INTAKE AND ADOPTION DECISION MAKING: HAZARDS AND HELPFUL HINTS
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Importance of decision making criteria

Every year, hundreds or even thousands of animals enter the typical shelter. For each animal, multiple decisions are required: where to house the animal; whether rescue contact should be initiated; whether additional investment in the animal, such as medical treatment, is needed and affordable; whether the animal is a safe candidate for adoption or poses a risk to the public; etc. This easily amounts to dozens of decisions required each day.

The most important and difficult decision that sometimes has to be made is the one to euthanize an animal. For shelters that limit intake, a similar dilemma is faced with the choice to admit an animal or not. We owe it to the animals and ourselves to ensure that these critical choices are made based on a well-thought-out set of criteria; developed in a rational manner with input from appropriate stakeholders; and designed to maximize the number of animals released alive while minimizing the holding time and suffering of animals that will ultimately be euthanized.

Avoiding decision fatigue

"Decision fatigue" is a well-documented phenomenon in which the quality of decisions deteriorates after extended sessions of decision making. This is no reflection on the intention, intelligence or effort of the decision-maker, but a simple result of depletion of the brain's resources. After a barrage of choices, people are simply unable to rationally evaluate the choices at hand. The greater the consequences to be weighed with each choice, the more rapidly decision fatigue sets in (for instance, several studies have found that poor people are more depleted by shopping than wealthy ones, perhaps because each choice requires a greater trade off). Fatigued decision makers often resort to the "default" choice, the one which tends to support the status quo.

This is an important consideration for animal shelter professionals. Not only are choices abundant and relentless, the consequences are often profound. The "default" choice for an animal's future is often to make no choice at all and simply hope for the best. This hazard exists for shelter intake choices as well as euthanasia choices – sometimes the emotional impact of declining an animal for admission or transfer can be similar to selecting an animal for euthanasia. Unfortunately, the default choice too often results in prolonged length of stay and a reliance on deteriorating health or behavior to "decide" the fate of animals.

In order to prevent decision fatigue from adversely affecting choices (or lack there-of), decisions should ideally be made early in the day or after a break – and a snack, as glucose helps restore decision making ability ☺. Decision making responsibility should be rotated between individuals if possible. Good

decisions are easier if less dire alternatives are developed: shelter/neuter/return instead of euthanasia for a healthy but timid stray cat, for instance, or deferral of admission rather than flat-out refusal. Most importantly, decisions with major implications - such as those that relate to intake, adoption and euthanasia - should be based on a set of criteria decided upon in advance by a group of knowledgeable stakeholders. With these criteria in place, the "default" decision is to comply with the thoughtful plan, and the active decision is to deviate from these agreed upon standards. This has the added benefit of relieving the weight of decision making from the shoulders of any one individual – even if they are the ones making the actual choices, the responsibility is shared by all who helped in the plan's development.

Adoption/intake criteria

There has been much discussion in the sheltering community of euthanasia criteria, but less discussion of the flip-side of that decision, admitting an animal or making it available for adoption. However, these choices are two sides to the same coin. For a limited intake shelter with finite capacity, deciding to admit or transfer some animals often means deciding against others, whose fate may be euthanasia at another facility. For an open intake shelter, if healthy animals are routinely admitted in excess of the number released alive, the "choice" is made daily that some animals will be euthanized. It only remains to be seen which ones. If the policy is additionally not to euthanize for space or time, the default system will be awaiting development of illness or behavioral disorders.

Each shelter and community has a finite ability to rehome animals within any given time period. The need often far exceeds this capacity. These are difficult realities to acknowledge. However, facing them and making conscious choices about priorities and alternatives can be profoundly empowering.

Protecting the youngsters and creating alternatives to adoption/intake

One of the most important roles of adoption/intake criteria is to protect the most vulnerable and, in many communities, the most adoptable animals: puppies and kittens. Juvenile animals are most likely to enter the shelter with minor treatable conditions, and most likely to succumb to disease associated with crowding. However, if these conditions are treated or prevented, in many cases these youngsters are almost certain to be adopted. If a shelter is chock full of adults, the "default" choice may become euthanizing a youngster with a treatable illness, or allowing a more serious illness to sweep through a crowded shelter and take the choice out of human hands. For a limited intake shelter, highly adoptable puppies and kittens may remain at risk in the community or at another shelter, missing their best window for adoption, while the shelter is packed with slower-moving adult pets. Meanwhile, some healthy but less "adoptable" (e.g. shy, older) adult animals may sit and wait for adoption for weeks or even months. Neither population is well served and fewer adoptions overall are achieved while considerable additional stress may be incurred by animals confined long term.

