

Fort Bend County Animal Services



Shelter Assessment

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Fort Bend County Animal Services – 9-28-17

Submitted by Brent Toellner, South Central Regional Director, Best Friends Animal Society

On June 26th & 27th I had the pleasure of spending time with some of the staff, volunteers and county leadership at Fort Bend County Animal Services.

Before getting into observations and identified areas of improvements, I would first like to commend the Fort Bend Animal Shelter team for the life-saving progress that has been made over the past couple of years. The single most important element in building a successful life-saving organization is having compassionate leadership that is dedicated to providing safe and positive outcomes for the pets in the community. The county shelter staff appears to have this dedication.

By all reports, county administration and leadership is also supportive of their efforts to save lives - -and has even expressed its own goal of making Fort Bend County No Kill by 2020. That goal is definitely within reach for the community.

It was also very good to see Director Rene Vasquez and Community Involvement Coordinator Barbara Vass at the Best Friends National Conference in July, where they were able to get the opportunity to learn tips from animal welfare leaders from around the nation and connect with peers

It's always important to take a moment to celebrate milestones and accomplishments. Fort Bend County has much to be proud of. But there is also still work to be done. And hopefully these recommendations will help Fort Bend Animal Services achieve its goal of being a no kill community.

Fort Bend Animal Service Area

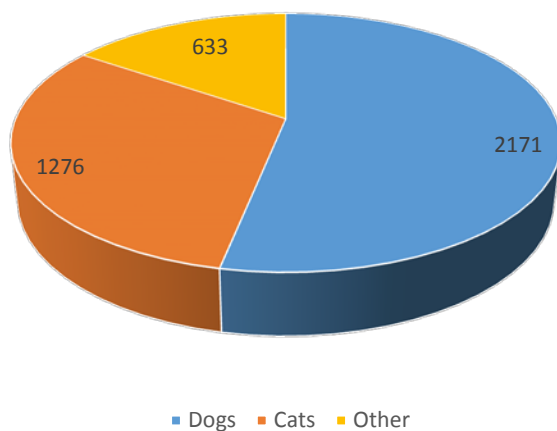
The Fort Bend County Animal Shelter serves the unincorporated areas of Fort Bend County, TX. Fort Bend County has a population of 685,345. The population is diverse, with 36.2% being White, 23.7% Hispanic or Latino, 21.1% Black and 16.9% Asian. The median household income is \$95,389. Fort Bend County has a very low poverty rate at just 6.6%.

The communities of Sugar Land, Rosenberg, Stafford and Missouri City all have their own animal shelters and are not served by the Fort Bend County Shelter. Given this, the Fort Bend County shelter supports a total population of approximately 467,000 people.

The Numbers

In 2016, the Fort Bend Animal Shelter took in 4,541 animals – including 2,423 dogs, 1,484 cats, and 634 “others”.

