

*Austin Animal Center Response
To Space Working Group*

The purpose of this document is to provide a response from Animal Services Office (ASO) to the Space Working Group Recommendations from the Animal Advisory Commission. ASO staff greatly appreciates the recommendations presented by the Animal Advisory Commission’s Working Group as input and involvement are vital to the success of our programs. Staff would like to recognize the working group members for their time and commitment to the success of the program.

From our ASO staff perspective, the following factors are the greatest contributors to space issues:

- Long-stay medium and large dogs
- Intake of “owned” strays
- Decline in pulls from partners
- Lack of microchipped pets

Analyzed data from July 2019 to July 2021 (below) indicates a decline in pulls from our rescue partners. While all shelters throughout the southern United States have been experiencing over-capacity issues, this decrease in partner pulls has had an impact on ASO.

	July 1, 2019,	July 1, 2021
Beginning animal count	1258	1196
Intake	1882	1402
Adoptions	847	849
Transfers	653	270
Total outcomes	1847	1514
Ending animal count	1304	1046
Live Exit rate	96.33	96.79

*Data is from Best Friends/MMHP Report

Over the last decade, space concerns have been a recurring issue since the Austin Animal Center (AAC) achieved No Kill status. This is the case for any high performing No Kill shelter. In late 2018, AAC staff placed animals in popup crates throughout the building due to an overflow of animals. In March 2019, press releases were sent out to address the issue and ask the public for help. In August 2019, then interim Chief Animal Services Officer, Kimberly McNeeley, sent a memo to Mayor and Council to address another space crisis. Austin Pets Alive! (APA!), the Austin Humane Society (AHS), and other rescue partners helped by pulling animals during these times. The [memo](#) sent this year was to communicate again that the Austin Animal Center was passed capacity for space for medium to large dogs.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed life for the entire community. With the limitations the pandemic imposed on the City and the AAC, staff saw opportunities to assess our processes and adapt them to the uncertainty of the time. AAC closed to the public and volunteers in March 2020, but the work of maintaining the shelter continued.

Although the City was locked down, animals continued to come into the shelter, and Animal Protection Officers (APOs) continued their work in the field, picking up sick or injured pets and dealing with aggressive dogs and bite incidents. APOs covered the entire week (Sunday through Saturday). Over the

last year, space at the shelter continued to decrease, especially with limited ways to find outcomes. As Covid-19 protocols were put in place, AAC staff had to come up with new tools and processes to achieve our desired outcomes and to get animals out of the shelter. Some of these new efforts included:

- **Adoption Fees Waived since March 16, 2020.**
- **Adoption and Foster Processes Streamlined.**
- **ASO: First City Shelter to offer a “Chatbot” to Answer Questions from the Public.**
- **Incorporated the Pet Harbor “Lost Report.”**
- **Text back program with LostATX and FoundATX.**
- **Created a Pet Reunification Guide.**
- **Staff Call finders of Confined Stray Dogs.**
- **Drive-through Microchip Clinics.**
- **Increased our Foster program.**
- **Created a Telemedicine Program for fosters.**
- **Created the Cactus Cats program.**
- **Community Cat Trapping operations continued**
- **Virtual Adoptions and Fosters**
- **Neighborhood Level Program.**
- **Hornsby Bend Neighborhood Group.**
- **Rescue pulls have been changed to allow for faster response from the rescue organizations**
- **PRC initiated telephone consults with all Owner Surrenders.**
- **PRC Microchip Scanning Station.**
- **Neonatal Kitten Nursery.**
- **Exotic Pets Area.**
- **Behavior Foster Program for Long-stay Dogs.**
- **Dedicated staff to work solely on out of area transports of dogs.**
- **Home to Home pet listing service for people needing to rehome their pets.**

It should be noted that the majority of these were implemented with limited staffed due to a city-wide hiring freeze that was not lifted until after October 1, 2020.

