

(Wilfull) Ignorance is not bliss

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A new study finds that shelter managers and senior staff tend toward regressive views about dog welfare and may not be committed to keeping shelter dogs healthy and happy.



The last two decades have seen a meteoric rise in the number of university professors and other scholars focusing their research on understanding and improving dog welfare in animal shelters. This includes studies that show that:

- Dogs “[experience fear and anxiety immediately upon admission](#)” to a shelter. Unless those “shelters” provide clean environments and social enrichment, dogs will experience continuing stress and physically and mentally deteriorate over time.
- Dogs [who are housed alone likewise suffer](#) and [should be pair or group-housed](#) (if they get along with other dogs).
- Isolating dogs in barren kennels [harms them](#).
- Dogs are set up to fail unreliable [temperament testing](#).

Much of that research has confirmed what people outside of the shelter who care about dogs already know: that, in order to thrive, dogs need love, routine, nutritious food, exercise, veterinary care, boundaries/reasonable rules, a clean environment, socialization with people and other dogs, and a sense of belonging.



Roughly two decades ago, before this issue became an object of scholarly interest, I ran a shelter where dogs were group-housed, provided daily exercise, playgroups, and lots of social interaction with the public. For example, dogs were walked at least four times per day by staff and volunteers and potential adopters were allowed to visit with them in and out of the kennels. More fundamentally, I [redesigned those kennels](#): clear windows and sniff holes so dogs could see, smell, and touch people. In addition, there were clear windows and sniff holes *between* kennels so dogs could likewise interact with their doggy neighbors. Our kennels were quiet because the dogs were happy. And a calm shelter is the kind of shelter where people stay longer and, therefore, are more likely to adopt.

I knew these things then without the benefit of the research. Volunteers in shelters know it now. Most Americans who live with dogs know it. And they know it for the same reason as I did: they are familiar with dogs, love dogs, and want what is best for them. But a new study finds that some managers and staff in kennel environments like animal shelters claim not to know it. In other words, the very people tasked with caring for the neediest dogs in our society are the least concerned about their welfare. And that has enormous implications for the health, well-being, and lives of these dogs.

Specifically, the [study looked at whether existing research into what dogs need for good welfare while housed in kennels](#) — such as in pounds and shelters, laboratories, breeding facilities, and working dog facilities — changes how these facilities house and care for dogs.

The short answer, unfortunately, is “No.”

A recipe for failure.

While the public and volunteers saw socialization as vital to dogs in kennel environments, the study found that staff and managers did not. Instead, employees were most likely to support “limiting social opportunities for dogs housed in kennel environments,” even though doing so undermines dog welfare. The study also found that employees were less likely to view health, hygiene, and enrichment as important. These beliefs put dogs at risk: “What people believe is important will influence their behavior, with direct relation to care provided to animals.” And given inconsistent, unenforced, and in many cases, non-existent regulations that mandate a commitment to dog welfare, what dogs need “may not be successfully translating into evidence-based changes in industry practice.”

Of course, employees *overwhelmingly* claimed they were concerned about the welfare of dogs. One would not expect them to say otherwise, but they also said that dogs in kennel environments were not at risk for poor welfare and didn’t need to be socialized while there. Given intuitive, experiential, and scholarly understandings of what dogs need and want, these views appear to be willful indifference to dog welfare.

This finding is tragic, though perhaps not surprising, for staff in kennel environments where dogs are mere “things” to serve human ends or maximize profits, such as laboratories, breeding operations, and “working” dog facilities. But unfortunately, these findings also apply to some animal “shelters” where dog protection, dog welfare, and treating dogs kindly are supposed to be the mission.

For example:

Even though studies prove dogs suffer if they are not provided “[mental and physical stimulation, time out of the kennel and close interaction with people](#),” managers who are responsible for that deterioration (by not providing those things) simply label these dogs as “kennel crazy” or “aggressive” and kill them.



