

Los Angeles Animal Services Factual Findings

This document consolidates the observations and notes of interviews conducted at the East Valley and Chesterfield Square facilities by the assessment team of Best Friends Animal Society from July 22 to July 31, 2024.

Background

Best Friends Animal Society is a major stakeholder in LA Animal Services and has been involved in Los Angeles animal welfare since 1991. The organization has collaborated directly with LA Animal Services GMs, dating back to Dan Knapp, helping to build a robust community of support around the city's shelters. Best Friends has been part of the mayor's advisory committees in GM selection and has worked to help every general manager succeed by increasing volunteer participation and improving lifesaving outcomes. In 2005, we funded the vacant position of LA Animal Services volunteer coordinator to facilitate greater public participation in shelter and off-site animal adoptions. In 2012, Best Friends launched and funded the No-Kill Los Angeles (NKLA) Coalition of 154 Los Angeles-area rescue organizations exclusively focused on the successful rehoming of dogs and cats from LA Animal Services' six city shelters through financial incentives and grants. At the same time, we took on operation of the mothballed Northeast Valley Animal Shelter and operated it as an adoption center exclusively for city shelter pets and as a low-cost spay/neuter center for low-income city residents. We fulfilled three, 3-year contracts with the city, exceeding the terms of the service agreement by multiple factors through each contract, and effected the smooth transition to new contracts. In 2020, the work of the NKLA Coalition resulted in the City of Los Angeles becoming the nation's largest no-kill community, with a sustained city shelter save rate above 90% for dogs and cats for one full year.

To date, Best Friends has invested more than \$75 million in support of Los Angeles Animal Services.

While never directly involved in shelter operations, Best Friends and coalition members understood that the department would incorporate policies and procedures consistent with no-kill management protocols in order to sustain the operational benefits it enjoyed as a result of the work of the NKLA Coalition.

The following report reveals a failure to incorporate no-kill policies into operations and, in some instances, a failure to even meet minimal humane standards of care.

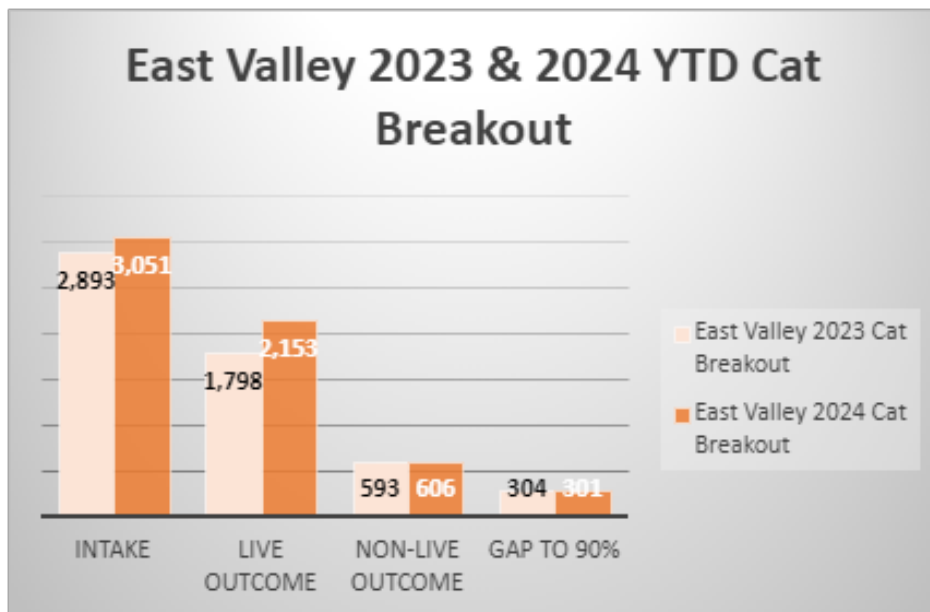
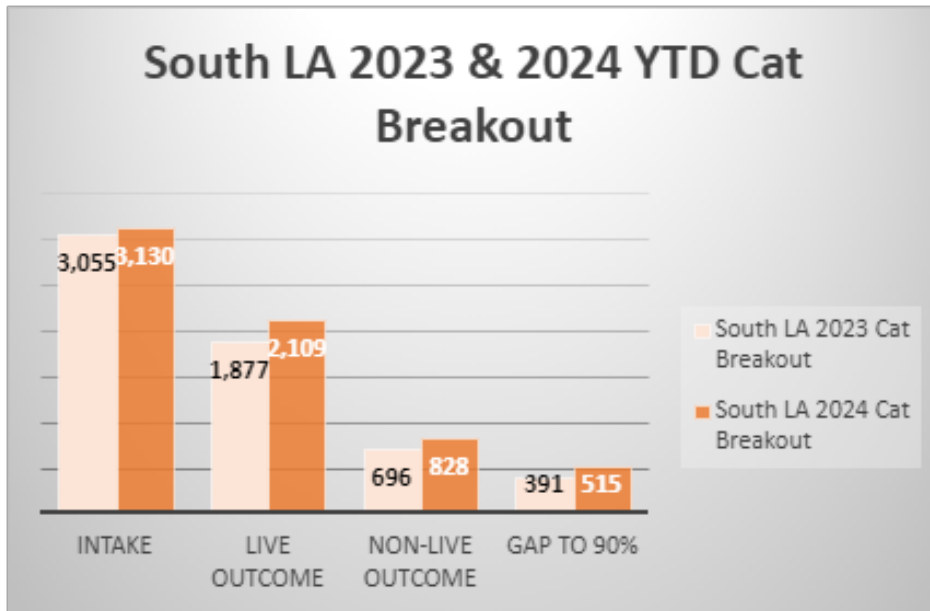
Overview

