APPENDIX O
Tracking data, using data to make decisions, and transparency

By Brent Toellner, Best Friends senior director of lifesaving programs

Several years ago, I was working with a shelter director in the south. The shelter had the goal of achieving no-kill (being defined as a 90% save rate). They had support from their administration and their elected officials. Everyone was on the same page for saving lives.

But the shelter director was frustrated. The shelter had implemented the Dogs Playing for Life playgroup program and some other behavior programming to aid in lifesaving for dogs with non-severe behavioral challenges. They hired a full-time veterinarian, so they were doing more medical treatments than ever before. But they were stuck. Their save rate had climbed a few percentage points, yet they were still a little short of their 90% goal.

So, we looked at the data, and specifically, the reasons why euthanasia decisions were being made. We quickly identified that their biggest lifesaving gap wasn't dogs (even though much of their programming was designed for the dogs), it was cats. About half the animals euthanized in their shelter were cats marked as "feral."

The shelter director said that releasing cats in the community wasn't allowed under their current ordinances, so he'd never really considered them a source of live outcomes. But based on their data, it was clear that they would never achieve their goal without coming up with positive solutions for this population of cats entering their shelter.

Armed with the data, the shelter director approached his direct supervisor and eventually his elected leaders about the need to change the ordinance so they could achieve their mutual goal. Within a few months, the ordinances were changed, and they began doing a shelter-neuter-return (SNR) program for the feral cats in their community. Within a short amount of time, the shelter reached and exceeded their 90% save rate goal. After more than a year of frustration and toil in implementing programming that wasn't targeted at their largest need, they were able to quickly solve the issue by focusing most specifically on the largest gap of savable animals in their shelter.

Tracking data is important in any type of industry, and animal welfare is no exception. Accurate and consistent data tracking (and just as importantly, making time to analyze the data) can help you, as a leader in your shelter, understand the trends in your community and in your shelter. It can also help you make the most effective programmatic decisions that will have your team focusing on the work that will have the highest impact on your goals.

Data-informed decision-making can help you work smarter, not harder. While I'm sad to report that the hard work won't go away, getting the results you want for all the hard work will make it more rewarding.

In addition to tracking your data internally, sharing the data with your community is also important. Transparency through data sharing builds trust. It also gives you opportunities to tell the stories of your successes and address areas of need where the community can support your work. The public is ill-equipped to solve a challenge they don't know exists. By sharing your challenges and specific actions about how the public can help you, you can give them the opportunity to be a part of your lifesaving work. Additionally, many states require cities and counties to share data if they receive Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. SPDA will enable shelters to retrieve the data faster and process these requests quickly.

Because of the importance of data and data transparency, Best Friends has developed many tools to aid in data capture — including Shelter Pet Data Alliance (SPDA), the most comprehensive dataset of animal shelter data that has ever existed. SPDA aids in automatic data capture and analysis and is designed so shelter leaders can analyze their data and compare themselves to similar organizations across the country.

The Pet Lifesaving Dashboard provides a public display of individual shelter-level data, which is critical if we want people to understand the needs of the shelters in their communities as well as neighboring ones. It also helps animal welfare professionals understand the needs across the country so we can support each other in our collective lifesaving work.

It's easy to sit back and say, "I'm not really a data person," but the expectation of leaders in industries is that they understand and can talk about their data. Let's not be afraid of rolling up our sleeves. Let's simplify and streamline it. Get comfortable talking about it. And get comfortable about being transparent and sharing it with our community. When we make smart, data-informed decisions, we do right by our staff and allow them to focus on the work that will make the most impact. We do right by our community by being sure we are providing the best services we can for them (and that they know about it!). We do right by ourselves and getting the rewards and benefit of our hard work. And we do right by the animals who come into our shelters.

So, let's dig in.

Data-informed decision-making

Animal sheltering work is hard work. There are always too many things to do and never enough time, resources, or staff to do them all. I know it's not uncommon for things to sit on a "to do" list for six months. Then, when you look at it six months later, you're frustrated because you still haven't gotten to that new project.

But making data-informed decisions can help focus and prioritize the work that will have the greatest impact toward your goals. Nothing is more frustrating than putting in the work and not getting the results you want. Data doesn't just guide the work, but it can also identify when things you want to do are not going to have the impact you think. Being able to focus your limited resources on the greatest need is essential to get the results you and your community want.

Transparency

Transparency in animal welfare can be scary. Often, we are concerned about what happens if we are candid. What will the community think if they see behind the curtain? If a shelter isn't no-kill, there is the concern that the data will be weaponized and used against the staff. If a shelter is no-kill or close to it, some worry that people will feel more comfortable bringing pets to them and intake will go up beyond their already strapped capacity of care.

People in your community want the shelter to do well. They want animals to be given a second chance and be adopted. And as is often human nature, if people don't have information, they assume the worst. The absence of information usually makes advocates think things are worse than they really are, and the void of other information makes it impossible for the rest of the public to know any differently. Being open and honest with your public can be scary. But it will pay dividends in the long run.