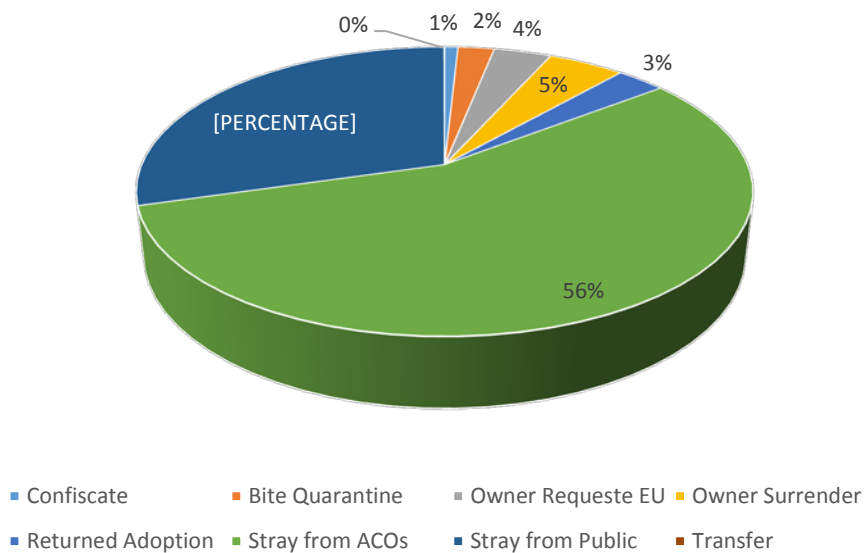
2016 Intake by Species



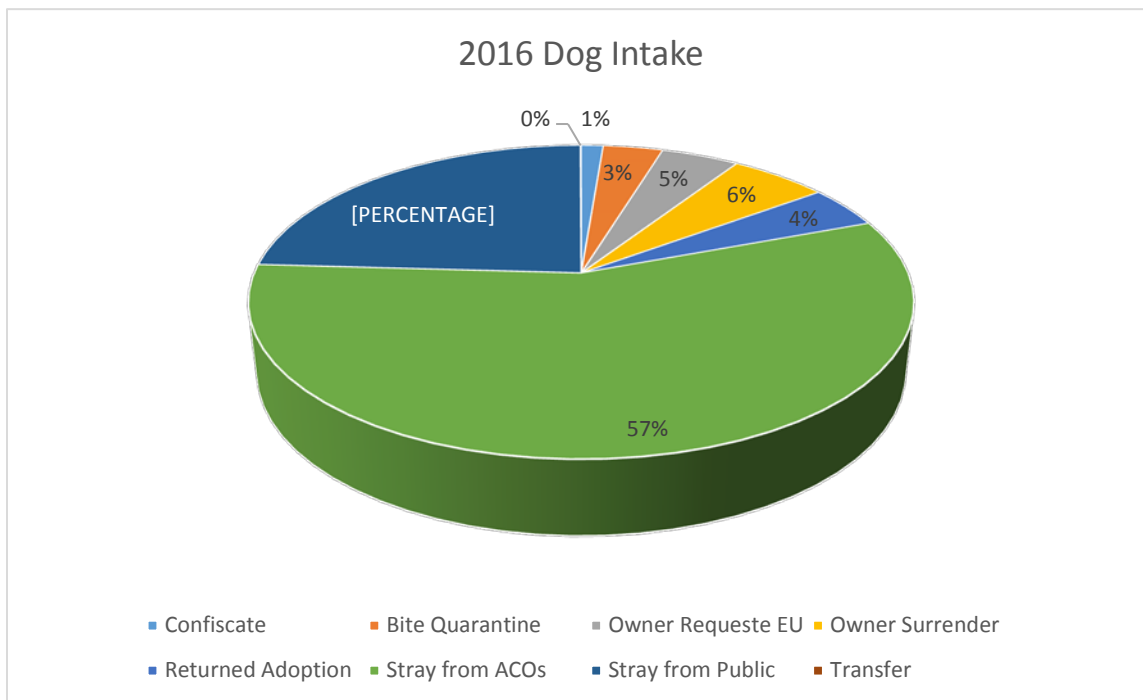
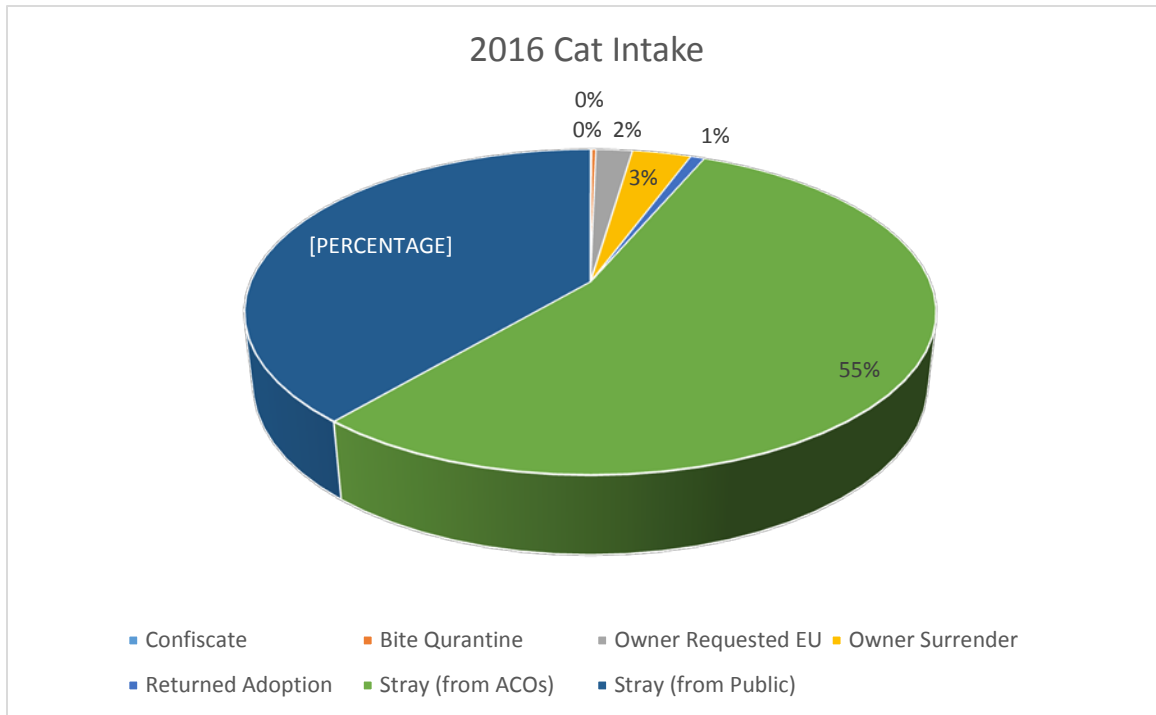
In total, 3,447 dogs and cats entered the shelter. Based on an estimated population served of 467,000, the shelter receives an intake of 7.4 animals per 1,000 people. This is a relatively low per capita intake, which is not surprising given the relative affluence of the area.