Likewise, studies have found that a fair number of kennelled dogs housed alone suffer behavior problems and engage in repetitive behavior. Still, [pair and group housing](#) remain the exception rather than the norm. Studies further show that frustration and related behaviors (such as incessant barking) significantly decreased “[when dogs were provided with visual social contact with other dogs and increased lines of sight within the room.](#)” Unfortunately, dogs can’t see people and other dogs in neighboring kennels in most shelters. Where there is glass, it is usually opaque. Where there are adjoining kennels, they are generally concrete. Where there are fences or bars, they typically face a wall (and include a “do not touch the animals” sign for people walking by).

Finally, despite “[no evidence that any canine behavior evaluation has come close to meeting accepted standards for reliability and validity,](#)” testing and killing dogs who “fail” remains the norm.

We don’t all want what is best for dogs.

Given this disconnect between what dogs need and how many animal shelters are run, we need to stop pretending that managers and staff at poorly performing shelters are there because they love dogs and are passionate about doing what is best for them. Instead, staff and managers appear ignorant of basic dog welfare, are not keeping up with the latest research, and are not implementing the findings. That suggests that staff at poorly performing shelters are not motivated by genuine concern for the welfare of dogs, but doing as little as possible *at their expense*.

This isn’t mere speculation. First, the study found that younger kennel attendants in shelters were more likely to agree that kenneling reduces welfare than older attendants and managers. Worst of all, this divide was not merely philosophical; it was evident in the shelter’s practices. The study found that kennel attendants with more enlightened views “are prevented from engaging in practices they believe to be of high value to the welfare of dogs” by senior employees and managers, leading them to “experience compassion fatigue, burnout, and moral distress.” Not surprisingly, this hostile work environment can lead such employees to resign their positions, leaving dogs and other shelter animals in the custody of those who do not have their best interests at heart. The result is a continuation of poor practices. Second, these managers appear committed to making matters worse, not better, given the growing trend by these facilities to [close their doors to the public](#) without an appointment. Although they claim that an “appointment only” policy will increase lifesaving (somehow), reduce intakes, and reduce stress for animals by limiting activity and noise levels, this is misleading. For animals, visitors mean stimulation, walks, getting out of their kennels, getting played with, and finding homes. Shelters that close their doors have fewer adoptions, more killing, more “behavior”-related killing, dirtier facilities, and more abuse. What they propose is, once again, precisely the opposite of what dogs need.

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Third, these facilities do not have standards to measure success. Without substantive guidelines created to implement our growing knowledge about dog welfare in kenneled environments, some managers and staff are not using objective measures to determine if they are meeting their obligations. For example, has the shelter fully implemented all the programs and services of [the No Kill Equation](#)? Do sick and injured animals receive quality veterinary care? Does the shelter follow the latest vaccination and cleaning protocols to ensure the health of the animals? Are the animals well-socialized? Are they exercised to reduce stress and anxiety? Do dogs get out of the kennels regularly? Do dogs have visual and direct access to people and other dogs? Of course, there are many more, like those in The No Kill Advocacy Center's "[Animal Evaluation Matrix: Policies & Procedures That Protect the Lives of Shelter Animals](#)." Given that the answer to these questions is often "No," then the next obvious question is, "Why not?" The answer appears to be self-interest. If you are an agency that is supposed to be providing high-quality care (and high rates of lifesaving) and you intentionally fail to do so, standards are a threat. Standards invite comparison and comparison can compel criticism. So while questions that attempt to gauge success and highlight areas of deficiency are important if you are seeking improvement and accountability; if you

