

Why did ACCT stop splitting its primary dog kennels in half, reducing the number of dogs who could be housed, and do so during the busiest time of the year?

In May, we had an outbreak of Pnuemovirus, a contagious upper respiratory infection, with more than half of our dog population getting sick with respiratory illness. ACCT experienced an outbreak of this in 2019 as well, and in both instances, experts identified that overcrowding was the biggest contributing factor. We made the decision to commit to giving dogs a full kennel, which brought the number of dogs in our care down from an average of 110 dogs to an average of 85.

Housing too many animals is done with good intentions, but we recognize that it is not what is best for the overall population as it results in our exceeding our capacity for care. Overcrowding increases the stress of the animals, thereby decreasing the immune system's ability to fight infection. Increasing the density of animals also increases the opportunities for contact between animals and negatively impacts the ability to effectively clean and disinfect. It increases the likelihood of outbreaks and interferes with disease control strategies, and in the end, it negatively impacts lifesaving.

Prior to the May outbreak, the percentage of our dog population with symptoms of upper respiratory illness increased from 37% to 44%, and it continued to climb after that. Throughout June and mid-July, after the clean break that we instituted in May, we saw that percentage decrease to 18%. The incidence of symptomatic dogs spiked again at the end of July to 37%. But having learned what was effective from the strategies we used in May, the incidence almost immediately decreased to 27%, and then 22%, rather than increasing as it had when dogs were given only half a kennel as they had been until the clean break.

We know that keeping within our capacity for care won't keep out disease entirely since as an open intake shelter, we must continue to take in stray animals, but it does decrease risk. Other benefits of this are that the kennels are cleaner, the dogs are not as stressed, and we've also seen a reduction in bites on site now that the dogs have the space that they should. In July, for the first time in several years, we passed the Bureau of Dog Law Enforcement kennel inspection with no negative marks.

When the current kennels were installed in 2020 the middle row was not replaced, leaving us with 59 large dog kennels and 12 for small dogs. Early in 2022, the City of Philadelphia approved our request for funding for 17 additional kennels: 10 to replace the middle row, and 7 for our overflow room, to allow for a quieter space for some of our more anxious dogs. Due to supply chain issues delivery was very delayed, but 10 of the kennels were installed in early August and are in use already. The 14 needed for our new dog isolation rooms, will be available for use toward the end of August, and the remaining 7 for the overflow room we anticipate will arrive in October. This addition of 17 regular housing kennels will enable us to house an additional 200 dogs a year if the average length of stay is 30 days. These additional kennels, and the additional staff we can now hire because of the return to a pre-pandemic level of funding from the City of

Philadelphia, will have a significant positive impact on the shelter.

I heard you're timestamping more animals and they aren't getting out, so how is this saving lives?

For the first time in years, ACCT as well as other shelters throughout every region of the country are being faced with the fact that they are needing to euthanize for space. Timestamping, where we place a "deadline" on an animal, draws attention to the urgent need for that dog to leave the shelter with a rescue or adopter. This urgency has historically resulted in the majority of timestamped animals finding placement.

We continue to timestamp animals with significant behavioral or medical issues for 48 or 72 hours (or shorter, if unstable to stay longer). For those being timestamped for space purposes, we provide 5 days, and start with the animals who have been here the longest. These animals have had exposure to adopters and rescues, have videos posted for the public to see, and also been given time to adjust to the shelter. While it is extremely difficult to do, we feel it is fairer to timestamp dogs who have been here the longest, as they've had the most opportunity and promotion. This way it is also easier for rescues and volunteers to know who is most at risk.

While the number of timestamps has increased, this is in part because we are now timestamping some dogs for five days in order to give them more attention and exposure, which was not done previously. Shelters across the country are seeing an increase in euthanasia of nearly 9 percent, and we have been fortunate that we have not seen that. We continue to have 8 out of every 10 animals entering the shelter leave alive through adoption, rescue or being returned to their owner. And of those who do not have live outcomes, many are owner-requested euthanasias; as a service to the community ACCT provides no-fee euthanasias to pet owners who have animals who have severe medical or behavior issues that cannot be cured and/or adopted out.

Who decides what animals are timestamped?

Every day, rounds are done to lay eyes on every animal in the shelter, and the person conducting rounds flag issues such as an animal whose microchip needs additional follow up, or one who has been with us for some time and is deteriorating behaviorally.

A team that represents all departments at ACCT Philly meets daily to review animals that have been flagged for behavioral or medical issues that we either do not have the ability to house, or resources to treat, or who may be unsafe to place in the community. If space is an issue at the time, as we cannot turn away stray dogs, we timestamp the dogs who have been at the shelter the longest.

The length of the timestamp is 1, 2, 3 or 5 days depending on a number of factors. All animals who are timestamped are promoted to our rescue partners via e-mail as well as individual outreach, are listed on the website, and are spotlighted in our lobby to stand out to potential adopters.