For the Fort Bend County Shelter, 56% of intakes are strays picked up by animal control. 29% are strays brought in by the public. Owner Surrenders and animals that are confiscated from owners make up a very small percentage of animal intake

2016 Intake by Type

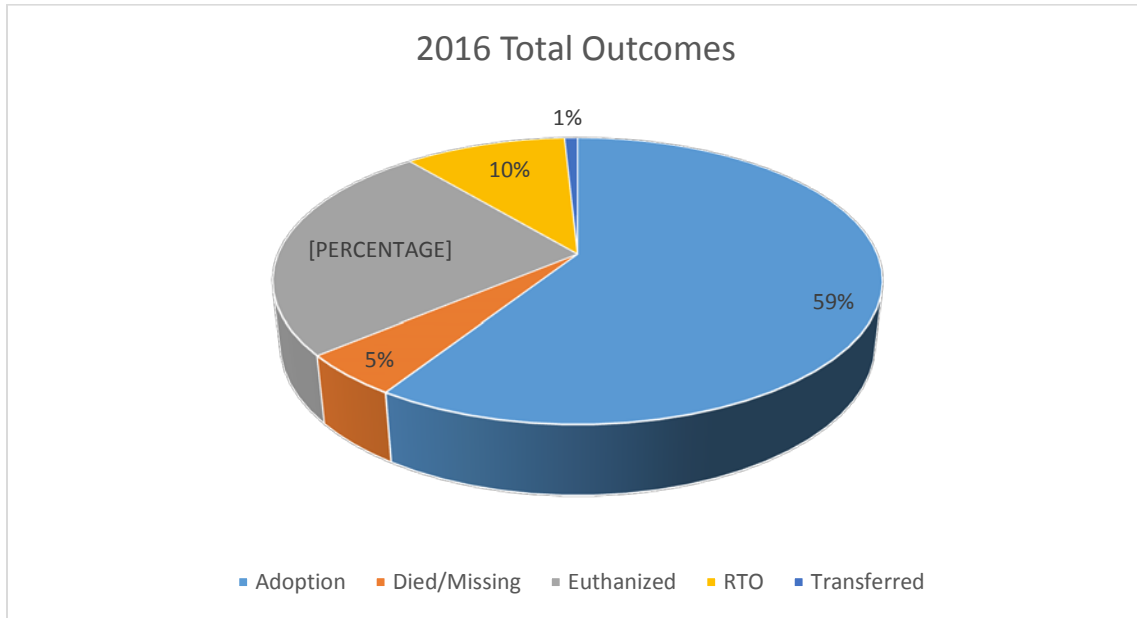


Cats are slightly more likely to come in from the public than dogs.

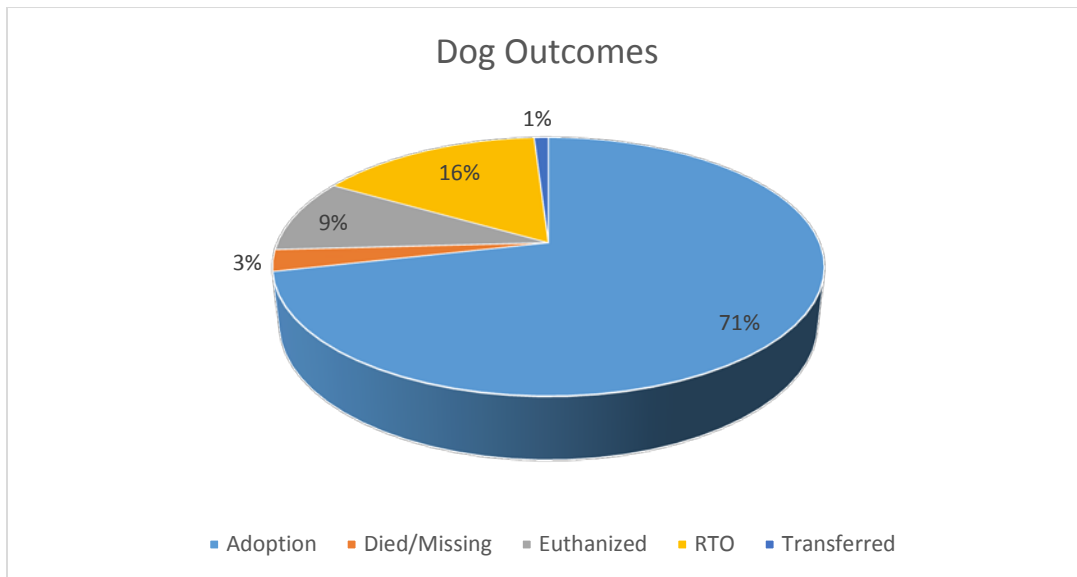


In 2016, 70% of dogs and cats entering the shelter had a positive outcome. 59% (2072) of dogs and cats were adopted, 10% (359) were returned to their original owners and 1% (29) were transferred to other organizations. 25% (880) were euthanized, and 5% (167) died in care or went missing.*

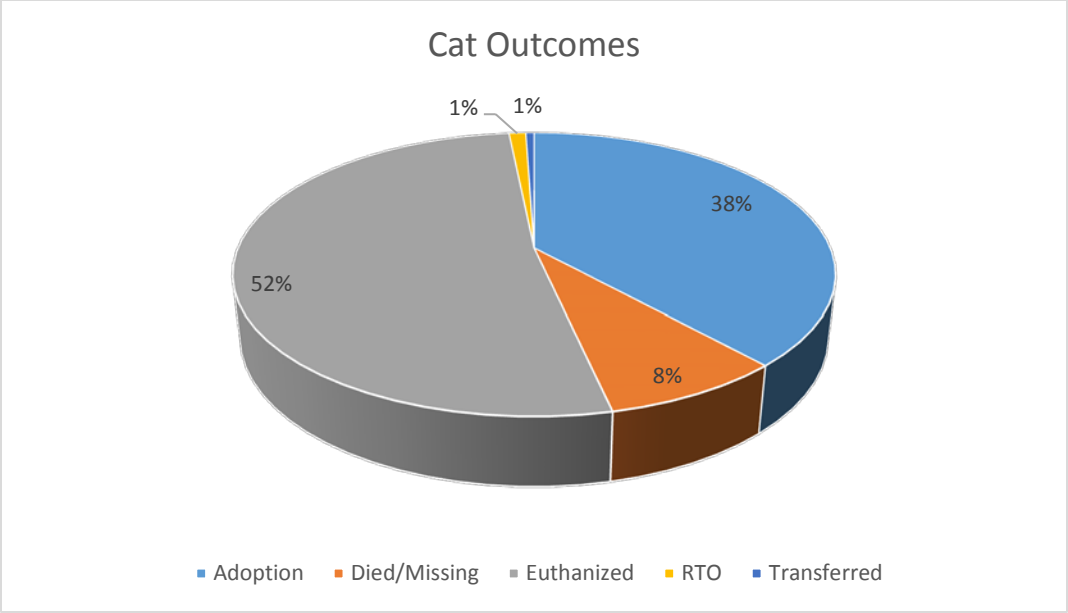
* 144 died, 23 missing. 53 of those that died were kittens, which can be very fragile in a shelter environment.



