



## Evidence-based Solutions for Increasing Live Outcomes for Dogs in Animal Shelter Care

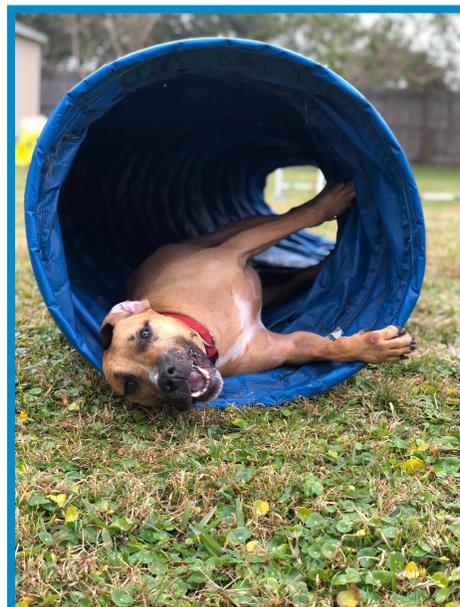
### Summary

This report details the impact of kennel housing on pet wellness and **evidence-based solutions for increasing live outcomes for dogs in animal shelter care**. Guidelines on how to use this report, peer-reviewed research articles, research summaries, and practical applications for shelter operations are included. Solutions are discussed for the following:

- Return to Home
- Transfer
- Foster
- Behavior and Training
- Playgroups
- Free Adoptions
- Constructive Adopter Meet-and-Greets

Overall, the report concludes that population management and proactive intervention programs can improve shelter dog welfare, decrease their length of stay, and provide increased opportunities for live outcomes.

*For questions and support regarding this report, please contact [hass-project@americanpetsalive.org](mailto:hass-project@americanpetsalive.org).*





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## Report Notes and Background

**How to use this report:** This report was developed based on requests for support received by Human Animal Support Services. This report is filtered to reflect the topic of the crisis facing many shelter dogs in need of live outcome solutions. Readers are encouraged to utilize the evidence provided in this report to inform program development to address extended lengths of stay for dogs.

**Scope of sources:** The sources collected in this report focus on interventions that can be implemented in an animal welfare organization to achieve live outcomes and placements, rather than on the influence of pet characteristics and adopter preferences as those factors (i.e. size and appearance) cannot be modified.

**Request for help with “big dogs”:** While many dogs in need of live outcome solutions could be described as medium or large dogs (approximately 25+ lbs), the research detailed in this report often evaluates all sizes of dogs (and cats) in shelters.

**Resource curation and quality:** The majority of the resources included in this report are published in peer-reviewed journals. Additionally, some resources were published by professional organizations in the animal welfare industry, such as the Association of Shelter Veterinarians. If a statement below cites a resource from a professional organization, there is also an additional peer-reviewed journal cited. Care was given to summarize resource content with respect to the context of the publication and experimental design.

**Practical applications:** The “Practical Applications” sections detail action items that shelters can apply to their operations. These recommendations were developed from the evidence compiled in this report, industry best practices, and subject matter experts at Human Animal Support Services.

**Report limitations:** This report highlights evidence regarding live outcomes and placement solutions and ways to expedite those placements. The scope of this report does not include a comprehensive list of all recommended interventions for maintaining the physical and behavioral health of animals while in care prior to placement.



## Research Topics

### Detrimental Impact of Kennel Housing

**Kennel housing can cause behavioral distress and physical illness in shelter pets.<sup>1-3</sup>**

- The kennel environment causes stress for most pets due to its novel surroundings and separation from social attachment figures.
- Kennels are spatially and socially restrictive, leading to acute stress in many dogs.
- Social isolation or restriction can cause physiological and behavioral problems in dogs.
- Continual stress and anxiety are detrimental to animal health and lifespan.
- Overcrowding, stress, weakened immune systems, certain medical treatments, and other factors in animal shelters can create conditions where new diseases can arise and spread.
- Common diseases can become more severe, and new diseases can appear in animal shelters.
- The noise level in a shelter environment places stress on animals, contributing to health problems and behavioral distress.

**Population management programs can improve animal welfare and decrease length of stay in shelters.<sup>4,5</sup>**

- Population management programs can improve pet welfare.
- Population management programs have been associated with increased adoption probability, a decrease in shelter death probability, and a decrease in infectious disease spread.

### *Practical Applications*

- Prevent shelter intake and kennel housing whenever possible through [Pet Support Services](#), [Supported Self-Rehoming](#), and live outcome programming discussed in this report
- Provide regular time out of kennel
- Increase kennel sizes
- Identify and monitor anxiety and stress indicators, such as through daily observation rounds or automated reporting systems, to provide intervention and behavioral and medical support to pets
- Follow best practice standards of veterinary care for large animal populations, such as vaccinating on intake
- Design and/or modify kennel building structures and adjust care procedures to reduce noise pollution
- Utilize population management processes, such as Intake to Placement



## Return to Home

Lost pets are found close to their homes.<sup>6</sup>

- Keeping pets close to where they are found, such as in finder-foster programs, may assist in reunification efforts.
- It is worthwhile to invest resources into outcome programs aimed at lost pet reunification.

### *Practical Applications*

- Offer finder-foster programs
- Offer finder hold programs, such as [48 Hour programming](#)
- Have staff/volunteers actively search the area where a pet was found
- Apply [HASS Lost Pet Reunification](#) practices

## Transfer

Transfer programs offer increased opportunities for live outcomes through detailed coordination and relationship development.<sup>7,8</sup>

- A comprehensive animal relocation program that transports a range of dogs, not just puppies or small dogs, and is well-promoted to the public, can significantly increase adoptions.
- Providing adopters with a variety of pet species and appearance types could increase the number of lives saved.

