



McKamey Animal Center Shelter Operations and Field Assessment

Best Friends Animal Society's shelter outreach team provides customized assessments and support for individual animal shelters and the communities they serve. Through the outreach program, each community receives a shelter operations and field services assessment (if applicable) designed to identify specific areas of need and help implement best practices in animal welfare. Ongoing support is also provided to ensure that new programs and practices are sustainable and successful. Our outreach team uses a collaborative approach to each shelter partnership and believes that every shelter should have the opportunity to determine its own organizational needs based on lifesaving impact in that community. As a rule, we avoid a "one size fits all" approach because, just like every individual animal, each shelter and its community has its own individual personality and needs.

On May 3-4, 2021, members of the Best Friends municipal and shelter support team conducted a shelter operational and field assessment for McKamey Animal Center (MAC). The basis of the request for an assessment was to provide the new leadership at MAC with a baseline understanding of where shelter and field operations currently are in line with nationally proven strategies and where there are opportunities for growth. This report will primarily focus on areas in need of improvement regarding main operational activities and community impact. Areas where improvement is needed will be highlighted and followed by recommendations based on proven strategies in shelter and field operations. Once the recommendations are accepted by MAC leadership, staff at Best Friends will work with MAC to create an implementation plan and schedule periodic meetings to discuss progress and challenges.

Defining the opportunity

McKamey Animal Center has seen significant growth in their lifesaving efforts recently and has expressed the desire to increase operational and field services in hopes of reaching and sustaining a 90% save rate.

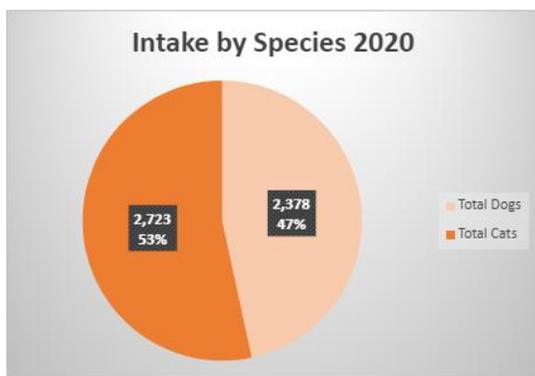
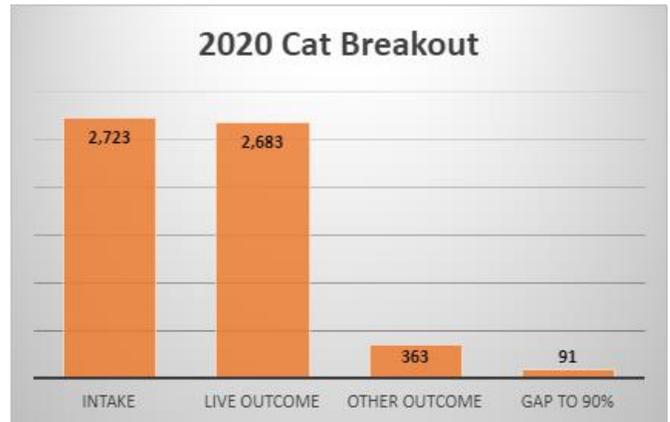
Demographic information

MAC provides sheltering and field services to the City of Chattanooga, Red Bank and Lakesite. The total service area has a population of approximately 194,000 and covers an area of about 152 square miles. The city/county of Chattanooga's median household income is \$45,527 with 20.7% of the population living below the poverty line.

Shelter data

Using 2020 as a full-year baseline, the agency took in 5,101 animals. Of those, 2,378 were dogs and 2,723 were cats. The shelter does occasionally take in other species of animals (livestock, wildlife or other non-companion animals), but for the purposes of this assessment, Best Friends focused predominantly on cats and dogs. This number represents a 23% decline in cat and dog intake from 2019.