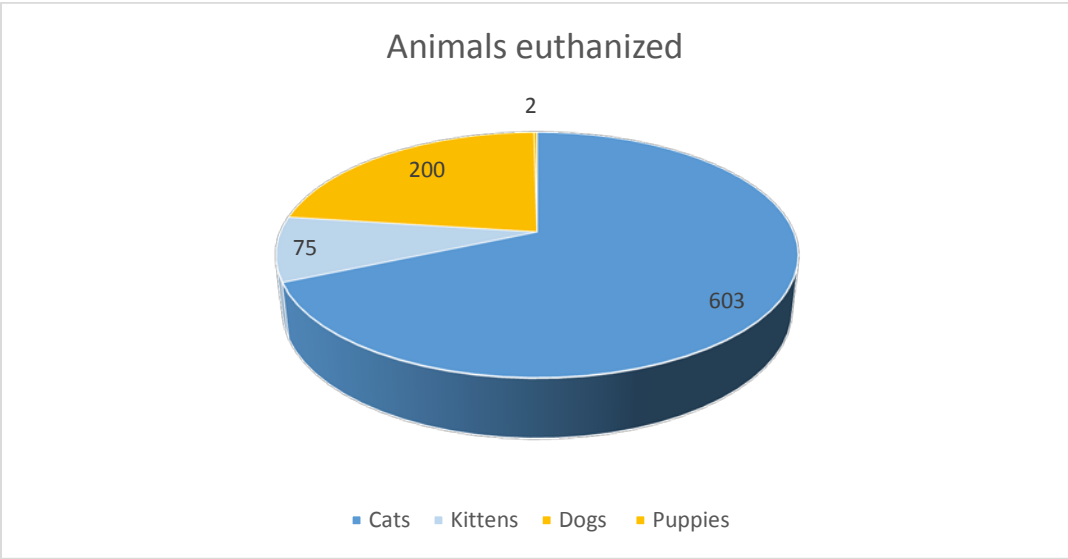
The outcomes for dogs vs cats are very different, however. In 2016, 88% of dogs entering the shelter had a positive outcome – with 71% (1,572) being adopted and 16% (345) being returned to their owners. 9% (202) were euthanized and 3% (59) died or went missing.



The outlook wasn't as good for cats. In 2016, 52% (678) of cats were euthanized and 8% died or went missing, while only 38% (500) were adopted and 1% (14) were returned to owner or transferred (7)

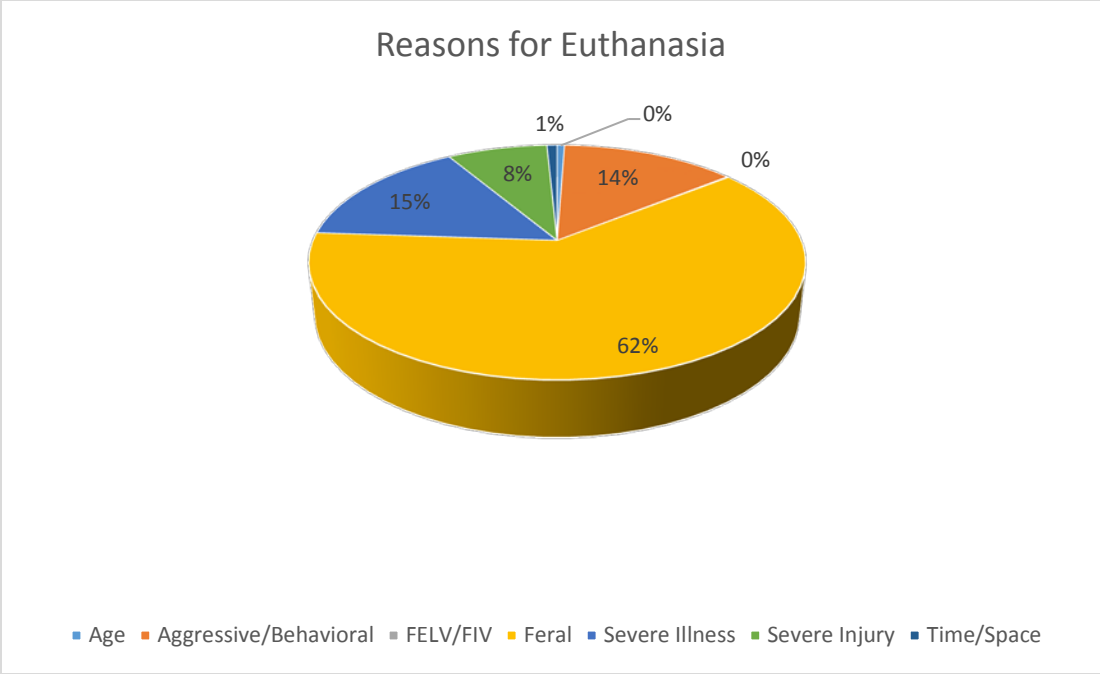


Of the 880 animals euthanized in 2016 at the Fort Bend County Animal Shelter, 77% of them were cats or kittens. 23% were dogs or puppies.



