



Training Playbook: Animal Flow

Introduction

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

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 is to move him/her through that sheltering system toward a live outcome as soon as possible.

Program Overview

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). Each of these factors requires adequate workforce in the form of staff and volunteers, and can be expanded by:

- Evaluating current medical and/or isolation and quarantine protocols
- Creating or expanding a volunteer program
- Creating or expanding a foster program
- Creating or expanding an enrichment (both in-kennel and out-of-kennel) program
- Creating or expanding a return-to-field program (RTF)

These programs will contribute to maximizing existing capacity without compromising care, and in turn will increase lifesaving.

Program Composition

"Capacity for care" refers to how many pets a shelter can house while still providing them with appropriate care, veterinary attention, adequate space, stress relief and caregiver attention, not simply how many cages and kennels a facility has or the number of animals in them. Species-appropriate housing must provide adequate space, which includes a resting place and enough room for freedom of movement.

Medical care

Administering core vaccinations to all animals at intake is a critical practice in 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 those who are sick have the best chance at recovery.

For cats, this means an exam at the time of intake and, if the cat is healthy, administration of the FVRCP vaccination, which provides protection against panleukopenia and the two upper respiratory viruses, herpes and feline calicivirus. For dogs, this means an exam at intake and giving both the DA2PP vaccination (which provides protection against distemper and parvo as well as adenovirus and parainfluenza) and an intranasal vaccination containing bordetella and parainfluenza with or without adenovirus.

Foster program

A well-run foster program can exponentially increase a shelter's capacity for care, as animals can reside in homes rather than the shelter. Animal flow can be increased by implementing a more 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 (for example, very young kittens and puppies) should spend as little time as possible in the shelter.

Foster families can be empowered to adopt their foster animals directly into new homes, rather than returning them to the shelter for adoption. In addition, shelters should consider creative fostering ideas, such as asking businesses to foster pets. One example is recruiting residents in an elder care facility to foster pets and help prepare them for adoption or transport. A hospice (hospice foster) program can get terminally ill or geriatric animals out of the stressful shelter environment.

Enrichment

Determining capacity for care includes examining whether a shelter's animals are being given an adequate level of enrichment and human interaction, which are essential to a good quality of life. Enrichment both in and out of the kennel helps the animals relieve stress and it improves their overall health and behavior, which will decrease their length of stay at the shelter.

Length of stay

When measuring your shelter's efficacy, it is critical to analyze the average length of stay for animals (broken down by species). Length of stay affects the overall health of the shelter population and is a key factor in determining the success of foster, enrichment, volunteer and managed intake programs. In addition, by identifying animals with a longer length of stay, you can allocate available resources to them to get them out of the shelter.

Some shelters find that their average length of stay is reduced by fast-tracking certain categories of animals (e.g., those who are likely to be adopted quickly) to get them out of the shelter and into homes as soon as possible. Fast-tracking involves bypassing certain procedures that delay the process of an animal entering the adoption program. Fast-tracking not only creates more space in the shelter, it frees up resources and time for shelter staff and volunteers to focus on those animals who are not as easily placed.

Return-to-field

If the shelter has a return-to-field (RTF) program, eligible community cats at the shelter will go back to their colonies (instead of being impounded), which means they have a live outcome and they have spent as little time in the shelter as possible.

Sample Procedure and Program Information Documents

Now that you have a general understanding of animal flow, the following documents may act as templates as you implement these strategies and programs at your organization. Keep in mind that there is no exact or perfect form of implementation. Using the considerations and program composition notes above, you should use the following only as guidelines or building blocks when creating your own standard operating procedures or documents (both internal and public). If you need further assistance or clarification, please reach out to your regional specialist, regional director, or the Best Friends shelter outreach team at team2025@bestfriends.org.

Medical care:

- Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) [Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters](#)
- American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) [Companion Animal Care Guidelines](#)
- Maddie's Fund [Flow-Through Planning webinar](#)

Foster and volunteer programs:

- ASPCA [Adoption Ambassadors](#) program
- Best Friends Animal Society [Foster Q & As](#)
- Best Friends Animal Society [Humane Animal Control Manual](#), chapter on foster programs
- Best Friends Animal Society [Humane Animal Control Manual](#), chapter on volunteer programs
- Humane Rescue Alliance [Foster Care](#) program
- Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley Surrender to Foster program in [English](#) and [Spanish](#)

Enrichment:

- Best Friends Animal Society [Enrichment for Dogs in Shelters](#)
- Animal Farm Foundation [Kennel Enrichment](#)
- 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

Community cat programs:

- Best Friends Animal Society [Community Cat Programs Handbook.](#)
- Best Friends Animal Society Humane Animal Control Manual
- Humane Society of the United States [Pets for Life Guidebook](#)
- Alley Cat Allies Guide to TNR and Colony Care
- Neighborhood Cats Overview of a TNR Project
- Neighborhood Cats TNR Handbook, and comprehensive [list of resources](#) for download
- The Jackson Galaxy Project comprehensive [list of TNR resources.](#)