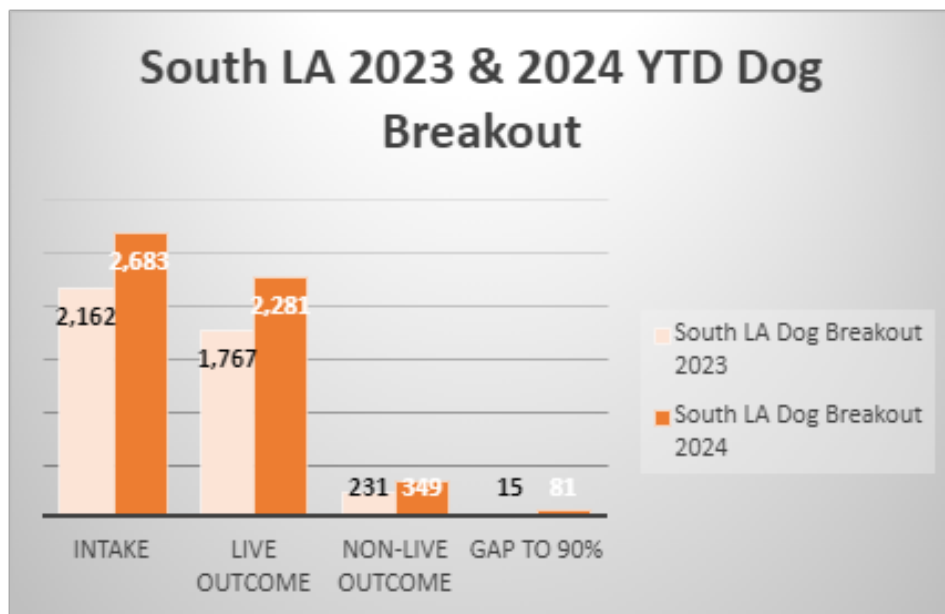
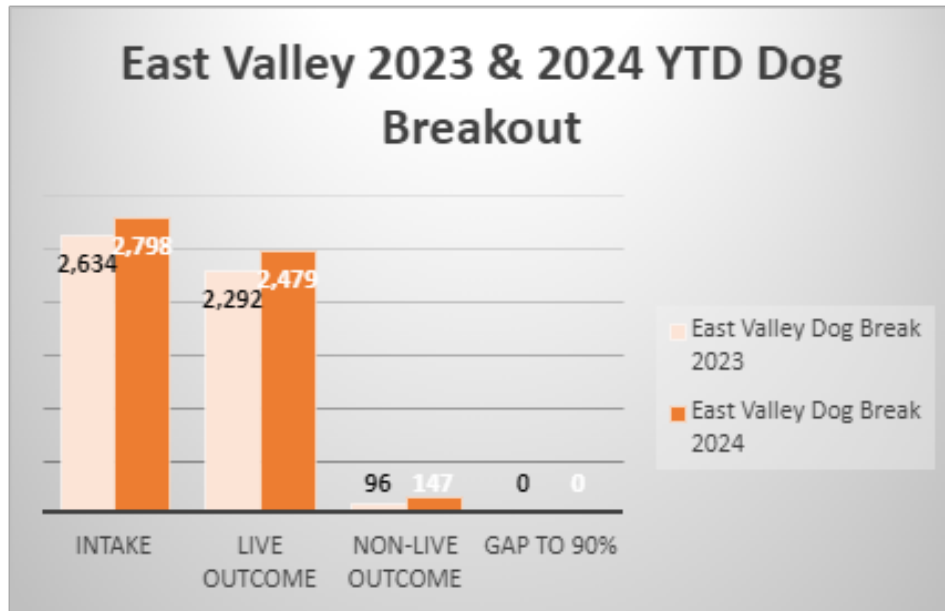
The team feels strongly that the biggest barrier to improving lifesaving at LA Animal Services (LAAS) is the leadership team, specifically the general manager (GM). Staff, including members of the LAAS leadership team, have expressed concerns about a serious lack of communication, accountability, and direction from the GM. We were informed by the GM that there were no written standard operating procedures, and most staff mentioned that they have never received any written protocols. However, one written policy of note is a euthanasia policy which, according to staff, has “changed five times in the last year” without notice or communication of the changes. An example: The GM informed our team that any animal with an upper respiratory infection is to be euthanized, yet members of the medical team stated they were never made aware of that (ill-advised) directive. LAAS staff confirmed this lack of accountability in discussions held during the assessment and **stated** that this negatively affects daily operations at both facilities. The reference mark for this assessment is based on the Los Angeles City Council policy that Los Angeles be a no-kill community with a 90% baseline save rate for all animals entering city shelters.

