

To meet the Council-mandated live release goal, the City has compromised parts of the Austin Animal Center’s mission and failed to provide appropriate care to all of its animals



Objective

Determine whether the City was effectively managing its animal population and providing animals in its shelter with necessary and humane care. Specifically:

- Why the Austin Animal Center has been overcrowded and animal intake has been restricted
- If animals in the shelter’s possession receive necessary care and humane treatment
- If the City’s live release goal of 95% is sustainable at the shelter’s current level of support

Background

The Austin Animal Center (AAC) serves lost and surrendered animals from Austin and Travis County and prides itself on being the largest “no-kill” shelter in the country. Last year, AAC provided shelter to more than 15,000 animals, in addition to other services.

However, AAC has been consistently at or beyond capacity and has faced criticism from community members and the media. In June 2022, the City Council asked our office to conduct this audit.

As a part of this audit, we hired an external expert who did an independent evaluation of the shelter that is available on [our website](#).

What We Found

Finding 1: The City of Austin’s animal welfare priorities conflict with each other, contributing to AAC’s inability to achieve stated goals.

AAC’s mission to serve as an open-intake shelter for the community while providing humane care for the animals in its possession and maintaining its goal live release rate do not all appear to be currently achievable at the same time. While AAC has consistently met and exceeded its goal live release rate for cats and dogs, these successes have come at the expense of animal care, and AAC has had to close its intake of new animals due to overcrowding. AAC does not have a strategic plan that balances these priorities.

Finding 2: AAC is not finding enough homes for its animals and is overcrowded.

Last year, AAC missed its goal for the numbers of animals adopted, returned to owner, and transferred to partners. AAC did not have a goal for the number of animals placed in foster care. Notably, in early 2022, the City changed its agreement with Austin Pets Alive (APA) and reduced the number of animals APA was expected to take from AAC.

By sheltering more animals than it had space and staff for, quality of care suffered. Specifically, we found:

- Animals housed in temporary crates
- Animals without enough space in their kennels
- Unsanitary conditions including animal waste and used gloves on the ground, dirty air vents, algae in outdoor pools, and bugs attracted to spilled food

Intake Closed in June 2023



Source: Auditor, July 2023

Austin Animal Center: What We Found, Continued

Dogs without enough kennel space



Source: Auditor, March 2023

Finding 3: Relationships between key stakeholders and within AAC are strained.

AAC cannot achieve its mission without support from the community and partner organizations. However, current and former AAC leaders said that while working at AAC, they faced personal and traumatic attacks, including death threats, for doing their jobs, and some said they did not feel supported by City leadership. Similarly, several community members shared their opinion that AAC leadership was not trustworthy and that they were not committed to the no-kill movement. In June 2022, the City's Animal Advisory Commission passed a Vote of No Confidence in AAC's leadership. While relationships have been strained since before the Commission's vote, the City has not assigned anybody the responsibility of rebuilding these relationships or addressing common concerns.

Finding 4: AAC does not have complete and accurate data, and not all data is tracked in a way that will allow management to access it in a user-friendly format.

Currently, AAC does not have staff dedicated to data management and has prioritized meeting the immediate needs of its animals over data collection and management. We found it often has conflicting or inaccurate information, or no information at all.

For example, AAC consistently meets and exceeds its goal live release rate for cats and dogs, but is often below this goal when including wildlife and other animals. Similarly, we tried to determine the number of spay and neuter operations conducted at AAC. Depending on where we found the data, the number could vary significantly.

The number of spay and neuter operations conducted by AAC varied by source

Fiscal Year	Citywide Performance Website	External AAC Dashboard
2018	5,621	4,425
2019	6,723	6,028
2020	4,979	4,642
2021	6,118	4,916
2022	6,199	6,080

Source: Auditor analysis, July 2023

What We Recommend

The City Manager should:

- Work with Council, AAC, and key stakeholders to establish a policy that balances the City's no-kill goals, the community's intake needs, and the humane treatment of its animals. This policy should be adaptable to changing conditions and resources in the shelter and should be clearly communicated to all stakeholders.
- Work with an independent third party to facilitate engagement sessions with key shelter stakeholders.

The Chief Animal Services Officer should:

- Work with stakeholders to develop, implement, and monitor a strategic plan.
- Establish, implement, and monitor a plan to keep both indoor and outdoors areas clean and sanitary.
- Identify resources needed to address structural issues noted in this report, and address these issues if possible.
- Ensure staff and volunteers are trained and monitored.
- Periodically verify data to ensure that it is accurate, complete, and consistent across different systems.