The overall 2020 save rate for dogs and cats for MAC was 82.7%. With the goal of achieving a 90% save rate, this data indicates a lifesaving gap of 374 dogs and cats who need to be saved in order to achieve that status. Broken down further by species, dogs had a 78.1% save rate, with a lifesaving gap of 283 dogs, and cats had a 86.7% save rate, with a lifesaving gap of 91.



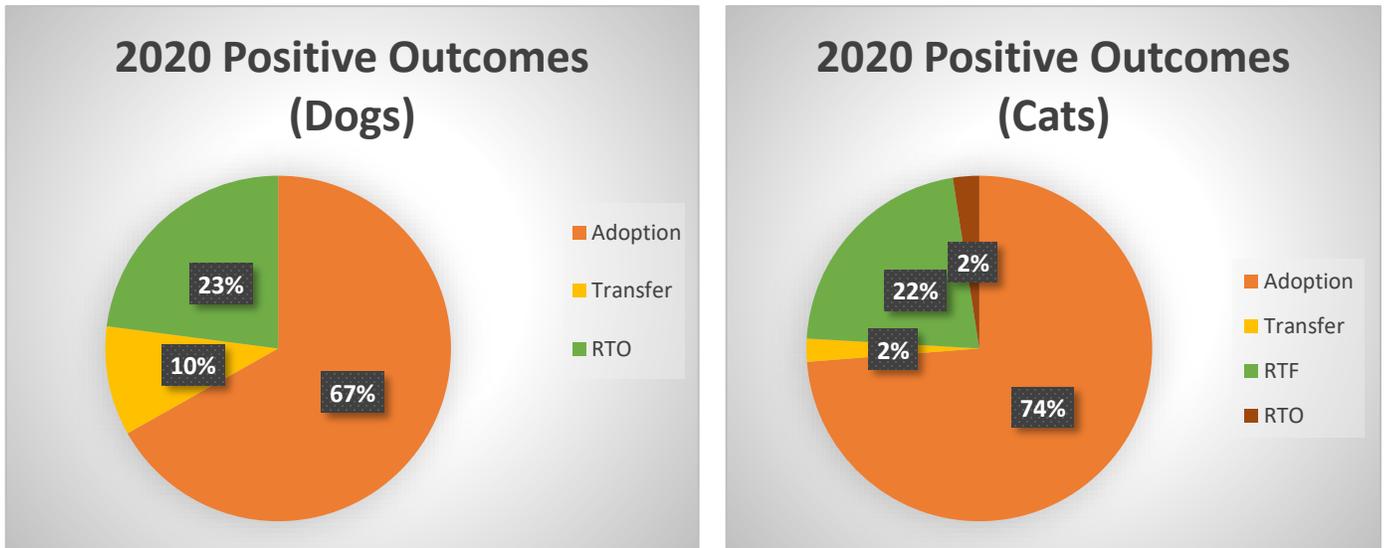
This data clearly demonstrates that adult dogs and underage kittens are the most at-risk animals entering the shelter system, as well as both dogs and cats of unidentified age. Increased accuracy in data entry (i.e., inputting age for all impounded animals) would increase the clarity of MAC's data for

reporting and analysis. Adult dogs had a 78.5% save rate in 2020 and underage kittens had a save rate of 86.7%.

The historical data for MAC shows a trend of substantially more stray intake over owner surrender intake, as can be seen in the chart below. These two intake types accounted for 87% of all intake for 2020.



Outcome data, broken out by species (in the charts above), shows that a large majority of the positive outcomes for both dogs and cats is via adoption. The other most common positive outcome types can be seen in the chart.



This data will guide the recommendations given below and can highlight areas that McKamey Animal Center can focus on to reduce intake and increase positive outcomes for the animals in their community.

Accolades

Before diving into specific recommendations, it is only appropriate to highlight aspects of MAC and its staff for work that is going notably well and can serve as a model for other communities.