Shelter data

While on-site, the assessment team received data from shelter leadership for both East Valley and South L.A., which compares live intake, live outcome, and non-live outcomes from January to July 31, 2024. Using that data, we compiled the following graphs that compare their YTD data in 2024 to their 2023 data¹.

¹ Best Friends acknowledges that there are discrepancies between the data provided to us during the assessment and the data that is provided to the public on the LAAS web site





Though maintaining a save rate (on average) of no less than 87% within the given data set, this has been at the expense of the quality of life for those pets in the care of both facilities. The idea of pursuing a save rate of 90% by warehousing dogs and cats in the shelter at the pets' expense is misguided. It contradicts the principles of no-kill sheltering, but also the overall purpose of any

animal shelter, which is to provide a safe haven for displaced and mistreated pets.

Areas of improvement to bring the quality of life of each pet to an acceptable level, while maintaining a 90% or better save-rate, are outlined in this report's recommendations.

The assessment examined three primary aspects of shelter operations:

- Intake
 - Intake diversion
- Standards of care
 - Treatment of dogs and sanitation practices
 - Enrichment
 - Medical
- Outcomes
 - Adoptions
 - Foster
 - Community cat programming

What follows is an outline of those three aspects, presented in no particular order of importance but rather representing the flow of an animal's journey through the sheltering system.

Intake

Intake diversion

The assessment team witnessed nominal efforts to divert non-urgent animal intake at either facility. Overall, shelter intake sharply increased, due to what can only be described as a "conveyor-belt" intake procedure with little to no attempts at diversion. While "safety net" programs (such as return-to-owner, finder-to-foster programming, home-to-home placements, and pet retention support) are advertised on the LAAS website, they were not witnessed by Best Friends staff, despite staff having had opportunities to utilize those programs. It appeared that most staff members at both shelters were unaware that these programs even existed and that they had not received any training on program implementation.

