster home.
- Die, either by natural causes like sickness, injury, or age, or by euthanasia.

Staff and community members would like to see AAC increase the number of animals that leave the shelter for temporary and permanent homes and expressed a desire to make sure AAC did not euthanize safe and healthy animals. However, many community members expressed concern

Exhibit 2: AAC limited intakes to emergencies only in mid-August 2023



Source: https://www.austintexas.gov/lost-found-pets, August 16, 2023

that keeping animals in the shelter indefinitely was cruel and suggested euthanasia may be a more humane alternative.

We analyzed the number of dogs in AAC's possession as of December 2022 and found that on average, AAC's dogs had been at the shelter for almost three months and in foster care for almost four months. 20 dogs had been in the shelter's possession for over a year including 9 at the shelter. We hired an external expert to do an independent evaluation of the shelter. The expert identified physical and mental problems associated with prolonged lengths of stay in a shelter. During his site visits, the expert observed multiple dogs at the shelter showing negative behaviors related to prolonged shelter stays.

Additionally, some staff and community members expressed concern that AAC was allowing dangerous animals that should be euthanized to be adopted to maintain its high live release rate. We reviewed AAC's records and found that AAC has consistently adopted and transferred dogs with "moderate" and "severe" bite histories, as seen in Exhibit 3. We did not review the circumstances of each bite and cannot say whether these dogs may pose an elevated risk to their community compared to dogs without bite histories.

Exhibit 3: AAC regularly adopts and transfers animals with moderate and severe bite histories

		Bite History Category	
Fiscal Year	**Animal Outcome**	**Moderate**	**Severe**
2019	**Adopted**	47	12
	Transferred	26	3
2020	**Adopted**	51	7
	Transferred	17	1
2021	**Adopted**	65	4
	Transferred	27	0
2022	**Adopted**	54	10
	Transferred	20	6
2023, Quarters 1 and 2	**Adopted**	102	22
	Transferred	3	2
Five-Year Totals		412	67

Source: Auditor analysis, May 2023

One of the key causes of these issues is that AAC does not have a plan to balance the needs of its animals with the needs of the community. While best practices recommend that organizations develop a strategic plan to guide their activities, AAC does not have one. Further, City leadership has not given AAC guidance on how they should prioritize their goals in the absence of a strategic plan.

Finding 2

AAC is not finding enough homes for its animals and is overcrowded. As a result, AAC has more animals in its care than it can humanely support and has made compromises that impact animal care and pose a safety risk to the community.

Any shelter's ability to care for its animals is directly related to the number of animals it has. The smaller the number of animals, the more time, attention, and space each animal can have. As the number of animals in the shelter increases, the amount of time, attention, and space each animal can have goes down. When a shelter takes on more animals than it has the capacity to care for, it may not be able to provide for all its animals' needs, and some animals may receive inhumane or uncompassionate care.

Exhibit 4: When more animals enter a shelter than leave, care suffers

Source: Auditor analysis, August 2023

Operating beyond an organization's capacity of care is an unacceptable practice.

-Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters

AAC has been operating beyond its capacity for more than a year. A review of AAC's available space from January through mid-February 2023 showed the shelter was operating above its capacity by 18 to 59 animals per day. This is because AAC's programs to move animals out of the shelter and into temporary and forever homes are not working effectively.

