



Training Playbook:

At-Risk Animals

Introduction

This playbook can help you create an objective “at-risk” animal process so that you are constantly evaluating each animal as an individual based on the resources available to you today. Thirty-five years ago, around 17 million animals lost their lives in shelters every year simply because they didn’t have safe places to call home. Today, that number is down to around 350,000 per year because people like you challenged the status quo, engaged your community and implemented proactive programs to say no to ending the lives of healthy and treatable animals.

Pilot programs have been turned into successful programs that use proven strategies and resources that were not available 35 (or even five) years ago. What seemed impossible yesterday is a reality today. Agencies all over the country in various locations and with differing demographics have successfully implemented protocols to assess at-risk animals in their facilities who may have an option for a positive outcome. Utilizing their experiences, standard operating procedures and proven strategies, we offer the following information to help you create your own at-risk protocol.

Program Overview

A standardized, consistent and transparent process for identifying animals who are at risk of not making it out of the shelter alive, along with identifying potential paths for them to have a positive outcome, will not only assist in increasing lifesaving, but it will also reduce the burden on your staff. The decision to end the life of an animal is not taken lightly by anyone who works at a shelter. This process will help you to assess the ability of the shelter and the community to meet the needs of all animals and to ensure that those needs are reviewed and evaluated individually in a timely manner.

As lifesaving programs and processes are developed and strengthened, the number of animals and categories of those at risk will continue to decrease. Nothing in this document is meant to imply that animals or certain populations of animals must be euthanized. However, by having a procedure to document, evaluate potential for, and attempt to achieve a live outcome for all animals in the shelter’s care, agencies can ensure that all animals have been afforded the advocacy and resources to try to achieve a live outcome.

Program Composition

The following describes workforce needs, internal and/or external resources, and any other additional steps that should be taken into consideration for successful program

implementation.

The first step toward creating an at-risk protocol is to understand which animals are not making it out of the shelter alive, and then breaking that list down further to determine which of those animals were healthy or treatable. To determine this, you must be keeping accurate, detailed [statistics](#). The more detailed your data, the more granular you can get about determining the populations most at risk. For instance, if you can break down intake by source (stray or owner surrender) and then further by species (cat or dog) and then even further by age (neonate, juvenile, adult), you can make more informed decisions and target resources toward the populations most at risk. Breaking down these intake types, even a little bit further, to subtypes (such as the reason an owner is surrendering their pet) will provide invaluable information for your programming.

From that subset of animals who are healthy or treatable, you want to determine what makes them at risk for a negative outcome. This [standard operating procedure](#) (SOP) contains what may be considered at risk, both upon intake and in-shelter, as well as some potential guidelines for addressing each category. The SOP should be customized to fit your agency.

Once you understand what populations of animals are most at risk, compile a list of what resources would be necessary to save those animals. Understandably, each agency and each community have limitations. However, by creating this list with the mindset that limitations do not exist, you can know what truly would be needed to save those animals. You can then use that information to work with rescue groups, funders, community members and others who want to be part of the solution. Providing those stakeholders with both the data and the path to the solution (acquiring the necessary resources) can yield immediate and amazing results.

From the list of resources created, prioritize cultivation of resources by what may be easiest to obtain and what will save the largest number of animals. For example, if you already have a foster program for kittens, expanding it to include adult cats who are scared in the shelter will not be that challenging and will immediately give a subset of the population a lifesaving outlet.

Another good strategy is to check out and copy what other agencies are doing to market at-risk animals, such as waiving adoption fees, highlighting the animals on social or traditional media, and creating programs in which staff or volunteers become the animals' "[case manager](#)" and follow a checklist to explore all avenues of positive outcome.

You'll want to implement a documented process, including sign-offs, to help ensure that each at-risk animal is receiving all appropriate avenues for positive outcome through an objective process. [This resource](#) from Pima County Animal Care Center can be customized for any agency and at-risk animal. Documentation also ensures transparency if euthanasia is the ultimate outcome.

In the event that euthanasia is an animal's outcome, ensure that your agency is compliant with state and local laws and ordinances, and that the procedure is performed in the most humane and ethical way for the animal and your staff.

Conclusion

Creating a formal process for identifying at-risk animals and constantly evaluating them as individuals based on the resources available to you today is a proven strategy to increase lifesaving. What may not have worked yesterday has potential today. Together with your community, you can continue to challenge the status quo and reduce the number of animals considered at risk as resources and options are uncovered.

Sample Procedure and Program Information Documents

Now that you have a general understanding of developing an at-risk animal process, the following documents may act as templates and/or guidelines as you implement or scale up this process at your organization. Keep in mind that there is no perfect form of implementation. Using the considerations and program composition notes above, you should use the following resources only as building blocks when creating your own standard operating procedures or documents (both internal and public). If you need further assistance or clarification, please do not hesitate to reach out to your [regional strategist, regional director, or the Best Friends national shelter support team at team2025@bestfriends.org](#).

Resources

- Austin Animal Center's [video on Lifesaving Protocol for At-Risk Dogs](#)
- Austin Animal Center's [policy and procedure for euthanasia of animals](#)
- Austin Animal Center's [working pilot program policy and procedure for euthanasia for dogs with demonstrated aggression](#)
- Maddie's Fund [webinar series and resource](#) on lifesaving protocol for at-risk dogs
- Pasco Animal Services' [SOP for Humane Euthanasia](#)
- Jefferson Parish Animal Services [owner requested euthanasia policy](#)