The recommendations for AAC space crisis by the Animal Advisory Commission Working Group did not address the primary reason for the bottleneck: the outcomes of dogs with behavioral issues. This group includes dogs with a bite history, long stay dogs of greater than 180 days, or returned dogs (once adopted or placed in foster). Many of these dogs had been pled to our rescue groups and partners and have been declined due to their behaviors. Of the medium to large dogs that are currently in ASO inventory, 29 percent (82 dogs) have some sort of bite history. Despite the working group members being notified of this concern at the commission meeting and during conversations with the members, this topic continues to go unaddressed. The recommendations that are listed will only exacerbate the space crisis.

The following report is staff’s initial response to the [recommendations](#) provided by the workgroup.

RESPONSE: Recommendation: Rapid medical make ready

On the surface, the data presented by the workgroup illustrates that the veterinarian staffing levels have been consistent. However, upon further analysis, and considering not just the number of veterinarian staff but also the number of hours worked by veterinarians, and the number of hours that could be worked by vets, then the data shows that ASO lost 995 hours of labor over the past three years due to vacancies or

absences. Also, during the pandemic, ASO lost several part-time vets and was required to assign one veterinarian technician to the City's COVID-19 response team.

It was recommended that AAC sterilize animals within 48 hours of ownership. To accomplish that, the ASO veterinary staff would have to eliminate their role as an emergency vet clinic for stray and owner-surrendered animals at the shelter and the Emergency Clinic. ASO vets treat approximately 150 to 200 animals per month on an emergency basis. Without this emergency medical care, these animals would be at risk of euthanasia. These emergency services are an integral part of our operations and has made a significant impact on the live outcome rate.

Regarding the recommendation that AAC be given 48 hours to catch up when behind on sterilizations, that would first require mitigating large numbers of intake. On average, ASO may take in between 10 to 50 animals per day. Please consider the following:

- In July 2019, AAC took in 1882 dogs+ cats. Of those, 209 came in spayed, and 248 came in neutered, 1,425 came in unaltered, requiring a total of 1425 surgery (105 came in unknown). We did 707 surgeries.
- In July 2021 – AAC took in 1292 dogs and cats. Of those 120 came in spayed, and 150 came in neutered; 1,022 requiring spay/neuter surgeries (40 came in unknown). ASO Vets did 713 surgeries.
- 713 surgeries is the most S/N surgeries ASO has ever done in a month, and yet a space crisis still exists
- ASO strives to get animals altered once the stray hold ends but that is dependent on surgery capacity and staffing.
- Only animals healthy enough or of appropriate age will be altered.

ASO has instituted the ability to send animals home with foster to adopt status. Adopters will be given spay/neuter date to return to ACC for surgery. Due to an inability to book spay/neuter appointments with local veterinarians, ASO is currently exploring a similar system where an animal can be adopted, and the owner would bring the animal back to AAC for surgery. This would only be done when AAC is exceeding capacity and staff is working with the Law Department on specific parameters for implementation. It should be noted that this is strategy would be implemented as a last resort to help when AAC has extended space capacity. This strategy does not make it easier on adopters or staff. It would still require follow up efforts from staff and adopters and would require significant effort on the part of the adopter to make sure this surgery occurs. Unfortunately, Emancipet is backed up for dogs over 40 pounds and for kittens/puppies.

Of the five recommendations, the last three (memo in Chameleon for young or medically unable to be sterilized; vets trained on high volume spay/neuter techniques and catching up on backlog) have been completed.

Due to the veterinary shortage, clients are unable to book spay/neuter surgeries within our community in the 30-day period required by law. In addition, a 50 pound spay /neuter surgery in our community would cost approximately \$300. This is a significant financial burden on our clientele. ASO does offer medical vouchers for spay and neuter services for owned pets however, ASO needs to create a system where more local veterinarians will honor spay/neuter vouchers given to the community by ASO.

A major problem is the shelter was not built for No Kill. Our facility's surgery suite has one prep area, two surgery tables and limited number of cages to facilitate more surgeries than can be currently scheduled. Furthermore, there is inadequate space for recovery. In fact, the facility only has one recovery

kennel for a large dog. To aid with surgery prep and recovery, ASO only has space for two technicians and one volunteer to assist.

The telemedicine service that was implemented to assist our large number of foster animals with medical care has been helpful but requires a technician seven days a week and requires regular communication with our veterinarians.