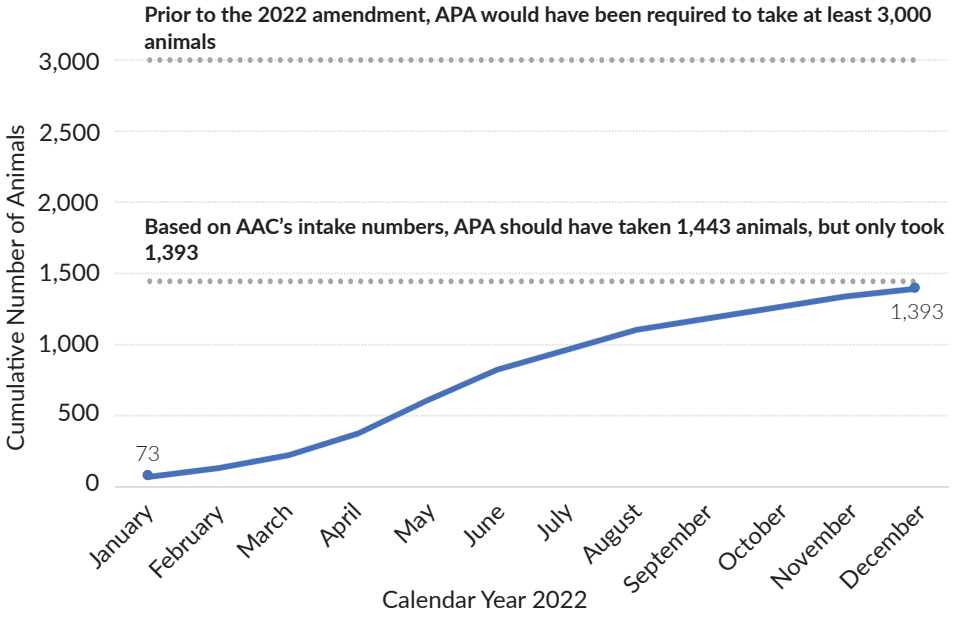
Animals leave the shelter by being returned to their owner, if they had one, by being adopted, by getting fostered, or by getting transferred to a partner organization. Animals that do not leave through one of these means, stay at the shelter. AAC has various programs to find temporary and forever homes for its animals, each with its own challenges.

AAC has a live release goal of 95% or greater and is committed to finding forever homes for all its animals. AAC has consistently met or exceeded this goal for cats and dogs. In 2022, it reported a live release rate of 97.3%. However, to continue meeting this goal while providing the intake services the community expects, AAC's animal placement programs must be effective. Currently, these programs are not meeting their goals.

In fiscal year 2022, AAC missed its goal for the numbers of adoptions and animals returned to owner, and it did not have a performance measure for the number of animals it would place in foster care. Further, we heard concerns from multiple community members who said they contacted AAC to adopt or foster an animal, but never heard back. Additionally, we found that AAC did not meet its goal for the number of animals transferred to partner organizations over the past several years. For example, AAC had a fiscal year 2022 goal of transferring 4,500 animals to its partners, but only reported transferring around 2,750.

Austin Pets Alive (APA) is AAC's largest transfer partner. In spring 2022, the City Council amended the City's agreement with APA and lowered the number of animals it was required to take each year from a minimum of 3,000 animals to 12% of AAC's previous year's intake. Under the amended agreement, for 2022 and 2023, APA is expected to take less than half of the number of animals it would have under the previous agreement. In 2022, APA did not meet its new, lower goal, as seen in Exhibit 5.

Exhibit 5: In 2022, the City amended its agreement with APA, lowering the number of animals AAC would transfer to APA each year



Source: Auditor analysis of APA's monthly reports, August 2023

Further, under the amended agreement, APA was required to take five or more "behaviorally challenged large dogs" each month, in addition to certain other animals. Based on reports from both organizations, APA did not always meet this requirement, even though the majority of AAC's dogs are classified as medium and large.

Until AAC improves its placement programs, it will struggle to meet the needs of its animals and the community. In a December 2021 press release, AAC stated that its "ideal capacity is around 350 animals." In August 2023, AAC was housing over 320 dogs, most of which were classified as medium or large, and 220 cats. To keep the situation from worsening, AAC closed its intake of new animals in June 2023.

Additionally, AAC has had to compromise its animal care. For example, AAC is housing animals in temporary crates and in spaces where animals were not intended to be housed. These enclosures are too small for its animals' comfort and needs, add to the stress animals experience at the shelter, and can contribute to the spread of disease.

Over multiple site visits of the shelter, we found AAC was housing animals in temporary, "pop-up," crates in AAC's multimedia room, as well as in other parts of the shelter. According to Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, "the use of cages or crates intended for short-term, temporary confinement or travel is… unacceptable as primary enclosures."

