



# Reduce Length of Stay

Reducing Length of Stay (LOS) of animals admitted to the shelter is the single most effective way to improve the well-being of your population and maintain or expand your capacity to care for animals needing to enter the shelter.



## Why LOS Matters

Unnecessary days in the shelter increase crowding, compounding shelter-acquired illness and behavior decline. Reducing average length of stay (aLOS) improves staff and resource efficiency while ensuring animals do not spend needless nights in the shelter.

This document contains evidence-based strategies to reduce aLOS. Some will be a better fit for your community than others, but most of these interventions will work for all with minor adjustments. If you have any questions about implementation or would like help getting started, please reach out to a member of the Koret Shelter Medicine Program.



### Pre-Shelter Intake: Triage Care

Decrease shelter input by assessing and triaging each animal presented for shelter admittance; offering appointments for all non-emergency intake; dedicating resources to field reunification; supporting public rehoming; expanding foster programs, access to care, and behavior resources.



### Post-Shelter Admission: Move Animals Through With Urgency

Improve shelter throughput by identifying the shelter's capacity; conducting routine population and medical rounds; developing protocols and pathways; providing animal-centered housing; removing barriers to outcome and monitoring the shelter's data/headcount and tracking trends,



## PRE-SHELTER INTAKE: TRIAGING CARE

### Avoid Indiscriminate Intake

Do not pick up “stray” cats or dogs who appear healthy and are not in danger nor pose a danger to others. Chances are they are close to home and unlikely to be lost. Even if they are lost, the odds of getting home are greatly increased when an animal can remain where they were found. Encourage finders to post found animals online (e.g., social media, lost and found forums, Nextdoor, shelter website), hang flyers, and check in with neighbors to help identify the owner before removing the animal from their neighborhood. Remember, both cats and dogs are more likely to get home (and more quickly) if they DO NOT enter the shelter.

### Prioritize Reunification: Reunite Lost Animals in Their Neighborhood

**Dogs are more than 11 times more likely to be found by searching the neighborhood of origin or returning home on their own than through a call or visit to a shelter (Weiss E, Slater M, Lord L. Frequency of Lost Dogs and Cats in the United States and the Methods Used to Locate Them, 2012).**

- Ask people who have found dogs to hold them for a short period prior to relinquishing to the shelter.
- Assist community members contacting the shelter by posting descriptions of found pets.
- Offer rehoming support if the owner is not identified and finders are willing to continue fostering.
- Supply animal field officers or other community service providers (e.g. police, firefighters, municipal workers) with microchip scanners and support for tracing microchip information back to families of found pets.
- Equip field officer trucks with printers so that "found" flyers can be hung in areas where dogs are picked up if the owner was not located.

#### Did you know?

**A Dallas Animal Services study found most dogs are found within a mile of their home (70% of RTO'd dogs), and many within a block (42% of RTO'd).**

### Offer Appointments for Non-Emergency Intake

- Use appointments to schedule non-urgent admissions of any type (e.g., surrenders, strays, transfers, etc).
- To offer the appropriate care, match staff availability to predicted intake (i.e., public appointment hours).
- Availability of appointments should be based on current conditions in the shelter.
  - Example: When the shelter is full, few to no non-urgent intake appointments should be available.

#### Surrendering Your Pet

The Fairfax County Animal Shelter is an open access animal shelter, meaning that we accept owner-surrendered dogs, cats, and other companion animals in need, regardless of age, health, or behavior, from residents of Fairfax County. We take in owner-surrendered pets by appointment; this helps us serve our community best, by keeping the population in the shelter at humane levels. It helps shelter staff by allowing us to prepare in advance, and ensures that we have an open kennel available for an incoming pet. It also allows pet owners to prepare, by gathering medical documents and thinking through the surrender decision completely before actually bringing their pet in. We understand that there will be emergency situations that require exceptions to be made.