Recommendations

- We recommend an evaluation of current intake practices and work to bring them in line with nationally proven strategies of non-emergency pet surrender. Implementing a managed intake program, which schedules non-emergency intake procedures in order to better sync shelter intake

numbers with available kennel/cage space and staff workload, benefits both animals, staff, and shelter operations. It is a widely accepted policy that supports the success of lifesaving programs.

- A consistent approach to client services, with appropriate counseling and offering of resources, is essential to achieving success in reducing unnecessary animal intake. We recommend that LAAS provide customer service training and managed intake training for all staff, as well as ensure that public-facing staff has a good understanding of resources available to the public.
- Create a thorough SOP on intake and intake diversion.
- More resources should be allocated for public programming that can help increase owner retention. These resources should include [Adopt a Pet](#) flyers that encourage owners to find new homes for pets without having them enter the shelter, materials to assist with behavior issues, and supplies such as food, vaccines, leashes, and collars made available via donation. Other resources (such as medical care) can be obtained by working with local veterinarians to offer services at a reduced price and/or offering some services (where appropriate) at the shelter. By offering public resources and managing intake, overall intake at the shelter will be reduced, and more animals will be reunited with their families.
- We recommend shoring up resources to educate the public on what to do upon finding a stray or lost pet. With the size of the service area, bringing stray animals to the shelter is often an impediment to them getting back to their homes. However, since our industry has trained the public to do this, we must take steps to change the narrative and encourage community members to help stray animals find their way home before bringing them to the shelter. This includes posting photos of animals on social media and asking neighbors if they recognize the animal, as well as having the pet scanned for a microchip at a local animal hospital.

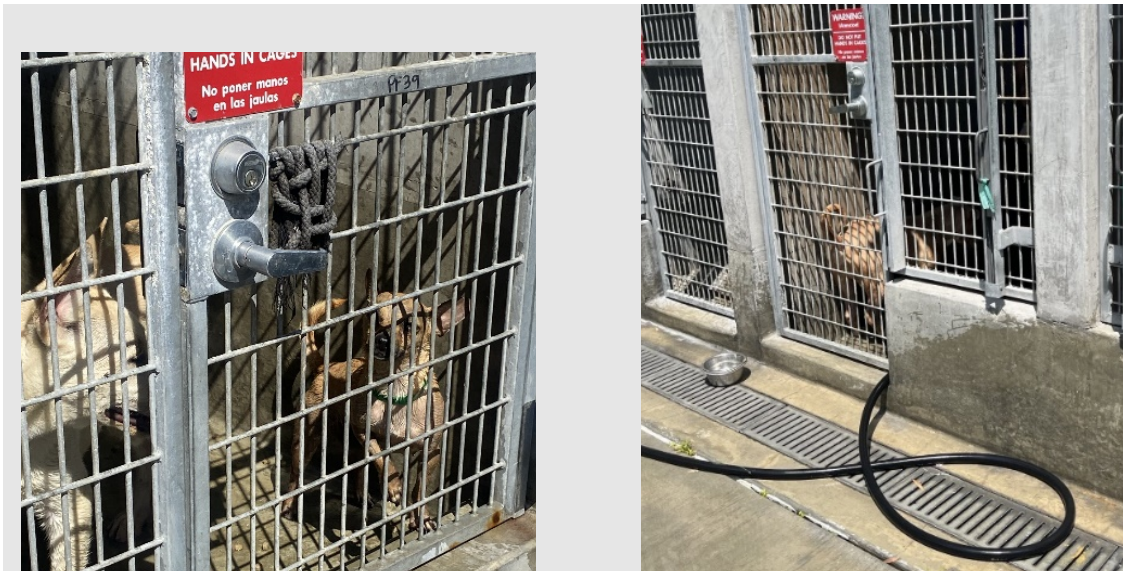
Comment:

The fundamental idea of all no-kill policies and programs is to do whatever is most likely to save the life of a pet — at every point of interaction with the shelter system. Offering alternatives to shelter intake helps to reduce crowding, reduces staff workload, and spares the animal from the stress and trauma of shelter life, which is at the root of many behavioral problems resulting in euthanasia decisions.