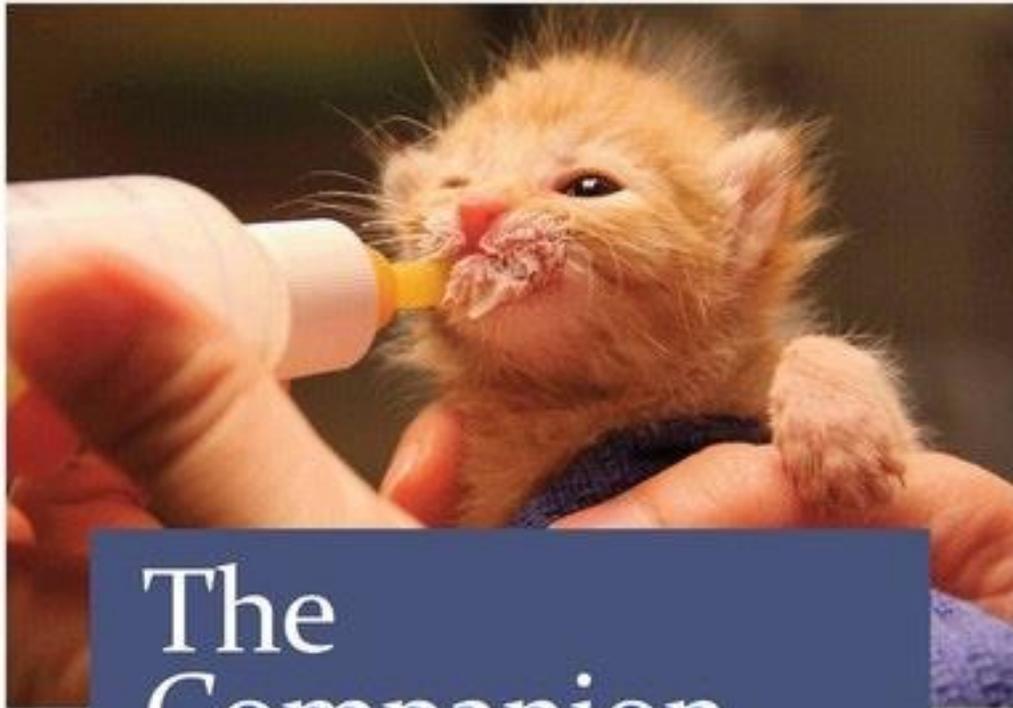
are not — *if no matter what the answers, you do not intend to do anything about them* — then they are dangerous questions to be asking. But ask them we must.

There ought to be a law.

It's been over 20 years since the achievement of [the nation's first No Kill community](#), and with it, the creation of [the model](#) that not only provides high-quality care conducive to the best interests of dogs but allows any shelter to replace killing with humane alternatives. And while hundreds of shelters across the nation have already embraced the No Kill philosophy and [the No Kill Equation](#) that makes it possible — saving millions of animals in the process — there are still too many animals suffering and dying in taxpayer and philanthropically-funded facilities that have yet to do so.

So what do those of us who love dogs (and other companion animals) do to make sure our community shelters reflect rather than thwart our values?

*Model Legislation to Improve the Performance
& Life-Saving of Animal Shelters*



The Companion Animal Protection Act

A PUBLICATION OF THE NO KILL ADVOCACY CENTER

The answer lies in doing what every other movement does to ensure that the intended beneficiaries of their advocacy are treated fairly, humanely, and in line with community values: *we must pass laws that compel best practices*. That means [shelter reform legislation](#) mandating how shelters operate. These laws, like [The No Kill Advocacy Center's "Companion Animal Protection Act,"](#) eliminate the discretion that allows managers and staff to avoid doing what is in the best interest of dogs. They mandate protocols that improve dog welfare through clean, hygienic, and enriched environments. And because a clean environment and social enrichment are necessary, but not sufficient if a dog does not get out of the shelter alive, most importantly, they result in placement rates of 98% - 99%, returning killing to its dictionary definition: an act of mercy for hopelessly ill, [irremediably suffering](#) animals only.

Selected studies:

- Cobb, M., “Perceived importance of specific kennel management practices for the provision of canine welfare,” *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* (April 2022).
- Grigg, E., “Evaluating pair- vs. solitary-housing in kennelled domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*) using behaviour and hair cortisol: a pilot study,” *The Veterinary Record* (August 2017).
- Kiddie, J., “Identifying environmental and management factors that may be associated with the quality of life of kennelled dogs (*Canis familiaris*)”, *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* (June 2015).
- Martin, A., “Impact of Visual Barrier Removal on the Behavior of Shelter-Housed Dogs,” *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* (January 2022)
- Patronek, G., “What is the evidence for reliability and validity of behavior evaluations for shelter dogs?” *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* (May 2019).
- Payne, S., “An Evaluation of Respondent Conditioning Procedures to Decrease Barking in an Animal Shelter,” *Pet Behaviour Science* (2017).