



Reducing the Increase in Shelter Animal Euthanizations Since Harris County's 2024 Policy Change

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since Harris County, Texas, which includes the City of Houston, changed its euthanasia policy in 2024, there has been an increase in the number of shelter animals being euthanized. This paper discusses the background behind the change in Harris County's policy, the impact of the change on the number of local shelter animals being euthanized, the possible solutions to reverse this trend, and the top three solutions having the biggest impacts.

BACKGROUND

Prior to November 1, 2024, Harris County provided for a thirty-day euthanasia eligibility window as well as only two euthanasia days per week for shelter animals. Effective November 1, 2024, however, the county changed its euthanasia policy to reduce the minimum shelter stay before an animal can be considered for euthanasia to fifteen days and increased the number of days shelter animals can be euthanized to three per week.¹

The county argued the policy change was driven by severe overcrowding at local animal shelters. Specifically, according to the county, shelters were reportedly operating at approximately 175% capacity as well as handling over 30,000 animal control calls annually.²

Data shows the number of adoptions and rescue transfers have increased since the policy change. However, evidence shows the policy change, while within the county's legal authority,³ has actually resulted in an increase in the number of shelter animals being euthanized in Harris County. Indeed, in February 2026, the county's Public Health Director stated euthanizations had increased by 1,355 animals from November 2024 to October 2025.⁴

HARRIS COUNTY'S POLICY IS LEGALLY COMPLIANT, BUT MORE SHELTER ANIMALS ARE BEING EUTHANIZED

As noted previously, the number of shelter animals being euthanized in Harris County has increased since the policy change. The change to Harris County's policy, however, is legally compliant. Texas' anti-cruelty laws do not prohibit humane euthanasia. Accordingly, even though Harris County's policy

change results in an increase in the number of euthanized shelter animals, the policy change does not create a violation of the law unless the county has failed to comply with some other afforded protection, such as not allowing sufficient time for an owner to be notified and reclaim an animal.⁵ Prior to the policy change, however, animal welfare advocates warned that shortening the hold period before a shelter animal could be considered for euthanization from thirty days to fifteen days would reduce opportunities for shelter animals to be fostered, transferred to a rescue facility, and adopted.

When the policy change was implemented, Adriana Barrios with Rescue Dog Army warned, “There is a sense of panic, like we’re losing a battle. The 30-day policy was already hard, but a 15-day window is going to be nearly impossible.” Barrios also stated, “The new policy feels like a slap in the face to us and all the work we’ve been doing. It’s almost like a death sentence for all these dogs. It seems helpless and hopeless.”⁶ Other animal welfare advocates expressed similar concerns, stating they did not understand why Harris County Pets, the open intake municipal animal shelter servicing the county’s unincorporated areas, was “making it more difficult for animals to leave the shelter alive.”⁷

Although Texas as a whole showed “nearly an 11% decrease in dogs and cats killed in shelters last year [in 2025],” according to Best Friends Animal Society, Texas still “remains the number one state for killing healthy, treatable pets in the United States.” Further, although Texas’ other major city shelters improved their lifesaving efforts in 2025 in comparison to 2024, Houston appears to have the sole municipal shelter not seeing an improvement in the number of shelter animals saved. After citing improvements in the cities of Fort Worth, El Paso, San Antonio, and Dallas, Best Friends staff noted, “In contrast, BARC Animal Shelter and Adoptions in Houston killed nearly 400 more pets in 2025 than in 2024.”⁸ Data shows from April 2025 through March 2026, 22,082 pets entered BARC but only 15,843 of those pets’ lives were saved.⁹

Thus, despite data showing an increase in the number of adoptions and rescue transfers, it appears the warning from animal welfare advocates has come to fruition considering the number of animals euthanized in Harris County animal shelters has increased since the policy change. With the county’s policy change being legally compliant, and absent any indication the county plans to reverse the policy change, animal welfare advocates will need to focus on other solutions to potentially decrease the number of shelter animals being euthanized in Harris County.

VIABLE SOLUTIONS TO DECREASE THE NUMBER OF SHELTER ANIMALS BEING EUTHANIZED IN HARRIS COUNTY

There are several possible solutions to address the increase in euthanasia rates for shelter animals in Harris County. These solutions include options such as community cat trap-neuter-release (TNR) programs, keeping pets with owners before surrender, and increasing adoption and reclaiming rates. They also include other options to expand spay and neuter programs, fostering programs, and rescue transfer partnerships and transports.

