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Animal Shelters: Hope for the Homeless

Some animal shelters are wonderful places; others are hideous dumps. Their treatment of animals, pur capacities vary greatly. They may be run by the government, local humane societies, or private individu funded by donations alone, while others receive tax support. Sometimes tax money comes with a stipu animals must be turned over to experimenters. Every effort should be made to eliminate this policy, w/ "pound seizure." (See the "Pound Seizure" factsheet for more information.)

Some shelters take in only dogs or only cats, but most take in both, as well as smaller animals like rabt and exotic birds. Some can properly handle wildlife; others refer wildlife emergencies to naturalists or v rehabilitators. If a wildlife facility is nearby, it handles all incoming wildlife.

Because of severe space limitations, most shelters kill animals who are old, seriously ill, or aggressive a who remain unclaimed or unadopted after a certain number of days.

The Ideal Animal Shelter

The ideal shelter is a true safe haven for lost, injured, abused, and unwanted animals. It receives adeq from the jurisdiction that it serves, and no animal is ever knowingly given to a laboratory, guard dog cc unqualified or cruel guardian. When euthanasia is necessary, it is painless rather than traumatic.

The ideal facility also has kind, attentive, knowledgeable staff members, cruelty investigators, spacious housing for dogs and cats, a pre-release spay-and-neuter program, pre-adoption screening and follow- a comprehensive humane education program. The staff is supplemented by active volunteers. Animals veterinary care, and there are sick wards and rooms for isolating newcomers.

The ideal cat room has windowsills and various nooks and perches where cats can lounge, feel safe, or allowed to roam the room freely. They won't fight because they know that no one cat "owns" this territ each adult is spayed or neutered before being introduced into the room. The ideal shelter also has arec must be confined because they need to be observed or because they feel more secure alone when the;

The public is made to feel welcome, and there is a quiet room where people can be alone with the anir considering adopting.

Through a strong publicity program, the public is made aware that the shelter is working to eliminate tl animal overpopulation crisis, the primary cause of homelessness among animals, and that animals are . adoption at the shelter. Sometimes, as a public service, local newspapers are willing to publish a notice animals who are available for adoption, along with the shelter's public hours. They may also print a phc animals, which is a good way to attract attention. As a public service, local radio and television stations willing to publicize the shelter. Notices and photos can also be posted in stores, animal hospitals, etc.

The ideal shelter is open for redemption and adoption of animals during hours that are convenient for v is open at least several evenings a week and at least several hours each weekend.

When animals must be killed, a painless intravenous injection of sodium pentobarbital should be administered by caring staff members. (For animals who are feral, very small, or very young, an intraperitoneal—in the abdominal cavity—injection may be acceptable.)

Remember: The programs and facilities above would be included in the ideal shelter, and with the help of dedicated volunteers, good shelters can become ideal shelters.

Less Than Ideal

"No-kill" shelters euthanize animals only under extreme circumstances, if at all. Because of this, they care for the animals who are in need of help. Some no-kill shelters only take in animals who are highly attractive purebred or those who come from the police stations of certain municipalities. Many of these shelters care for unadoptable, old, injured, or sick animals to facilities that have no choice but to kill the animals to make room for new arrivals. Each time such a referral is made, there is a greater chance that the animal will be abandoned to a shelter.

At some no-kill shelters, "unplaceable" animals end up confined to cages for years. They may become severely depressed, and "unhousebroken" or develop anti-social behaviors that further reduce their chances of being adopted. Well-meaning people who take on the huge physical and financial responsibilities of a no-kill shelter often find themselves overwhelmed very quickly, and too often, the animals suffer from lack of exercise, playtime, social care and attention, ending up warehoused in misery. Some "no-kill" shelters have been shut down by the public after gradual neglect turned into blatant cruelty.