The Guidelines state that an animal's primary enclosure must allow each animal to easily sit, stand, stretch, turn, and so forth. We hired an external expert to conduct an independent evaluation of the shelter. The external expert also observed that some of the animals were too big for their pop-up crates and did not have enough space to move comfortably.

Compromising the welfare of animals and personnel is not an acceptable strategy for meeting the increased care demands of unpredicted intakes.

-Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters

Exhibit 6: Dog with too little space in a pop-up crate

Source: Auditor site visit, March 2023

Even when animals were placed in kennels that were built to house animals for longer periods of time, many of these spaces were used in ways that did not meet recommended living standards. For example, the Guidelines state that enclosures "must allow animals to sit, sleep, and eat away from areas of their enclosures where they defecate and urinate." When two or more animals are housed together, the Guidelines state that enclosures must allow animals to "maintain distance from roommates when they choose to do so." We found that AAC was housing small dogs in kennels originally intended for cats. In some instances, two or three dogs were housed in one kennel. As seen in Exhibit 7, these animals did not have the necessary space to stay comfortable and healthy.

The Guidelines note that wire enclosures, like the pop-up crates in AAC's multimedia room, "increase the risk of disease transmission, animal stress, and injury." While AAC has placed cardboard between these crates to minimize contact between animals, it may not prevent the spread of disease and may not be visually appealing to potential adopters. Additionally, as noted by the external expert, pop-up crates require more of staff's limited time to clean and sanitize than do permanent enclosures.

Adding to the challenge, the external expert found that AAC has too many animals for its current level of staffing. The expert found that AAC does not always have enough staff to provide the minimum amount of time recommended by the National Animal Control Association and the Humane Society of the United States for feeding and cleaning its animals

each day. When staff are asked to do more than they can, some may look for shortcuts. The expert observed staff cleaning enclosures in a way that could result in some animals getting sprayed with chemical cleaners and noted that some staff were moving too quickly for the cleaning solutions to be effective. He also observed staff working without proper protective gear like gloves and aprons in quarantine areas, which could result in the transmission of disease to staff and other animals.

Part of AAC's mission is to "promote humane, compassionate treatment of animals and responsible pet ownership," but it is failing to do so for all the animals in its care.

Exhibit 7: Three dogs without enough kennel space

Source: Auditor site visit, March 2023

Exhibit 8: Dogs in pop-up crates in AAC's loading dock in November 2022

Source: Auditor site visit, November 2022

More generally, the expert noted some issues with the shelter's physical condition that could be addressed with sufficient staff and direction. These issues included:

- Animal waste on the ground
- Unsanitary air vents and fans
- Used gloves on the ground
- Algae in outdoor animal pools
- Spilled food that had attracted gnats and ants
- General disorganization in storage areas

Exhibit 9: Algae in an AAC animal pool

Source: External expert's evaluation, July 2023

The expert also noted several structural issues with the shelter that may not be related to the number of animals at the shelter or any AAC program but could still impact animal health and wellbeing. These issues included:

- During a site visit in July 2023, surface temperatures in many kennels exceeded the recommended temperature range of 60°F - 80°F and included temperatures over 100°F. The surface temperature on one of the shelter's artificial play lawns was 176°F and required staff to place towels on the ground so animals did not have to step directly on the artificial lawn.
- Inadequate drainage for outdoor kennels
- Damaged baseboards that had accumulated animal waste
- Inadequate sound buffering

In contrast to these problems, the expert noted that AAC's Veterinary Service team operated in an efficient manner and met or exceeded municipal care standards.

Finding 3

Relationships between key stakeholders and within AAC are strained. This has had a negative impact on AAC's ability to coordinate effectively with key stakeholders, as well as in the working conditions and operations in the shelter.