Three Solutions with Limited Impacts

Of the potential options discussed herein, the first three—TNR programs, keeping pets with owners before surrender, and increasing adoption and reclaiming rates—while helpful, have limited impacts overall in reducing the number of animals being euthanized in Harris County. The reasons these solutions are not as impactful as other solutions are discussed below.

1. TNR Programs

TNR programs are utilized to try to reduce the number of cats impounded and euthanized. Specifically, TNR programs are designed to trap, neuter, and then return free-roaming cats. Although Harris County Pet's Community Cat Program does not provide TRN services, they note such programs seek to reduce the number of free-roaming cats, prevent kitten births, reduce nuisance behavior (such as yowling, fighting, and spraying), and lower shelter intake of cats.¹⁰ These programs have a limited impact, however, because they do not significantly reduce the overall population of free-roaming cats.

According to Dr. Brayshaw of the Animal Humane Society, you would need to "sterilize and return at least 70% of the [free-roaming] cats to reduce a cat population via TNR." Even then, he notes, "even small populations are rarely eradicated altogether."¹¹ Dr. Brayshaw sees TNR programs as beneficial because they are more humane than euthanizing cats, reduce the number of new cats entering a particular population where neutered cats have been returned, and vaccinate sterilized cats from diseases that can be fatal to cats. Because these programs do not reduce the number of free-roaming cats overall, however, as well as the fact that they typically only impact cats, TNR is not the most effective means of reducing the overall number of animals euthanized in Harris County.

2. Keeping pets with owners before surrender

Another option put forth to reduce the number of shelter animals being euthanized in Harris County is helping owners keep their pets instead of surrendering them to animal shelters. Although this appears to be a rational option, this potential solution also has a limited practical impact on the number of animals euthanized by animal shelters.

Oftentimes pet owners who are considering surrendering their pets lack financial and other resources necessary to care for their pets. Such necessary resources include money for pet food, vaccinations, veterinary care, and behavior concerns. Other concerns are related to housing issues, including rental restrictions regarding animals, dogs in particular and/or specific breeds or weights of dogs. According to the ASPCA, "For low-income families, it's hard enough to find affordable housing, and affordable pet-friendly housing is even harder to secure. Many apartment buildings ban certain breeds or dogs over a certain weight. ... [Another issue is pet ownership] may just be too much for some pet owners to handle; training can require a lot of time and effort that some people aren't willing to spend."¹² Although some resources are available to assist pet owners in keeping their pets, the ASPCA reports approximately twenty-nine percent of animals entered shelters due to owner surrenders in 2024.¹³ Thus, keeping pets with owners before surrender is helpful to reduce the number of shelter animals being euthanized, but this option is not the best option for reducing that number.

3. Higher adoption and reclaiming rates

Animal adoptions, which again have increased in Harris County since the policy change, do help reduce the number of animals remaining and being housed in animal shelters. An increase in the number of shelter animal adoptions, however, does not necessarily result in "a higher overall live release rate," which refers to "the *percentage* [emphasis added] of animals that are adopted or rescued,"¹⁴ for the simple reason that there are more animals entering shelters than are being adopted. According to the ASPCA, "Unfortunately, not enough animals were adopted [in 2025] to significantly

reduce the number of dogs and cats in shelters nationwide.” The APSCA reported 5.8 million dogs and cats entered U.S. shelter and rescue facilities in 2025, but only 4.2 million of those animals were adopted.¹⁵ Rescued Pet Movement notes, “Houston faces an overwhelming challenge: more animals than there are homes willing to adopt them.”¹⁶ Harris County officials agree adoptions do not have a long-term impact on decreasing the number of homeless animals.¹⁷ Thus, as with previously discussed options, while adoptions are helpful to reduce the number of animals being euthanized in Harris County, higher adoption and reclaiming rates have a limited impact overall on that number.

Because the potential solutions discussed above are less effective in reducing the number of shelter animals being euthanized in Harris County, animal welfare advocates must consider alternative or additional possible options to address the issue. Next, this paper will discuss some of the potential options with more long-term impacts.

Three Solutions with Long-Term Impacts

There are three solutions to reduce the number of shelter animals being euthanized in Harris County that seem to be the most effective and have the most long-term impacts. These solutions, discussed below, are expanding the scale of spay and neuter programs, expanding foster programs and networks, and expanding rescue transfer partnerships and transports.