- During our time at the shelter and in the field, we observed many of the staff to be compassionate, hard-working, dedicated and eager for new ideas and progressive practices.
- Staff genuinely view the transition and changes as necessary and positive for the animals and community they serve.
- The volunteer coordinator has a clear and strong foundation for volunteer recruitment, retention and recognition. The coordinator has created a robust action plan to be implemented that is congruent with best practices in volunteer engagement. With continued leadership support and departmental mentoring for the coordinator, MAC should be able to put into practice a highly successful volunteer program.

- The field staff actively practices return-to-owner (RTO) in the field and operates with a community-focused mindset. The officers are highly engaged and have a genuine desire to take these practices to the next level.

Recommendations

Below are recommendations based on observations made and common themes derived from the MAC staff members interviewed.

Stray dog intake

Based on available data, our top recommendations involve stray dog intake. Field officers are authorized to pick up dogs roaming at large, but they are not required to do so under current law. This enables them to perform return-to-owner while still out in the field (F-RTO), rather than impounding dogs at the shelter.

Many agencies across the country are becoming more and more creative with techniques to enhance the ability of officers to identify and return dogs to their homes, beyond simply checking for ID tags and scanning for microchips. We were told that the officers at MAC are currently scanning dogs captured in the field, but performing additional steps to attempt reunification is inconsistent. We recommend putting a standard operating procedure (SOP) in place that requires officers to perform additional steps before leaving the scene. Best Friends is willing to provide additional training and assist in drafting the SOP if MAC wishes.

We also recommend creating an SOP for scanning stray animals multiple times as they move through the shelter system. Currently, there are multiple beliefs about whether an animal needs to be scanned past the admissions point, resulting in animals being scanned only once, upon intake. Scanning an animal multiple times is critical because microchips can migrate to different areas of an animal's body, and it is not uncommon for a scanner to miss a chip.

Finally, a comprehensive RTO program includes attempting to match incoming animals with lost-pet reports taken at the shelter and posts on social media, including Facebook and Nextdoor.com, so we recommend that MAC start doing that.

Underage kitten intake

Neonates or kittens coming in pose a significant challenge for MAC, which struggles with the time required to care for this population. It is essential to empower the community to take action for this specific population via a robust foster program. Additionally, educating members of the public via

programs is a great way to reduce intake of young kittens and mitigate unnecessary loss of life. The resources listed at the end of this assessment contain valuable information on programs designed to address this common issue.

Communications and culture

As is commonly seen in agencies across the country, MAC has apparent departmental silos, which leads to a lack of fluid and consistent communication throughout the shelter. Through our interviews, many staff shared that they feel inadequate communication is one of the biggest barriers facing MAC.

Staff do feel that the new leadership is available for communication, and they are receptive to staff opinions and input. The communication issues primarily lie between departments: field services, clinic and operations. Recently, operations did strategically bring together the dog team and the cat team. With continued leadership support and training, this silo effect should diminish greatly.

To sustain staff engagement and create a team synergy, it is important that staff members receive consistent messaging. MAC should work not only to break down silos in departments, but also to focus on bringing the staff together as one team working toward a unified mission.

Some recommendations for improving communications and culture:

- Host an all-staff monthly meeting (via virtual meetings if necessary). These meetings are important for relationship-building and allow a time for open communication between departments. In the meetings, include topics such as monthly statistics, policy and procedural changes, and accolades for employees. Encourage staff to participate in choosing the topics for the meetings and consider allowing different staff members to lead each meeting.
- Have each department supervisor report on the activities of their respective program or department. These meetings also provide an opportunity to discuss lifesaving programs (e.g., intake diversion, volunteer and foster programs, F-RTO) in more depth. From this meeting, create a monthly report to distribute to staff and post in break rooms.
- Before any new promotions and messaging are posted on social pages or sent out to the community, all staff (including field services) should be informed and any questions or concerns should be addressed with the appropriate department head. The staff should fully understand all changes that are made so the correct information can be transmitted to the community.
- Have all department heads do daily rounds *together* to allow an open line of communication surrounding the differing needs of the departments. This practice will further contribute to team-building and efficiency of operations.
- Paperwork should be kept to a minimum when that paperwork simply repeats computer-based work. Staff efficiency could be improved by limiting checklists to training only and making sure staff know how to properly add information into the shelter software.