On a final note, ASO staff looked into the claim that 65 percent of shelter dogs are not sterilized. As of August 5, 2021, ASO had 93 animals that were unaltered. Diving deeper in this list, 12 were underage and six were on medical treatments. Of this number (75), 38 were dogs. As of August 5, 2021, there were 576 animals on site, with 333 being dogs. As of August 5, 2021, 11.4 percent of the dogs onsite were not sterilized.

Response: All community resources and services be open and operating seven days per week, with AAC’s normal hours of operation.

The Pet Resource Center (PRC) is ASO’s intake unit where displaced and surrendered pets enter the shelter. A small team of PRC staff balance assisting owners and Good Samaritans who bring in strays to find solutions other than impounding an animal, while triaging cases with animals that truly need sheltering. The PRC provides resources and shares information in an engagement-based model rather than a transactional one.

Having the PRC open two extra days means increased intakes and subsequently even less kennel availability. Staff works hard to triage requests, strategizing meaningful solutions which support the animals and the finder while balancing urgent matters. ASO works hard to be in alignment with The Best Practice Playbook for Animal Shelters by ensuring, “...Appointments be made with a lag time of 14 days, for example, to give pet owners time to exhaust all other options and services. The number of appointments scheduled per day must be in line with the available Capacity for Care.” While many animals do not need to enter the shelter and their issues can be resolved without immediate intake, ultimately many unscheduled animals are taken in during open hours.

PRC Staff are adept at managing true emergencies and getting in animals which need to come in right away, which does require the need for available accommodations the schedule and kennel space. It is not feasible to create a system which relies on regular volunteers to consistently do this level of emotionally-taxing work. Staff from other units have stated on numerous occasions that they would be unable to work in the PRC due to the emotionally charged nature of customer interactions and stress of consistently seeing the darker aspects of animal welfare.

The following illustrate the animal intake on weekends currently versus pre-pandemic.

Weekend intake:

2021 OTC averages while closed (does not include APO intakes)

	Saturday		Sunday		Total
	Stray	OS	Stray	OS	
Cat	3	1	3	2	9
Dog	3	2	4	2	11
Other	1	0	1	1	3
Total	10		13		23

2019 OTC averages while open (does not include APO intakes)

	Saturday	Sunday	

	Stray	OS	Stray	OS	Total
Cat	15	5	12	4	36
Dog	18	5	15	4	42
Other	1	2	1	2	6
Total	46		38		84

Furthermore, although the City of Austin is not an official partner of the Human Animal Support Services (HASS) initiative, we have implemented processes that are actively promoted by HASS. In fact, some of the processes have preceded HASS and have been in place for the last several years. For instance, in one of the HASS’ teams more recent online posts, the following was stated:

“Ask good Samaritans to hold friendly, healthy found dogs, and empower animal control officers to return dogs in the field. We create safer, more humane communities, and more fiscally responsible animal services agencies, when we don’t unnecessarily bring dogs into the shelter.”

Part of being a No Kill community is to engage the community to help maintain it, especially when they find lost pets who are not injured or unsafe.

Response: Limit “unavailable holds” on shelter-housed dogs and cats awaiting transport or rescue

AAC is an open intake shelter with a consistently shifting population of animals. AAC must be able to manage our own population of behavior dogs whether a transport program exists or not. AAC cannot choose its population of dogs and determines resources in order to focus on the appropriate placement for long-stay dogs. Also, transfers with rescue partners is in alignment with the No Kill Advocacy Center’s No Kill Equation, which states, “...transfer/transport to a rescue group frees up scarce cage and kennel space, reduces expenses for feeding, cleaning, and killing, and improves a community’s rate of lifesaving.”

The ASO Transport Coordinator began the transport process in mid-July 2021. Processes are still being put in place and an initiative to build a short-term foster base is already underway. Any dogs placed on transport will not return to the shelter.

Once a rescue partner has identified an animal for transfer, the animal is earmarked until it can be transported or picked up from AAC. AAC rescue/transport coordinators and the partner rescue staff communicate regularly and agree on dogs to mark for transfer. Once partner agrees to take a dog, the dog is marked unavailable so adoption team does not receive inquiries, and the AAC coordinator can work internally to place dogs in short term foster without misalignment with adoption team.

