



# Length of Stay Manual

## **Introduction**

The guiding principle in animal sheltering is providing for the welfare of the animals housed within the shelter. In many organizations, balancing animal welfare science and physical space limitations can present significant lifesaving challenges. As proven lifesaving strategies and shelter medicine continue to evolve, so should shelters' procedures, programs and protocols in pursuit of providing humane care for the animals.

When measuring your shelter's proficiency in these lifesaving areas, it is critical to analyze the average length of stay (LOS) for animals. Length of stay is the amount of time the animal is in the shelter. It is measured from the time of the animal's intake to the time of the animal's outcome. LOS affects the overall health of the entire shelter population. These analytics are usually broken down by species to allow a more accurate depiction of where lifesaving gaps could be improved. In addition, by identifying animals with a longer LOS, you can allocate available resources to them to get them out of the shelter.

The idea behind managing LOS is that each animal is on the road to an outcome from the very beginning, and to make that outcome positive, each step should be anticipated, scheduled and completed on time. Capacity needs and limits (such as staffing, housing and other resources) can be evaluated for each individual pathway, helping to target priorities or identify problems.

When length of stay is efficiently managed, there will be fewer animals in the shelter overall. The animals who are in the shelter will have less risk of disease and will experience less stress from overcrowding. The staff will also benefit from a reduced workload.

## **Animal flow**

The term "animal flow" refers to the pathway options available to each animal from shelter intake to outcome. By design, shelters were never meant to house animals for the long term, and the moment an animal enters a shelter, the goal should be to move him/her through that sheltering system toward a live outcome as soon as possible.

Factors contributing to shelter animal flow include isolation, quarantine and expanded treatment capabilities for intensive medical cases; management of longer-stay animals or those with behavior challenges; enrichment; and management of the most medically vulnerable animals (the very young and the old).

Open intake shelters are over capacity when they are less than 100% full. Effective management of animal flow is essential to being able to provide adequate housing for the number of animals that will be received on any given day. Some options to help increase a positive animal flow in shelters are described below.

## Daily rounds

Daily rounds include medical and behavioral monitoring, logistical planning, and assessment and modification of each animal's pathway. Daily shelter rounds are performed to ensure that each animal, each day, receives the care and attention needed to move safely and efficiently through the shelter.

The University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Veterinary Medicine [recommends](#) that at least once a week, daily rounds should include the shelter manager, veterinarian and director (or equivalent positions) working together.

A helpful strategy is to always include two senior staff members and, when available, a staff member involved in the daily care of the animals. With this many different eyes and ears from the organization included in daily rounds, the entire team can be alerted when an individual animal is starting to succumb to shelter stress. A plan for that animal can then be incorporated to increase enrichment and marketing to push for a positive outcome.

Some of the benefits of having daily rounds are:

- A streamlined, efficient decision-making process with clearly defined roles in outcome planning for each animal
- Decreased LOS due to proactive planning and scheduling for each animal, which limits crowding, disease prevalence and cost, and improves animal welfare
- Decreased daily population in the shelter due to efficient animal flow, allowing staff time for individual animal care, monitoring and marketing
- Increased clarity among staff, volunteers and rescue partners about how decisions are made for each animal's outcome

## Fast-tracking

Fast-tracking involves bypassing certain procedures that delay the process of an animal entering the adoption program, such as extensive behavioral assessments. Fast-tracking not only creates more space in the shelter, it frees up resources and time for shelter staff and volunteers to focus on the animals who are not as easily placed. The animals labeled "fast-tracked" should get priority for immediate surgery and get moved up to the adoption floor first, regardless of what other animals are waiting.

It is a good idea to look for these groups of animals when considering fast-tracking in your shelter:

- High-appeal animals who are expected to be adopted within seven days on the adoption floor
- Kittens, puppies and young, friendly, small dogs

## Open selection

The purpose of this policy is to reduce LOS for the shelter population by limiting crowding in the shelter and streamlining animal flow to live outcomes. The definition of open selection as described here is to allow the public to view and place an adoption hold on an animal prior to expiration of that animal's stray hold.