### *Practical Applications*

- Have a variety of pet types available for transfer outcomes, including pet types that may be perceived as more “difficult” to place with transfer partners, such as large dogs.

## Foster

Foster care can improve live release rates and welfare for shelter dogs and cats.<sup>9-12</sup>

- Even temporary foster placement can reduce stress and increase rest in shelter dogs.
- Foster placement has been associated with an increase in live release rates, particularly for adult dogs.
- In a 2018 study, researchers found that foster care increased the odds of live release by about five-fold for all dogs compared to first-time owner-surrendered dogs.<sup>11</sup>



## *Practical Applications*

- Offer short-term foster engagements such as “Weekend Getaway,” “Sleepover,” or “Doggy Day Out” programs in addition to long-term engagements.

## **Behavior and Training**

**Positive behavior and training interventions can improve the lives of shelter dogs, increase adoption rates, and increase adoption success rates.<sup>13-16</sup>**

- Human interaction has been well-established to improve behavioral and physiological outcomes of dogs living in shelters.<sup>13</sup>
- Dog size, personality, behavior, and level of training were found to be significant perceived influencers of adoption success.<sup>14</sup>
- Attending training classes significantly decreased the chance that an adoption would result in return.<sup>15</sup>
- Training shelter dogs increases adoptability.<sup>16</sup>

## *Practical Applications*

- Have staff/volunteers interact with dogs in care regularly
- Implement positive reinforcement-based training programs
- Equip all staff, volunteers, and visitors with treats to reinforce desirable behaviors, reduce stress, and promote social engagement
  - Staff and volunteers should be equipped with a treat pouch containing treats at all times
- Have certified, positive reinforcement trainers and behavior consultants lead training programs for staff/volunteers to attend with shelter dogs
- Support the implementation and development of a Behavior and Training Department, if one does not exist

## **Playgroups**

**Playgroups, or social interaction sessions between dogs, are critically important to shelter dog welfare.<sup>13,17-21</sup>**

- Playgroups can increase adoption rates and adoptability indicators.
- Playgroups offer enrichment, stress reduction, and physical and mental stimulation.
- The Association of Shelter Veterinarians<sup>20</sup> supports the use of playgroups for shelter dog enrichment.



## *Practical Applications*

- Offer reinforcement-based playgroups for consenting dogs regularly
- Support the implementation and development of a Behavior and Training Department, if one does not exist

## **Free Adoptions**

**In an ASPCA study, waiving adoption fees did not affect adopter attachment to shelter cats.<sup>22</sup>**

- Eliminating adoption fees did not affect attachment to cats adopted from the study facility.<sup>22</sup>
- Adopters did not perceive the value of the animals to be lower when fees were eliminated.<sup>22</sup>
- Free adoption programs offer life-saving opportunities for shelter pets.

## *Practical Applications*

- Waive adoption fees, particularly for pets who have exceeded a predetermined length of stay (such as 10 days)

## **Constructive Adopter Meet-and-Greets**

**Guiding meet-and-greets between potential adopters and dogs through positive reinforcement training and play with toys can increase the likelihood of adoption.<sup>23,24</sup>**

- In a 2014 study, researchers found that dogs who lied down near and played with potential adopters were more likely to be adopted.<sup>23</sup>
- In a 2016 study, potential adopters were guided to walk a dog for an elimination break, play with a toy that the dog found valuable, and encourage the dog to lie down with food rewards. Researchers found that the dogs that participated in these constructive meet-and-greets with potential adopters were 2.49 times more likely to be adopted than dogs in the control group.<sup>24</sup>

## *Practical Applications*

- Provide dogs with no-pull harnesses such as the Freedom No-Pull Harness for adopters to more easily walk dogs
- Coach adoption counselors to offer proactive education, handling instruction, dog treats, and toys to potential adopters during meet-and-greets with dogs



- Potential adopter instruction for a constructive meet-and-greet could include:
  - Walk the dog outdoors for an elimination and sniff break
  - Play with a toy the dog finds enriching
  - Offer an alternate toy and/or treat the dog finds reinforcing in exchange for the toy item vs. taking the toy from their possession
  - Lure and reinforce desirable behaviors through positive reinforcement training exercises, such as a *sit*, *down*, or *hand target*
  - Toss treats on the ground, particularly if a dog is fearful, stressed, or anxious
- After potential adopters are encouraged to walk the dog in a larger space for elimination and sniffing, hold the majority of the meet-and-greet in a smaller space
- Conduct engaging enrichment and exercise activities prior to open adoption hours to promote calm behavior
- Equip all staff, volunteers, and visitors with treats to reinforce desirable behaviors, reduce stress, and promote social engagement
  - Staff and volunteers should be equipped with a treat pouch containing treats at all times

## Next Steps

### Identify Opportunities

This report may be used to inform **evidence-based** program development, educational materials, marketing and communications, and similar shelter operations documentation.

### Implement Policy & Procedural Changes

Apply the findings contained in **this report and your organization's data** to inform program development. For more resources on program development, visit [Pro Resources](#) or view our [Creating a Pilot Program](#) resource.

### Monitor Impact

Establish **key performance indicators (KPIs)**, **collect data**, and **regularly assess data** regarding your implementation efforts.

### Contact Us

For questions regarding this report, please contact [hass-project@americanpetsalive.org](mailto:hass-project@americanpetsalive.org).

### Celebrate Successes & Share Impact

**We want to celebrate with you!** Share implementation data, successes, and impact with the Human Animal Support Services team via [hass-project@americanpetsalive.org](mailto:hass-project@americanpetsalive.org).



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