City of
SACRAMENTO
Front Street Animal Shelter

What is "euthanasia for space" and is it necessary at Front Street?

We are sometimes asked the question, "Do you euthanize animals for space?" It is a complex question to answer, but because it is an important issue for many people, we want to provide a transparent explanation of our shelter's situation and our decision-making process regarding euthanasia.

Nearly all shelters euthanize a percentage of animals. The only exception would be the few private shelters that choose to only take in animals they know will get adopted – animals without life-threatening illness or injury and without behavior issues that would make them unsafe for adoption. Even then, because animals' health and behavior are fluid and dynamic, most private shelters are also faced with making these challenging decisions. Along with the thousands of stray animals we take in each year, as a government shelter, we must take in all sick and injured stray animals within our jurisdiction, as well as animals that have bitten or attacked people.

Our shelter and nonprofit partner invest many hundreds of thousands of City and donation dollars each year to attempt to treat every medically treatable animal, although we take into account the likelihood of treatment success, the animal's age, behavior, quality of life, and whether the amount required to treat is a reasonable and responsible use of funds for one animal. Unfortunately, there are many animals who come to us with extremely severe injuries or illness, and if the suffering is irremediable, euthanasia is usually the most humane outcome. Additionally, we take in thousands of kittens a year and hundreds of puppies, many of which are very young. Unfortunately, many young animals in litters do not survive, for reasons that often are neither preventable nor treatable. In particular, we take in hundreds of kittens each year who are under 4 weeks old, often taken from their mother and the antibodies in her milk far too soon, which lowers their chance of survival.

In terms of behavior issues, our shelter's number one priority is public safety. If there is a dog that we believe may pose a threat to the safety of an adult or child, we generally will not place that dog up for adoption, although depending on the behavior the dog may still be a candidate for rescue if a rescue organization can commit to finding the dog a very particular home where the behavior can be safely managed. If this isn't an option, however, then euthanasia is usually the outcome.

The majority of our shelter's euthanasia fits into the above categories – an irremediably suffering animal, a newborn animal who fails to thrive, or a dog with a safety risk. For most animals, the decisions are fairly clear – most community members would agree that a severely suffering animal who can't be treated should be euthanized, and that a dog that attacked someone should not be placed up for adoption.

However, opinions can vary drastically for cases that aren't as clear, especially in regards to behavior. For example, what if a dog has a history of growling at children, or who bit a child when they got too close to the dog's food? Should the dog be adopted out, as long as the family doesn't have kids? Is it possible that an adopter can guarantee the dog won't come into contact with children for the rest of its life? What if it is rehomed by the adopter later, but the new family isn't counseled on its history of possessiveness towards food or toys? Should the shelter take that risk? Another common situation is aggression or prey drive towards other animals. Many people are bitten when trying to break up dog fights. What if the dog escapes its property and attacks a small

dog being walked by someone in the neighborhood? Not only could the dog be hurt or killed, but the person could be at risk as well. Does our community want dogs like this in their neighborhoods? Could the "right decision" change if the dog was old and mellow, compared to a dog who is a known escape artist? Many community members will be divided on their responses to these questions.

These are the decisions shelters are faced with every day. Our shelter believes every dog is an individual and we take many factors into account when attempting to balance public safety with lifesaving.

However, there is another factor that influences euthanasia decisions – space and resources. If our shelter took in 100 dogs a year, we'd be able to find positive outcomes for nearly all of them. Even very aggressive dogs could be placed in a sanctuary or home in rural areas with a very secure enclosure, one where we could practically guarantee the dog would not pose a threat. So technically, any dog is "saveable," but finding the homes to do so can be extraordinarily difficult.

Unfortunately, our shelter takes in many more animals than that. In 2024, we took in 9,811 animals. This is 2,190 more animals than we took in in 2022. This increase in intake is in line with state and national trends. Economic conditions like inflation, smaller numbers of new home owners, and reduced veterinary care availability are making it harder for people to adopt. Rental restrictions don't help either – many of the breeds that frequent shelters also are banned from rental housing and insurance policies.

When more animals enter shelters than leave, shelters get very crowded, very quickly – especially shelters like ours that were built decades ago when the human population of our city was much smaller. We have 99 dog kennels but frequently have 150-200 dogs.

There are several strategies that we and other shelters use to combat this difference between intake and outcomes, each with their own limitations, described below:

Fostering: This involves housing animals in volunteer foster homes instead of at the shelter. In 2024 we sent 5,092 to some form of foster care. However, these animals still need medical care when they get sick, spay/neuter surgery, and coordination between the shelter's foster teams and the volunteer for questions and final placement into an adopted home. We currently have one full time staff member and a part time intern managing hundreds of dogs in foster care. For that reason, the number of animals we can send to foster care is limited by our staffing in the foster and medical departments. We continuously attempt to get more volunteer help, but it takes a lot of specialized training and time to fill these roles, and so far, we haven't been able to meet the need. At certain times in the year, we have over 1,000 cats and dogs in foster homes. Fostering is also not a final outcome – it is only a temporary solution. These animals still need homes, and creating an endlessly growing backlog of animals in foster isn't sustainable if there are an insufficient number of permanent homes for them to go to.

Rescue/transport: Rescue organizations often pull animals from shelters and adopt them through their networks. Occasionally shelters in areas with low intake will also offer to take animals from crowded shelters. Unfortunately, most rescues are also very full for the same reasons shelters are, and it is increasingly rare for shelters to have any openings to take animals from other organizations. We, with the help of our advocates and volunteers, continuously ask our shelter and rescue partners for assistance. In 2024 we transferred 819 animals to other shelters or rescues.