AAC cannot achieve its mission without support from the community and partner organizations. Community members volunteer at the shelter for a variety of tasks that include cleaning animal enclosures, walking dogs, and socializing AAC's animals. Community members also serve to foster animals, which removes them from the shelter until a forever home can be found.

Similarly, AAC transfers animals to partner organizations who take on the responsibility of sheltering animals, caring for them, and finding them forever homes. AAC's website lists over 100 active partner organizations as of February 2023. Austin Pets Alive (APA) is AAC's biggest partner. Its shelter location at Town Lake Center is located on City-owned property. As a part of its agreement with the City, APA accepts a certain number of transfers from the City each year. These transfers include neonatal kittens and puppies that have contracted parvovirus, neither of which AAC is equipped to handle.

In addition to these relationships, AAC works with the City's Animal Advisory Commission. Commission members are appointed by members of the Austin City Council and the Travis County Commissioners Court. Among the Commission's responsibilities are advising the City Council on

animal welfare policies and promoting collaboration between the City and external partners.

Despite the importance of these relationships, we repeatedly heard concern that AAC's relationships with its partners were strained. AAC management said they felt attacked by Commissioners and community members at Animal Advisory Commission meetings and did not feel supported by City leadership. Additionally, AAC leaders expressed concern that they are often challenged by community members and City leadership when they follow their policies to euthanize animals for medical and behavioral reasons.

Creating a no-kill community or a no-kill state requires collaboration among organizations and individuals committed to achieving a common goal.

-Best Friends Animal Society

Similarly, several community members shared their opinion that AAC leadership was not trustworthy and that they were not committed to the no-kill movement. This opinion was echoed by the Animal Advisory Commission. In June 2022, the Commission passed a Vote of No Confidence in AAC's leadership. The resolution stated, "the Commission does not have confidence that Austin's Chief Animal Services Officer has or will demonstrate the ability to achieve and sustain the Council-mandated goals of Austin's No-Kill Policy…"

We found AAC has maintained high live release rates for years and does not euthanize for space. Our external expert reviewed AAC's euthanasia policies and found them "in line with best practices for the animal sheltering industry" and "perhaps the best policy we have encountered in all of our evaluations."

Since 2010, AAC has had 8 permanent and interim directors. Of those, only the current director has served for more than 4 years.

We spoke with current and former AAC directors who shared personal and traumatic attacks they received while working for the shelter. They said they were called names like "murderer," told to "die in the street," and threatened. One person shared an experience in which they were followed home after work and had to call the police. One of them expressed concern that their decisions were questioned by Council members, in addition to the general public. As noted in the expert's report, since 2010, when Council voted to make Austin a no-kill city, AAC has had eight interim and permanent directors. Of those, only the current director has stayed in the role for over four years.

Within AAC, we heard concerns from multiple employees about poor communication between staff and management, as well as between volunteers and management. Several staff said they did not feel like management listened to their concerns, and multiple staff said they feared retaliation. Likewise, multiple community members said they felt that AAC's management did not listen to concerns and suggestions from volunteers, and they believed that management had retaliated against some volunteers by "firing" them. In his report, the external expert noted that he did not see management directly supervise or check in on staff.

While relationships have been strained since before the Commission's Vote of No Confidence, the City has not assigned anybody the responsibility of rebuilding these relationships or addressing common concerns. Multiple people we spoke with said that AAC management does not have regular and productive communication with its partners and key stakeholders.

One specific challenge staff and community members noted is a different understanding of what it means to be a no-kill shelter between AAC and key stakeholders. According to people we spoke with, certain members of the community believe that AAC's live release rate could be higher if AAC leadership were willing to do more to save each animal's life.

Strained relationships between AAC and the community have impeded AAC's ability to create a common vision with its partners and community stakeholders for how the shelter can best serve its animals and the City's residents. They have also contributed to a sense of mistrust between staff, management, volunteers, and community members, and AAC's staff and management have reported low morale.

Finding 4

AAC does not have complete and accurate data, and not all data is tracked in a way that will allow management to access it in a user-friendly format. As a result, AAC may not be making informed decisions and may be presenting inaccurate information to the public.