1. Expanding the scale of spay/neuter programs

Sarah Mills, senior director of operations at PetSet believes in addition to funding shelters, the other option with long-term impact on the number of shelter animals euthanized is low-cost spaying and neutering.¹⁸ PetSet veterinarians will perform spay/neuter surgeries, as well as microchipping and vaccinations, in its mobile facility for \$20 per dog and cat. According to PetSet’s co-president, Tena Lundquist Faust, a standard veterinary clinic would charge an average of \$300 to \$700 for this bundle of services. Harris County Precinct 3 Commissioner Tom Ramsey agrees with Mill’s position. According to Ramsey, “Spay and neuter is the most effective tool we have to reduce stray populations long term. ... One spay and neuter can prevent 67,000 puppies and 370,000 cats in a six-year period.”¹⁹

According to BARC, “Low-cost spay/neuter programs are a proven way to reduce the stray animal population over time. BARC recently launched Fixin’ Houston – the first public, in-house, low-cost municipal spay/neuter clinic in Texas. So far, since the clinic began in 2014, BARC has performed low-cost spay/neuter surgeries on more than 11,000 pets.”²⁰ Therefore, expanding the scale of spay/neuter programs can have a considerable impact on reducing the number of euthanizations performed at animal shelters in Harris County.

2. Expanding foster programs and networks

Another highly effective and impactful, as well as quick, option for reducing the number of shelter animals euthanized in Harris County is expanding foster programs and networks. Many animals in shelters are euthanized due to shelters running out of space for all of the animals in the shelters. Foster homes provide animals with a temporary space that immediately helps reduce overcrowding in animal shelters. Among other benefits, foster homes also help reduce the stress on animals who are brought into shelters—which can be loud—and many times shelter animals can remain in foster homes until they are adopted.²¹

Across the nation, animal shelters with strong foster programs and networks often maintain higher live release rates for shelter animals.²² Animal welfare advocates agree with this position. According to Sophia Proler, South Central Regional Director at Best Friends, in addition to volunteering and adopting, fostering is one of the ways to help reduce euthanasia rates. Proler states, “If you can only foster for a short amount of time, those days are so meaningful for that dog to not be in a shelter.”²³ Rescued Pet Movement notes, “Every time a foster opens their home, they’re not only saving an animal from the euthanasia list but also creating space at the shelter, potentially saving a second life.”²⁴ Thus, expanding foster programs and networks can be a key and outstanding option for reducing the number of animals being euthanized at animal shelters in Harris County.

3. Expanding rescue transfer partnerships and transports

Another highly effective option offering a more immediate impact on the number of animals being euthanized in Harris County shelters is expanding rescue transfer partnerships and transports. Transporting shelter animals to areas outside of Harris County provides the county’s animal shelters with better opportunities to find homes for the shelter animals already being housed in their facilities. According to Rescued Pets Movement, which touts itself as being the “largest transport and rehabilitation rescue group of its kind in the country,” there is a higher demand for rescued animals in other parts of the country because, unlike Houston and other parts of the South, other states have spay/neuter laws as well as breeding regulations that help control animal populations. Further, these other areas of the country, with “their colder winters naturally limit the breeding of stray animals, unlike Houston where the temperate climate allows for year-round reproduction, exacerbating the overpopulation issue” in Harris County.²⁵

Many animal shelters in Harris County lack the networks and capacity to transport shelter animals to other regions of the country, however. Accordingly, BARC has established a “revolutionary partnership” with Rescued Pets Movement.²⁶ According to Rescued Pets Movement, it provides weekly transport trips to its rescue partners in Colorado and Illinois, and since it was founded in 2013, the organization “has saved over 100,000 companion animals, including more than 75,000 from BARC.” The organization notes that through its efforts, it is helping BARC consistently achieve a live release rate of over 80%, which is an extraordinary increase from BARC’s live release rate of only 42.6% in 2012.²⁷ Accordingly, expanding rescue transfer partnerships and transports is an option that can have quite a remarkable impact on reducing the number of euthanizations performed at animal shelters in Harris County.

CONCLUSION

The number of shelter animals in Harris County being euthanized has trended up since the county enacted a change to its euthanasia policy in November 2024 to reduce the minimum shelter stay before an animal can be considered for euthanasia to fifteen days and increased the number of days an animal can be euthanized to three per week. There are options available, however, to help reduce this upward trend.

This paper has discussed three options that have somewhat limited impacts as well as three additional or alternative options that are significantly more impactful on reversing the current trend. Animal welfare advocates who are focused on increasing live release rates for shelter animals and reducing

euthanasia rates in Harris County should strongly consider how they can more effectively implement the three most impactful options, which are expanding: the scale of spay and neuter programs, foster programs and networks, and rescue transfer partnerships and transports.

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