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THE FOUNDATION FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND EDUCATION PROMOTING
ANIMAL WELFARE

**Measuring Shelter/Community Progress for Reducing
Companion Animal Overpopulation**
A Maddie's Fund, Inc. White Paper

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Introduction

Of significant importance for achieving the goal of reducing the suffering and death of companion animals is the ability to measure the success of animal shelters and communities. Ultimately, some form of numerical measurement is necessary both to track the progress of organizations/communities and to enable comparisons between organizations/communities. However, the goals of animal welfare organizations are multidimensional making the process too complicated to be captured by a single number. In addition, a single measurement can be distorted by a number of extenuating circumstances and can be subject to manipulation.

The optimal approach therefore is the use of multiple metrics to measure success. This should include at least one “percentage based” outcome measure and at least one “level based” outcome measure. The measure should also include an accounting of total deaths as well as separate death categories. Progress in controllable goals as well as final outcomes should also be measured.

Problems with Measuring Success

If reducing the deaths of companion animals in a community is a shelter's or community program's goal, it would seem to be a simple matter to measure these deaths. However, there are a number of issues that need to be considered including: (1) whether to use a percentage-based or a level-based measure, (2) whether to look at all deaths or only deaths in certain categories, (3) whether to look at the final outcome of interest or to instead focus on more controllable measures, and (4) how to take into account the deaths of homeless companion animals outside of the shelter environment.

Level-Based versus Percentage-Based Measures

One of the most obvious ways to measure deaths is to simply look at the level of animal deaths in a community. Often this is scaled by dividing by the total human population to enable comparisons in the number of deaths between communities¹. However, there are problems with simply using the total death level. One of the problems is that the less aggressive a community is with its animal control efforts, the better it appears to be performing in terms of the number of deaths at the shelter. Some public shelters have also reduced intake by requiring appointment times or fees to relinquish animals, which can further reduce deaths at the shelter without necessarily reducing the real overpopulation problem². Just because animals are not dying at the shelter does not mean that they do not ultimately die. On the other hand, shelters that

¹ Often this is then multiplied by a thousand to get the deaths per thousand people.

² These types of efforts to limit intake may cause some people on the fence to keep their animals, however they might also simply displace the problem by causing animals to be abandoned outside of the shelter environment. Currently, there is no publicly available research either way on the effects of such policies.

make extra efforts to take in all strays and to guarantee that all animals relinquished by the public are taken in frequently show up as having a higher level of killing.

Additionally, if a community simply has more animals or more homeless animals than the norm, the shelter appears to be doing worse if they kill more animals even if they are at the same time saving more animals through adoption or returning animals to their guardians than another community with a similar number of people with less of a homeless animal problem.

One method of overcoming some of these issues is to use a variable that looks at the rate of killing as a percentage of all animals coming into or going out of the shelter (such as the “Live Animal Release Rate”). One advantage of this method is that shelters that deal with more animals are not penalized. However, this method also has some disadvantages. The percent of animals saved says nothing about the scale of death occurring. If a community has successful programs to avoid relinquishment (such as through behavioral training programs), or reduce animal overpopulation (such as through spay/neuter), the shelter’s success in reducing intake does not directly show up in a percentage-based measure³.

Total animals versus animals by category

A second important issue is whether to use measures that look at all animals together that die at a shelter or to use measures that break animals down by category such as adoptable, treatable, and non-rehabilitatable. One advantage of breaking animal status

³ This can, of course, have an indirect effect. For example, if intake is reduced and the same number of animals are adopted, the Live Animal Release Rate will improve. However, if reduced intake also causes some reduction in redemptions or adoptions the full impact of the intake reduction programs will generally not be visible in this type of measure.

down by category is that it creates more achievable goals because shelters have much more control over the outcomes for adoptable or treatable animals than they do over non-rehabilitatable animals. A second advantage is that such an approach takes into account special challenges faced in certain communities. In particular, certain shelters indicate that the major hurdle they face in reducing dog deaths is a large number of highly aggressive, unadoptable dogs (often pit bulls) coming into their shelters. Taking the mix of animal types coming into a shelter into account can reduce the measurement bias against shelters in areas that face these challenges.