Instituting a 24-hour hold for animals on tagged for transport or rescue would be difficult for partners in Austin or the state. ASO frequently have animals that are pled to rescue for in town transfers that are held at AAC until the partner has space to pull; these include medical and behavioral cases. Expecting a partner to tag dogs for transport, prepare health certificates, and arrange all transport logistics in a 24-hour period would negatively impact the rescue altogether. As previously stated, the ASO Transport Coordinator is still developing the processes. Staff is exploring options to mitigate space concerns and tag dogs no sooner than two weeks prior to transport.

With regards to dogs appropriately marked unavailable, the “Adopted T” pink stickers are used onsite to better manage adopter expectations and not create undue conflicts with the adoption team. It allows the adoption team to focus on available dogs that require more of an in-depth adoption counseling process.

When space is not an issue, staff has looked at housing unavailable animals (adopted or tagged for rescue) in unoccupied, non-public kennels.

Response: Return program support to peak levels.

Since the pandemic began, there have been some gaps and progress in our engagement and outreach programs. With the mandated closures ASO experienced, volunteer hours were negatively impacted. At the same time, ASO did see increases in the number of animals going to foster homes.

Once Covid restrictions were put in place, volunteers were not allowed onsite from March 16, 2021 – July 5, 2021. The volunteer program welcomed volunteers back onsite on July 6, 2020, beginning with dog walkers and only those trained to handle orange dot dogs and above. As COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, volunteer slots were increased. Below is the progression of volunteer support from July 2020 – present:

- 2020
 - July- 20 volunteers donated 256.13 hours (orange dot dog walkers and cat enrichment only)
 - August – 27 volunteers donated 439.23 hours (added anesthetic recovery shifts)
 - September – 28 volunteers donated 445.88 hours
 - October- 36 volunteers donated 502.17 hours (opened dog walking to blue and purple dog volunteers)
 - November- 37 volunteers donated 537.37 hours
 - December- 31 volunteers donated 444.77 hours
- 2021
 - January- 51 volunteers donated 1,334 hours
 - February- 56 volunteers donated 937 hours
 - March- 56 volunteers donated 1263 hours
 - April- 63 volunteers donated 1372 hours
 - May- 79 volunteers donated 1291 hours
 - June- 84 volunteers donated 1491 hours
 - July- 105 volunteers donated 1895 hours

In reviewing the intake and total number of animals in foster care, the foster program saw a slight increase percentage wise in the number of animals that went into foster. Staff did a comparison between January -August 2019 and January - August 2021. Staff findings are listed below:

- 2019 - 1/1 - 08/04
 - Total dog and cat intake – 11396
 - Total to foster – 1975 or 17.33 percent of intake.
- 2021 - 1/1 - 08/04
 - Total dog and intake – 7448
 - Total to foster – 1375 or 18.46 percent of intake

The volunteer department had a staff member partially reassigned in April 2021 to create programming for a Behavior Foster Program. This program focuses on long-stay large dogs that may need specific placement options. We have offered multiple adoption and foster match-making events that include on-site long-stay large dogs and behavior foster dogs. These events have resulted in seven long-stay dogs leaving the shelter, including dogs that have been in the shelter system for over 337 days. Focusing resources on these dogs has resulted in more appropriate placement options and fewer returns.

Response: Additional Reports should be utilized by AAC staff, overseen by The Deputy Chief Animal Services Officer, and copies provided to the Animal Advisory Commission each week.

The ASO can provide reports that already exist in an automated email to commission members. Any requested reports with specific criteria that do not exist will need to be created. If new reports are requested, then the technician will need to build them. Technology support is provided through Austin Public Health with a workload shared between ASO and APH. The individual was hired in the middle of last year and was immediately assigned to help with COVID-19 pandemic response. As case numbers decreased, the individual has been able to provide support and work on the reports mandated by Council on October 25, 2019. These reports are about 90 percent complete.

Also, ASO has already been notified that as active COVID-19 cases continue to increase IT support for ASO would be impacted. This would last until case numbers have decreased and the stage levels go down to manageable levels.