Standards of care

The Best Friends assessment team witnessed inhumane treatment of dogs during the cleaning procedures at both the East and South shelters. We observed LAAS staff members at both facilities cleaning dog kennels while they were still occupied, not removing solid waste, flooding the kennels with water, and spraying animals directly in the face. These cleaning procedures, which result in unnecessary stress to the animals, are in direct contradiction to the American Shelter Veterinarian's (ASV) guidelines for care of shelter animals: *"Splattering or soaking animals when spraying water, cleaning products, or disinfection products can cause significant distress. It is unacceptable to spray primary enclosures while animals are inside them. Animals must be removed from nearby housing compartments when overspray is likely."* [ASV Guidelines Standards of Care in relation to sanitation \(see chapter 5\).](#)

The following includes pictures and screen captures of videos, showing LAAS staff subjecting dogs to this treatment.





Sanitation and disease control

As previously mentioned, the assessment revealed major issues with cleaning procedures at both facilities: improper kennel cleaning, not removing solid organic matter, not using cleaning solutions, leaving dogs in kennels during cleaning, and dogs being sprayed directly with hoses. While all animal care technicians are receiving training prior to starting work at LAAS, none of the practices discussed with leadership and the individual tasked with developing onboarding are being followed. This is common knowledge among the GM and direct supervisors of both observed shelters. An expression heard from many in authority: “There’s a difference between what they are supposed to be doing and what they are actually doing.”

The way the cleaning process is supposed to be conducted, as explained to the assessment team, is as follows: Dogs are moved to the front of the kennel for morning feeding, with the rear of the kennel closed off for cleaning. (However, this is not done if multiple dogs are confined in one unit and labeled for separate feedings.) After feeding and cleaning the rear, dogs are supposed to be moved there so that the front can be properly cleaned. It is important to note that, during the assessment (unless it was first brought up by the assessment team), there was no discussion about using Rescue (the brand of kennel disinfectant on-site but not being utilized), any other disinfectant, or recommended contact times (the time period that a chemical must be on a surface to be effective).

At the South L.A. facility, the assessment team never saw the inside sections of the kennels being cleaned, and LAAS staff said these areas are never cleaned

beyond spraying the kennels with water (with dogs and their food still present in the kennel).

At the East L.A. facility, the assessment team observed the cleaning of a kennel housing a brown female dog. The LAAS staff member doing the cleaning continuously sprayed the dog in the face. Attempting to run to the back of the kennel, the dog fell repeatedly.

Recommendations

- We recommend creating a cleaning standard operating procedure using information outlined in the latest ASV guidelines. Staff should be fully trained in this and required to acknowledge that they have received the training.
- Attach proper Rescue labels with the date mixed on all spray bottles and mark the appropriate dilution and contact time.
- Observation periods should be established for animals with known disease exposure, and appropriate PPE should be utilized. Animals should be handled in a specific order (from healthy to exposed to sick) to minimize disease transmission. By implementing comprehensive biosecurity measures and adhering to recommended protocols, LAAS can effectively protect the health and well-being of its animal population.

Comment:

Failure to provide appropriate care described above needs no explication. They are deplorable and inexcusable by any reasonable standard. What may not be evident to all are the consequences of the conditions described. Dogs are effectively “trained” not to trust people by such treatment, and they suffer mental and emotional breakdown, making them less likely to be adopted and more likely to develop behavior issues. In effect, dogs wind up being killed because of their learned response to the mismanagement of their care. This is clearly a violation of public trust and taxpayer expectations.

