

Disposition of Shelter Companion Animals From Nonhuman Animal Control Officers, Citizen Finders, and Relinquished by Caregivers

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Many private not-for-profit humane societies have contracts with their local government entities to provide nonhuman animal control services that the law commonly requires the government to provide to its residents. These services normally have the humane organization providing either the total animal control program (including field work to pick up stray animal companions, enforcing local animal ordinances, and the impounding of stray companion animals) or just the boarding of companion animals with no fieldwork or enforcement duties. Shelter companion animals normally come from three main sources: (a) stray or lost companion animals impounded by animal control field officers or animals impounded for violations of humane care regulations; (b) stray companion animals brought to the shelter by a resident who happens across, and catches, a lost companion animal and delivers the animal to the shelter; and (c) companion animals relinquished by their caregivers.

Difficulties in performing animal control functions in a cost-effective manner have led many humane societies to consider divesting from these contractual arrangements. Examples of agencies already taking the divestiture step include the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animal, San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animal, and the Wisconsin Humane Society. A key reason for this change in organizational responsibility has to do with shortfalls between cost and reimbursement. Higher costs are thought to emanate

from the companion animals from animal control sources because these companion animals have poorer outcomes (including lower rates of adoption and higher rates of euthanasia) as compared to animals who are relinquished by their caregivers. However, this decision is being made without determining whether the companion animals received in shelters from animal control services have, on average, worse outcomes than do companion animals brought in by citizen finders or relinquished by their caregivers.

The question of disposition of animals and the costs associated with that disposition has become more pressing with the trend in increased number of companion animals initially owned and subsequently abandoned. Alexander and Shane (1994) found an increased number of cats impounded paralleled the increase in the number of cats owned. Posage, Bartlett, and Thomas (1998) found abandoned dogs and cats overwhelmed shelters' kennel space. A number of studies have found that caregivers relinquish a companion animal for a variety of reasons: changes in the caregivers lifestyle, behavioral problems, and a lack of knowledge as to proper care and the animal's needs (Miller, Staats, Partlo, & Rada, 1996; New et al., 2001; Patronek, Glickman, Beck, McCabe, & Ecker, 1996a, 1996b; Salman et al., 2000; Salman et al., 1998; Scarlett, Salman, New, & Kass, 1999; Zawistowski, Morris, Salman, & Ruch-Gallie, 1998). The disposition or outcome of cats and dogs (adopted, euthanized, and returned to caregiver) by the type of finder (animal control officer, citizen finder, and caregiver) that brought the companion animal to the shelter has not been examined.

As animal caregiving continues to increase, Alexander and Shane (1994) found that the numbers of companion animals that enter shelters likely could parallel that increase. The behavior and adoptability of those companion animals entering facilities will greatly impact the operation of shelters. Kass, New, Scarlett, and Salman (2001), Patronek and Dodman (1999), and Zawistowski et al. (1998) found companion animals who are less adoptable because of serious behavioral issues and health problems place a significant burden on a shelter. These companion animals can require special handling or may require special medical attention that increases the cost of providing humane care and shelter. Knowledge of the disposition of shelter companion animals by type of finder will help determine if companion animals who originate from animal control officers, citizen finders, or caregiver surrenders cause a financial burden on shelters. It also will yield important information regarding the appropriate level of government funding of shelters or about the advisability of humane societies divesting from animal control contracts.

This article provides an empirical analysis of the magnitude of the burden imposed by animal control companion animals on humane society operations by comparing the adoption, euthanasia, reclamation rates, and average length of stay for stray companion animals from animal control, citizen finders' animals, and caregiver-relinquished companion animals. Each of these functions carries different levels of staff and equipment obligations for the humane society.

METHOD

This article will analyze the disposition of all shelter companion animals who originated within a single county during 2001 and 2002 received by the county's only animal shelter, a private not-for-profit humane society. The county has a human population of slightly less than 250,000 residents. This animal shelter is an open admission facility that accepts all companion animals and has contracts for boarding services of stray and impounded animals brought in by the animal control officers as well as stray companion animals brought in by the residents of those areas. This analysis will be limited to dogs and cats who were found as stray animals within the county or were caregiver relinquished by county residents. Dogs and cats make up more than 90% of companion animals who entered the shelter and are central to the question of this study. The dogs and cats received in calendar 2001 and 2002 who originated in county comprised a total sample of 7,442 animals consisting of 4,173 cats and 3,269 dogs.

The dispositions of shelter companion animals were compared by their source (animal control, brought in by citizen finder, caregiver relinquished), and disposition (adopted, euthanized, returned to caregiver). The number of companion animals adopted and euthanized are controlled by those returned to caregiver, as that excludes the returned-to-caregiver animals from both these categories. Also, all companion animals who had a disposition other than adopted, euthanized, or returned to caregiver (such as died or transferred to another shelter) were removed from the data. Additional analysis compares these populations on their length of stay at the shelter as an indicator of cost incurred to the shelter.

