

Animal Shelter Checklist: How Does Your Local Shelter Measure Up?

Every Decent Animal Shelter Should Have the Following:

- A compassionate, well-trained, and dedicated staff
- A clean, bright environment in which animals are provided with fresh litter and bedding (cats), dry resting platforms (dogs), clean water in clean containers, two nutritious meals a day (three or four for puppies and kittens), and special care for elderly or especially stressed or frightened animals (a hiding place, canned food for picky eaters, etc.)
- A policy of accepting every animal brought in at no charge
- A spay-and-neuter program that ensures that all animals are sterilized prior to adoption and that guarantees that all adopted animals who cannot be spayed or neutered (on the advice of a veterinarian) are later sterilized



- A thorough screening procedure for prospective adopters (a preadoption home check and follow-up program are ideal), as well as a legally binding adoption contract prohibiting irresponsible and inhumane practices such as the declawing of cats, using cats as “barn cats” or “mousers,” allowing cats to roam freely outside, and keeping dogs outdoors or as guard dogs (See the enclosed “Adoption Application” and “Adoption Agreement” for sample language.)
- A humane method of euthanasia for animals who are not adopted (usually an intravenous injection of sodium pentobarbital) administered by well-trained, gentle staff members
- A policy against giving or selling animals to laboratories
- A sick ward and isolation area for animals who are or may be ill
- A veterinarian or animal hospital on call 24 hours a day
- A policy of holding lost and stray animals for a minimum of five operating days, including at least one Saturday
- Cruelty investigators (sometimes called “humane officers”)
- A quiet room for potential adopters to meet and get to know animals
- An active public education program to teach children and adults to care for animals properly
- A solid and active volunteer network

Red Flags to Look Out for:

■ **Extreme crowding.** The animals may be housed in airline carriers or wire crates stacked on top of each other. No animal shelter should keep more animals than it can properly care for. If you see animals collected in hallways, bathrooms, storage rooms, etc., there is a fundamental problem with the shelter's policies and procedures.

■ **Subjecting animals to loud rock, rap, or heavy metal music.** Only soft classical music should be playing (studies have shown that dogs in shelters find other types of music distressing but respond to classical music by vocalizing less, acting calmer, and resting more comfortably).

■ **Promotion of free and/or impulse adoptions.** Animals are individuals who require a high quality of life in an excellent home in which they will receive exercise, attention, praise, and love, will not be crated or yelled at, will not be made to wear choke or prong collars, and will be treated with respect as members of the family. Relaxing adoption standards in order to lower euthanasia rates puts animals at risk.

■ **Outdoor-only housing.** Good shelters do not house domestic animals outside. Keeping dogs, cats, or rabbits at the mercy of the elements (just as some people relegate dogs to life in a lonely back yard) is not humane. If you notice filthy conditions, chewed-



up doghouses, or other signs that outdoor areas are used for anything other than play and exercise, do not leave an animal there.

■ **Animals who have been at the facility for months or years.** The sad reality of the overpopulation crisis is that some animals are just not wanted by anyone. For those animals, a peaceful release is far more humane than a lifetime in a shelter environment, which should serve only as a temporary situation, not a permanent makeshift solution to their homelessness.

■ **Claims of no euthanasia under any circumstances.** Some shelters make sweeping declarations about their euthanasia policies, failing to consider the welfare and safety of the individual animals in their charge. It is inhumane to condemn a social animal to an existence in a shelter environment. Shelters, no matter how clean, organized, or humanely run, cannot provide an animal with the love, attention, praise, and exercise that they need in order to be happy. Additionally, for animals with terminal illnesses or severe behavioral problems, euthanasia may be the most compassionate option. Making difficult, heartbreaking decisions is part of daily life at a responsible shelter.