Medical

At both shelters, the assessment team found no known documented standing orders for medical care, and treatment plans that were inconsistent. According to the chief veterinarian, medical decisions are primarily made by the GM with little to no input from the medical team. Though the medical staff has made efforts to combat a growing issue of upper respiratory infection (URI), the South L.A. facility does not isolate animals already identified as being ill but, rather,

consistently moves dogs around the facility, with no apparent attention to isolating sick animals. The assessment team observed a similar situation at the East L.A. facility, and although East L.A. makes use of isolation rooms, a breakdown in communications and tracking of dogs in care causes many to be exposed to those confirmed with URI.

Coupled with the rapid increase of URI at both facilities, LAAS has experienced a reduction in the number of spay/neuter surgeries performed. After speaking with LAAS medical staff and the chief veterinarian, the assessment team concludes that the current vet staff has little desire to perform in-house sterilizations — a clear barrier to outcomes due to the state prohibiting pets from leaving the shelter prior to being sterilized.

Recommendations

- Current medical staff should receive daily rounds training, provided by the Best Friends Animal Society national shelter medicine team free of charge.
- The chief veterinarian should be involved in all executive leadership-level discussions related to shelter operations and population management. The chief veterinarian's expertise is crucial for decision-making since operational decisions directly impact individual and population health. We recommend the implementation of medical SOPs, along with providing proper training to all appropriate staff on all medical policies and procedures. The Best Friends shelter medicine team can help with the creation of these SOPs.

Enrichment

Enrichment is as essential to animal health as proper nutrition and medical care. A lack of enrichment often manifests itself in behavioral deterioration and increases in illness and disease. The assessment team found that there is virtually no enrichment provided for animals in the shelters' care. Likewise, we didn't see any enrichment items (blankets, beds, toys) in the kennels. The only form of enrichment offered is through playgroups, which is facilitated and executed solely by embedded staff members and volunteers of Dogs Playing for Life, Inc. (DPFL). This is the standard at both the South L.A. and East Valley facilities. At the South L.A. facility, animals in the shelter's care seldom receive human interaction, and it may be two weeks or more before they get any extended time outside of their kennels. For example, a dog named Olive Oil who was in care at LAAS and stayed there 240 days, was only taken out of the kennel 14 times during that time and was placed on the euthanasia list before being

rescued at the last minute by a local partner. At the East L.A. facility, there is some volunteer involvement for enrichment and behavior modification; however, animals remain in their kennels for extended periods of time. Since there is little in place as far as pathway planning, animals stay in the shelter's care longer. The average length of stay for animals in care over 30 days is 102 days. Though cats are afforded more daily enrichment than dogs, based on our observations of both facilities, there are areas for improvement for cats, such as making sure they all have safe places to hide in their cages.

Recommendations

- We recommend integrating in-kennel enrichment into cleaning routines and establishing formalized schedules for playgroups and out-of-kennel time for all dogs. Shelters should ensure all animals receive adequate mental and physical stimulation. Volunteers play crucial roles in implementing enrichment programs that foster a sense of responsibility for each animal's well-being.
- Information should be gathered through playgroups and used during the decision-making for pathways of each dog in care.
- We recommend that DPFL staff train all LAAS staff on execution of daily playgroups, as well as create and implement an SOP for playgroups and note-taking.
- We recommend coupling playgroups with cleaning times to give all dogs in care a moment outside of their kennels. This makes it less likely that cleaning technicians are cleaning around multiple dogs inside a kennel.
- All cats should have access to soft resting areas and hiding spots such as [feral dens](#) or cardboard boxes. For comprehensive guidance on feline housing, please refer to this [comprehensive article](#) for detailed information and recommendations.

Outcomes

Adoptions

Many barriers in place at LAAS are limiting adoption opportunities. One of these is the requirement that potential community adopters provide landlord approval and address verification to be considered eligible. There is a general lack of customer service in the adoption process at both facilities, although this problem was more apparent at the South L.A. facility. Adopters do not receive any direction or assistance throughout the process, and they are often left to explore the animal housing areas on their own without guidance or follow-up from staff.