We also doing additional advertising thanks to a generous grant, to raise awareness of our animals up for adoption, and continuing to look for additional ways to promote our animals

Why isn't every animal timestamped, and why are some euthanized without a timestamp?

Many of the animals euthanized are brought in by their owners, as ACCT provides this service without charge in order to support the Philadelphia community and minimize animal suffering. We do not automatically euthanize owner-surrenders, but rather do so only for medical or behavioral reasons.

If an animal is unsafe to place in the community, or medically suffering and has a grave prognosis (or if it is inhumane for us to continue to house the animal), we will not time stamp the animal, but will euthanize it. Unfortunately, even though someone may be willing to sign a waiver indemnifying ACCT for behavioral issues, it is our responsibility to do our part to keep both people and pets in the community safe. We also have seen our insurance costs rise precipitously in recent years, and liability is a significant factor in our decision-making as well, as we do not want to place an animal only to have that dog injure someone.

All euthanasias must be approved by either a veterinarian if medical, or by either of the Acting Co-Executive Directors or Director of Strategic Initiatives. Before an animal who is timestamped is euthanized, all communication channels are checked to ensure there are no pending placement options such as rescue or adoption. These decisions are never easy, and each and every animal euthanized weighs on staff and volunteers.

Why can't animals who are timestamped for medical issues receive offsite medical care through ACCT Philly's Yoda or Stella Fund?

With the veterinary shortage, one of ACCT's veterinary partners closed on weekends, leaving only two 24-hour emergency hospitals for emergency veterinary care in all of Philadelphia. Frequently hospitals are on diversion and unable to take in animals. ACCT is fortunate to have a partnership with PASE, and on average sends 4-5 animals there a week to receive emergency care provided that they appear to not have behavioral issues (beyond pain related behavior). The more intense medical care needs require recovery to be outside of the shelter, and with the shortage of foster homes, we are not always able to find a foster for the animal to recover in. Recently, knowing that rescues are struggling with the same shortage of fosters and adopters that we are, we also try to look for ways to make an animal available for adoption by facilitating the medical care that they need. We have begun offering to provide offsite medical care for some animals if rescue placement is secured, as well as to partner with Providence Animal Center to offer some of the specialty surgeries to rescue partners to decrease financial barriers to pulling dogs.

Have many rescue partners been banned?

ACCT Philly has a network of more than 200 approved rescue partners, and the number of animals transferred in the first six months of 2022 increased by more than 20 percent compared to the same time last year. We are so grateful to all of our partners who continue to take animals in need.

Since November of 2021, four new partners have been approved. Two rescue organizations have been banned, both for significant animal welfare concerns. ACCT Philly is seeing a very troubling increase in individuals who are misrepresenting themselves to the shelter, adopting a timestamped animal to “save” them, only to rehome them on their own, or dump them on a local rescue organization, without disclosing all of that animal’s behavioral and medical history. Area rescues have received countless emails seeking help from individuals who were talked into fostering a dog for these individuals. Many have not been made aware of the animal’s behavioral issues and realize they are not equipped to handle them and have nowhere to turn. This has resulted in dogs being euthanized, abandoned emaciated in a parking lot, and most recently, a dog who was severely injured in a home where she was not provided with the emergency medical care needed. This dog suffered for a week prior to being euthanized. As a result, we have had to make sure that we do not ever knowingly place an animal into such a situation, and we have discontinued working with those individuals. Rescue partners are not banned without significant cause, however out of respect for other organizations, those specifics are not publicly disclosed.

Why can’t ACCT Philly release the names of rescues taking animals?

ACCT Philly’s agreement with rescues is that ACCT is not to release the name of the rescue that took a specific animal without that rescue’s permission. This has been a long-standing policy, and partners have been adamant that they do not want this information shared, as they are volunteer-based and do not want to be inundated with more requests to help animals.

Why doesn’t ACCT do adoption events?

This summer we have started to do offsite events to raise awareness as well as bring dogs up for adoption. We can only bring as many dogs as we have handlers for, but are finding these events to be helpful as many people aren’t aware of ACCT. We partnered with one of our rescue partners, Philly Bully Team, to do an adoption event in Skippack, PA, and have four events currently planned for August, and several more for September. We are also looking for locations to have monthly adoption events for both cats and dogs. We continue to encourage day trips as well, where fosters and volunteers take dogs offsite for the day to help get them more exposure as well as get more promotional content on the animal to help them find a home.

With the decrease in dogs, why can't your staff do more for the animals now that you have fewer dogs and the same number of staff?

While our dog population has decreased from an average of 110 to 85, our cat and critter populations remain very high, so our total population of animals requiring care hasn't decreased substantially. Most of our staff are also new to animal sheltering and to ACCT Philly, with this being the first summer in three years that we have had funding to increase our staff to pre-pandemic levels. With a workforce almost entirely new to sheltering, as opposed to prior years where there was a mixture of seasoned staff along with new staff, there is a learning curve that has to be factored in as well. However, our goal is to ensure each animal in our care receive the medical, mental and physical care they need while with us and that is what we will continue to work toward.