Back in 2012, I co-founded an organization that took over the municipal contract in my hometown of Kansas City. From the start, we were committed to public transparency. Each month, we'd share our full data so the community could see the progress we were making. We shared the increases in save rates, and the rise in adoptions and other live outcomes.

Then, at the end of the first year of operations we had a dilemma. As we were getting ready to share our first full year of data, a number jumped out at me: 160 animals had died in our care. Throughout the course of the year, this small percentage of our population (less than 2%) had fallen under the radar. In aggregate, however, it was a lot of animals. Seeing that 160 animals had died in care, I knew the public would have images of dogs languishing in their kennels — which was even more problematic because that was part of the reason for the shelter leadership change the year prior.

I knew animals weren't getting sick and dying at our shelter, so I wanted to better understand who these 160 animals were and started digging into the data. It turned out that the vast majority of those that died in care were neo-natal kittens — the most fragile animals in any shelter. Further, the vast majority of those died in foster care — in a home that cared for them. This made sense. Heck, my wife and I lost a kitten from a litter we were personally fostering earlier that year. As upsetting as it is, kittens dying in foster homes is different than dogs dying in kennels.

So we shared our full and complete data. We highlighted our wins: We doubled our adoptions, sent more animals to rescue, and increased our save rate by 25 percentage points. But there was still more work to do. We were still below our 90% save rate goal. And then, there was 'died in care' — those 160 animals, mostly neonatal kittens, who died in a foster home. Kittens were fragile, but we needed to do better. We sent that messaging out to our community and hoped for the best.

The public was overwhelmingly supportive. They celebrated our successes with us. More importantly, a couple of our kitten fosters came forward and told us they weighed their kittens on a kitchen scale twice daily and recorded those weights so they could recognize weight loss immediately, before it was too late.

We purchased about $250 in kitchen scales and made them available to our neonatal kitten fosters. The following year, we reduced that died-in-care number by more than two-thirds and came in with a total save rate above 90%.

The public wants animals to have successful outcomes in your shelter. Be transparent with them. Celebrate your wins with them. But don't be afraid to share your struggles. They may be able to help in amazing ways.

The basic data matrix

Back in the mid-2010s, many groups in animal welfare including Best Friends Animal Society, PetSmart Charities, Maddie's Fund, The Petco Foundation (now Petco Love), the ASPCA, and Humane Society of the United States (among others), created the basic data matrix to replace the Asilomar Accords. The matrix was designed to simplify the data collection process and represent the most basic information all animal shelters should collect. Data includes intake type by species (stray, owner surrender, seized, transferred in, owner-requested euthanasia) and basic outcomes information also by species (adopted, transferred out, returned to owner, returned in field, died in care, lost in care, and euthanized).

Tracking and sharing this basic information lets shelters and communities track trends over time by species and identify changes in different intake and outcome types. It also allows shelter leadership to have more programmatic insight by seeing high-level trends and changes. Additionally, the standard format allows national organizations to easily aggregate

data at a county, state, or national level to understand areas of the greatest need and opportunities across animal welfare.

About owner-requested euthanasia (ORE)

ORE is a complex issue in animal sheltering with many variables to consider, some of which are discussed below, but it is a figure that should be included in all save rate formulas.

ORE is an important service in many communities, and shelters can offer it to assist low-income pet owners who cannot afford veterinary services for end-of-life care, as well as when no low-cost services are available. This is one of the reasons why the no-kill benchmark is set at 90% rather than 100%. Animals who are suffering from conditions related to age, injury, or disease, as well as dogs whose unmanageable aggression would prevent their safe rehoming typically comprise no more than 10% of all pets entering the shelter system. Euthanasia in these situations is justifiable and therefore should be accounted for in a no-kill benchmark.

Shelters should provide ORE only for pets who meet the standard described below. For instance, some shelters will honor an owner's request because of the historical view that an owner has the right to determine the fate of a pet (who, under the eyes of the law, is considered property). Many shelters have changed their policy in recent years to require that pet owners surrender healthy or treatable animals (rather than honoring a euthanasia request) so that the shelter can determine the best outcome for that animal.

The standard for qualifying an ORE as true euthanasia is as follows. Each pet, no matter whether they were surrendered as an ORE, should be euthanized only if:

- A veterinarian or trained medical staff under guidelines set by a veterinarian has deemed the prognosis to be poor or grave, there is no chance of recovering an acceptable quality of life, and/or it would be clearly inhumane or unsafe not to do so immediately.

- In cases of unmanageable canine aggression, (1) a veterinarian has eliminated medical treatment as a solution, (2) rehabilitation by a specialist in canine behavior has failed, and (3) staff and public safety cannot be reasonably assured; or when other management protocols seriously compromise quality of life.