A deeper analysis of the primary reason for animals being euthanized shows that by far the largest category of euthanized animals was feral cats. 62% of the shelter euthanasia (540) was solely because cats were feral. These were cats that were healthy but were euthanized because the county code forbids the release of feral cats due to its leash law for cats.

15% (134) of those euthanized were euthanized due to severe illness, 14% (119) due to aggressive behavior and 8% (68) due to severe injury.



The average length of stay for animals leaving the shelter alive is 18.14 days – 17 days for cats, and 18.5 days for dogs.

Facilities

The shelter facility currently features two different buildings. Each building is approximately 6,000 square feet.

Building 1 is the older of the two buildings. The front section is air conditioned and includes staff offices and lunch/break area. The back area contains two rows of dog kennels. Kennels are metal fencing on a concrete base with a guillotine door that allows for dogs to go indoor and outdoor. Both sides of the run are covered, but the outside area has more exposure to outside air. On the days visited, the kennels were all “doubled down” so that the guillotine door was down and dogs were on both sides of the runs. The shelter runs at maximum capacity regularly and this is common. The runs are large enough, and the average length of stay is short enough, that “doubling down” the kennels did not appear to be creating substantial undue stress on the dogs. The kennel area is not air conditioned, thus heat can sometimes be an issue. Large fans do an adequate job of keeping air circulated inside the building. Building 1 also has a small quarantine area for incoming cats.

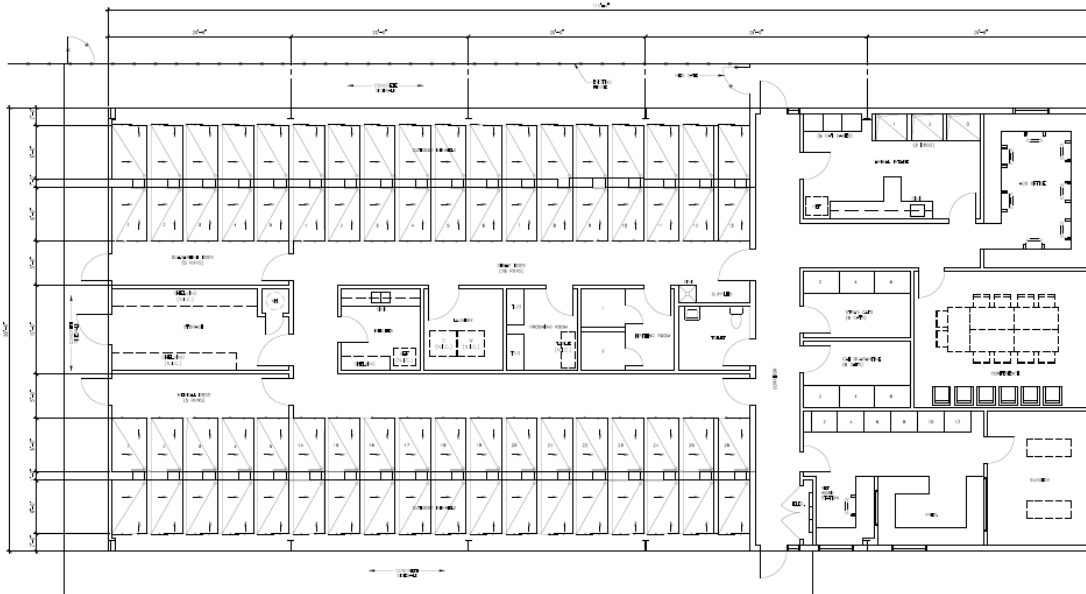


Building 2 is the newer of the two structures and is similarly designed. The back kennel area is nearly identical to building 1 (although better lighting is needed in building 2*). (** Lighting has been replaced since June visit.*)

The up-front, air conditioned area contains an adoption counselor's area, a large under-utilized room behind the adoption counselor's office, and a large free-roaming cat room. Building 2 also contains the veterinary clinic which is very small and wasn't adequately designed to be a surgery suite.

Building 2 was originally supposed to be an adoptions building, with building 1 handling intake and animal quarantine. But due to capacity issues, the animal housing area in both buildings is used interchangeably.

The County is also preparing to build a third, similar building. The new building will be 5,976 square feet and cost \$950,000 to build. The building will also be concrete construction, similar to Buildings 1 & 2. Building 3 is designed to provide quarantine for incoming animals, and the front area will house a more adequately-sized veterinary clinic area and office and meeting space. There is also a lot of land available that will be repurposed to have play yards and walking trails with a lot of outside space for the dogs. The primary animal housing area for building three will also not be air conditioned.