Data was collected and tallied using the shelter's automated database and record-keeping program. Animals from animal control officers are comprised of all cats and dogs brought to the shelter by an animal control officer. Stray animals brought in by citizen finder are comprised of all lost cats and dogs brought to the shelter by a citizen who reported finding the lost companion animals within the county. Caregiver-relinquished companion animals are comprised of all who were caregiver-surrendered to the shelter by a resident of the county. Proportions were calculated for stray companion animals adopted or euthanized from animal control and citizen finders by dividing the number of companion animals adopted or euthanized by the total number of companion animals minus the companion animals returned to caregiver.

Data were analyzed using a chi-square test. Sheltering days were calculated by the automated database and include the day the animal was received at the shelter—through and including the day the companion animal was dispositioned. The results reported here for sheltering days are descriptive. The parameters reported provide a first step in understanding the characteristics of the three groups of companion animals to humane society operations.

FINDINGS

The results of the analysis suggest that dogs and cats brought to the animal shelter by an animal control officer are adopted at a lower rate and euthanized at a higher rate than are dogs and cats brought in by citizen finders or who are caregiver relinquished. On average, dogs and cats brought to the shelter by animal control officers spend more days in the shelter before being adopted than do dogs and cats brought in by citizen finders or who are caregiver relinquished. Lost dogs and cats brought in by animal control officers are returned to their caregivers at only a slightly higher rate than are lost dogs and cats brought in by citizen finders. Cats from animal control officers were returned more quickly than those from citizen finders, although dogs from citizen finders were returned more quickly than dogs from animal control officers (see Table 1).

Compared to cats, dogs were adopted at a higher rate, euthanized at a lower rate, and had a shorter average length of stay in the shelter. Dogs brought in by citizen finder were adopted at a slightly higher rate than were caregiver-relinquished dogs, although caregiver-relinquished cats were adopted at a higher rate than were cats brought in by finder. Fewer than 30% of dogs received from citizen finders or caregiver-relinquished were euthanized. Fewer than 40% of all cats received from citizen finders or who were caregiver relinquished were euthanized. Considerably more than half of dogs and cats received from animal control officers were euthanized.

Although there was not a large amount of variation in the number of days that dogs and cats from all sources stayed at the shelter before being euthanized, there was a noticeable discrepancy in the number of days taken to adopt the companion animals (see Table 2). Caregiver-relinquished dogs were adopted in the least number of days (18.75), whereas caregiver-relinquished cats were adopted in the least number of days for cats (47.66). Comparing strays brought in by citizen finders and animal control officers yielded interesting results, as both are stray companion

TABLE 1
Proportion of Dogs and Cats Adopted, Euthanized, and Returned to Owner
by Intake Source

| Source | Cats | | | Dogs | | |
|-----------------|-----------|--------------|------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|
| | Adopted** | Euthanized** | Reclaimed* | Adopted** | Euthanized** | Reclaimed |
| Animal control | .299 | .675 | .069 | .448 | .543 | .419 |
| Citizen finder | .480 | .417 | .042 | .715 | .265 | .404 |
| Owner surrender | .592 | .374 | — | .677 | .316 | — |

Note. Associations between pet outcome and source of pet were examined with chi-square tests.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Average Number of Days in Shelter for Dogs and Cats Adopted, Euthanized, and Returned to Owner by Intake Source

| <i>Source</i> | <i>Cats</i> | | | <i>Dogs</i> | | |
|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------|
| | <i>Adopted</i> | <i>Euthanized</i> | <i>Reclaimed</i> | <i>Adopted</i> | <i>Euthanized</i> | <i>Reclaimed</i> |
| Animal control | 67.97 | 12.34 | 3.68 | 30.67 | 12.65 | 3.65 |
| Citizen finder | 61.00 | 15.97 | 5.11 | 26.49 | 17.27 | 2.99 |
| Owner surrender | 47.66 | 14.23 | 4.40 | 18.75 | 10.80 | — |

animals. Stray dogs brought in by animal control officers took about 16% more days to adopt than dogs brought in by finder (30.67 days vs. 26.49 days); cats brought in by animal control officers took more than 11% more days to adopt than did stray cats brought in by finder (67.97 days vs. 61.00).

DISCUSSION

It appears that dogs and cats brought to the animal shelter by animal control officers caused more difficulties for shelters compared to companion animals from citizen finders and caregiver-relinquished companion animals. These findings are limited to the experience of one humane society in the Midwest. Other facilities may experience different patterns of disposition. However, the profile of outcomes presented here provides some empirical guidance to shelter directors as to what to expect in terms of resource expenditures for companion animals from difference sources of human finders.

