

Highlights of

The Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, Second Edition (2022)



9. Behavior and Mental Well-Being

9.1 General

It is essential for shelters to address animals' emotional and physical needs to promote health and well-being.

9.2 Stress and welfare

Shelters must have comprehensive protocols in place for recognizing and mitigating stress and associated negative emotions including fear, anxiety, and frustration, starting at the time of intake and continuing throughout the animal's stay. Foster care is generally the preferred method of housing for dogs and cats. Animals must be monitored daily to detect changes in well-being; any animal experiencing mental suffering, distress, or behavioral deterioration must be urgently assessed and treated. Alternative placement options must be urgently pursued for distressed animals not responding to behavioral care; if other options are not available, these animals should be humanely euthanized.

9.3 Intake

Collecting information before admission allows the shelter to offer services that prevent intake, such as outpatient behavioral care, other rehoming resources, or spay-neuter. If intake to the shelter is necessary, personnel must collect a thorough behavioral history at or near the time of intake, including the reasons the animal was brought to the shelter and previously observed behavior. Information about aggressive behavior must be recorded with an objective description of the animal's actions and the circumstances. Information about positive behaviors and preferences is also important. Personnel must use the available history to tailor animal care, meet the needs of individuals, and protect the safety and welfare of people and animals.

9.4 Environmental management

Shelters must have policies and protocols for managing the environment in a manner that supports animal mental health and well-being.

9.4.1 Housing: Shelter housing has a tremendous impact on animal health and welfare. Novel environments are especially stressful for shy, under-socialized, or geriatric cats and dogs. Feral animals must not be housed in the shelter except for a brief time related to the delivery of veterinary care. Prey species must be housed away from predatory species at all times. Cats should not be handled or housed within spatial, visual, or auditory range of dogs.

9.4.2 Daily routine: Animals should be provided with a consistent, structured environment that minimizes reassignment of

enclosures, caregivers, and schedules. An unpredictable environment can result in chronic fear and anxiety.

9.5 Enrichment and socialization

Successful enrichment programs promote emotional well-being and must be given the same significance as other components of animal care. Positive social interaction, mental stimulation, and physical activity that meets each animal's needs must be provided daily, outside of the activities of feeding and cleaning. Animals should also be provided with choice and control over their environment. Physical and mental activity need to be tailored to meet individual animal needs.

9.5.1 Time out of enclosure: Time out of the primary enclosure is one of the most effective means of reducing stress in kennel dogs and must be provided daily unless doing so creates an unmanageable risk. Cats must be offered regular opportunities to express natural behaviors, including physical activity and exploration.

9.5.2 Interactions with people and other animals: Shelters should provide all animals with opportunities to engage in healthy social contact with humans and animals of the same species. Regular positive daily social interaction with people is essential for all socialized dogs and cats, beginning at the time of admission. Animals benefit greatly from having the opportunity to play, and play behavior is a strong indicator of positive welfare. If confinement is necessary for medical or behavioral reasons, interactions can be provided without removing the animal from the enclosure.

9.5.3 Playgroups: Well-managed playgroup programs provide opportunities for healthy social contact. Playgroups require a safe and well-maintained space and the participation of sufficient personnel trained in canine behavior and humane handling. Shelters should optimize human and animal safety by limiting the number of dogs in playgroups based on competency of personnel, play yard size, individual dog behavior, and shelter resources.

9.5.4 Enrichment within enclosures: All cats need the opportunity to rest comfortably, hide, perch, scratch, play, and exercise choice within their environment. All dogs need the opportunity to rest comfortably, retreat from view, chew, play, and exercise choice within their environment. Feeding enrichment and olfactory, visual, auditory, and tactile stimulation can all be used as forms of sensory enrichment. Rotation of novel items is necessary to maintain interest.

9.5.5 Socialization of puppies and kittens: For young puppies and kittens, proper socialization with people and other animals of the same species is essential for normal behavioral development. A broad range of positive socialization experiences must be provided and is best accomplished in a foster or adoptive home. While in the shelter's care, young puppies and kittens should be housed with their littermates and their mother to promote normal behavioral and emotional development, as well as the establishment of species-specific behaviors. Single, unrelated puppies or kittens benefit greatly from being housed with one or more age-matched individuals once health status for each is determined.