There are however problems with using animal status categories. Even if organizations are making every effort to be accurate and honest in maintaining such categories, there will be more variance between regions/shelters and even within a region over time due to differences in categorization. Even when this variation is small relative to the size of the total animal population, it may be enough to cause significant changes in the interpretation of results such as turning a 2% decline in adoptable animal euthanasia into a 2% increase. Even if most shelters attempt to honestly report their statistics by category, there may be some shelters that are more focused on good public relations than accurate data management and using animal status categories can provide an opportunity to manipulate results. In addition, the status of animals can change over time in a shelter environment. Therefore, tracking the category of animals at the time of death rather than throughout the shelter process can distort the results by category.

Final Consequences versus Controllable Measures

Another important issue in measuring success is whether to focus on final consequences or more controllable measures. The final consequences, such as how many animals die at the shelter, are what ultimately matter if the goal is to improve the welfare of animals. This argues in favor of using final outcomes to measure success.

However, shelters and programs only have limited control over final consequences. An adoption program or spay/neuter program can be very successful, yet external factors may simultaneously cause deaths to remain flat or even rise. Therefore, programs and shelters arguably should be judged at least in part by things they can control like the success of their programs. For example, Maddie's Fund Community programs focus on adoption and spay/neuter efforts, so the change in measures of spay/neuter and adoption give the most direct indication of how well a coalition is doing at these efforts. Other possible overpopulation reduction efforts could focus on reducing intake by providing behavioral counseling or improving housing availability, or on reuniting more animals with their original guardians. The downsides of using such measures include that it is possible (1) some measures may be subject to manipulation, (2) they do not account for everything the shelters can control, and (3) they are not ultimately what is important for the welfare of animals.

Taking into Account the Deaths of Animals Outside of a Shelter

One of the most difficult issues with measuring the success of shelters and programs is that there is a shadow population of homeless animals that does not normally show up in shelter statistics. What a shelter or community program is really attempting to do is

reduce the death and suffering of all homeless companion animals in the region. But in fact, the only animals accounted for statistically are the ones that end up in a shelter. Dogs and cats that live or die on the streets may not be accounted for directly, but they can have an important impact on shelter statistics. Breeding feral cats can keep shelter cat intake high even when the public spays/neuters their animals. In addition, shelter policy on taking in feral cats can have a large impact on the shelter's death rate. As previously mentioned, shelters that have policies which discourage intake or that are less aggressive in picking up strays may improve the level of deaths at their shelter while at the same time increasing the number of strays. Therefore, the effect may be to cause the appearance of an improvement in deaths when in fact the effect on total deaths (including strays) may be less clear.

Unfortunately, there is no easy way to account for what happens in the stray population. Therefore, any measure or set of measures of success will be incomplete. The best that can normally be done to account for the stray population is to qualitatively take the impact of shelter policies and programs on this population into account when judging shelter success.

Discussion

As the previous section makes clear, there are advantages and disadvantages to any type of measure. No single measure can give an adequate picture of how much a shelter or community is improving nor of how that community or shelter compares to others

around the country. Communities can conduct impressive spay/neuter and adoption programs yet not see a drop in euthanasia. The Live Animal Release Rate could improve while simultaneously rising intake causes the absolute level of deaths to increase. Adoptable animal deaths could show a decline while total deaths increase. Deaths at area shelters could decline while the death of strays increases by a similar amount. In fact, some of these disparate trends have already been seen in actual program results.

In order to get a firm grasp on how shelters and communities are performing, multiple measures need to be utilized. At least one measure should look at final results based on levels, while at least one should look at percentage rates. At least one measure should take into consideration animal categories in addition to looking at total deaths. And at least one set of measures should look at controllable program goals in addition to looking at the ultimate final outcomes.