Creating adoption/intake criteria becomes easier if we remember that the alternative need not be euthanasia. In fact, accurately identifying animals with a low chance of adoption *in a particular shelter at a given time* increases the opportunity for alternatives to be provided. For animals not yet admitted to the shelter and not in immediate danger, intake can be deferred until a more favorable time period. The owner or finder can be provided with a realistic assessment of the outcome should the animal be

accepted for admission, and resources can be provided to allow them to keep or rehome the animal in the meantime. For animals already in the shelter, alternative avenues of live release may be available. For healthy but fearful stray cats, spay/neuter/vaccinate and release to the location found is an increasingly popular choice. When this is not an option, less readily "adoptable" animals can be sent to long term foster care for return at a better time, e.g. after kitten season or to coincide with major adoption promotions. Meanwhile, they need not sit in a cage awaiting adoption when their chances are low and the space is needed for others. Ultimately, even if the choice is euthanasia, a conscious decision-making process will protect more lives, avert more suffering, and conserve more resources for life saving programs.

Getting into the finer points: fast track/slow track

While many adopters will come to the shelter seeking the classic "highly adoptable" friendly, healthy, young pet, there are also adopters that either come in wanting to be a hero for a special-needs pet, or fall in love in spite of themselves with an animal not meeting the classic adoptable profile. It can be helpful to include some animals with special needs and challenges in the mix of animals available for adoption – not only to serve the animals, which is a given, but to help convert every potential adopter who walks in the door into someone walking out with a new pet. These animals can be thought of as "slow track" animals, while the classic cute youngster or purebred can be considered "fast track".

In reality, if the balance of available animals is right, both groups can move through the system quickly. With a flag that an animal is at risk for being "slow track", extra measures can be taken early on to promote and highlight the animal. If slow track animals do tend to stay longer, housing can be planned that accommodates a longer length of stay while preserving adoptable behavior and maintaining good welfare. Intake/adoption criteria can ensure that the balance of slow track/fast track animals is in line with the potential for adoption and the shelter's ability to maintain good care for each one.

Defining "unadoptable"

Identifying animals that are clearly not adoptable at a given facility helps make a "first cut" and entails a more easily defined set of standards than deciding amongst animals of varying levels of "adoptability". To start with, develop a list of medical, behavioral and other conditions that will automatically disqualify an animal for adoption or admission. Note which of these, if any, will also disqualify an animal for rescue or other avenues for live release (e.g. spay/neuter/vaccinate/return). Examples may (*or may not, depending on shelter and community resources*) include: history of biting or seriously injuring humans; history of killing livestock or other pets; un-handle-able for examination or vaccination (define time frame after shelter intake to allow adaptation to the new environment); biting, snapping, or otherwise showing serious aggression towards staff during routine care or behavioral evaluation (policy may vary by breed/size; be aware that food guarding in some cases may not persist after adoption); chronic debilitating or fatal progressive conditions such as kidney failure, diabetes, cancer. Even in these cases, exceptions may be warranted (e.g. due to a special circumstances surrounding the impound or an extraordinary personality).

Defining adoptability criteria for "adoptable" animals

Unfortunately, in many communities more fundamentally healthy (or readily treatable), behaviorally sound animals are presented to shelters than are released alive. Choosing amongst these animals for intake or adoption presents a much more difficult dilemma than simply making a list of criteria for "unadoptable". Fortunately for dogs, the imbalance between intake and adoption tends to be less than for cats in most communities. Additionally, behavioral evaluations for dogs are widely used and help provide some decision making criteria, whereas these tools are not well developed for cats. Therefore, the rest of this discussion will focus on cats. The same principles can certainly be applied to dogs if need be, or applied to particularly over-represented breeds of dogs within a given community or shelter.

The first step in defining criteria will be to identify, and eventually to appropriately "weight", the characteristics that influence the likelihood of adoption. These characteristics will generally include age, color, behavior, health, and physical characteristics (e.g. weight, size, coat length, extra toes). However, the weight of each of these will vary by shelter and often over time within each shelter. Ideally, the goal would be to admit, or place up for adoption, only those animals that are reasonably likely to be adopted based on both individual characteristics and overall numbers. Over time, adoptions will likely increase and criteria can be expanded to include an ever-widening pool of animals. Ultimately, the only animals admitted to the shelter for euthanasia would be those that are a danger to others or are irremediably suffering.

Establishing the baseline

As a baseline, determine how many animals entered the shelter free of any of the criteria for non-adoptability as described above (e.g. dangerously aggressive, terminally ill). This report is readily available from most shelter software if data are entered accurately. These are the "Theoretically Adoptable (TA)" amongst which choices may need to be made for actual admission or adoption. If data are not available, a conservative estimate is that no more than ~ 10% of cats entering shelters are fundamentally unadoptable by reason of health; outcome reasons can give a guide to the proportion of cats released or euthanized as "feral". Subtracting these proportions from the total intake can give a rough estimate of the number of cats that are theoretically candidates for adoption.

