

Statesman

Report: Austin's no-kill policy led to overcrowding at animal shelter

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A city auditor's report on the Animal Services department says Austin's "no-kill" policy had led to severe overcrowding at the city-run shelter, with animals not receiving adequate care and response times lagging on calls about aggressive or injured animals.

The report noted that the City Council established the strict "90 percent live outcome" goal in 2010, a successor to its previous "no-kill" policy, but that Animal Services did not have "sufficient facilities and resources allocated to meet the city's live outcome goal and remain in line with state requirements and industry best practices."

The Austin Animal Center regularly exceeded its capacity by 32 to 96 dogs a month from October 2013 through August 2014, the auditor found. Animals are often housed in temporary cages over long periods of time, the study found, and were not receiving at least 15 minutes of care time per day for feeding and cleaning, the minimum time recommended by the National Animal Control Association.

A new city audit says Austin's animal shelter is so overcrowded that staffers aren't spending enough time with animals or responding quickly enough to residents' calls about aggressive, stray or injured animals. The chronic overcrowding led to another problem: Animal Services did not respond to 29 percent of high-priority calls about aggressive, stray or injured animals until 12 or more hours after the call was made, the report says. The auditor attributes that delay to officers being "encouraged to spend significant time driving around trying to locate the owners of stray animals," rather than taking them to a shelter that's already full.

The 13-page report, sent last week to the City Council, will be presented at the council's Audit and Finance Committee meeting Thursday. The city refused to comment Wednesday on the auditor's report, with a city spokesman saying it was "inappropriate" to comment prior to Thursday's public discussion.

Acting City Auditor Corrie Stokes said the examination of Animal Services occurred now because it had never been audited as a standalone department since it was spun off in 2011 from Health and Human Services. There is substantial "public interest" in the no-kill policy, Stokes said, adding that the auditor's office wanted to examine whether that goal was achievable with the city's limited resources.

The animal shelter has met its "90 percent live" outcome goal since at least 2012. Last fiscal year there were still 1,051 dogs and cats that had to be euthanized and 108 that died. But the vast majority of animals — nearly 16,500 — brought in to the shelter that year were adopted, returned to their owner or transferred to other animal rescue groups, such as Austin Pets Alive or the Austin Humane Society.

The overcrowding stems from the no-kill policy, the report notes, but is exacerbated by a lack of kennel space. It didn't help that the city's main animal shelter in East Austin has 462 kennels, only two more than the previous shelter at Town Lake.

The new shelter opened in 2011. Within two years, the overcrowding got so bad that the shelter briefly turned away owners who wanted to surrender pets, a restriction that was lifted a short time later.

Last year the City Council approved hiring a design-build firm to create 100 additional kennels at the Austin Animal Center, along with weatherproofing and additional parking, at a total estimated cost of \$5 million. It's not clear if construction has started on the new kennels.

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