A More Humane Future for Shelter Animals

Other states could learn from California's approach to overcrowding in animal shelters.

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BY S.E. SMITH 5 MIN READ DEC 16, 2024

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In May, LA Animal Services Kennel Supervisor Leslie Corea, who had been working in animal welfare for two decades, was attacked

by Brie, a 63-pound dog that had been exhibiting signs of fear, anxiety, and stress. When Corea went into a kennel at Harbor Shelter in San Pedro, California, to care for Brie, the dog went for her leg and, according to Corea, "started fighting me like crazy." Though Corea screamed for help, a volunteer said the shelter was overcrowded and understaffed, so there was no one close enough to respond to her cries.

"It does affect the dogs when they are caged like that, without getting walks, or exercise or any stimulation or any human contact," the volunteer told NBC Los Angeles. "It's not natural for them to live like that. It's inhumane."

Corea, who underwent three surgeries for the injuries she sustained in the attack, left the field after the incident, but the incident still highlights the consequences of the crowding crisis spreading through animal shelters in the U.S.—and as a geographically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse state, California's approach to this overcrowding crisis could be an incubator for other states facing similar issues.

"We are very overcrowded right now," an animal control officer in Southern California who asked to remain anonymous tells YES!. "It's resulted in a dangerous working environment, not just for staff but for the people who have to do business in the shelter, the public, the volunteers, our own animals. We're having to jam them into cages with other animals. Sometimes there's fights, or they're not being cleaned as often as they should be."

Data organization Shelter Animals Count estimates 256 shelters and rescues in California took in 391, 204 community animals in 2023, with 69,988 non-live outcomes such as euthanasia or unassisted death in care and 302,698 live outcomes, including adoption, transfer, and return to owner. The remainder are still in the care of shelters, rescues, or fosters.

Lisa Young, a veteran of animal welfare and executive director of Rescue Train, a Los Angeles–based organization, describes the current situation as "the worst I've ever seen." It has been compounded by the state's growing housing crisis, inflation of food and veterinary costs, a shortage of access to veterinary care, and the dramatic fall in spay/neuter services during the early pandemic.

A 2024 report from Hills Pet Nutrition looking at national trends found 43 percent of respondents cited costs as a concern for prospective adopters, with people making less than $75,000 annually experiencing increased financial barriers. Vet care in particular is a serious issue, according to the report, which identifies a growing number of veterinary "deserts" where care is not simply not available at any price.

"In East Valley," a shelter Rescue Train partners with, "they have animals in crates in the hallways," Young shares. "It's disgusting, it's inhumane. I've never seen animals in the hallways living in crates." Young is quick to note that this is not the fault of shelter workers, who are "just here trying to clean up the mess of our community," but is instead a symptom of how dire the issue is.

Nina Thompson, director of public relations at the San Diego Humane Society, which operates a shelter that also manages animal care services contracts from 13 cities in San Diego County, explains that overcrowding has serious consequences for shelter animals. "Any time that you have too many animals in kennels, there are disease outbreaks, and also the stress of sitting in a kennel for long periods of time increases with time."

San Diego Humane is experiencing an uptick in upper respiratory illnesses and a rise in the number of "behavior dogs" who are not coping well with life in the kennels, especially young, large dogs with high energy who aren't getting adequate exercise and enrichment. Length of stay for at least 100 dogs at the shelter was more than three months, and large dogs across the state and country are similarly

lingering longer in shelters. Shelter Animals Count reports the median length of stay for large dogs has doubled since 2019.

Organizations such as Human Animal Support Services, founded in 2020 by Austin Pets Alive! and a coalition of animal welfare partners, propose investing resources in keeping animals out of shelters altogether. Shelter intervention programs, a relatively recent innovation in animal welfare, include pet food pantries, free and low-cost veterinary care, spay/neuter programs, help with pet deposits and landlord disputes, behavior counseling, and assistance with self-rehoming.

Models that approach animal sheltering as part of a larger community care program are working; San Diego Humane, for example, has managed to fulfill its pledge to "Stay at zero," with no euthanasia of healthy, treatable animals. Pasadena Humane's More Than a Shelter program has been similarly successful.

High-volume spay/neuter, which streamlines surgical processes to alter as many animals as possible while still maintaining quality, may also be a part of the solution. This approach involves coordination to keep animals constantly moving through the various stages of surgery, from initial induction to recovery. It's particularly valuable for managing community cat populations and can be done as a mobile or pop-up event to eliminate barriers such as transport and travel.

Related community clinics such as that at Sonoma Humane can also decrease barriers to access to veterinary care; on a tour of the facility in August, staff highlighted the clinic's critical role in keeping pets and people together by providing affordable vet care to families who might otherwise surrender their animals.

However, shelters are in critical need of more funding to reduce intake, administer these creative community programs, and safely house the animals who will inevitably need care. While there are some grant programs such as those offered by Maddie's Fund or

California for All Animals, a state-funded program administered by the University of California, Davis' Koret Shelter Medicine Program, it hasn't been enough to meet the need.

Increasing government contracts (which can seem large as budget line items—in San Francisco, Animal Care and Control received $10 million in the $14.6 billion 2022-2023 budget) could help shelters expand their services and capacity.

And, Young argues, more philanthropists need to open their pockets: Despite a growing awareness of the beneficial role pets play in our lives, a Giving USA report found that just 3 percent of philanthropy in 2020 went to the environment and animals, a small slice of the $471.44 billion donated by individuals, foundations, corporations, and bequests. "Of all the money donated in this country"—a nation of animal lovers with 90 million dogs and 74 million cats, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association—"and with all these foundations closing, it's a scary time."

Community buy-in is also key to any solution, says Lisa Kauffman, a campaign strategist at Best Friends Animal Society. She's working on the We Are 90 for Riverside County campaign, which is pressuring county officials to improve conditions at three municipal shelters, including "one of the highest-intake shelters in the United States." The grassroots campaign encourages residents to show up at community meetings and includes extensive Spanish-language outreach to connect with stakeholders who are sometimes overlooked.

An engaged community doesn't just adopt animals and create more space in shelters for animals who vitally need it. It's also more likely to foster, getting vulnerable animals such as neonates, seniors, and long-stay dogs out of the shelter and into homes where they can decompress and experience socialization. Large foster programs are especially valuable for rescues, which can serve the community without a physical shelter location. In addition to fostering,

community members who volunteer also relieve pressure on underfunded, overcrowded shelters and their staff.

For California's animals, this moment may feel bleak, but, Young says, "like any storm, it will pass." They just need a helping hand, from lawmakers drafting policies that help animals such as AB 2216, which would restrict "no pets" housing policies, to the workers who creatively utilize resources for the animals in their care, to the volunteers who show up every day, rain or shine.

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