

Welfare Challenges Faced by Dogs in Shelters and Rescues

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Introduction

Dogs hold a unique place in American society. They have been our companions and work partners for many thousands of years and are unique among non-human animals in their ability to form attachments with members of other species. They are the most commonly found companion animal in the United States; a recent survey found that 48 percent of US households include at least one dog, and the majority of dog owners are described as considering their dogs to be family members (Humane Society of the United States, n.d.). Despite the affinity between dogs and humans, approximately 5.5 million are put in shelters every year (Woodruff and Smith, 2017).

Dogs enter shelters or rescue organizations from three primary sources: They may have been confiscated by local animal control or police as abused or endangered, or because their owners were taken into custody. They may have been picked up as strays, having been lost or abandoned by their owners; or simply as “street dogs”. Lastly, the dogs may have been surrendered by their owners for any of a variety of reasons, such as loss of income, the family having to move, medical issues or behavioral problems. In some cases, dogs are moved from one shelter to another either for space and funding restrictions, or to provide a better chance for placement.

In any case, the dog entering shelters face multiple challenges to their emotional and physical welfare; some of these issues stem from limitations of care available from the shelter organization, and some simply from the shelter’s environment. This paper will attempt to identify these issues and their impact on the dogs, and will discuss possible ways to mitigate these challenges to improve the dogs’ welfare while they are kept in shelters. This will conclude with possible ways of influencing the outcomes of their stays in these organizations.

Welfare Challenges

Methodology. This review of welfare concerns will deal with dogs in shelters that meet the following criteria: First, the shelters must be “intake facilities”, meaning that they accept dogs from various sources including owner surrenders and confiscation by authorities. Second, they must adopt dogs to the public. Third, the shelters must be “brick and mortar” facilities, meaning that they have a physical location for housing and caring for the dogs. No distinction will be made between shelters operated by local governments and those run by private organizations. The various challenges addressed in this paper are drawn from peer-reviewed studies and from data collected and published by animal welfare organizations.

Welfare Issues.

Euthanasia. When a dog is placed in a shelter the possible outcomes are limited. Strays can be returned to their owners. Dogs can be adopted or transferred to other organizations such as breed-specific rescue organizations or shelters and rescues with higher adoption rates. Lastly, the dogs can be euthanized due to space and funding concerns, medical reasons or behavior issues that are judged to make the dog unadoptable. In many cases, owners surrender dogs to shelters for the purpose of euthanizing them, often for reasons of age, health issues or behavioral concerns (Patronek, Glickman & Moyer 2015).

Estimates of euthanasia rates vary widely, as there are no real metrics maintained by state or local agencies. Recent survey data shows that approximately 777,000 dogs are euthanized annually; however, there is no information available on how many were “put to sleep” for medical or behavioral concerns or based on owners’ instructions. Further, the likelihood of a dog being euthanized by a shelter varies by geographic area; shelters in the southeast and

southwest united states are more likely to euthanize unadopted dogs than shelters in other regions of the US (Woodruff & Smith, 2017). In any case, approximately 14 percent of all dogs in placed in shelters every year will be euthanized.

Medical Welfare Issues. Dogs housed in shelters are particularly at risk for exposure to infectious diseases. The population of dogs in any shelter is fluid, as new dogs arrive frequently from multiple sources in varying degrees of health. In many cases, dogs are surrendered or seized by authorities with no, or unreliable, information on their immunizations, medical history or current state of health. Dogs seized by authorities as a result of criminal activity, such as dog fighting operations, have been found to have had a very low degree of preventative care and are at high risk for spreading disease and disease-bearing parasites (Cannon et al, 2016).

A 2014 study found that dogs entering shelters from the local community with infectious respiratory illness, such as Canine Influenza, had a very high incidence of affecting other dogs held by the shelter (Pecoraro, Bennett, Nuyvaert, Spindel & Landolt, 2014). Further, the majority of shelters do not have on-site veterinary staff and use local veterinary clinics on a periodic or ad hoc basis (Laderman-Jones, Hurley & Kass, 2016). The training and disease awareness of shelter staff and volunteers is also a subject of concern, creating higher risk of disease transmission within shelters (Steneroden, Hill & Salman, 2010).

The gaps in veterinary staffing and availability mean that intake evaluations are conducted by shelter staff with varying levels of expertise, increasing the risk that medical conditions or infectious diseases will not be detected (Steneroden, Hill & Salman, 2011). Further, shelters have a high concentration of animals, which creates a situation in which animals are more likely to be exposed to diseases than they would be in private residences (Newbury, et al., 2010). Although guidelines have been published for the vaccination of shelter dogs (AAHA

Canine Vaccination Guidelines, 2017), they are not implemented uniformly (Pecoraro, Bennett, Nuyvaert, Spindel & Landolt, 2014), increasing the likelihood of disease transmission within kennels and by transfer of dogs between shelters.