Training

Cross-training is an effective method of ensuring collaboration and consistency across departments, along with written and available SOPs. Staff also need to be empowered to make their own decisions regarding daily operations (e.g., adoptions, waiving fees, behavior assessments). This can be achieved through a well-developed training program, along with providing continuing education to staff.

Some recommendations for improving training for staff:

- Staff should be cross-trained as part of the onboarding process, as well as on an intermittent basis. Most of the staff members we spoke with were very interested in cross-training opportunities, especially working with co-workers across separate departments. These opportunities should not be limited to in-shelter only. MAC should also offer cross-training opportunities in the form of ride-alongs with animal control officers. This practice should be fully embraced as part of the training process for new staff members, in addition to being available to existing staff. New field service officers should also spend two weeks in the shelter as part of the onboarding process. This is a great step toward bridging the gap among shelter staff, administration and field services and further development of cross-training.
- SOPs need to be written for all departments with a sense of urgency. SOPs need to be shared not only in specific departments, but organization-wide. A different staff member should learn and present a new SOP every other week in organizational meetings. Newly presented SOPs should be printed out and posted around the shelter for that entire week. A fun and short quiz on the new SOPs for the month could help remind staff of protocol changes. Leadership should have staff follow checklists until they are knowledgeable about the new SOP. New and old SOPs should be available to all staff in a binder or on a shared drive. Any changes to SOPs should be shared with the entire staff and updated in all locations.
- All staff members, including field services and administrative staff, should be trained on adoptions and return-to-owner processes, so that any time a staff member is in the building, a community member can reclaim or adopt a pet. This will also allow kennel staff to assist the front desk staff during busy times.
- All staff members should receive training on effective complaint mitigation regarding outdoor cats as the organization pushes further development of community cat programs.
- We recommend reallocating the staff assigned to the behavior program — empowering and training them to act in a different capacity. MAC would be better served with this talented group of individuals implementing a full animal enrichment program, providing behavior consultations to families at risk of surrendering their pets due to behavior problems, and focusing on animals in the shelter that the staff have identified as having potential behavior problems. Adoptability and behavior concerns can be identified by care staff, who interact with the animals daily, and discussed during daily rounds. This will provide a better understanding of each animal's needs and free up time for the behavior team to provide the lifesaving services mentioned above.

Intakes and live outcomes

MAC has made tremendous strides in reducing intakes and increasing live outcomes in the last year. Implementing changes to these existing programs will ensure the sustainability and success of these efforts.

Some recommendations for improving these programs:

- Open adoption procedures need to be fully implemented and embraced by staff and leadership. Overwhelmingly, staff mentioned that they would like to transition to conversation-based adoptions and move away from the checklist. Research has revealed that prospective adopters find a checklist process stressful, and some adopters don't answer the questions truthfully. Conversational adoption counseling allows agencies to collect the information needed to make adoption decisions in a stress-free way, while simultaneously educating adopters in an organic way, and building trust between the agency and the adopter. Another benefit to this approach is that it can improve community engagement and client service.
- Managed intake and admissions is a critical program that has allowed great strides forward at MAC. We recommend adding a comprehensive list of resources beyond rescue and placement options (e.g., where to obtain low-cost or free food and supplies, affordable medical care and affordable pet-friendly housing).
- The ambassador program is adding a lot of time to the animals' length of stay. Changing the adoption language to encourage all animals to be adopted at the same price will decrease the length of stay and increase the flow of animals leaving the shelter daily.

Field services

MAC's field service staff are highly engaged and passionate about improving relationships with the community. The officers actively practice return-to-owner in the field and understand that an enforcement-heavy model of operations can be detrimental to compliance rates, positive lasting relationships and overall lifesaving. However, there are ways to take this proactive, community-based mindset to the next level. The officers also expressed a desire to formalize their onboarding process and increase the amount of professional growth and development opportunities available to them.

