

## **City of Austin Animal Advisory Commission Report to Council Regarding Recommendations**

Dear Mayor and Council Members,

On January 15, 2009, you passed a resolution observing that the “City of Austin has a long-standing goal of ending the euthanization of adoptable pets at its animal shelter, but we have much to do to meet this goal,” and directing us “to evaluate and make recommendations on policies and programs proven to be effective at reducing the killing of homeless animals, including, but not limited to, policies and programs related to reducing the intake, and increasing live outcomes of shelter animals.” We have dedicated five Commission meetings to implementing your directive, and we thank you for the opportunity to provide input on this very important subject.

### ***Report Summary:***

It is our conclusion, that with a renewed focus on and dedication to life-saving solutions, Austin’s Town Lake Animal Center could save as many as—or more than—ninety percent of animals that enter the shelter within eighteen months. Austin is a progressive community of animal lovers who overwhelmingly support our city’s lost and homeless pets. The City of Austin, along with non-profit organizations like Emancipet, the Austin Humane Society, Austin Pets Alive!, Animal Trustees of Austin, FixAustin.org, the ASPCA and countless others, have dedicated tremendous resources towards improving the outlook for homeless dogs and cats. If the City’s shelter rigorously implements the proven programs and policies we detail in this letter, Austin can and should quickly join the ranks of America’s “No Kill” communities.

### **I. RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE LIVE OUTCOMES**

#### **A. Comprehensive Adoption Program**

Town Lake Animal Center should immediately design and implement a comprehensive program to increase adoptions of impounded animals. This program should include:

1. Off-site adoption locations throughout the City and County staffed seven days a week in high-traffic areas. This is a core life-saving program of highest importance to reducing Austin’s kill rate and can be expected to save several thousand additional lives each year;
2. Mechanisms (such as a partnership with EmanciPET) to increase the capacity of the shelter to make more impounded animals available and ready for adoption;

3. Employing training techniques to solve treatable behavioral issues in impounded cats and dogs;
4. Ending the option of killing any healthy and non-aggressive animal while cages or kennels are unused;
5. Developing a plan to maximize the utility and usage of the Davenport Building and existing shelter structures in compliance with the Council's October 2007 directive; and,
6. Implementing a public-awareness campaign to educate the public about the adoptable and lovable nature of shelter animals (including establishing long and short-term media partnerships).

Each of these programs, if implemented, should be anticipated to increase the number of impounded dogs and cats adopted from Austin's animal shelter. To maximize live outcomes and avoid budgetary increases, staff should train and trust volunteers to conduct core life-saving programs like off-site adoptions, behavioral training, and public relations. Staff should also work with non-profit groups like EmanciPET and Animal Trustees of Austin to find ways to become more efficient in making animals ready for adoption.

#### **B. Large-Scale Volunteer Foster Program**

Austin's animal shelter should design and implement a large-scale volunteer foster program to immediately increase shelter capacity in order to save more lives. In a progressive community like Austin, it is an achievable goal that no healthy kitten or puppy should be euthanized as a result of being too young for adoption. The shelter management should train and trust volunteers to play a core life-saving role in fostering dogs and cats. A foster program on the scale of other communities should be our goal. Volunteers in Charlottesville, Virginia, fostered 1,700 animals in 2007 in a community of roughly 100,000 residents. Said another way, about one animal was fostered for every 60 residents in the community. If TLAC implemented a foster program to the same scale, over 11,500 animals would be fostered—more than the number of animals predicted to be euthanized at the shelter this year. Foster programs can be cost-effective and revenue-neutral because fosters pay for food and shelter and the City retains adoption fees (and avoids disposal costs) for every additional life saved.