AAC management, City leadership, and the public rely on data to determine if AAC is meeting its goals, effectively serving residents, caring for its animals, and whether any operational or policy changes are necessary. However, we found that AAC's data was often incomplete and inaccurate.

For example, AAC has a Council-mandated goal of maintaining a 95% live release rate or greater. AAC consistently meets this goal for cats and dogs. However, according to the City Code, this number "must be calculated by dividing the number of animals released alive during the reporting period by the number of animals with final dispositions during the same period." When calculated for all animals between February 2022 and February 2023, AAC's rate fell below its 95% goal in over half of the months we looked at, as seen in Exhibit 10.

Exhibit 10: AAC consistently hit its 95% live release goal for cats and dogs, but falls short when including other animals like wildlife

Month and Year	AAC's Reported Live Release Rate (Only Includes Cats and Dogs)	Auditor-Calculated Live Release Rate for All Animals Including Wildlife
February 2022	97.30%	93.29%
March	96.70%	90.68%
April	97.40%	92.58%
May	96.76%	93.22%
June	96.28%	93.05%
July	96.73%	92.66%
August	97.63%	96.13%
September	97.68%	95.18%
October	97.86%	94.84%
November	98.49%	95.28%
December	97.25%	95.49%
January 2023	98.81%	95.00%
February	98.40%	95.57%

Source: Auditor analysis, August 2023

Exhibit 11: AAC accepts animals of all species and breeds, including cats, dogs, rabbits, reptiles, livestock, wildlife, and chickens

Source: Auditor site visit, February 2023

Additionally, there were minor differences between the live release rates for cats and dogs presented in AAC's monthly reports and the rates on its public dashboard online. We calculated the number for cats and dogs and came up with slightly different rates, as well, though always above AAC's 95% goal.

We also reviewed AAC's spay and neuter numbers. Running an effective spay and neuter program is an important part of AAC's no-kill plan. Over the past five years, AAC has had a goal of spaying and neutering between 6,000 and 6,800 animals per year. AAC posts the number of spays and neuters it does each year in multiple places, including the City's performance measure tracking system and AAC's public-facing dashboard. Over a five-year period, none of AAC's reported yearly spay and neuter numbers matched, as seen in Exhibit 12. Often, the numbers in one location showed that AAC met its yearly goal while the numbers in a different location showed it did not.

Exhibit 12: The number of spay and neuter operations conducted at AAC varied dramatically depending on the source

Fiscal Year	Raw AAC Data	Internal AAC Dashboard	Citywide Performance Website	External AAC Dashboard
2018	7,992	232	5,621	4,425
2019	8,839	393	6,723	6,028
2020	6,292	705	4,979	4,642
2021	6,140	59	6,118	4,916
2022	7,029	4,139	6,199	6,080

Source: Auditor analysis, July 2023

In other situations, we found that AAC was not consistently tracking useful information. For example, AAC uses a magnetic board that is updated each day to track animal enrichment activities. As a result, we were unable to determine whether animals were consistently receiving walks, opportunities for play and socialization, and treats. Likewise, AAC does not track the appointment information for residents wishing to surrender an animal to the shelter in a way that can be easily analyzed. As a result, we were unable to determine the timeliness of the intake process.

There appear to be multiple reasons for these issues, including:

- AAC does not have dedicated personnel for data management and analysis. Instead, AAC relies on Austin Public Health staff for many of these services.
- AAC staff prioritize meeting the immediate needs of AAC's animals over data collection and management.
- AAC management does not provide adequate oversight for data collection and reporting.
- AAC's current software may not be convenient or user-friendly for some data-related tasks.

- Key stakeholders do not have a clear understanding of some definitions, such as which animals should be included in AAC's live release rate calculation.

Without complete and accurate data, City leadership and AAC management may not be able to determine which of AAC's programs are working effectively and where it can best improve its operations. Additionally, animals may suffer, because AAC staff and volunteers cannot reliably tell which animals are most in need of attention and care. Lastly, the public may lose confidence in AAC when it reports conflicting and inaccurate information.

