

APPENDIX A

Community Engagement Strategies

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Austin Animal Center’s Animal Protection program operates from the belief that well-run, professional animal control programs can promote and enhance animal welfare in the community, support a community’s lifesaving ethic and positively affect lifesaving in the municipal animal shelter without compromising public safety or leaving animals in neglectful situations. This engagement-based model evolved from the Austin City Council’s 2010 mandate that the city shelter achieve at least a 90 percent save rate for animals entering the shelter.

While a 34-point implementation plan was created to get the shelter’s internal operations to no-kill, there was no road map for how animal control would support this new ethic. Austin’s animal control department was operating from the tradition of measuring success by the number of animal impounds and captured stray dogs. Animal Protection supervisors realized that this old measure of success would not support lifesaving efforts.

Going forward, all policies, procedures and practices needed to be filtered through the lens of “What needs to change to support lifesaving?” particularly given that the solution was not going to be more officers or a larger budget. Focusing on impounds was untenable in terms of live outcomes goals because the animal center simply did not have enough capacity. Impounding animals without evaluating their individual needs would result in bringing in animals who did not actually need the center’s resources to resolve whatever situation they were in.

The entire program, then, needed to be restructured and transitioned from a punishment-based model, with success determined by intake and ticket quotas, to an engagement-based model. To achieve this, the teams did the following:

- Reprioritized activities, which resulted in resource reallocations to focus on what’s most important (in this case, lifesaving, redefining animals in need, and preserving, protecting and promoting the human-animal bond)

- Emphasized the value of collaborations with internal shelter operations, community members and partners
- Sought strategies to balance enforcement and engagement

This appendix focuses on how to achieve that balance between enforcement and engagement.

Creating a culture of meeting residents where they are

The first strategy is to create a culture of meeting residents where they are, which means empowering animal control officers to work with residents to achieve compliance and resolve the root cause of the issue if possible. Officers must be empathetic and non-judgmental in all interactions with community members and receive adequate training in customer service, conflict resolution and engagement. Officers must be able to think about what created the situation in which they have been called to intervene, and not just focus on what they see in front of them. When making hiring decisions regarding officers, it is imperative to focus on behaviors and experiences that speak to these skills.

An example of addressing a root cause is considering the factors that contribute to habitually straying dogs. Impounding the dog may seem like the solution, but people have pets for a reason and will usually replace the animals, creating a cycle that wastes animal control resources by requiring officers to respond to an address over and over, contributes to shelter intake, and does nothing to improve the community's animal welfare ethic.

To resolve the factors contributing to a dog habitually running off his owner's property, officers need easy access to provide resources to residents, whether it is fencing, a better gate latch, a crate or other structure to contain the dog, or other ways to help the owner keep the pet safely at home. It's also important for the officer to approach the situation from the perspective of wanting to understand the viewpoint of the owner and involving him or her in deciding what a positive outcome can look like and how it can be achieved.

Helping officers build positive relationships with community members

Animal control officers need to understand that the purpose of their interactions with the community is not to punish wrongdoing, but to build positive relationships and resolve animal welfare concerns by working toward compliance. Punitive measurements do not typically lead to behavioral change, particularly when trying to resolve nuisance complaints or quality-of-life concerns.

Enforcement is just one tool that officers have available to them in trying to achieve residents' compliance with an ordinance, code or law. The animal control agency will need

to determine for itself what offenses must result in immediate citations. In Austin, these offenses center on public safety or health concerns. For example, failure to quarantine an animal associated with a rabies exposure receives an immediate citation. Violations of dangerous dog requirements are another example. Neglect complaints, which do not present immediate safety and health concerns for the animal, are handled on a case-by-case basis; officers issue a notice of violation and can work with the animal's owner to rectify the situation over a 10-day period.

Creating meaningful measures of success

Measuring success through outputs such as the number of citations issued or the number of animal impounds does not measure the effect an animal control program has on rabies control, public safety, animal welfare or shelter lifesaving. Enforcement is simply one strategy to try to gain a resident's compliance with local codes or ordinances. Used indiscriminately, it often doesn't improve an animal's situation, doesn't resolve the root cause of the situation (which may re-occur with a different animal in the future) and/or doesn't engender public support. It is also important to encourage officers to work toward a balance between meeting response times and providing quality responses.

With the new framework, performance measures could include the following:

- Successfully diverted intake (for example, through a return-in-field program in which officers are encouraged or required to return animals to owners or caretakers without bringing them to the shelter)
- Time spent on engagement activities in the field (rather than waiting for calls in the shelter or driving back and forth to the shelter when not necessary for addressing sick, injured, dangerous or at-risk animals)
- Successful resolution of neglect situations and resolution for repetitive complaints such as habitually straying animals

Animal control programs also can impact intake per capita, live release rates, return-to-owner rates and number of bites. In Austin, one success measure used to evaluate the Animal Protection program is overall animal center intake and euthanasia. (See the table below.) It is important to note that the animal center had outreach and community spay/neuter resources prior to 2010. While intake is generally on a declining trend, it reduced much more dramatically with the Animal Protection program change. In 2017, Animal Protection diverted almost 5 percent of the center's would-be intake through a return-in-field program alone.

Austin Animal Center	Intake	Euthanasia
2005 Punishment-based measures and quotas	22,460	12,964
2010 Passing of no-kill mandate	21,181	5,273
2015 Focus on community engagement	17,830	861

Understanding the difference between outreach and engagement

Although outreach efforts have value, the communication flow it creates is one way. Done properly, outreach can connect a segment of the community to services, resources or information that those residents may already want, but don't know how to find. Engagement strategies are about creating a dialogue around an issue and building relationships.

In Austin, the average intake per 100 residents is on a declining trend. However, some geographic areas are not following this overall decline, with an intake three to five times higher than the average. This indicates that outreach efforts were not reaching the residents most in need. Austin's neighborhood-level programs now focus on these neighborhoods with canvassing to create conversations with residents to understand the animal needs from their perspective, including how they frame issues, whether they feel safe and if they feel they have necessary resources. After collecting this information, events, messaging and resources are tailored to the residents' input.

Affirming a lifesaving culture through word choice

Language has a great impact on culture, so word choice must be carefully considered. In Austin, the animal control program is consciously called Animal Protection, with the implication that the program focuses on preserving, protecting and promoting the human-animal bond and supporting an ethic of valuing the welfare of animals, rather than simply controlling the animal population, companion or wild. Because animal control programs still suffer from the "dog catcher" and "pound" connotations, many members of the public react in a more positive way when an officer introduces himself or herself as an animal protection officer.

The Animal Protection team works out of the Austin Animal Center, which implies a different relationship to the community than an animal shelter. This word choice supports Animal

Protection's engagement-based approach to resolving animal issues. Animal Protection and the Austin Animal Center are presented as partners with the community that can offer resources but do not take on full responsibility for addressing all of the community's animal needs because, quite simply, there will never be enough government resources to do that. With that said, animal control programs have a tremendous opportunity to positively affect the lives of people, pets and wildlife in their communities and to help connect residents with their mission.