At both facilities, the assessment team observed multiple instances of interested adopters not getting any support from staff, and then leaving the shelter without adopting. When members of the assessment team stepped in to offer support to potential adopters, they also struggled to find staff members available to help, or they were met with resistance from staff. In addition, local laws require that animals be spayed or neutered before being allowed to leave a shelter. This results in adopted animals holding kennel space, which increases the risk of disease transmission and space-related euthanasia.

Recommendations

- Foster an “all-hands-on-deck” mentality and cross-train staff so that, when needed, they can support each other. A sense of urgency to increase adoptions and improve customer service should be instilled and encouraged with incentives in each staff member.
- Bios should be created for every available pet and used to highlight individual animals’ behaviors, temperaments, and compatibility with different lifestyles. These bios can also challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about certain breeds or types of animals. PetSmart Charities created an AI tool, called [Rescue Writer \(TM\)](#), to help volunteers, staff, and fosters to create instant profiles.
- Remove superficial barriers to adoptions such as landlord approval and address verification.
- To reduce length of stay, free up space and allow families to take their new pets home the same day, we recommend allowing pets to go home as a “foster to adopt.” This allows adopters to take their pets home after agreeing to return the pet for a later spay/neuter appointment, and reduces the time spent in the shelter. This is especially important for pets possibly in danger of euthanasia for space because they are held over a weekend. Many shelters across the country do this successfully, with appropriate measures and agreements in place to ensure pets are spayed and neutered.
- Another avenue for increasing adoptions is implementation of a system to [fast track](#) easier-to-adopt animals. This would involve getting any pet deemed highly adoptable (by means of a customized matrix) spayed or neutered the day after the stray hold is up, allowing the pet to leave the shelter immediately after adoption. This also means immediately placing these pets into prominent shelter adoption viewing areas. (Fast-tracked pets get adopted much faster.) The overall concept is to get pets (who we

know are likely to leave quickly) out of the shelter to make more room for those who will need more time.

Foster

The foster program at both shelters is operated entirely by volunteers. While volunteer involvement is a definite asset, the foster programs should be overseen by an LAAS staff member(s). Community members fostering animals are financially responsible for all medical care. And though this regulation was confirmed by the general manager, this is not the norm for shelters operating successful foster programs. The foster program currently does not serve shelter animals in most need of fostering (animals with medical or behavioral concerns). The assessment team witnessed one instance of two community members coming to the shelter to foster after hearing about the high level of sick dogs in the shelter's care. But LAAS staff members informed them that they could not foster any unsterilized animal or any animal with medical problems. There is no proactive sterilization occurring at the shelter. The existing foster contract, which is four pages long, is a barrier to recruiting new foster homes. Supervisory staff expressed a desire to update the foster program, but the assessment team found no evidence of any effort to update the program or remove the barriers that prevent it from being effective.

Recommendations:

- Research other successful programs and create guidelines and procedures that focus on animals most in need of support.
- Provide a foster coordinator to oversee the program. Recruit big dog fosters-in- waiting. Have them trained, ready, and waiting for medical cases, as well as animals who are seniors, shy and fearful, or jumpy/mouthy. This should mirror the current kitten fosters-in-waiting program.
- Work directly with the veterinary team to create and implement a medical protocol for pets with common illnesses in order to alleviate space limitations and ensure positive foster placement.
- Offer ongoing support and resources for foster caregivers to ensure they feel confident and supported in their roles. This could include access to behavior consultations with shelter behavior and enrichment specialists, veterinary care assistance from partnerships outside of the shelter, and round-the-clock support from other foster program “mentors.”

Community cat programming

We commend LAAS for the extensive amount of sterilization surgeries done in the community since the inception of this program; however, the assessment team found that program is lacking in structure. There are persistent communication problems among various stakeholders, including LAAS staff. The front desk staff who were interviewed by Best Friends didn't know about the community cat program. The assessment team sat in on a meeting (that included management, shelter supervisors, and the South L.A. receiving staff). The meeting focused on the lack of information collected on where stray cats were found. The staff were not only unaware of the directive and the ability to put these stray cats into the program, but they were also unaware of the program's existence and were never properly trained on community cat programming. Obtaining information on where a cat is found is imperative to returning the cat to the proper caregiver. The philosophical beliefs of some staff (some feeling that TNVR is the equivalent of animal abandonment) and the lack of training of others could be the primary reason why LAAS's feline intake for the months of May and June of 2024 is higher than it has been in the past three years, at 2,601 and 2,636, respectively. The feline save rate year to date through June is 82.6%.