The next step is to determine what proportion of these TA animals are actually adopted by looking at adoption as a percentage of the number of TA animals admitted. The aim of adoption criteria will be to develop alternatives to intake for the approximate percentage of TA animals that are not adopted. So for instance, if only 25% of TA cats are adopted out of a particular shelter, the goal of screening criteria should be to identify approximately the 1 out of 4 cats most likely to be adopted. Cats not making this cut may be candidates for TNR or owners/finders may wish to keep or rehome the cat themselves. If these options are not available, these cats should be prioritized for rescue or, if all else fails, will be candidates for euthanasia. Remember, a decision making system *will not increase euthanasia*, only codify the criteria to allow a more consistent, thoughtful, and humane process. Not admitting a cat is always an option if euthanasia is *not* a preferable alternative to the cat's existing circumstances.

Create a scoring system

Based on your brainstorming of adoptability characteristics and your baseline assessment, assign a score to categories within at least each of the following groups: behavior, age, health, and "special characteristics". Do not include a score for conditions considered "unadoptable" as these will be evaluated by a different process. So, for example, if feral cats would not ever be candidates for adoption, or if the shelter is unable to place animals with major/untreatable health issues, do not include scores for these in your behavior or health categories respectively.

Think of the middle score as "zero" and imagine a cat that is "neutral" for adoption – nothing strongly in its favor but no characteristics making adoption less likely. For instance, in the scheme below, an adult, healthy, social black cats is considered "neutral" and scores a 4 in each category (with no bonus points for special characteristics). Then consider characteristics that make a cat more or less adoptable and weight them above and below "zero" based on the collective impression of importance in that shelter. For instance, in this shelter a healthy, social, black kitten is about twice as likely to be adopted as a healthy, social, black adult cat; thus "kitten" receives a score of 8 compared to the adult's 4. The special characteristics category is for conditions that increase the likelihood of adoption over and above the basic behavior, age and health scores. You can download and modify a sample scoring system on our website, www.sheltermedicine.com (type "decision" into the search box if the link in this document isn't working).

| Feline evaluation for adoption tool	Points
Behavior	
Exceptionally friendly/no known cat issues	8
Social/no known cat issues	4
Shy/neutral/doesn't like other cats	1
Age	
Kitten (6 weeks -4 months)	8
Adolescent (4 - 6 months)	6
Young adult (6-12 months or so)	5
Adult (1-4 years)	4
Middle aged (5-8 years)	2
Senior (9 plus years)	0
Health	
Healthy	4
Minor, treatable health issue	2
Moderate, treatable health issue	0
Special characteristics	
Non-black but non-exceptional color	1
Special color/pattern	2
Purebred(ish)	2
Other physical cuteness	2
Already spayed/neutered	2
Well told sob story	2

Some of these are self-explanatory, but some characteristics will need to be defined, e.g. what constitutes "exceptionally friendly" versus "social", what constitutes a minor versus moderate health

issue at your particular shelter, or what "other physical cuteness" might involve (e.g. extra toes, odd color eyes). Provide brief written descriptions of these categories to accompany the scoring sheet. Try to use easily understood descriptive terms that staff can understand at a glance when performing an assessment.

Test driving the system

Before using the scoring system for decision making, ideally test it for at least a few months – remember that cat adoption is highly seasonal, and the impact of a given score might be different in kitten season versus the winter months. To start with, create a score sheet (either hard copy or in excel, whichever is easier at your shelter) and have several staff members score the same cats to test it out. Try it out on at least 10-20 cats – it's fine to just use it on cats that happen to be in the shelter at the time. Note any areas where there are discrepancies between scores. These categories may need to be better defined, or score-givers may need additional training.

Decide on a field in your shelter software where you can enter the result. Ideally use a field that can be tracked via a report that shows the outcome for that cat and the length of stay to outcome. For instance, one shelter used the "Extra 1" field in their Chameleon™ software.
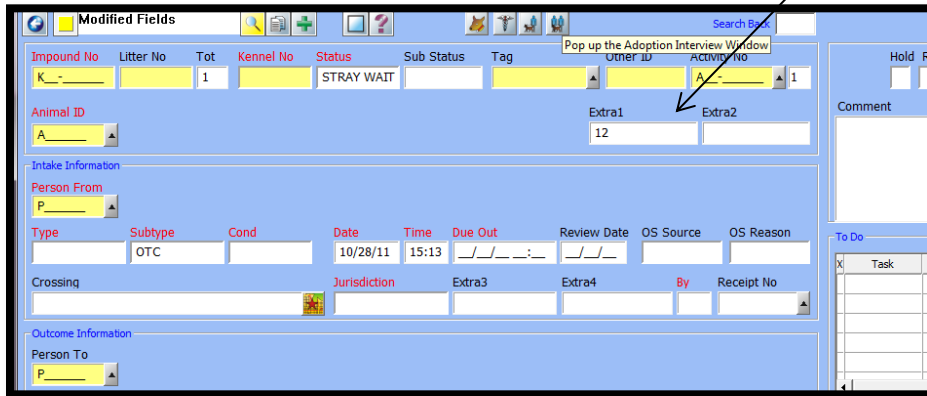
Once you've got the kinks worked out and your staff trained, test drive it by entering the score for each cat for several months without using it as a further basis for decision making. For shelters considering limited or scheduled intake, perform the scoring at the time of intake to replicate the scenario in which cats are evaluated immediately and alternatives to intake offered for cats not scoring sufficiently high for admission. For open-intake shelters, the score can be performed at the end of any required holding period prior to making the cat available for adoption. Make sure that a number is always entered into whatever field is chosen, so that you can differentiate between staff being unable to complete the evaluation versus simply not getting around to it – use the number 0 if the evaluation is not performed for any reason.