We currently have a very high population of dogs, due to a higher-than-usual number of surrender requests combined with a lower-than-usual number of adoptions. This is occurring in shelters across the country right now. If you can delay surrendering your dog, or if you are able to rehome your dog to a new family on your own, please do so!

#### BEFORE MAKING AN APPOINTMENT FOR YOU TO SURRENDER YOUR PET, WE WILL ASK:

1. How can we help you keep your pet?
  - Our goal is to help keep pets with their families, if at all possible! If you're looking for resources to help you keep your pet, please visit our Pet Resource Center, which contains an organized list of spay/neuter, vaccination clinic, and financial assistance options that may help.
  - If you need dog or cat food during this tough time, please let us know! We have a supply of pet food and oftentimes other supplies, for the sole purpose of helping people keep their pets - instead of surrendering.
2. Have you tried rehoming your pet on your own?
  - This is beneficial because you know your pet best, and you know what type of new home they would do best in, and it allows you to be part of the process of finding a new family for your pet. Plus, your pet will not need to enter the Shelter, which is helpful as we work to maintain a humane capacity within the Shelter.
  - For help rehoming your pet on your own, visit Adopt-a-Pet (it's only for dogs and cats at this time): [www.rehomeadoptpet.com/702770](http://www.rehomeadoptpet.com/702770)
3. Did you originally adopt your pet from another shelter or rescue organization?
  - If you please contact that shelter or rescue organization to return the pet there. Responsible rescue organizations and other shelters usually require that any pet adopted from their organization be returned to them and will take the pet back, if the owner can no longer keep them. Please give the shelter or rescue at least a few days to respond - they're busy, too!
4. If you have exhausted all options and find that you still need to surrender your pet to our Shelter, please email us at [animalshelter@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:animalshelter@fairfaxcounty.gov) to schedule an appointment.
  - We are receiving more surrender requests than usual, and we schedule appointments based on the order residents contact us and based on capacity for any given species within the Shelter.
  - Please be patient. You will hear from Shelter staff within 48 hours to start the surrender process.
  - If you have already emailed, you do not need to call to request an appointment. If you emailed an appointment request, we will respond, and if you've received a response via email you do not need to call. This will not speed up the process and may delay our response to you.
  - Email is the preferred method for communicating a need to surrender your pet: [animalshelter@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:animalshelter@fairfaxcounty.gov)





## Support Care Outside the Shelter

Unless an animal is sick, injured, or unsafe, the right place for an animal to receive care is outside a shelter. Partner with your community by providing the support that keeps pets with people.

- If a momma cat is not located when kittens are found, provide support and supplies to help finders raise kittens until they are old enough for rehoming (6 weeks in most cases).
- Ask if there are supplies or services that the shelter can provide that will help slow down or prevent the need for an animal to be admitted into the shelter. Depending on agency resources, this might include veterinary care, spay/neuter surgery, food, pet care supplies, behavioral training support, rehoming support, or temporary boarding.
- Use a rehoming platform to make it easier for the public to rehome pets or found animals outside of the shelter.

### We're here to help families through hard times.

If you're overwhelmed by challenges that seem super-sized, you're not alone. We offer assistance to help keep you and your pet together, and if [your pet needs a new home](#), we're here for that too. Explore our resources below or reach out and tell us more about you and your pet.

Shape the path to your preferred method of communication: consider an email address reserved for case management requests or link to a request assistance form.

In the space below, mirror information also available on a Pet Support/Resources page of your website; list resources and support available at your shelter or in your community, like a pet food bank, behavior helpline, assistance with veterinary care, emergency fostering, etc.

