



The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical role of capacity in allowing organizations to function safely and effectively. As human hospitals and ICUs neared capacity, emergency measures were taken to attempt to stem the tide of incoming patients. In spite of these efforts, in many regions the number of patients exceeded hospitals' physical and staffing capacity during the peak of the pandemic. Patient care suffered and lives were lost. Increased staff burnout and resultant turnover exacerbated these issues and delayed full recovery at the organizational level.

Historically, operating at or beyond capacity has been an accepted norm or even an explicit expectation for many animal shelters in North America. Shelters were given little opportunity to match the number of animals admitted to the shelter with the availability of appropriate housing or adequate staffing for care. Most shelters operated with little or no reserve to accommodate emergencies that predictably occurred, such as response to natural disasters or large hoarding cases. Just as in hospitals, the result was compromises to safety, welfare, health and in some cases, needless loss of animal lives.

Paradoxically, while the pandemic resulted in strained capacity in many sectors, many animal shelters were able to alter operations to operate within capacity for the first time. Shelters retooled intake and outcome policies and processes to prioritize the safety of the staff and surrounding communities. The focus shifted to providing, whenever possible, safety net services for healthy animals better served by staying in the community. Shelter intake was reserved for animals that were sick, injured, endangered, or dangerous. The result was a higher level of care for animals within the shelter, while also providing resources more widely for the community. Staff morale improved as a result in spite of the many ongoing challenges presented by the pandemic. While achieved under the circumstances of a pandemic, many shelters recognized that working within their capacity maximizes lifesaving, leads to the efficient use of resources, and improves the health and welfare for both animals and staff.

As pandemic restrictions lift, it is our strong recommendation that shelters maintain the policies and procedures that allow shelters to work within their capacity for care. There are several strategies prior to entry to the shelter, during a shelter stay, and to facilitate placement that help achieve this goal. These include:

1. Coordinated Care:
 - a. Leave animals in place when shelter intervention is unnecessary
 - b. Return of animals in the field by both ACO's and the public
 - c. Provide access to veterinary and behavioral care
 - d. Encourage use of self-rehoming resources for owners such as Home-to-Home
 - e. Strengthen lost and found programs
 - f. Utilize strategic scheduling of intake
 - g. Remain accessible as community resource

2. Pathway Planning
 - a. Identify appropriate pathways at intake
 - b. Develop daily rounds to review outcome plan and welfare for every animal
 - c. Establish daily monitoring protocols
 - d. Maximize housing choices within the shelter
 - e. Avoid wasted time by minimizing flow through bottlenecks
3. Remove barriers to outcomes
 - a. Prioritize return-to-home and communicate goal of reunification widely within the community
 - b. Implement open adoptions culture
 - c. Expand foster base and facilitate adoption from foster

Implementing these programs not only allows shelters to operate within capacity, it will allow shelters to deliver an elevated level of service to their constituents, as well as facilitate long term cost savings for the community. Shelters functioning as a resource center and support network drives healthy relationships and benefits all members of the community. Shelters were given the opportunity to shift their role and the resulting impacts on staff, animals and the public were astounding. We support these continued efforts.

Places to start:

Humane Canada (2018) *Capacity for Care (C4C) Case Studies: Final Report*. Retrieved from <https://humanecanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2017-Canadian-Animal-Shelter-Statistics.pdf>

Miller, L., (Ed.), Zawistowski, S., (Ed.). (2013). *Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff*. John Wiley & Sons.

Newbury, S.P., et al. (2010). *Guidelines for standards of care in animal shelters*. The Association for Shelter Veterinarians.

Pizano, S. (2019). *The Best Practice Playbook for Animal Shelters*. Gatekeeper Press.

The Humane Society of the United States. (2020). *Adopters Welcome Manual*. <https://humanepro.org/page/adopters-welcome-manual>