Kudos

While the primary purpose of this document is to provide recommendations for areas of improvement for the shelter, it would be remiss to not mention several things the shelter team is doing very well.

- 1) **Dedicated staff and leadership.** As previously noted, having competent leadership at the shelter committed to saving lives is an essential part of the no kill solution. The leadership at the shelter appears to have this commitment. It is also very important that it appears that county leadership is on board with providing the shelter staff the resources it needs to achieve no kill success.
- 2) **Adding an on-staff veterinarian to the team is a great solution.** By having an on-staff veterinarian, the shelter will be able to better and more efficiently provide for the medical needs of the animals arriving at the shelter. The veterinarian will also provide a lot of help in maintaining herd health within the shelter and save the shelter money that was being used to outsource spays & neuters and other medical needs. Over time, this position will also allow for the treatment of more medical conditions of the shelter animals.
- 3) **Shelter staff has good morale and feels good about the work they are doing.** This is a tough job and often an emotionally draining one. But the staff seem to have good morale and generally enjoy working with each other toward a common goal.
- 4) **Smart use of social media and media contacts.** During the time of the visit, the shelter was at a very high capacity. But shelter staff was using social media and making themselves available to local media contacts to get the word out about the need for adopters and fosters. Shelter staff is also very good about creating creative adoption specials and events to increase adoption traffic. Also, the use of the "push list" is a positive way to promote animals that need additional help getting out of the shelter.
- 5) **Staff willingness to try new things.** Trying new ideas is always important to grow and learn better practices in doing things. The staff's willingness, with short notice, to open on the 4th of July and do

an adoption event is a great example of the staff's willingness to do something new (and inconvenient) to save more lives. Twenty six animals were adopted on Independence Day – on a day that would have traditionally been zero. Staff will have to continue to learn and develop new opportunities to save lives. The willingness to do this is important; as is making the opportunity to learn new things through conference attendance and through connecting with their peers.

Recommendations

While there is a lot of good work being done at the shelter, there is still a lot of work to do. The following are several opportunities that exist to improve life-saving, improve staff efficiency, and create more positive outcomes for vulnerable populations of pets at the shelter.

- 1) **Change the law to exempt “ear tipped cats” from the county’s leash law.** Current county law requires cats to be on leash. However, many cats currently live in the community without true owners. These cats are usually fed and cared for by members of the community - -but are not social enough to be indoor cats.

The current “solution” is that the cats are brought into the shelter, and, lacking the ability to release the cats into the community, the cats are euthanized. In 2016, 540 of the 874 (62%) animals euthanized at the shelter were community cats that were otherwise healthy animals, but killed due to lack of options for releasing them back into the community.

Best practice is to allow for TNR, which is the trapping of community cats, neutering them, vaccinating them, providing an ear tip (so they can be identified as having been helped) and then releasing them back to where they came from – or into an existing managed colony. Changing the law to exempt these vaccinated & neutered ear-tipped cats from the county’s leash law is strongly recommended.

The county would not necessarily, at least right away, have to adopt a full scale TNR program. If the practice is legal, a not-for-profit may emerge that can help facilitate TNR practices. However, it will allow for the successful placement of community cats that are currently being killed at the shelter to be released back into the community as healthy, vaccinated cats.

It is important to note that given the current data, it will be impossible for the Fort Bend County Animal Shelter to reach a 90% save rate without implementing a program to allow community cats that enter the shelter to be released back into the community.

Best Friends has amazing resources for helping communities create laws that provide protections for Community Cats in communities.

<https://bestfriends.org/resources/community-cat-programs-handbook-stray-and-feral-cats-resource>

- 2) **Create safer housing for puppies.** At the time of the visit, most puppies are being kept in the large kennels in the main canine area of the shelter. Due to the construct of this area, these areas can create a challenge for housing puppies. Puppies are very susceptible to disease, particularly parvo, and special care and attention should be made to ensure that puppies are living in the most sterile environment possible.

Given the concrete nature of the kennels, and being “walk in” kennels, staff may unknowingly track in viruses on their shoes or boots. Additionally, as kennels are cleaned, water sometimes seeps under guillotine doors from one kennel into the kennel behind it.

Because all of these factors, puppies at Fort Bend County Animal Services are at a high risk for contracting diseases such as parvo.

It is recommended that puppies under four months be housed in stainless steel kennels (that can be properly sanitized) in an area separate from the main kennel area. Currently, the most viable space appears to be the small room behind the adoption counselor’s area.

By keeping the puppies off the floor, the shelter can be better assured that the puppies are being kept free from disease so they can be adopted quickly from the shelter.

The Fort Bend Animal Shelter staff should work closely with their veterinary team to ensure that puppies are kept in the most sterile environments possible and fast-tracked out of the shelter either through adoption or transfer.

- 3) **Fort Bend County Animal Services should be transparent with its shelter intake and outcome reports.** In the absence of transparent data, it is human nature to assume the worst and that the shelter is “hiding something.” By posting its data at least quarterly, Fort Bend County Animal Services would be able to overcome many of the misperceptions of what may be happening at the shelter, which will help garner more public support. It is recommended that Fort Bend County Animal Services post its quarterly data on a designated page on its website and via social media in an Asilomar (or similar) format.