Recommendations

- Create, implement, and train all receiving and customer service staff on an SOP document that details the CCP program and includes all necessary information.
- Create an intake form (for all stray cats) that tracks all information needed for successful return-to-field. Best Friends can provide templates for this form.
- Include CCP sterilization within in-house spay/neuter planning to alleviate relying solely on external veterinary partnerships.
- Implement a community cat complaint mitigation team that not only defines nuisance behavior but trains staff on how to hold mitigation conversations with the public.
- We recommend that LAAS provide staff, volunteers, leadership, community members, and partners with comprehensive training on the benefits of and need for stray cat intake diversion as part of a full-scale community cat program. All staff should receive training on outdoor cat nuisance mitigation and kitten diversion programming so that they can have more successful public conversations. Best Friends has abundant resources to help with this.

Comment: The LA City Council approved a city-wide community cat program in December of 2020, and the Commission adopted the governing rules and regulations in

February of 2022. Such programs have a proven lifesaving track record and high public acceptance in communities across the country. No-kill policy would advance these options as a matter of management decisions and communication. Compliance should not be subject to personal opinion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is much to be done at LAAS; however, we believe it can be achieved, and that the city of Los Angeles can once again be considered a no-kill city. Embracing and fully implementing changes that have been proven successful in cities across the nation will take commitment and dedication from both city and agency leadership.

Resources

Intake

Intake diversion

- [Keeping Pets with their families](#)
- [People, Pets, and Policies: Towards Community Supported Animal Sheltering](#)

Standards of Care

Cleaning

- [Best Friends Cleaning & Disease Control Playbook](#)
- [Cleaning & Sanitation Training Video](#)

Enrichment

- [Canine Care & Enrichment Playbook](#)
- [Feline Care & Enrichment Playbook](#)

Medical

- [Best Friends Shelter Disease Outbreak Management Playbook](#)
- [Daily Rounds: Planning a Pathway Playbook](#)
- [Innovative Care for Canine URI & Kennel Cough](#)

Outcomes

Adoptions

- Operational training playbook on [Adoption](#)
- [Removing Barriers to Adoption](#) webinar

- [Making the leap to fee-waived adoptions: Reduced fee adoptions and why they work](#)
- PetSmart Charities' [Rescue Writer](#) AI tool for creating bios.
- Sample effective [kennel cards](#)
- Online learning course on [Client Service and Barrier-Free Adoptions](#)

Foster

- [Foster Programs Training Playbook](#)
- Best Friends *Humane Animal Control* manual chapter on [Foster Programs](#)
- [Cat Foster Care Manual](#)
- [Kitten Foster Care Manual](#)
- [Dog Foster Care Manual](#)
- [Secrets to Pet Foster Program Success](#)
- [HASS “Recruit More Fosters” Blog](#)
- American Pets Alive [Tips to Recruit More Foster Homes](#)

Community cat programming

- Best Friends comprehensive [Community Cat Programs Handbook](#)
- [What to do if you find kittens](#) flyer
- Best Friends webinar on [mitigating nuisance cat complaints](#)
- Best Friends *Humane Animal Control* manual chapter on [Management of Stray and Feral Cats](#)
- [2022 AAFP/ISFM Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines: Approach and Handling Techniques](#)
- [A Long-Term Lens: Cumulative Impacts of Free-Roaming Cat Management Strategy and Intensity on Preventable Cat Mortalities](#)
- [Guidelines for medical care for community cats](#)
- [The Dilemma of the Friendly Outdoor Cat](#)
- HumanePro: [Returning Healthy Feral Cats: Tips for veterinary care during trap-neuter-return](#)