Our recommendations for field services:

- Develop a robust field training program and onboarding process. (Resources can be found below.)
- Build out SOPs and policies around return-to-owner in the field to ensure that F-RTO is being practiced efficiently and consistently across the department.

- Ensure that all officers have resources (e.g., dog food, fencing repair tools) on their trucks at the start of every shift. This will enable them to solve problems proactively in the field and keep more pets in homes and out of the shelter.
- Offer the dispatch staff training on conflict mitigation and active problem-solving in order to engage the community and reduce shelter intake.
- Hold monthly meetings to discuss national trends and allow all officers to contribute ideas that are “outside of the box” to address problems.
- Each month, celebrate the officer who has successfully returned the most animals to their families.
- Utilize field data and heat mapping to address trends and hotspots in the community. Collaborate with officers and dispatch staff to develop targeted action plans.

Resources

The following resources can assist MAC with implementing the recommendations given above.

Intakes and live outcomes

- Operational training playbook on [Adoptions](#)
- Operational training playbook on [Alternative Outcomes](#)
- Online learning course on [Client Service and Adoptions](#)
- Operational training playbook on [Managed Intake or Admission](#)
- Illustration for [Community Pet Resources](#) for managed intake programs
- Operational training playbook on [At-Risk Animals](#)
- Maddie’s Fund: [Removing Barriers to Adoption](#): How Evidence, Innovation and Compassion Grow Pet Adoptions
- HSUS: [Adopters Welcome](#)
- Best Friends Pet Adoption Survey Results: [Infographic](#)
- Best Friends *Humane Animal Control* manual chapters on:
 - [Return-to-Owner Strategies](#)
 - [Managed Intake](#)
 - [Delayed or Diverted Intake](#)
 - [Intake Diversion in the Field](#)
 - [Intake Diversion via Pet Retention](#)
 - [Adoption Programs](#)

Underage kittens

- Best Friends Lifesaving Library: [Kittens](#)
- Pasco County Animal Services: [Leave Them Be](#) program

Communication and culture

- [Taking daily rounds of your animal shelter facility](#)
- The Best Friends [Culture Initiatives Playbook](#)
- [Seven-Minute Seventh Level Checklist \(for ensuring high engagement with a particular audience\)](#)
- HSUS: [The Art of Communication](#)

Training

- [Community Cat Resources](#)
- [Staff and Volunteer Training and Development Study: Caring for Animals, Caring for People](#)
- [3 low-cost or free tips for training animal shelter staff](#)
- [ASPCA Online Courses](#)
- [Behavioral Assessment in Animal Shelters](#)
- [Best Friends E-Learnings](#)
- [A Road Map to New Hire Orientation](#)
- [Maddie's Fund Learning Opportunities](#)
- [Role-Playing: Preparing for Difficult Conversations and Situations](#)

Field services

- [Best Friends Field Training Program Playbook](#)
- [Community Engagement Webinar](#)
- [Advanced Field RTO Webinar](#)
- [Community Cat Complaint Mitigation Webinar](#)
- Online learning course: [Intake Diversion in the Field](#)

About Best Friends Animal Society

Best Friends Animal Society is a leading national animal welfare organization dedicated to ending the killing of dogs and cats in America's shelters. In addition to running lifesaving programs in partnership with around 3,300 animal welfare groups across the country, Best Friends has regional centers in New York City, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Salt Lake City, and operates the nation's largest no-kill sanctuary for companion animals. Founded in 1984, Best Friends is a pioneer in the no-kill movement and has helped reduce the number of animals killed in shelters nationwide from 17 million per year to around 625,000. That means there are still about 1,700 dogs and cats killed every day in shelters, just because they don't have safe places to call home. Working collaboratively with shelters, rescue groups, other organizations and you, we will end the killing and Save Them All. For more information, visit bestfriends.org.

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