9.6 Behavior assessment

Behavior assessments provide information that should be used to better understand and meet an animal's needs, address behavior and welfare concerns, and match them to an appropriate outcome. Requiring all shelter animals to go through a formal behavior evaluation test, where behavior is observed and interpreted using a series of sub-tests, is no longer recommended because these tests fail to reliably predict future behavior, require considerable time and resources, and can increase length of stay. Current recommendations for behavior assessment are to combine objective information collected via behavioral history with objective behavior observations noted during a variety of interactions. Documenting relevant behavior observations daily can track positive and negative trends. Behavior that requires intervention or affects how an animal can be safely handled must be entered into the animal's record and communicated with shelter personnel promptly.

9.7 Responding to behavior or welfare concerns

When behavior or welfare concerns are present, it is important for shelters to develop an individualized plan, provide support, and make timely outcome decisions. Behavior care and outcome decisions must be based on current animal behavior science. When behavior cannot be humanely managed in the shelter environment, seeking foster care and making timely outcome decisions are essential components of providing behavioral care.

9.7.1 Animal training: Animal training must be based on Least Intrusive Minimally Aversive principles and the Humane Hierarchy of Behavior Change in accordance with current professional guidelines. Positive reinforcement training programs for dogs and cats improve health, welfare, and likelihood of adoption. Training methods that incorporate punishment can increase fear, anxiety, and aggression toward people and compromise safety and welfare.

9.7.2 Behavior modification: Behavior modification applies techniques which change an animal's behavior and underlying emotions. These protocols must incorporate scientific principles of animal behavior and learning, such as classical and operant conditioning, systematic desensitization, and counterconditioning. It is unacceptable to use physical force as punishment to modify animal behavior. Shelters must ensure they have the necessary

resources to support behavior modification plans.

9.7.3 Behavior medication: Behavior medications must be strongly considered to address welfare concerns related to emotional health. Behavior medications may address immediate welfare concerns associated with shelter intake or housing, or long-term problems that impair welfare (e.g. separation anxiety, fear of people, and chronic stress associated with shelter housing). Behavioral health concerns must be objectively assessed and diagnosed to ensure that medications are prescribed when indicated, with clear goals for treatment and outcome. Behavior medications must only be administered under the advice of a veterinarian. When behavior medication is prescribed, it must be part of a comprehensive plan to address the animal's condition.

9.7.4 Animals with long-term stays: Keeping length of stay as short as possible is a critical factor in maintaining animal welfare. For all animals staying in the shelter more than a few days, appropriate levels of additional enrichment must be provided daily. In addition to more time and enrichment activities outside of their enclosures, housing that provides additional space, enrichment, and choice within the enclosure must be provided daily for all animals remaining in the shelter long term. When an outcome is not quickly available (e.g. animals seized as legal evidence), foster care is a better choice than confinement in the shelter. Long-term confinement of any animal who cannot be provided with basic care without inducing stress or compromising safety is unacceptable. Euthanasia is the humane option for animals who cannot be provided with basic care when live outcome (e.g. return-to-field) is not possible in a timely manner.

9.8 Risk assessment of animals displaying aggressive behavior

Shelters must respond promptly to behavior that poses a significant safety risk. When an animal's behavior might result in harm to people, other animals, or themselves, assessing the magnitude and likelihood of that harm is crucial. Shelters must have protocols and criteria in place that attempt to identify and manage animals at high risk of causing harm to shelter personnel, the public, or other domesticated animals. Euthanasia is the appropriate outcome for animals at high risk of causing serious harm to people.

9.9 Rehoming considerations

Adopters and foster caregivers must be counseled on providing safe, gradual, and controlled introductions of shelter animals to children and resident pets. A record of the animal's behavior should be provided in electronic or hardcopy form at the time of transfer, foster, or adoption. When behavior concerns have been noted, communication about humane and appropriate management, and modification of concerning behaviors reduces the risk of placing animals into a home environment and reduces shelter returns.

*See the full guidelines for references and supporting documents:
<https://jsmcah.org/index.php/jasv/issue/view/2>*