When publishing the data, it is always best practice to interpret the data for readers. When publishing the data, highlight areas that have seen improvement and things staff is proud to have accomplished such as “we increased adoptions by 23% vs the year prior”. But also feel comfortable highlighting areas that still need to be improved and tell the public how they can help be a part of your success (eg: “Our live release rate for cats is up to 80%, but there is more work to be done and we could really use more fosters for our young kittens”).

- 4) **Properly dry kennels during morning cleaning process.** Due to the high volume of animals at the shelter at the time of the visit, most kennels were “doubled down” with dogs on each side of the guillotines. The morning cleaning process involved removing dogs from row one of the kennel, washing row one, then moving the dogs from row two into the row one kennels. Then, row two is cleaned, and the dogs from row one were moved into row two.

This method of cleaning is fine – and doesn’t need to be changed. This process is efficient, and has a practical value in moving indoor dogs to outdoors and vice versa each day. However, it does open the shelter up for potential disease cross-contamination because dogs are changing kennels daily. It is really important that the shelter staff remain diligent in maintaining proper contact time for cleaners and cleaning protocols to ensure proper sanitization. It is also a reason for increased concern for leaving puppies in this main kennel area (see point #2)

The one area of concern is that kennels didn’t appear to be properly dried before dogs were moved into clean kennels. Many dogs were witnessed in kennels that were still very wet, sometimes even

with small pools of water on the floor. Most bacterial pathogens prefer a moist environment, so the combination of the wet kennel, and Houston's humid environment, create a substantial risk of pathogens residing in the kennels.

Ensuring that kennels are properly dried before dogs are moved into the kennels can help keep dogs healthy for adoption.

See more at the UC Davis Shelter Sanitation:

<http://www.sheltermedicine.com/library/resources/sanitation-in-animal-shelters#Drying>

- 5) **Develop a functional and sustainable "Friends of" group.** The Animal Services budget is currently approximately \$1.3 million and covers both shelter and field services. While it is often a challenge for government shelters to fundraise, a "Friends of" group, established as a 501c3 not-for-profit, would have more abilities to solicit donations and in-kind donations for needed programs and support for the shelter.

The County should maintain some structure with the not-for-profit by establishing a board structure that must include the Animal Services Director and one (or more) Commissioners or Commissioner-appointed positions on the board, in addition to community leaders who wish to serve in this capacity. This structure would ensure that the organization always stays on mission to support Fort Bend County Animal Services.

Harris County has a similar "Friends of County Pets" that could be used as a model for the establishment of a Friends of group for Fort Bend County.

- 6) **Communication with Volunteers.** One area that staff identified as a need was to get more and better communication between staff and volunteers. One option that has worked well for many shelters has been the use of a closed volunteer Facebook group to help in communication.

Volunteers would have to ask to be a part of the group, and would only be accepted by the page manager (who would be employed by the shelter) and only would be approved if they were a known volunteer or upon completion of the volunteer orientation.

The purpose of the group would be to share out time-sensitive opportunities for help, ways to be involved at the shelter, and as a forum to otherwise share information with volunteers and supporters. A group like this allows a forum for the sharing of information, and clearing up questions or misinformation that may exist. It also can provide an opportunity for more senior volunteers to provide answers to questions that otherwise would have to be answered by staff – which frees up staff time for other activities.

This page would be in addition to regular emails to volunteers – because not every volunteer will be on Facebook. But it would enhance the volunteer engagement for those on the page.

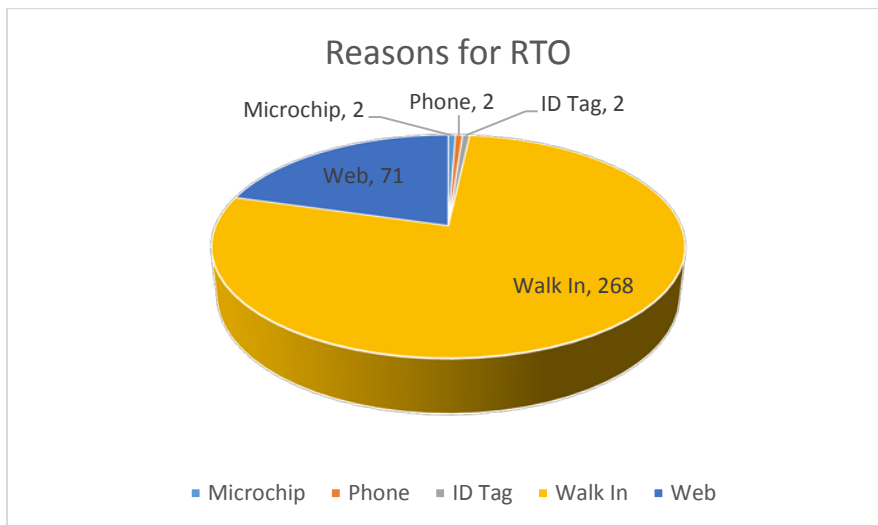
- 7) **Fort Bend County Animal Services should be open to the public on Sundays for adoption.** The shelter takes in animals 365 days per year, and should maximize the opportunities to adopt out pets. Being open for adoptions during adopter-friendly hours is an important part of finding homes for the pets in the shelter's care. Sundays tend to be very strong adoption days at most shelters because it is a day when most potential adopters are off work and can visit the shelter with their

families. Staffing on Sundays can also be offset by the fact that more volunteers are able to volunteer at the shelter on Sundays because they, too, are off work.

