



HUMANE SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL

Celebrating Animals | Confronting Cruelty
Worldwide

Starting a Shelter – issues to consider and alternatives to sheltering

There are many pitfalls in becoming involved in running an animal shelter. The Humane Society of the United States/Humane Society International (HSUS/HSI) urges well-meaning animal protection groups to consider them carefully before attempting to do so. Building a shelter offers a reactive solution to the problems that can result from conflicts between humans and free-roaming dogs and cats. A shelter will not solve the problem of free-roaming dogs and cats, and it will provide individuals with a way to dispose of their unwanted animals rather than learn to care for them.

A humane dog/cat population management program must be proactive, and offer a comprehensive strategy that will successfully curb the number of unwanted litters. First, and in the broadest sense, we believe that it is the government's responsibility to develop a dog/cat population management strategy. While animal welfare groups play an important role in ensuring the welfare of the animals, it is the government's obligation to protect the health and well-being of its citizens. The government's animal control entities should be committed to controlling the animal population in the community, thereby reducing potential hazards, such as the spread of rabies and other zoonotic diseases.

A humane dog/cat population management program involves much more than providing a shelter for homeless animals. It should consider other components such as vaccination against rabies, spay/neuter services, an adoption and fostering program, and provision for humane euthanasia of those animals that are unadoptable due to being too old, ill, or injured. This kind of comprehensive program, coupled with community engagement and education on the needs of dogs and cats, addresses the *causes* and not just the *effects* of animal abandonment. It becomes a *proactive* solution rather than a *reactive* one.

In the United States, local governments sometimes contract with private humane societies to perform some or all of the animal control functions. These services are paid for; they are not given to the government without cost.

Even then, running an animal shelter is a time- and money-consuming proposition, and without the other elements of a comprehensive animal control program in place, it is like running on a treadmill. You never get ahead. In other words, you are dealing with the effects of the problem (human-animal conflicts) without addressing causes (lack of spay/neuter services, lack of understanding regarding dog and cat welfare, poor (no) legislation or lacking enforcement of existing laws, etc.).

Once you open an animal shelter, all your time, money, and energy will go into addressing the very basic of needs for those animals in that shelter. You need to be absolutely *sure* that you can sustain your fundraising at a level which will allow you to provide for the animals humanely (adequate veterinary care, adequate housing, exercise and enrichment, food, disease control, an active adoption program, humane euthanasia when necessary, etc.). “Animal welfare” not only refers to the animal’s physical wellbeing, it also includes the animal’s mental health. The animal’s quality of life must include daily evaluation of his or her behavioral/emotional state so the animal is moving toward eventually leaving the shelter for a nurturing home/family in the community. Simply “warehousing” the animals into a fenced area is not only unkind, it can create poor health conditions, with easily transmitted diseases, infighting and potential unwanted pregnancies. To meet the animal’s physical and emotional needs, shelters need divided spaces – keeping males and females in separate areas, an elimination area separate from an eating/sleeping area, and daily direct human contact. Staff members need to be well-versed in sensing any warning signs that could lead to declining physical or emotional wellbeing. Simple signs like spinning, pacing, or jumping can mean unrest as can licking or chewing. In addition, the animal’s overall physical appearance should be routinely evaluated using a Body Condition Score that evaluates the weight, coat, smell, and mental health of each individual animal. Again, the goal is to lead to successful adoption within the community. Sheltering is a temporary situation for animals, not a permanent solution. While shelters can assist in finding forever homes for animals, they are not intended to be a long- term home for animals.

Rescuing animals should mark the beginning of their quality of life improving, rather than declining. Housing standards and enrichment need to be considered in any plan. Overcrowding often occurs when animals are taken in with no plan of exit (adoption/foster/euthanasia) and for the reasons just described, overcrowding results in cruelty. It is not enough to just provide bare minimums of food, water and shelter, the animal has been removed from all things familiar and free. Rescuing an animal should also mark the beginning of their rehabilitation rather than their deterioration, taking into consideration their physical health, emotional and psychological needs and physical comfort and well-being. The ultimate goal of a shelter is to house an animal for the shortest time possible; this will not be the case in a place where adoption is not part of the culture.

The HSUS/HSI would argue that much more can be accomplished for the animals of the community in the long run if an animal welfare organization focuses its energies on such things as empowering communities to be more engaged in understanding and caring for the welfare needs of the dogs and cats in their families, providing low-cost spay/neuter services, and working alongside the government for the establishment and enforcement of animal protection laws and the development of a comprehensive animal control program in the community.

It is also very important to keep in mind that very few people have proper training in how to run a humane animal shelter. In many countries such training may be hard to find, and it is our hope you do not underestimate the skill needed to run a humane shelter. Until you have a source of trained personnel, substantial funding for two years of operation for the shelter, and a culture that embraces adoption of homeless animals, you should not even consider starting a sheltering program. This having

been stated, please also take a look at the following resources:

Resources

We strongly encourage you to browse HSI's online *Resources*, a collection of documents and guides in several languages, designed specifically to aid those working for animals worldwide. Please visit: hsi.org/resources

Visit the ICAM coalition website to view and download the Humane Dog Population Management Guidance (available in several languages, including Spanish) and Humane Cat Population Guidance amongst other resources: www.icam-coalition.org/downloads

Animal Sheltering Online, The HSUS website for animal care and control professionals and volunteers. Animal Sheltering Online offers everything from sample forms and guidelines to back issues of *Animal Sheltering* magazine, the premier resource for workers in the animal care and welfare field. www.animalsheltering.org

For additional resources, visit:

<http://www.aspcapro.org/> - General information on standard operating procedures, management, and shelter statistics

<http://www.sheltermedicine.com/> - Vaccination, cleaning and disinfection, disease treatment and control, housing and stress reduction, animal flow management

<http://www.shelternet.org/> - Offers the Association of Shelter Veterinarians Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters in English, Spanish, and French

Training and Education

In reference to training, we would also like to mention The HSUS's Animal Care Expo, held in April or May of each year. This event combines a world-class educational conference with a full-scale international trade show. The goal of this annual event is to help people working in the fields of animal sheltering, care, control, and rescue do the best and most efficient jobs possible. The Animal Care Expo is a complete educational conference, offering dozens of specialized workshops in areas such as management, field services, shelter operations, and community outreach. **There is a special HSI-developed program for attendees from abroad. Please be advised that HSI has a scholarship program to assist individuals working with animal welfare groups outside the United States** who would not otherwise be able to attend. Contact Donna Pease at dpease@hsi.org if you would like to receive scholarship application information.

For more information about Animal Care Expo, please visit: animalsheltering.org/expo