## **II. RECOMMENDATIONS TO DECREASE SHELTER INTAKE**

### **A. Reduce the Euthanasia of Owned Animals**

One of the key ways to reduce shelter killing is to increase the number of already-owned animals being returned to their homes. The shelter should do this in three ways:

1. Replicate the policies of cities (like Reno, Nevada) that have significantly higher return-to-owner rates and implement policies designed to train Animal Control and Austin Police Department officers to identify additional opportunities to return animals to their homes. Efforts should include outfitting officers with microchip scanners, and engaging the community where a dog or cat is found. Microchip scanners can be placed in all fire stations so lost pets can be identified and returned to owners. All available efforts should be made to return already-owned animals (whether indicated by condition of animal or presence of collar) to their owners.
2. Prepare an owner-surrender disclaimer to ensure that an owner surrendering his animal to TLAC fully understand the chances of the animal being adopted or killed. The disclaimer should clearly indicate the number of animals killed in the prior year, and shelter staff should read the disclaimer to persons contemplating surrendering their pet.
3. Provide resources, such as a Pet Safety Net Hotline and owner counseling, to provide alternative solutions to owners contemplating pet surrender. The shelter should partner with the City's 311 service, the Statesman Inside Line, the ASPCA, and/or the Denver Hotline to help owners solve routine problems before they lead to owner surrenders.

### **B. Reduce Feral-Cat Euthanasia**

There is no reason to kill a healthy, feral cat in the City's animal shelter. Other communities throughout the United States have demonstrated success in dramatically reducing feral-cat intake through aggressive trap-neuter-release programs. The shelter should partner with rescue groups, other non-profits, and volunteers to implement and fund the program. In addition, the City should help rescue groups maintain feral cat colonies by setting up food donation sites, educating the public, and coordinating the purchasing and distribution of food.

### **C. High-Volume, Free and Low-Cost Spay/Neuter**

The City shelter should maintain its efforts to help EmanciPET and Animal Trustees of Austin provide free and low-cost spay/neuter services. It is estimated that eighty percent of Austin's pet owners already spay and neuter their pets, and cost is the primary reason other owners do not do so. The City should continue its efforts to promote spay/neuter in order to continue reducing

shelter intake. Shelter staff should also work with the veterinary community to design partner programs to reduce shelter intake.

### **III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGES TO ENHANCE LIFESAVING**

We recognize that saving the lives of our community's lost and homeless pets is about more than specific programs. It is also about the overall objectives and management of animal-services tasks. Accordingly, we also recommend that the City of Austin:

#### **A. Revise the Mission of Animal Services**

The City Council should revise the goals and objectives of Austin's Animal Services to reflect Council's clear directive to reduce the killing of lost and homeless pets by increasing live outcomes and reducing shelter intake. The Council should formally adopt a goal of saving 90% of impounded animals, a goal that has proven reachable in communities all across the United States. In addition, additional performance measurements should be included in TLAC's monthly and annual reports. For example, reports should include the number of animals adopted at TLAC off-site adoptions, the number of animals fostered in TLAC's foster program, and the number of animals transferred to each partner program that rescues ten or more animals annually.

#### **B. Ensure a Compassionate Management and Staff**

The City Manager should ensure that the Animal Services Department is fully onboard with the Council's new directive to make Austin a "No Kill" City by saving 90% of impounded animals. Shelter management and staff should clearly identify and implement the Council's goals of increasing live outcomes and reducing shelter intake. Any employees of the shelter who reject the Council's directives either through disagreement or lack of effort should be removed or reassigned.

#### **C. Public Involvement and Candor**

In order for Austin to become a "No Kill" City, Austin's shelter must engage the public, trust the public, and repeatedly ask for its assistance. This includes galvanizing adopters and volunteers and asking for donations and fosters. Rather than seeking to blame the public for the pet "problem," the shelter should ask the public to be the "solution." In addition, the shelter should aim to be candid with the public at all times, including being honest about the shelter's kill rate. Finally, the shelter should completely revamp its website, providing (1) much more information about each animal in its care (including where a stray animal was picked up, personality traits if

known, etc.), (2) candor about the number of animals killed at the shelter, and (3) opportunities to help reduce the unnecessary killing of sheltered animals.

#### **D. Explore Outsourcing Possibilities**

The City Manager should explore the possibility of outsourcing. Private partners, rescue groups, and non-profits should be permitted to bid on services (such as adoption, veterinary care, etc.) that they may be able to perform at substantially reduced costs.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

We sincerely thank you, the Austin City Council, for giving us the opportunity to provide our recommendations for the implementation of policies and programs that will increase live outcomes and reduce shelter intake at Town Lake Animal Center. We firmly believe that with the right policies and programs in place, Austin can and should quickly become a national leader in animal sheltering—saving the lives of 90% or more of our community’s impounded dogs and cats.