Recommendations

1 **To ensure AAC knows what to do if its animal welfare priorities conflict, the City Manager should work with Council, AAC, and key stakeholders to establish a policy that balances the City's no-kill goals, the community's intake needs, and the humane treatment of its animals. This policy should be adaptable to changing conditions and resources in the shelter and should be clearly communicated to all stakeholders.**

Management Response: Management agrees with the proposed recommendation in addition to balancing these goals with state law and industry standards.

Proposed Implementation Plan: The City Manager's Office (CMO) will work with the Council, AAC, and key stakeholders to establish a policy that balances the City's no-kill goals, the community intake needs, and the humane treatment of its animals.

Proposed Implementation Date: Fall 2024

2 **To ensure AAC has adequate guidance to manage the operations of the shelter, the Chief Animal Services Officer should work with stakeholders to develop, implement, and monitor a strategic plan. At a minimum the plan should:**

a. Address how the shelter should balance its mission to serve as a safety net for lost and homeless animals while maintaining its live release rate goal given current capacity and partnerships.

b. Identify resources needed to achieve and sustain its mission.

c. Be reviewed and approved by City leadership, including City management and City Council.

Management Response: Management agrees with the proposed recommendation and supports updating the existing No Kill Implementation Plan or producing a new strategic plan that considers the current needs, operations, and constraints of sheltering.

Proposed Implementation Plan: The development of this plan would occur after the implementation of recommendation #1 and shelter priorities are clarified for ASO. ASO management will create a core team of staff to begin drafting a plan. After internal review, this will be shared with stakeholders for feedback and recommendations. After all feedback is taken into consideration the plan would seek approval from the City Manager and then the City Council. Additional information can be found in the attached document.

Proposed Implementation Date: Winter 2024

Recommendations Continued

3 **To ensure the health and welfare of animals and shelter staff is protected and to minimize the risk of infectious diseases in the shelter, the Chief Animal Services Officer should:**

a. Establish, implement, and monitor a sanitary plan for the shelter including animal kennels, common-use areas, and outdoor spaces.

b. Develop, implement, and monitor a process for cleaning all areas of the shelter. The process should minimize the risk of transmission of infectious diseases.

c. Identify resources needed to address structural issues noted in this report, and address these issues if possible.

Management Response: Management agrees with the recommendation but would like to clarify that industry-standard cleaning protocols and policies are currently in place. However, when in-shelter animal counts exceed capacity of care, additional resources are necessary. The establishment of policies in recommendation #1 will help direct staff in how to balance animal care when in-shelter animal counts exceed capacity of care.

Proposed Implementation Plan: While cleaning protocols and policies currently are in established in accordance with guidance from the Veterinary Services team, ASO will review them for necessary changes. In addition, ASO will ensure staff will check on the areas being cleaned and do random checks while the area is being cleaned. In the Fiscal Year 2024 adopted budget, ASO received funding for four additional Animal Care staff and will begin the recruitment process as soon as those positions become available.

ASO will also work with the Building Services Department (BSD) to resolve facility concerns outlined in the consultant's report. Additional information can be found in the attached document.

Proposed Implementation Date: Spring 2024

4 **To ensure AAC programs operate effectively, the Chief Animal Services Officer should ensure staff and volunteers are trained and monitored.**

Management Response: Management agrees with the recommendation.

Proposed Implementation Plan: ASO will evaluate current staff and volunteer training, explore potential revisions, and assess feasibility of internal and external training opportunities. Additional information can be found in the attached document.

Proposed Implementation Date: Spring 2024

Recommendations Continued

5 In order to address strained relationships and build trust among the shelter's stakeholders, the City Manager should:

a. Work with an independent third party to facilitate engagement sessions with key shelter stakeholders. Such engagement should ensure that key interests and concerns are part of the dialogue or consultation.

b. Implement an approach for building and maintaining trust across the shelter's internal and external stakeholders. At a minimum, this approach should ensure:

i. Periodic stakeholder engagements on shelter operations and any desired enhancements

ii. Responsibilities of the key stakeholders are clearly identified and communicated to all parties

Management Response: Management agrees with the recommendation.