Similar to the success of being open on Independence Day, being open on Sundays can capitalize on the shelter being open when it's most convenient for adopters to adopt.



- 8) **Develop a public microchipping and vaccination program.** Last year, 16% of dogs entering the shelter were successfully returned to their owners. However, of the 345 dogs returned to their owners last year, only four were returned because they were wearing a ID tag or microchip.



If the shelter is not actively checking for tags and microchips it should begin doing so immediately.

If the practice is already in place, it is recommended that the Fort Bend County Animal Services begin a low cost vaccination and microchipping program.

Low cost vaccination & microchipping programs should be set up, on weekends, in areas with the highest numbers of intakes.

By providing a low-cost service, Animal Services can also microchip pets so they can be more quickly identified at the shelter and returned home more quickly. This saves the shelter from having to care for the pets for an extended amount of time and ensures a quick, positive outcome which saves the shelter time and money.

Grants are generally available for low cost vaccination and microchipping clinics like this to help defray up-front costs.

- 9) **Implement a canine behavior and enrichment program.** Currently, 88% of the dogs that enter the Fort Bend County Animal Shelter achieve a positive outcome. This is an admirable accomplishment. Based on the feedback from shelter staff and volunteers, the dogs at the shelter that are most at risk are those that exhibit behavioral challenges that are not really aggressive, but are not ideal.

Shelters provide a particularly challenging environment for assessing behavioral needs of dogs as dogs often act differently in the shelter than they would outside of it. However, a well-designed canine behavior program can help shelter staff to work with basic behavioral challenges, as well as better assess dogs that exhibit particular behaviors so they can feel confident in the placement of these dogs into the community.

It is recommended that Fort Bend County Animal Services investigate options for implementing a canine behavior and enrichment program that may include the use of daily playgroups and the use of a volunteer-based Canine Good Citizenship program for dogs with extra needs. It is noted that shelter staff says they do have a playgroup program, but it does not appear that playgroups happen daily as they did not take place on days during the evaluation.

The best way to do this would be to do a short “internship” at Austin Pets Alive in Austin TX – where they regularly train organizations such as Fort Bend County Animal Services to implement these types of programs at their shelter.

Grants and/or scholarships may be available to help fund the travel for this training for staff or key volunteers.

- 10) **Building out foster program.** While Fort Bend County Animal Services already has a foster program, staff agreed that there was opportunity to increase the size and capabilities of the foster program.

Foster programs can be an amazing way to increase shelter capacity and to provide capacity for animals that might otherwise take longer before they are ready for adoption. Foster programs can be extremely beneficial for dogs that need a little more socialization before being adoptable, and for younger puppies and kittens that are not quite ready for adoption, but would be most at risk of disease in the shelter.

At the link is a webinar produced by Maddie's Fund that can help with ideas for building out the foster program:

<http://www.maddiesfund.org/secrets-to-pet-foster-program-success.htm>

- 11) **Charge same fees for owner surrendered and public drop-offs.** Fort Bend County Animal Services currently charges \$50 for Owner Turn-Ins, and has **free** Citizen Turn-ins of stray pets. Based on this, it is not surprising that the shelter has 615% more "citizen" turn-ins (1022) than "owner" turn-ins (166). Often, when shelters have such a vast difference in fees between the two services, citizens will misrepresent their relationship with the pets and they will tell shelter staff they "found" the animal when they really own it.

This provides a disservice to the shelter in several ways. First, it diverts fees the shelter could be collecting and second, causes the shelter to have to hold an animal on stray hold for longer than necessary because the animal was really owned and not stray.

It is recommended to make these amounts similar and charge \$30 for both citizen turn-ins and owner turn-ins. It should have a cap of \$60 on surrenders of litters of puppies or kittens. This will increase revenue for the shelter, decrease the length of stay for surrendered pets, and also create a more honest dialogue between the public and the shelter staff. Shelter staff should retain the right to waive these fees if they fear the pet may be at risk or the \$30 fee would provide a financial hardship for the surrendering individual.

- 12) **Convert to a managed intake process.** In 2016, Fort Bend Animal Services took in 1,419 animals from the public, including 1,022 public stray drop-offs, 166 owner surrenders, and 106 returned adoptions.

Staff noted that being "on-demand" for intakes was disruptive to their day as they often had to drop other projects in order to handle intakes. Scheduling appointments, or narrowing the hours in which surrenders are accepted, can help staff manage their time and still ensure animals are successful vaccinated on intake.

Requiring appointments for owner-surrendered pets and public stray drop-offs when staff is expecting them also allows for more personal conversations with surrendering owners so that more pets can be helped kept in the home or diverted through other means (such as providing the owner or finder of the pet resources that would enable them to feel comfortable rehoming the pet themselves).

Managing intake also allows the shelter to better manage the flow of pets coming into the shelter, which can better enable staff to plan for potential positive outcomes for incoming pets. Read more about the [Oregon Humane Society's managed intake process](#).

Also attached (or at the link) is information regarding [the Austin Pets Alive PASS Program](#) that helps pets bypass the shelter and either stay in their home or be rehomed directly by their owner.

Best Friends Animal Society is excited about the opportunity to work with Fort Bend Animal Services and its leadership team to increase the life-saving in Fort Bend County. There is a lot of opportunity in the region and we look forward working with the staff and county leadership to make Fort Bend County a No Kill community by 2020 – or even sooner.