Stress-related welfare issues. The experience of being housed in a shelter is stressful for dogs. Upon entering a shelter, dogs find themselves separated from any personal attachments they may have, isolated in unfamiliar surroundings and being cared for by strangers. This naturally creates a state of heightened fear and anxiety, which impact their health and behavior. This fear reaction can result in dogs' exhibiting defensive behavior and avoidance of humans and other dogs (McMillan, 2017). Aside from the direct impact on a dog's quality of life, the behavioral indications of stress, such as stereotypic behavior, increased arousal or displays of anxiety, negatively affects dogs' chances of being adopted (Wright, Smith, Daniel & Adkins, 2007).

There are multiple stressors affecting shelter dogs' quality of life:

Separation. Dogs have lived with humans for tens of thousands of years and have adapted to be human companions. They affiliate with humans and form attachment bonds with their owners and caregivers, and these bonds provide a measure of security for dogs when they are in unfamiliar situations (Bradshaw, 2012; Mariti, Ricci, Zilocchi & Gazzano, 2013).

Isolation from their human attachment figures and people in general, particularly in an unfamiliar environment, causes anxiety and stress. This condition persists as long as the animal remains isolated (Marston & Bennett, 2003).

Further, dogs are social animals with a natural desire to interact and form attachments with other members of their species. To reduce the transmission of disease and the possibility of aggression and fighting, shelters typically isolate them from each other. Thus, shelter dogs are aware that other dogs are nearby, but are unable to engage in normal social activity with them.

They can detect stress and excitement from the other dogs' vocalizations, but are unable to communicate and interact with them as part of their natural behavior (Hedges,2017). This serves to increase their frustration and anxiety while housed in shelters (Grigg, Nibblett, Robinson & Smits, 2017).

Confinement and reduced activity. While kept in shelters, dogs are housed in confined spaces and have limited access to outdoor spaces. The fact of being kept in a restricted space with no means of exit and no opportunity to engage in any play or physical stress-relieving behavior has been shown to increase the anxiety and stress reactions of dogs in shelters (Normando, Contiero, Marchesini & Ricci, 2014). The confined space also requires dogs to engage in an unnatural behavior of eliminating and urinating in close proximity to the spaces in which they eat, drink and sleep, adding to their anxiety (Wagner, Newbury, Kass & Hurley, 2014).

Environmental stressors. The lack of a familiar environment in a shelter can be exacerbated by sensory overstimulation. The dogs are suddenly thrust into completely new surroundings and the sounds and smells within a kennel can be overwhelming. Their senses are suddenly bombarded by intense new odors and sounds. The noise level found in shelters is particularly concerning from a welfare standpoint.

Dog shelters are noisy environments. The shelter interiors are generally hard, smooth walls and floors to facilitate cleaning and disinfecting. While these hard surfaces are beneficial from the standpoint of hygiene, they contribute to the problem of excessive noise levels inside the buildings. Although dog's hearing is far more sensitive than that of humans and extends to frequency ranges that are not audible to humans, dogs housed in kennels are regularly exposed to continual noise levels that exceed ranges considered safe for a human work environment. The

sound levels in shelters has been found to regularly exceed 100 decibels; by contrast, the mean sound level of human houses is 45 decibels (Coppola, Enns & Grandin, 2006). Although the physical effects of this noise exposure in dogs has not been adequately explored, the noise levels commonly found in kennels have been found to cause damage and stress in animals with less sensitive hearing (Sales, Hubrecht, Payvandi, Milligan & Shield, 1997).

Conclusion

Dogs in a kennel environment face unique challenges to their health and general welfare. The causes for these challenges tend to overlap, requiring great care in identifying and addressing particular issues.

The most pressing concern is the possibility that shelter dogs will be euthanized for non-medical reasons. Although there are no statistics available to determine the number of dogs that shelters euthanize for medical reasons, the raw numbers suggest that non-medical euthanasia occurs at a high rate. Short of increasing space, funding and training for shelter staff and volunteers, the most obvious solutions would appear to provide outreach and assistance to owners in the process of surrendering their dogs and to increase the dogs' chances of being adopted once they are in the shelter. Anecdotal evidence suggests that interviews with owners who are surrendering dogs to shelters, coupled with assistance in resolving the issues leading to the surrender, would assist them in keeping their dogs at home (Protopopova & Gunter, 2017). Increasing dogs' chances of being adopted once in the shelter can be accomplished by human interaction and socialization, coupled with enrichment of their environment and training in basic behavior. (Luescher & Medlock, 2008).

The next major concern is the risk to dogs' health. Animals in shelters are at a heightened risk of exposure to contagious diseases due to the density of the shelter population and the varying states of preventative care that the animals received prior to intake. Steps should be taken to increase the level of training among shelter staff and volunteers in disease awareness and transmission, and to encourage the administration of all recommended and optional immunizations for shelter dogs, regardless of their medical history (Steneroden, Hill & Salman, 2011; American Animal Hospital Association, 2017).

The above steps would also serve to remove causes of stress and anxiety in these dogs, enabling them to interact with visitors and becoming more adoptable. When it is all said and done, the best way to improve a shelter animal's welfare is to have a family take it home.

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