Proposed Implementation Plan: The City Manager's Office will work with an independent third party to address strained relationships and build trust among the shelter's stakeholders.

Proposed Implementation Date: Fall 2024

6 The Animal Services Officer should periodically verify data to ensure that it is accurate, complete, and consistent across different systems.

Management Response: Management agrees with the recommendation.

Proposed Implementation Plan: The Animal Services Office has utilized Austin Public Health for technology support due to lack of ASO staffing resources. During the budget development process for fiscal year 2024, ASO was allocated an IT position to support the department. ASO will begin recruitment for the position.

ASO will continue to work with CTM to evaluate other software opportunities that will improve data and the ease and use of the software necessary to manage the entire shelter. ASO will implement a process to verify data to ensure it is accurate, complete, and consistent across different systems.

Proposed Implementation Date: Spring 2024

Management Response

MEMORANDUM

TO: Office of the City Auditor

FROM: Don Bland, CAWA, Chief Animal Services Officer

DATE: September 25, 2023

SUBJECT: **Audit on Animal Services**

This memo is to provide additional information regarding Management's response to the Audit on the Animal Services Office (ASO).

The most recent strategic plan is the No Kill Implementation Plan which was adopted in 2010 to support ASO reaching a 90% live outcome rate (revised to 95% in 2019). As ASO has since maintained a 97% live-outcome rate for dogs and cats, and adoption and transfer rates have declined nationally and locally, a new strategic plan is warranted. The plan will guide the shelter in balancing open intake while maintaining a specified live release rate.

ASO utilizes the established cleaning protocols daily. During times of disease outbreak, additional steps are taken to ensure animals receive proper care. However, finding space for isolation is difficult when the shelter operates over capacity. Building Services Department (BSD) provides daily maintenance including mowing services to all areas of the facility that do not house animals and contracts with a vendor to regularly clean AC vents and replace filters. ASO will establish a schedule to ensure cleaning protocols are updated, including the work done by our vendors.

ASO will ensure staff development occurs on a regular calendar basis. In addition, ASO will work with the Human Resources Director to strategize ways to identify and maximize training opportunities. Currently, volunteers undergo an onboarding process where they are given guidelines, training, and a volunteer handbook. Volunteers working directly with animals must complete a training focused on safety protocols. All volunteers are monitored by volunteer coordinators. ASO will explore options for enhancing the training and monitoring process for both volunteers and staff.

ASO has been working with SNAP Management to assist with strategic and operational goals that include examining internal and external communications and strengthening the office. Additionally, SNAP Management is coordinating a retreat in November for ASO and the Animal Advisory Commission to assist in improving relationships. Stakeholder relationships and support are critical to better support the community's animal service needs. ASO supports working to improve relationships.

Should additional information be needed, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

cc: Jesús Garza, Interim City Manager
Stephanie Hayden-Howard, Assistant City Manager

Scope

The scope of this audit included the Austin Animal Center's animal intake, animal care, and placement programs.

Methodology

To complete this audit, we performed the following steps:

- Conducted two in-person community engagement sessions and one virtual session
- Conducted a community engagement survey
- Conducted an employee engagement session
- Conducted multiple announced and unannounced on-site observations
- Interviewed current and former AAC staff and management, volunteers, and stakeholders
- Reviewed best practices related to animal care
- Analyzed AAC's policies and procedures
- Collected and analyzed data related to AAC's mission and operations
- Reviewed contracts and agreements between AAC and key partners
- Reviewed publicly available data provided by AAC partners
- Solicited and hired an external animal sheltering expert who produced an independent evaluation

Audit Standards

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

The Office of the City Auditor was created by the Austin City Charter as an independent office reporting to City Council to help establish accountability and improve City services. We conduct performance audits to review aspects of a City service or program and provide recommendations for improvement.

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