Adoption events: Our shelter offers waived adoption fees when we get full. Historically this has been used when the above options fail, and is usually enough to help us avoid euthanasia for space.

Historically, we've had to utilize these events once every few months to maintain kennel space, but we've had to do these events more and more often. They're becoming less effective for a variety of reasons, including changes to social media algorithms that reduce distribution of our promotions and general reduced interest in adopting due to economic and other factors mentioned above. Additionally, the more often we do them, the less impact each has. We seem to fill up again within a week or two of these events. Staffing shortages limit our ability to handle large crowds – we find that many customers leave due to wait times being several hours long. We regularly recruit for volunteer adoption counselors, but only a small number of those have become consistent and reliable in the long term. We don't want to generate more traffic than we can serve, as it leaves everyone feeling frustrated.

Using the above strategies, euthanasia for space has not been required for small dogs, puppies, kittens or cats, all of which are in high demand (although newborn kittens without a mother may be euthanized if we are unable to find a foster home to care for them, as we do not have 24 hour staffing to bottle feed kittens throughout the night.) We also limit intake of healthy adult cats found outside, as these are usually just someone's owned outdoor cat, although we take various exceptions into account. This is part of what helps us avoid negative outcomes for cats. Research in shelter medicine demonstrates that cats are often more at risk for disease and death in shelters than staying in their community.

Unfortunately, the above strategies are not always able to prevent us from exceeding critical capacity for large dogs. This means that all kennels are full, with multiple dogs housed in each kennel when safe to do so. Shelters *should* be operating far lower than critical capacity. Dogs should generally not be paired in kennels, as it causes both anxiety and easy transmission of illness. It also increases the chance of dog fights, which sadly are not uncommon in crowded shelters.

When all else fails, euthanasia for space may be considered. There is a point where continuing to cram more dogs in kennels becomes unsafe and inhumane. As an organization that exists to protect animal welfare and prevent suffering, we cannot create a hoarding situation within our own walls. When deciding which dogs should be euthanized to create capacity, we will generally select dogs that have a behavior concern that falls into the gray area of safety mentioned above. We may then select dogs that have severe anxiety in kennel and are unlikely to get adopted anytime soon due to their breed or age. Our shelter and most of our surrounding shelter partners are filled to the brim with huskies, shepherds, pit bulls, and their mixes, leaving these types of dogs most challenging to place due in part to the sheer number of them, as well as rental housing restrictions targeting these breeds. We may also consider animals who are older or who have a health condition likely to inhibit adoption or cause discomfort later in the animal's life.

It is rare that we need to euthanize an animal with no behavior or medical issues, but we are concerned this may become more common if intake and adoption trends continue the way they are. Other well-respected organizations in the sheltering community have already sounded the alarm that they are in this position, such as Pima Animal Care Center and Wake County Animal Care Center.

In addition to space, staffing is also a key factor. There is a nationwide veterinary shortage that is impacting shelters heavily – until recently, we had two veterinary positions that we were unable to fill for years. We're also struggling to recruit registered veterinary technicians, animal control officers, and animal care technicians. This has limited our ability to provide timely and quality medical exams, treatments and spay/neuter surgeries. It also impacts how much time we can spend evaluating and working with dogs with behavior issues, managing animals in foster, and many

other activities required to run a shelter efficiently and humanely. Stress, burnout and compassion fatigue are extremely prevalent amongst shelter employees, and management takes this into account with decision-making. Losing medical staff, foster staff, and other staff would be a devastating blow that would very negatively affect lifesaving. Sometimes, the best thing we can do for the animals is to take care of the mental health of the people caring for those animals. This may mean putting limits on the number of animals or people we can help through various programs.

Despite the challenges, our shelter is doing our very best to adapt, innovate, and provide the best outcomes possible, for as many animals as possible. Our community can rest assured that our shelter is full of staff and volunteers who care deeply for animals and are working tirelessly to avoid negative outcomes.

That being said, the community is also a necessary part of the solution. Here's how to help:

-Adopt your next pet. "Designer dogs" from breeders are cute, but dogs in shelters can provide the same joy and companionship and are in great need.

-If you find a lost dog, they very likely have an owner. If you can hold onto them for at least 48 hours while actively looking for the owner before bringing them to the shelter, it can make a huge difference. Many dogs are reunited without having to impact our kennel space. Visit cityofsacramento.org/found for proven tips and websites to find the owner.

-If your pet gets lost, look for them proactively. Get your pets microchipped and put tags on them, so we can quickly return them to you if they go missing. 1 out of 3 pets go missing in their lifetime – it can happen to you! If you lose your pet, text LOST to 833-511-0426 for proven tips to find them.

-Volunteer. From helping staff with shelter chores, walking dogs, adoption counseling and so much more, volunteers make a huge difference. Learn more at https://www.cityofsacramento.gov/community-development/animal-care/volunteer

-Foster. Taking animals into your home can create space, help young animals grow up, help animals through behavior issues, and allow sick or injured animals to heal. Learn more at https://www.cityofsacramento.gov/community-development/animal-care/foster-care

-Donate. There are many programs that rely on donor dollars to function, especially our medical and foster programs. You can help an animal by donating at https://www.cityofsacramento.gov/community-development/animal-care/donate