This issue is further complicated by different shelter operating models across the country. Some shelters that operate both public clinics and animal shelters ask how we distinguish between ORE in a clinic setting versus a shelter setting and how that affects the data. While individual shelters operate differently, the recommended standard for not counting a euthanasia as part of the shelter's admissions data should be the following: a shelter operating

a clinic where a veterinarian meets a human client with a pet and the veterinarian determines that the pet is suffering irremediably with no chance of recovering an acceptable quality of life.

If the veterinarian deems that the pet is treatable, but the person still requests euthanasia, that pet should then be referred to the shelter to be relinquished. That would then be considered part of the shelter's data. If a shelter doesn't have a clinic where a veterinary/client relationship is established, then the pet would be taken in by the shelter. While a pet's person may request euthanasia, the recommendation is that the shelter take full legal possession of that pet and only then determine (on the advice of veterinary staff) what the best course or outcome is for that individual animal.

Beyond the basic data matrix

Save rate/live release rate

There are a number of ways by which shelters measure the admissions and outcomes of pets in their care, and each method has pros and cons. The save rate formula below has been used for consistency across the nation. However, an alternative metric called the live release rate is being used by many shelters as well. We encourage shelters to consider transitioning to the use of save rate as their own internal standard, particularly because live release rate formulas may vary from shelter to shelter.

Here's an explanation of each rate and the formulas often associated with the rates (In each formula, "shelter deaths" = animals euthanized, killed, or died in care):

- Save rate:

  For individual shelters, a gross save rate calculation is used:
  [(live intakes) - (lost in care) - (shelter deaths)] ÷ [(live intakes)]
  At the state and national levels, a net save rate calculation is used:
  [(live intakes) - (transfers in) - (lost in care) - (shelter deaths)] ÷ [(live intakes - transfers in)]

- Live release rate:

  Pets with live outcomes as a percentage of total outcomes (excludes ORE from total outcomes):
  [(live outcomes) ÷ [(total outcomes) – (ORE)]

Length of Stay

Length of stay is one of the least understood data points, but it is also one of the most influential. The number of animals a shelter has in its care on any given day is a direct result of the number admitted into the shelter as well as how long they stay in care.

Length of stay (or more accurately, average length of stay) is a standard report in most shelter management software platforms. Essentially, it is the average length of time between when an animal comes into the shelter and when it leaves. If an animal comes in on a Monday and leaves the following Monday through adoption or transfer, the length of stay for that animal is seven days. If they leave a month later, their length of stay is 30 days.

The following chart from the American Shelter Veterinarian (ASV) "Sheltering Guidelines" shows the impact of a longer length of stay on shelter capacity:

Table 2.1. Example of the relationship between length of stay and shelter population

Average admissions per day	Average length of stay (days)	Average daily population (animals)	Admissions per year (animals)
10	7	70	3,650
10	14	140	3,650
10	21	210	3,650

By increasing the speed at which animals leave the shelter and cutting down on the average length of stay, shelters can reduce the daily animal population, alleviate stress on staff and animals, and increase the volume of pets for which they can provide adequate support.

Days in care

Days in care is similar to length of stay and is an important measure when determining shelter capacity constraints. Length of stay is a calculation that occurs once an animal has left the shelter, and measures how long it took before that dog or cat had a live or non-live outcome. Days in care provides a measurement of how long an animal is in the shelter and applies to current residents.

While some animals may have been in the shelter for only a day or even just a few hours, others may be long timers who have been there 30 days, 60 days, six months, or even a year or more. Days in care can help identify when there is a certain group of animals who are simply not moving out of the shelter.

Animal age

While not a part of the basic data matrix, animal ages (typically labelled as 5 months old or less or over 5 months of age) can be important elements in shelter data tracking. Age is particularly valuable in terms of doing deeper evaluations of programming needs, which are quite different for younger animals, who are often more susceptible to diseases than they are for juvenile or adult animals.

Return to owner (RTO)/return to owner in field

Many organizations are now having officers return animals to their homes in the field without taking them to the shelter. The officers scan for microchips in the field to help find owners, or, if no microchip is found, knock on doors, and ask area residents if they are familiar with the found pet. In these instances, animals should be labeled as RTO. A sheltering organization may choose to separate RTO from returns in the field for data measurement, performance metrics, or other analysis, but these categories also can be grouped together in the basic data matrix.

About Shelter Pet Data Alliance (SPDA)

Powered by Best Friends Animal Society in partnership with Maddie's Fund, PetSmart Charities and Petco Love, SPDA is a new data analytics platform that will help enhance the availability of data to the industry. Data will be set to automatically update in the system by connecting to your shelter management software (not available yet on all platforms). Additionally, it will allow shelters to compare themselves to similar shelters across the country and see how they are addressing the same challenges.

The platform launched May 1, 2023, and will have more features rolling out as time progresses. We're excited to share the platform as the most transparent, expansive data source in the industry.