Using a series of measures as described above allows decision-makers to create a profile of how a shelter or community is doing. This gives a more complete picture than a single number. Unfortunately, even this does not give a perfect picture of how a community is doing. The results for the stray population are very important, but there are no good shelter-data-based measures to determine what is happening in this population. Nevertheless, a profile consisting of multiple well-thought-out measures gives the best opportunity to evaluate how a community or shelter is performing. This profile of measures can be used both to make comparisons between communities and for evaluating the change within a community or shelter over time.

Although multiple measures are needed to adequately monitor a community or shelter, simplicity is still an important goal. For high-level monitoring, as few different measures

as possible should be used⁴. Therefore, the set of measures selected should balance giving a full picture with minimizing the number of different metrics.

Specific Recommendation

There are a number of reasonable combinations of measures that can be used to profile how a community or shelter performs. The choices selected here are by no means the only reasonable combination. With that in mind, using the following combination of measures is suggested:

1) The Live Animal Release Rate: This percentage-rate-based measure of outcomes is a sound, overall measure of success (see prior Maddie's Fund documents for calculation). Although it is a useful measure, it does suffer the same deficiencies as other percentage-rate-based measures and therefore should be supplemented with other data.

2) Total Animals Killed divided by estimated Animal Population: Various counts of total animals killed are a commonly-used shelter measurement tool. Oftentimes, this number is divided by the total human population to allow comparisons between communities of different sizes. However, it would be more appropriate to divide the number of animals killed by the size of the *animal* population. The primary reason this has not been done in the past is that the size of the community animal population is typically unknown. A method has recently been created to estimate the size of the animal

⁴ Detailed analysis of programs may benefit from a more numerous and complex set of measures.

population⁵. It is important to note that this is merely an estimate and is subject to significant error. However, it does allow for more reasonable comparisons between a high animal population per capita area (such as many rural communities), and a lower animal population per capita area such as a dense city like Washington DC or New York City. It should be noted that using the animal population instead of the human population does have downsides, including estimation error and the fact that that the estimation process may be too complicated for most shelters to do without some guidance. On balance, however, using the community animal population is preferable to using the human population in the denominator (though both are acceptable measures).

3) Adoptable plus Treatable Animals Killed divided by estimated Animal

Population: At least one measure should look at animal status categories. Although many ways of doing this are possible, it is recommended that adoptable plus treatable animals killed be used as the focus. A level-based measure rather than a percentage-rate-based measure (such as the “Save Rate”) is recommended simply because a save rate requires tracking more information than many shelters currently do. On the other hand, a save rate by category is better able to account for the status of animals when they enter the shelter if the necessary data is available. Adoptable plus treatable animals killed is selected rather than adoptable animals alone because it is hypothesized there may be more subjectivity in dividing adoptable and treatable animals than treatable from nonrehabilitable. In addition, combining these two categories delineates animals that are at least rehabilitatable. This puts a focus on the issue of differences in nonrehabilitatable

⁵ See the FIREPAW document created for Maddie’s Fund “Community Population Estimates”, October, 2004.

animals. Once again, the estimated animal population is used in the denominator, but the human population could be used in the denominator as an alternative measure.

4) Controllable Measures—Adoptions and Discount Spay/Neuters divided by

estimated Animal Population: As previously mentioned, some attempt needs to be made to measure controllable variables. The two selected here, adoptions and discount spay/neuter, are perhaps the two most powerful tools for reducing overpopulation. Total spay/neuter procedures is another option, and may even be preferable, but this is only possible with the cooperation of most area veterinarians. An alternative way to measure adoption success would be as a percentage of intake. Once again, the estimated animal population is recommended in the denominator but the human population could also be used. If the community has aggressive intake reduction programs other than spay/neuter, it would also be worthwhile to add intake as a variable to track. In addition, if the shelter is actively seeking to improve redemption rates, this can be added as a controllable variable.

A Final Note

In all, five measures have been suggested to get a good shelter or coalition profile. There are, of course, many equally plausible alternative measures that can be added or substituted. For reasons already discussed, it is unlikely that fewer than these five can give an adequate picture of a community. Detailed analysis of a shelter or program also requires looking at much more than these five measures. But these five measures can offer an adequate high level profile of a community or shelter.