Animals are individually evaluated by shelter staff and placed into public viewing kennels with a distinctive "stray hold" signage after an intake assessment. Prospective adopters can place an adoption hold on the animal (up to two holds can be placed on each animal) and finalize their adoption if the animal is not reclaimed before expiration of the required stray hold period.

### **Data tracking**

Learning to identify the gaps in your shelter's data will help you to place your resources for the animals most at risk. Strategic plans, resource allocation and lifesaving programs all benefit from a LOS data-driven approach.

Shelters should track LOS by animal intake total and broken down by species for stray, seized, surrendered by owner or otherwise. Shelters should also track and break down all final disposition of animals, first by total and by species, then by including returned to owner, adopted, transferred to another agency, returned to field (trap-neuter-return), euthanized at the owner's request, and euthanized for all other reasons.

For the purposes of planning and analysis, it can also be helpful to break LOS down into separate components (age, size, color) and target programs toward reducing each component, such as pre-intake (e.g., awaiting an appointment for admission), pre-adoption (e.g., stray hold and quarantines), and actively moving toward adoption or rescue.

The more detailed the data, the more accurately programs can be targeted to needs, evaluated for efficiency and refined.

### **Behavior assessments and evaluations**

Truly understanding how you are assessing the behavior needs of animals coming into your agency will give you insight into how you are determining their needs and pathways.

Because there are myriad stress factors in a shelter, formal behavioral tests are often not a reliable source of accurate information. Animals' behavior can change in stressful environments, so we recommend daily observations from staff, volunteers and foster caregivers as the primary method of behavior assessment. It is also important to make sure information from animals' previous owners and finders is recorded. Documenting all behavioral information is necessary to having a clear understanding of whether an animal is thriving or declining, and then being able to adjust pathways accordingly.

## **Enrichment**

Enrichment both in and out of the kennel helps shelter animals relieve stress and improves their overall health and behavior, which in turn will decrease their LOS at the shelter. An animal who is not only physically stimulated but mentally stimulated is more likely to have lower stress levels. Less stressed animals often present well to adopters and consequently may be adopted more quickly.

The animals' first 24 to 48 hours in a shelter are crucial for helping them to adjust to their new environment and feel some level of comfort. Enrichment should begin for each animal upon entry to the shelter and continue throughout their stay. This can be achieved by incorporating physical and mental stimulation into their day, and by maintaining some level of familiarity for them. Even during cleaning, easy enrichment practices can be provided for shelter animals, with little or no extra time required from staff or volunteers.

## **Foster care**

LOS can be decreased by implementing a robust foster program that allows all segments of the animal population to be fostered, including those who have medical and/or behavior concerns. The most vulnerable animals (pregnant moms, animals with poor kennel presentation, medical cases, seniors, very young kittens and puppies) should spend as little time as possible in the shelter to decrease stress and disease. Foster families should also be empowered to adopt their foster animals directly into new homes, rather than returning them to the shelter for adoption.

While some animals are in definite need of fostering, all animals in the shelter should be looked at as potential foster candidates. Building and advertising a robust foster program not only helps decrease LOS, it improves the animals' welfare.

## **Marketing**

You can decrease LOS by identifying your organization's most at-risk animals and starting to market them right away. Organizations can use a variety of methods to promote longer-stay animals. Here are some suggestions:

- Put "Pet of the Week" spots, featuring one or more animals, on television, radio and in print.
- Do special promotions for longer-stay pets on Facebook and other social media sites.
- Move longer-stay animals to off-site adoption locations and events.

- Highlight animals by decorating their cage cards and displaying them in the shelter lobby.
- Update the animals' photos and descriptions online after a certain number of days, to help the animals seem new.
- Add appealing video footage to the profiles of longer-stay animals.
- Promote longer-stay animals via adoption events and free or low-fee adoptions.
- Ask for donations instead of specific adoption fees. Asking for donations makes the entire process less intimidating and opens the door for engagement with the community.

## **Medical care**

### **Disease control**

A healthy animal leaves the shelter faster. Overcrowding increases disease and stress, so alleviating a packed shelter through organizational means (reduced-fee adoptions, fostering, etc.) is a great way to keep animals healthy and moving along positive pathways.