Data analysis

After test driving the system for several months (or sooner, if you like), analyze the following data points: Number and percentage of cats achieving each score; outcome distribution for each score (e.g.

how many and what % of cats scoring 10 were adopted, rescued, or euthanized); and for those that were adopted, the average length of stay to adoption. Sometimes just "eyeballing" the results will give you a sense of a possible cut off point for "highly adoptable". For instance, in the chart below, there seems to be one natural break at 14 and above (average LOS to adoption 12, versus 19 for those scoring below 14), and another at 10 and below (likelihood of adoption 38% and lower versus 76% and higher).

Number of Cats Per Score	% Of Total	FEFA Score	Avg Length Of Stay to ado	Adoption	Euthanasia	Percent adoption
3	2%	20	10	3	0	100%
1	1%	19	12	1	0	100%
2	2%	18	10	2	0	100%
15	11%	17	14	15	0	100%
8	6%	16	10	8	0	100%
24	18%	15	15	24	0	100%
11	8%	14	11	10	1	91%
5	4%	13	23	4	1	80%
19	14%	12	24	16	3	84%
17	13%	11	22	13	4	76%
8	6%	10	16	3	5	38%
8	6%	9	8	1	7	13%
9	7%	8	22	1	8	11%
2	2%	7	0	0	2	0%
132	100%			101	31	77%

The goal in choosing a score for "adoptable" should be to choose a range that includes at least as many animals as were adopted in that time period, even if some were actually euthanized. This is easy to do in excel simply by selecting both columns (adoption and euthanasia) with your cursor and scrolling from the highest score downwards. Look in the lower right corner of the spread sheet to see a running sum of the cats included. Stop when you reach a number equal to or slightly higher than the total number of adoptions.

In this case, it works out nicely to be 105 cats that scored 11 or higher, just higher than the 101 total that were adopted. So, this shelter could extrapolate that admitting only those 105 would likely have resulted in 100% adoption; this might be the bottom cut off for "adoptable" during the season in question. They might further distinguish that 14 and above would be considered "fast track" and prioritized for quick passage through the shelter, while 11-13 might be at higher risk for a longer length of stay and should be accordingly provided suitable housing and enrichment, and extra efforts made to promote them for adoption. The score for "adoptable" should be reevaluated seasonally and adjusted accordingly. If the shelter finds themselves constantly running out of cats because adoptions increase, the score for admission/adoption can be progressively lowered.

Making exceptions, implementing fast track/slow track/super slow track

Once a baseline "adoptable" score has been established, in general only cats scoring that level or above should be admitted and/or moved through to adoption. This score will tend to include both fast and slow track cats in proportion to the number adopted from each group. However, there are likely to be some occasions when an exception to the general rule is warranted. For instance notice in the example above, one cat scoring only a 9 was adopted after just 8 days. There are some adopters who come to the shelter specifically looking for an animal with a hard-luck story, and perhaps this fortunate cat got

matched up with one of these good-hearted folks. Having a few less-adoptable cats will actually serve this "market" and may increase adoptions as well as generating warm, fuzzy stories to share. If shelter resources permit, it may be helpful to reserve a few "super slow track spaces" for these cats, ensuring ample space and enrichment to accommodate a longer length of stay. Designating spaces can also help keep "exceptions" from turning into the rule – when the "super slow track spaces" are full, further exceptions will have to wait (either at their homes through managed intake or in foster care if available) until space opens up .

Whatever the rule for exceptions, it's a good idea to limit the authority for exceptions to just a few people, ideally *not* those in charge of making the bulk of day-to-day decisions. The individual advocating for the exception can participate by creating a written "treatment plan" outlining how the animal will be cared for and what the strategy will be for rehoming, so that a clear path is created. Remember, the goal of creating a decision-making tool was to relieve the ongoing burden of making good choices for those who must make many such choices each day. If every rule can be broken every time, the purpose of the tool is defeated.

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