Improving Your Local Shelter

Many shelters are in serious need of reform. Citizen involvement is essential if progress is to be made. Shelters can be made successful by organizing friends, neighbors, and other concerned individuals to take action:

- At all times, maintain a positive attitude. For each problem that you encounter, offer a solution, and offer assistance in implementing your suggestions.
- Focus on specific problems. And don't expect to get everything that you ask for all at once.
- Document! Before you can launch a campaign to make changes at your local humane society or shelter, you must thoroughly document the abuses occurring there. Common problems include cruel killing methods, dirt and filth, lack of veterinary care, lack of adequate food and water, poor record-keeping that results in animals being lost, destroyed, lack of spay/neuter requirements or programs, pound seizure policies, inadequate screening of adopters, and callous, untrained, or unthinking staff.

To effectively document abuses, volunteer at the facility or visit it frequently. Compile photographs, statements, and observations about specific incidents and conditions. Record all pertinent information (names of people involved, weather conditions, etc.). Label each photo and get statements notarized. Have as many people as possible visit the shelter and document their experiences. Be sure to keep copies of all your documents and correspondence.

- Organize a group. After you have collected concrete evidence indicating that there are poor conditions at the shelter, enlist others to work with you. Not only will you need help with your campaign, you'll also find that officials tend to be more receptive to groups than to individuals. You might want to run an advertisement in your local newspaper, asking people who have complaints about the shelter to contact you. For instance: "Do you think that our animal shelter needs improvement? If you have experience with the shelter or want to get involved in efforts to improve it, write to" In your ad, be careful not to target any individual, such as the shelter director.

- Organize a meeting with other interested people and set goals. Address the most serious problem first. All members should be familiar with your state's anti-cruelty statutes, local animal ordinances, and the shelter's current behavior and care. Your efforts will be more productive if each member has clearly defined responsibilities.

- Present your case. Depending on the problems that you have observed, you may want to start by talking to the shelter director to discuss how you might help improve the facility. If this approach fails or is not feasible, present your case to the hearing before the agency that oversees the shelter—the city council, board of county commissioners, or the county society's board of directors. Attend the hearing with members of your group and as many other supporters as possible. Present your documentation in an organized way, and be specific. To maintain a high profile in the community, several of your group's members regularly attend these public meetings. This is essential to monitor public officials that your group is serious about reaching its goals.

- Launch letter-writing campaigns to contact local officials. Be sure to write letters of thanks when information is made. Develop media contacts so that the entire community gets up-to-date information. Local newspaper reporters who are sympathetic to your concerns can be valuable allies.

- Write letters to the editor. Keep the issue alive in the media by using this easy, free channel to educate the community!

- Get involved in local politics. If there is an upcoming election, you may want to meet with one or more candidates. Schedule your meetings early in the race, dress professionally, and keep your presentations short and to the point. Emphasize votes first, and if the candidate is sympathetic to your concern for animals, you may want to request the group's endorsement and active support. You will be in a good position to influence your candidate if you get him or her into office.

For more information on improving conditions for animals at your local shelter, please visit [HelpingAnimals.org](#)

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 501 FRONT ST., NORFOLK, VA 23510; 757-622-F

Animal Shelter Checklist: How Does Your Local Shelter Measure Up?

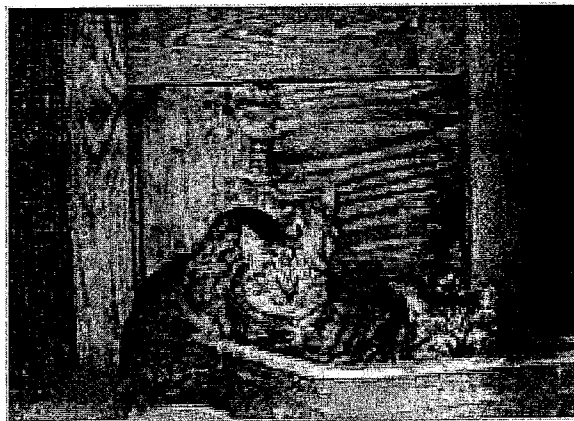
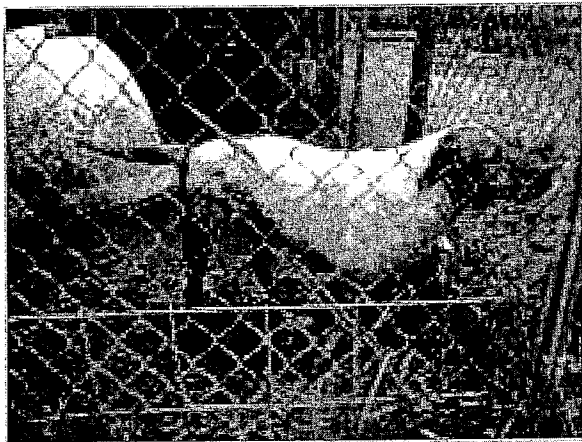
Every Decent Animal Shelter Should Have the Following:

- A compassionate, well-trained, and dedicated staff
- A clean, bright environment in which animals are provided with fresh litter and bedding (cats), dry resting platforms (dogs), clean water in clean containers, two nutritious meals a day (three or four for puppies and kittens), and special care for elderly or especially stressed or frightened animals (a hiding place, canned food for picky eaters, etc.)
- A policy of accepting every animal brought in at no charge
- A spay-and-neuter program that ensures that all animals are sterilized prior to adoption and that guarantees that all adopted animals who cannot be spayed or neutered (on the advice of a veterinarian) are later sterilized
- A thorough screening procedure for prospective adopters (a preadoption home check and follow-up program are ideal), as well as a legally binding adoption contract prohibiting irresponsible and inhumane practices such as the declawing of cats, using cats as "barn cats" or "mousers," allowing cats to roam freely outside, and keeping dogs outdoors or as guard dogs (See the enclosed "Adoption Application" and "Adoption Agreement" for sample language.)
- A humane method of euthanasia for animals who are not adopted (usually an intravenous injection of sodium pentobarbital) administered by well-trained, gentle staff members
- A policy against giving or selling animals to laboratories
- A sick ward and isolation area for animals who are or may be ill
- A veterinarian or animal hospital on call 24 hours a day
- A policy of holding lost and stray animals for a minimum of five operating days, including at least one Saturday
- Cruelty investigators (sometimes called "humane officers")
- A quiet room for potential adopters to meet and get to know animals
- An active public education program to teach children and adults to care for animals properly
- A solid and active volunteer network



Red Flags to Look Out for:

- **Extreme crowding.** The animals may be housed in airline carriers or wire crates stacked on top of each other. No animal shelter should keep more animals than it can properly care for. If you see animals collected in hallways, bathrooms, storage rooms, etc., there is a fundamental problem with the shelter's policies and procedures.
- **Subjecting animals to loud rock, rap, or heavy metal music.** Only soft classical music should be playing (studies have shown that dogs in shelters find other types of music distressing but respond to classical music by vocalizing less, acting calmer, and resting more comfortably).
- **Promotion of free and/or impulse adoptions.** Animals are individuals who require a high quality of life in an excellent home in which they will receive exercise, attention, praise, and love, will not be crated or yelled at, will not be made to wear choke or prong collars, and will be treated with respect as members of the family. Relaxing adoption standards in order to lower euthanasia rates puts animals at risk.
- **Outdoor-only housing.** Good shelters do not house domestic animals outside. Keeping dogs, cats, or rabbits at the mercy of the elements (just as some people relegate dogs to life in a lonely back yard) is not humane. If you notice filthy conditions, chewed-



up doghouses, or other signs that outdoor areas are used for anything other than play and exercise, do not leave an animal there.

- **Animals who have been at the facility for months or years.** The sad reality of the overpopulation crisis is that some animals are just not wanted by anyone. For those animals, a peaceful release is far more humane than a lifetime in a shelter environment, which should serve only as a temporary situation, not a permanent makeshift solution to their homelessness.
- **Claims of no euthanasia under any circumstances.** Some shelters make sweeping declarations about their euthanasia policies, failing to consider the welfare and safety of the individual animals in their charge. It is inhumane to condemn a social animal to an existence in a shelter environment. Shelters, no matter how clean, organized, or humanely run, cannot provide an animal with the love, attention, praise, and exercise that they need in order to be happy. Additionally, for animals with terminal illnesses or severe behavioral problems, euthanasia may be the most compassionate option. Making difficult, heartbreaking decisions is part of daily life at a responsible shelter.