

Survey of animal shelters says dogs fare better than cats

According to a new survey of animal shelters across Ohio, the outlook for sheltered dogs has improved considerably in the last decade. But conditions have deteriorated for cats.

Animal shelters reported that, since 1996, the number of dogs they received decreased by about 16 percent, while the number of cats taken in increased by nearly 20 percent. And while the number of dogs euthanized decreased by 39 percent, the number of cats that were put to sleep increased by nearly 14 percent.

"We saw a dramatic drop in the number of dogs euthanized, which we didn't expect to see," said Linda Lord, the study's lead author and a research fellow in veterinary preventive medicine at Ohio State University. "But the survey showed that we are losing ground with cats."

Lord and her colleagues collected data from 165 animal care and control agencies in Ohio in 2004. They compared the answers to those of a similar study of shelters that they did in 1996. The results of the latest survey are published in the July issue of the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

It's likely that the general findings of this study apply to other states, Lord said.

"What's going on in Ohio is probably pretty reflective of many parts of the country," she said.

The researchers mailed the surveys to dog wardens in each of Ohio's 88 counties, and also to humane societies and municipal animal control agencies in the state. The researchers did not include breed-specific rescue groups in their study. The surveys included questions on vaccination, spaying and neutering practices, relationships with veterinary practices, euthanasia rates and the cost of running a facility.

The study revealed that since 1996:

- The number of shelters that vaccinate and spay or neuter their animals has risen from a little more than half (56 percent) to nearly three out of four (71 percent);
- The number of animal care and control agencies that have an established partnership with a veterinarian or a veterinary practice has doubled (40 percent in 1996 to 80 percent in 2004);
- More than two out of three agencies (68 percent) include the cost of spaying or neutering in the adoption fees that they charge. Less than half (46 percent) of the agencies did so in 1996. (In Ohio, adoption fees for a dog or puppy range from \$5 to \$150, and the price to take home a cat or kitten ranges from nothing to \$80); and
- The cost of running an animal shelter has increased considerably since 1996. Estimated total expenses for all animal care and control agencies in Ohio during 2004 were \$57.7 million, up from an estimated \$34.2 million in 1996.

The amount of money earmarked by county and city governments in Ohio for animal care

and control agencies in 2004 rose to \$25.8 million, up from \$18.6 million in 1996.

"Non-profit agencies and private donations provide much of the financial support beyond what comes from the government," Lord said.

Lord said she would like to see more agencies scan animals for microchips, which pet owners can buy and have implanted under the skins of their pets. These chips provide permanent identification about where the pet belongs.

"About 60 percent of the shelters scan for microchips, and that's up from 48 percent 10 years ago," she said. "Having the ability to scan for these chips could keep more animals out of shelters."

Some 63,700 dogs were adopted in 2004, compared to 51,600 in 1996. It's possible that the fate of orphaned dogs has improved due to more vigilant spaying and neutering policies.

"It may make potential dog owners more likely to adopt an animal from a shelter," Lord said.

Nearly 40,000 cats were adopted in 2004, up from an estimated 29,400 in 1996. Still, euthanasia rates rose for cats.

"Shelters do everything that they can to care for the animals, but there are so many cats that it's very difficult to manage the quantity," said Lord, who also pointed out that, like most other states, Ohio's domestic animal laws differ for dogs and cats.

"We need a comprehensive strategy in Ohio at the state and local level to deal with stray cats," she said.