

Are Austin's No-Kill Shelters Adopting Out Dangerous Dogs?

By Brian Collister | February 26, 2016

AUSTIN (KXAN) -- This month marks the 5th anniversary of Austin becoming the nation's largest no-kill city, saving 90 percent or more of the homeless pets that enter the Austin Animal Center. While the goal seems like a win for pets and people, a surprising group of critics is blaming Austin's no-kill policy for adopting out dangerous dogs to avoid euthanizing them.

To be classified as a no-kill shelter, Austin cannot euthanize more than 10 percent of the animals it takes in. Maintaining the status of no-kill also comes with a big price tag. City documents point directly to the no-kill policy as the reason for spending more and more of your tax dollars. In the time since city leaders first started discussing the policy in 2008, the Austin Animal Services' budget has increased by 146 percent to nearly \$12 million. Also in that time, the number of employees has increased from 81.5 to 106.5 employees.

Last fall, public outcry saved Neville from being euthanized after he bit a child who was visiting the Austin Pets Alive! shelter. The shelter says they told the family not to put their child on the ground, but they did anyway. While a judge originally ordered the dog to be euthanized, the judge reconsidered his order and outlined criteria that any potential adopter must meet.

In the aftermath, dog trainers reached out to KXAN saying the city shelter and its partners are putting the public in danger by adopting out aggressive dogs in order to maintain its status as a no-kill city.

Trainer Jennifer Burns say some dogs are too dangerous and should have never been adopted out. "There really needs to be... a lot more responsibility taken on where these dogs are going, what homes they're going to. I don't think the screening process is really all that great," said Burns.

The Austin Animal Center does no formal evaluations on dogs, only what it calls "observations." And based on those observations, nearly all dogs are deemed safe to adopt. In fact, more and more so. In 2009, the year before the no-kill policy went into effect, the city shelter euthanized about seven percent of dogs it deemed aggressive; compare that to around just one percent last year.

The city says numbers don't drive their decisions. "I don't ask about statistics or numbers. We are not meeting a quota. And it is not a numbers game for us," said Tawny Hammond, Director of Austin Animal Center. "It's truly ethical decisions we are making about animal sheltering and the safety of our community. And no-kill and the safety of our community are absolutely compatible. The data shows they are compatible."

But the data shows something different. Last year, Travis County hit a record with 1,696 reported dog bites, a 58 percent increase since 2009. In that same time, the population only increased 16 percent, meaning the number of dog bites is growing at faster rate. Currently, there is no information indicating how many of the dog bites involve dogs that were adopted from the city shelter.

"There is no evidence to suggest what the trainers are saying is true. And for us to say could it happen, maybe, should it happen, maybe. I can't do that. It is not fair", said Hammond.

But it's not just dog trainers criticizing No-kill.

"No-kill is responsible for putting aggressive dogs out there," said Patt Nordyke with the Texas Federation of Animal Care Societies, which works with animal welfare agencies to protect and care for animals. Her organization includes animal shelter directors from across the state who are concerned about the impact the policy is having in Austin. "Because they are adopting out animals, aggressive animals that have not been properly screened so that they can keep their 90 percent save rate. This is detrimental to the health and safety of the community as a whole."

Austin Pets Alive!

Many dogs end up at the city's largest non-profit partner, Austin Pets Alive, which also has a no-kill mission. The veterinarian who runs the agency says the claims about dangerous dogs being adopted out are unfounded.

"I think it is a ridiculously false statement. No kill is not about saving animals at any cost. It is about public safety, it's about animal quality of life, it is about not killing animals for no reason any more," said Dr. Ellen Jefferson, Executive Director of Austin Pets Alive.

In order to find every dog a home, APA uses marketing videos showing dogs at their least threatening.

On the APA's website, Max is described as "an absolute love bug" with a "sweet demeanor." But, that's not the Max we met when we went undercover with a hidden camera inside APA's shelter. The dog lunged at the fence and growled aggressively when we approached his kennel. Later, staffers warned Max is afraid of strangers and could bite. When we inquired about the possibility of adopting Max, they said he needs a very specific home, no kids and no other dogs.

APA admits Max's "positive" marketing is meant to draw in prospective owners. "We want to see the best this dog can be, but we also want to talk to our public openly and honestly about here are the great things, and here are the things we want to help you with", said Mike Kaviani, APA's Dog Behavior Team manager.

But even with help, some adopters return dogs because they're too aggressive. When dogs are returned, Jefferson says they do try to find another suitable home for the dog but it depends on the situation.

"Every situation is different, every dog is different," said Jefferson.

"We don't want to be adopting out an animal that is going to turn around and attack someone. and when they get an animal that does that and comes back in, they turn around and adopt that animal out again. That is absolutely absurd," said Nordyke.

Toby was a dog Diana Walker says she just couldn't resist when she went to APA. "Could be the sweetest and most affectionate, and then turn around and bite you," said Walker. In the year since she adopted Toby, she says the Yorkie bit her nearly a dozen times. "I've got the scars to prove it and the photos of the wounds. It was horrifying."

Walker says Toby is an example of a dog being adopted out despite having a history of biting. After multiple bites and multiple adoptions at APA, he finally came to live with Walker, who says workers did tell her about his history and thought she could handle him. But in the end, she had to make the tough call on her own. "I had to make the appointment to euthanize," said Walker. "Even though I signed the APA contract that says if it doesn't work out I'd bring him back, I could not risk him being adopted out to somebody else, and somebody else possibly getting bit far worse than me and my family did."

Colleen Lynn is another vocal critic of no-kill. She addressed city council members in 2012, complaining the rising number of dog bites in Travis County was tied to the no-kill policy. Lynn was seriously injured when she was attacked by a neighbor's dog in 2007 while living in Seattle. She later moved to Austin to run a public education website about dangerous dogs.

"The motto of no-kill is: Save them all. And our motto is: They can't all be saved. Nor should they, for public safety reasons. There are some dogs that don't belong in our neighborhoods," said Lynn.

And while there are critics, there are also many who support the no-kill policy and how the agencies work to rehabilitate dogs.

Leah Manners told us the story of her dog, Frank. She says when Frank first came to Austin Pets Alive!, he was labeled "aggressive" and not good with people. But workers spent a year training Frank before putting him up for adoption

"I think they gave a dog like Frank a second chance. And I think he deserved it, and he has turned into an incredible dog," said Manners.

Tips Before Adopting a Dog

- Do your research
- Bring a trainer with you to the shelter to evaluate signs for aggression
- Make a list of what you want in a pet
- Go in with questions
- Consider rescue groups, since they usually hand pick dogs and put them into foster homes

<http://kxan.com/investigative-story/are-austins-no-kill-shelters-adopting-out-dangerous-dogs/>