My pet has behavioral issues. ☐

I can't find pet-friendly housing. ☐

I'm having trouble paying for vet care or pet supplies. ☐

I'm being deployed or experiencing a health/housing emergency and can't take care of my pet. ☐

I need a safe place for me and my pet. ☐

I'm worried my pet won't be compatible with children. ☐

Visit [www.sample-shelter-site.squarespace.com](http://www.sample-shelter-site.squarespace.com) for website copy ideas

## POST-SHELTER ADMISSION: PROVIDE ANIMAL-CENTERED HOUSING, MOVE ANIMALS THROUGH WITH URGENCY

### Leverage Your Data: Identify Shelter Capacity and Monitor Population Trends

Fast track/slow track length of stay

Number or % fast track

Expected LOS fast track

Number or % slow track

Expected LOS slow track

Average overall length of stay

Right-size the number of animals in shelter care by looking at and using your shelter data on a regular basis to track trends and respond to concerning population dynamics leading to crowding.

#### Questions to ask yourself:

- Do you know the canine and feline aLOS for the past year? Past month?
- How does the number of animals in the shelter today compare to the staff available to provide daily care?

Visit: [www.sheltermedicine.com/library/shelter-capacity-calculators/](http://www.sheltermedicine.com/library/shelter-capacity-calculators/) for handy dandy custom calculators



[info@sheltermedicine.com](mailto:info@sheltermedicine.com)



[www.sheltermedicine.com](http://www.sheltermedicine.com)

## Fast Track Yourself to Success

*Super Leveraged!*

- Replace or retrofit housing units that are single-sided or too small by installing a pass-through that converts two cages into one (i.e. double-sided housing).
- Use protocols to provide appropriate preventative healthcare to all pets admitted into the shelter based on their age, health status, and history.
- Determine the staffing level needed to keep animals moving through the shelter and avoid waiting time. Again, reach out if you need help calculating this!

## Make Individual Pathway Plans for Each Animal Admitted for Placement

- Perform daily monitoring and population rounds to identify and respond to individual animal needs promptly, including whether their current pathway is still the best plan.
- Enable and train staff performing intake processing to make animals available for adoption or transfer immediately upon intake based on health, behavior, and policy criteria that make sense for your agency.
- Use “fast” and “slow” tracking to identify the best ways to get individual animals to their optimal outcome as quickly as possible.
  - Fast track (e.g., juveniles, healthy, friendly, special look): prioritize services needed to leave through adoption (i.e., don’t increase LOS with predictable events).
  - Slow track: prioritize promotion and enrichment. The animal doesn’t have to have a long stay in care. The goal is to have proactive systems in place to keep animals from becoming slow track and having a long LOS.



## **Review the To-Do List to Prepare an Animal for Placement and Remove Non-Essential Tasks**

- Stop holding animals back from adoption to wait and see if they will display evidence of health or behavior problems. This is usually a way to create problems.
- Allow animals to be available for adoption prior to completing tests or services that do not affect their outcome (e.g., spay/neuter, heartworm testing, microchipping, etc.).
- Stop routinely screening healthy animals for
  - Retroviruses FeLV and FIV in cats
  - Internal parasites
  - Behavioral problems without historic or observed indication of problems, or problems that will not affect outcome.

## **Remove Barriers and Delays to Outcomes**

Recognize when an animal has a home where they are safe and wanted and seek to return pets there as quickly and efficiently as possible.

- Don't "wheel and deal" for reclaim fees. Instead, welcome donations when offered and celebrate pets returning home.
- Thriving outdoor cats without signs of traditional ownership are thriving because one or more people are caring for them. They do not need sheltering, euthanasia, or adoption; return them promptly to their origin location. Provide sterilization if available, but do not admit these cats.
- Offer collars, ID tags and microchips to reclaimed and owned pets for low to no cost, as this promotes prompt return to home (RTH) of roaming pets, possibly even without shelter admission.
- Adoptions: Home is just better. Get animals out of kennels and into homes by making adoption a pleasant, pain-free process. Default to YES and streamline adoptions by
  - Minimizing lengthy applications
  - Applying automatic screening criteria
  - Customizing counseling to provide the support the prospective adopters want.
- Do not rush to euthanize a shelter animal, but do intentionally gather and review information about each individual animal to decide when euthanasia is the best available outcome. In these cases, do not delay euthanasia.