It also is important to recognize the various factors at play in leading to different dispositions for companion animals. The companion animals brought to shelters by animal control officers include those whom citizen finders might have been unable to catch because of elusiveness or because the companion animals demonstrated dangerous or aggressive behaviors. These companion animals also may be more likely to have caregivers who allow them to wander unattended and who may be less likely to keep identification on them that would enable finders to re-home the companion animals. The longer stay of animal control companion animals could be explained in part by companion animals' being impounded and held for court dates because of dangerous behaviors. Also, a significant number of cats brought in by animal control officers are trapped cats who may be feral, semiferal, or, in general, less adoptable. The greater number of days spent by stray companion animals brought in by animal control officers, compared to the number of days spent by those brought in by finder, suggests that the former—possibly because of health or behavior issues—are less desirable for potential adopters. Conversely,

dogs and cats brought in by citizen finders may be more adoptable because the companion animal had to be friendly enough to be approached, secured, and transported to the shelter. Also, it is possible that the finders bringing some companion animals to the shelter actually may be caregivers hoping to avoid some personal issues or any perceived charges for relinquishing a companion animal. Because the citizen-finder dogs had the highest proportion of adoptions—and almost half the cats from citizen finders were adopted—it does not appear that these animals brought in by citizen finders are as great a burden on shelters as are strays from animal control officers.

It also is interesting to note that the 7-day stray holding period for citizen-finder strays accounted for most of the difference in the number of days needed to adopt a stray dog found by a citizen versus a dog surrendered by a caregiver. When controlling for the 7-day stray holding period, dogs found by citizens took less than 1 more day to place, on average, than did dogs surrendered by their caregivers. Therefore, when reviewing the proportion of dogs adopted and the number of days taken for these companion animals to be placed into homes, the adoptability of dogs surrendered by their caregivers and dogs found by citizens appears to be about the same.

By comparison, dogs in animal control took, on average, about 12 more days to adopt than did dogs surrendered by their caregivers. For cats, controlling the 7-day holding period accounted for more than one-half the difference of days taken to adopt cats surrendered by their caregiver versus cats found by citizens. The resulting difference still is about 6 more days to adopt a cat found by a citizen than to adopt an cat surrendered by a caregiver. By comparison, stray cats in animal control take, on average, 20 more days to adopt than cats who were surrendered by their caregivers. Therefore, when reviewing the number of days for these pets to be adopted, it appears that cats surrendered by their caregiver are most adoptable, and cats found by citizens are more adoptable cats in animal control. More companion animals surrendered by their caregivers may be adopted because the caregiver can supply a great deal of health and behavior information that is useful in re-homing the companion animal. The shorter stay, in part, may be a function of not having a holding period, as for stray companion animals (in this case, 7 days beginning at the first midnight).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it appears that dogs and cats from animal control sources impose a greater burden on shelters. They have lower adoption and higher euthanasia rates than do companion animals from other sources. Companion animals brought in by animal-control sources spend a much longer time in the shelter than do animals relinquished by their caregivers and found by citizens:

1. For dogs, 64% more days than dogs relinquished by their caregivers and 16% more than dogs found by citizens.
2. For cats, 43% more than cats relinquished by their caregivers and 11% more than cats found by citizens.

This could be an indicator of a companion animal's being considered less desirable because of behavior issues and health issues that could take extra days and resources postadoption to modify or correct. Often, even when the companion animal is euthanized, these more challenging animals require special handling and control, frequently requiring extra personnel. In addition, these animals may expose the more adoptable animals to disease that would take more resources to treat prior to adoption.

Budgets awarded to humane societies should reflect the extra burden assumed in providing shelter to these companion animals and protect the citizens of the area. Humane societies with boarding contracts for animal control services may deserve to receive higher levels of compensation for handling these more difficult dogs and cats and the related issues in dealing with the caregivers of impounded and lost animals. Stray cats and dogs from citizen finders deserve separate consideration from those brought in by animal control officers as the dogs have adoption rates that exceed those for dogs relinquished by their caregivers. Adoption rates for cats found by citizens, although less than for cats relinquished by their caregivers, appear to be at a level high enough not to impose as great a burden on shelters as cats from animal control officers and warrants a shelter's efforts to place these cats. However, if higher compensation is not provided after an appropriate process is pursued for cats and dogs from animal control officers, humane societies may consider divesting from the animal contract a viable option.

Many factors must be considered based on the unique needs in each community. In the end, the information provided in this analysis could be used as a starting point for discussions among governmental bodies and humane organizations that have contractual agreements to provide animal control services to area residents on how equitably to provide and finance a higher level of care to the companion animal and human population they both serve.

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