Administering core vaccinations to all animals at intake is a critical practice for minimizing infectious disease and preventing widespread outbreaks. Vaccines are the best defense we have against some of the most serious (and sometimes deadly) contagious diseases that are of concern to animal shelters.

Isolation areas or a medical treatment ward for sick animals, as well as a quarantine area for newly arrived animals, should be designated where appropriate. Isolation is considered a cornerstone aspect of medical care, capacity for care and sanitation. Emphasis should be placed on ensuring that healthy animals stay healthy, while ensuring that those who are sick have the best chance at recovery.

### **Working with vets for higher spay/neuter volume**

Building productive relationships with local veterinarians is a necessity for decreasing LOS. Partnering with vets in your area to help with spay/neuter surgeries goes a long way toward getting animals placed quickly into new homes. To save on staff time, have volunteers trained and ready to go for veterinarian drop-offs and pick-ups.

### **Getting intact animals into foster care**

Having unaltered animals stay in their newly adoptive homes or foster homes while waiting for spay/neuter surgery is another way to help cut down on LOS. With proper training and guidelines, any issues associated with housing intact animals can be dealt with.

## **Ordinances, contracts and policies**

Changing shelter contracts, ordinance language and shelter policies can help decrease LOS. If the language is set up to help community members rather than punish them, there will be more opportunities for positive outcomes for pets.

### **Return-to-owner (RTO)**

Contractual language should encourage the return of pets to their owners. Waiving fees for first-time offenders is a great way to shorten LOS, but fee adjustments should be allowed on a case-by-case basis so that all owners can reclaim their pets. If an animal already has an owner, organizations should try all means necessary to return the animal to the owner rather than using shelter resources. The money saved by not using those resources could very easily cover the reclaim fees.

### **Stray hold**

Changing ordinance and policy language regarding hold times can be key to decreasing LOS. For example, if an animal is available for adoption in three days instead of five, that animal can find a positive pathway through the shelter much faster. Discuss the benefits of a shortened stray hold period with your county or city officials and work with them on changing this definition.

To encourage shelters to make lifesaving decisions about appropriate care and achieve live outcomes, ownership should automatically be transferred to the shelter at the end of any mandatory stray hold period. This not only prevents confusion about who or what entity owns the pet, it reduces the likelihood of litigation. This language should be in the contract if it's not contained in the relevant local ordinance or state law.

## **Open adoption**

Open adoption means removing barriers to adoption and creating a friendly and relaxed experience for the public. How each shelter attempts to implement this practice is different, depending upon the shelter's needs, the community it serves and the number of animals in its care. Strategies that can reduce the amount of time animals spend waiting for adoption include conversation-based adoptions, special promotions, mass marketing and waiving of adoption fees.

Open adoption involves working with adopters as individuals to help them find the pet who will best fit their lifestyle and situation. By supporting potential adopters, we can place more animals in homes and shorten their LOS in the shelter. Providing counseling and post-adoption follow-up help to create a welcoming experience for the public and engagement with the community, and also helps to keep adopted animals in their homes.

## **Operational policies**

Availability sets the tone for movement when it comes to LOS. If a shelter can meet its community's needs regarding pets, LOS will decrease dramatically.

### **Hours for adoption and reclaims**

If a shelter closes at 5 p.m. during the week, has limited weekend hours and is closed on holidays, there's less opportunity for the public to come in and adopt a new pet or reclaim a pet. In order to decrease LOS, shelters should be open during hours (including evenings and weekends) that are convenient for the public.

### **Payment issues**

To help decrease LOS, payment structures should not incentivize impoundments. Shelters sometimes think that by charging high reclaim fees and penalties in addition to daily care fees, they are teaching people a lesson about responsible pet ownership. Instead, shelters are making it impossible for people with limited economic resources to get their pets back.

### **Training**

All staff need to be trained to perform adoptions and reclaims. Staff should carry out adoptions and returns even when the shelter is not open to the public (e.g. days the shelter is closed to the public but still in-house taking care of the animals, holidays, and after-hour programs). In many shelters, volunteers have been trained to assist with and perform adoptions.

## **Transfers**

Creating policies for quick, direct transfer of animals to rescue organizations will allow animals to move through the facility faster, often without the additional vetting and medical care necessary for adoption or transport outcomes. Agencies should make all animals available for rescue placement once they are off any applicable holds. Ensuring that MOUs held with rescue organizations empower animal services agencies to use them without liability is essential to the success of these programs.

## **Transports**

Organizations can find positive outcomes through programs that transport pets to areas where adoptable pets are in demand. Organizations should use transport partners strategically to help alleviate overcrowding during times when their animal population is high. However, organizations should not rely on transport for the majority of their positive outcomes, since transport is often not a long-term comprehensive solution.

## Resources

Animal flow:

- [2014 HSUS Exposition Fellowship Presentations](#)
- Maddie's Fund [Flow-Through Planning](#)

Daily rounds:

- [UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program Daily Shelter Rounds](#)
- [ASPCApro Daily Rounds and How They Can Decrease LOS](#)
- [How to Take a Daily Animal Inventory](#)

Fast-tracking:

- [MACC Pathway Planning and Fast-Tracking SOP](#)

Open selection:

- [MACC Open Selection](#)

Data tracking:

- [Cat and dog reclaim cost comparison calculator](#)

Behavioral assessments:

- ASPCA [two-part webinar](#): ways to gather information from a variety of sources to create a more accurate picture of each individual dog
- Maddie's Fund: [Behavioral Assessment in Animal Shelters](#)
- ASPCA: [Position Statement on Shelter Dog Behavior Assessments](#)

Enrichment:

- Best Friends: [Enrichment for Dogs in Shelters](#)
- Animal Farm Foundation: [Kennel Enrichment](#)
- Tufts University, Center for Shelter Dogs: [resource library](#)
- St. Hubert's [Enrichment on a Dime](#) webinar
- Maddie's Fund: [Enrichment for Shelter Cats](#) presentation
- ASPCA: [Hiding Places for Cats](#)
- Best Friends [Humane Animal Control manual](#), chapter on shelter cat enrichment
- Best Friends [Humane Animal Control manual](#), chapter on shelter dog enrichment
- [Dogs Playing For Life](#) manual
- Best Friends operational playbook: [Feline Housing and Enrichment](#)

Foster care:

- ASPCA: [Adoption Ambassadors](#) program
- Best Friends: [Fostering Q&As](#)

- Best Friends: [Humane Animal Control manual](#), chapter on foster programs
- Best Friends: [Humane Animal Control manual](#), chapter on volunteer programs
- Humane Rescue Alliance: [foster care](#) program

#### Marketing:

- [Reduced and Fee-Waived Adoptions: Why They Work](#)
- [Tips for Taking Photos](#)
- [Images with Heart website](#)

#### Medical care:

- Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV): [Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters](#)
- American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA): [Companion Animal Care Guidelines](#)
- ASPCApro: [Strategies for Recruiting and Retaining Spay/Neuter Veterinarians](#)
- Maddie's Fund: [Animal Groups and Vets Working Together](#)
- ASPCApro: [Behavior Tips for Living with Intact Dogs and Cats](#)

#### Ordinances:

- [Best Friends: Lifesaving Animal Service Contracts](#)
- HSUS Humane Pro: [Pets Are Welcome](#)
- HSUS Humane Pro: [Creating Animal-Friendly Communities](#)
- American Legal Publishing: [code library](#)
- HSUS: [Steps to Pass a Local Ordinance](#)
- Best Friends Humane Animal Control manual: [Progressive Animal Control Ordinances](#)

#### Operations:

- Best Friends Humane Animal Control manual: [Shelter Operations and Lifesaving Programs](#)
- [The Price of Leaving Them Behind](#)

#### Open adoption:

- [HSUS: Adopters Welcome manual](#)
- [Best Friends: Adoptions Training Playbook](#)
- [Best Friends: Community-Powered Lifesaving](#)

#### Transfers:

- [Best Friends: Removing Rescue Roadblocks](#)

#### Transports:

- [Best Friends: Animal Transport Volunteer Playbook](#)

- [Best Friends: COVID-19 Lifesaving Programs, Transport](#)