



Getting Real Making the ASV Standards Work for You

The Cats at Chemung County
Humane Society & SPCA

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In 2010, the Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) released a document several years in the making: Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters. Developed by a roster of veterinary experts, the standards are designed to “balance animal welfare science with practical and realistic recommendations for shelters,” and to provide a vision based on the needs of animals, which, the authors noted, remain the same regardless of how individual organizations’ missions and resources may differ. Here, we feature the first in a series using real-life shelter examples to demonstrate how the ASV standards can be applied within the sheltering and rescue field to create better and more humane outcomes for the animals shelters care for.

Cat Housing Standards

Poor cat housing, the ASV guidelines note, “is one of the greatest shortcomings observed in shelters and has a substantially negative impact on both health and well-being.” Indeed, many shelters were originally designed to house animals for short-term holding periods, and the resulting housing is often poorly suited to meet the needs of the animals.

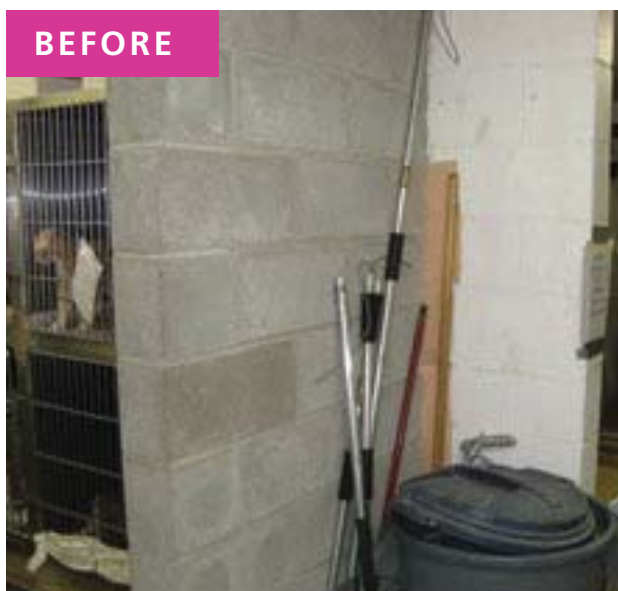
Like many shelters that were built a number of years ago, the facility at the Chemung County Humane Society & SPCA was inadequately equipped for the humane housing of cats. The staff was keenly aware of this issue, and concerned about its impact on the health and well-being of cats in their care—so in 2009 they sought to make some changes.

Located in Elmira, N.Y. (human population 87,000), this shelter admits approximately 1,500 cats annually. The highly dedicated staff is small, and their operating budget is low (sound familiar?). Nonetheless, they were determined to improve the care of cats entrusted to them.

Their first concern was the location of intake housing for cats: a narrow hallway immediately adjacent to the dog kennel. In the cramped hallway, cats were subjected to the sounds and smells of barking dogs beginning at the moment of their arrival. Housed in the small cages typical in many shelters, cats had no option but to rest, eat, and eliminate in the space of a couple of feet—with no separation of these areas. The staff recognized that a secure, quiet intake area for cats—one completely separated from dogs—was crucial for proper welfare, and would give cats the best chance of a smooth adjustment to the shelter environment.

Fortunately, the cat adoption area was separate from the dog population, but it consisted of a hodgepodge of cages of varying sizes arranged in a room. Assorted steel and wire cages were stacked high along the walls, obstructing windows and compromising lighting. An additional row of cages created a center aisle in the room, making it crowded and stuffy, increasing stress for both the cats and their caregivers.

As the standards state (and the staff recognized): “As the length of stay increases (e.g., beyond 1–2 weeks), it becomes progressively more important to provide space that is both mentally and physically stimulating; alternatives to traditional housing must be provided. For animals housed



BEFORE

Intake housing for cats at the shelter was located in a narrow hallway, right next to the dog kennel. Cats were subjected to the sounds and smells of dogs from the moment they arrived, and lived in small cages that offered no separation of space to rest, eat, and eliminate.



AFTER

Staff relocated the shelter’s intake housing for cats to a secure, quiet room at the front of the facility, completely separate from the dogs. They also selected the largest cages they had on hand, placed them off the floor, and furnished them with hiding boxes and other creature comforts.

BEFORE



The shelter's cat adoption area consisted of an assortment of steel and wire cages stacked high along the walls, which obstructed windows and compromised lighting. An additional row of cages created a center aisle, making the room feel cramped and stuffy—a recipe for stress.

AFTER



Chain-link runs with top panels were built, featuring shelves and perches. Staff bought condo-style cage units to house litters of kittens and single adult cats. These double-sided enclosures ensure separate functional living spaces.

long term, the physical environment must include opportunities for hiding, playing, resting, feeding, and eliminating. For cats, the environment should also allow for scratching, climbing and perching.”

The staff recognized that despite their best efforts, the adoption housing simply did not come close to meeting the behavioral needs of their cats.

Because cats are less stressed and feel instinctively safer at higher vantage points, staff elevated the cages off the floor.

Making Changes

As the standards report, a prior study of shelter cats found that cats housed in cages with 11 square feet of floor space (e.g. a 4-foot-wide cage) were significantly less stressed than those with only 5.3 square feet of space (e.g. a 2-foot-wide cage).

To address the intake area issues, the shelter staff identified a small room in the front of the shelter that had been used for grooming and storage, and set out to relocate and redesign their cat intake area in this space. In order to meet the needs of cats during short-term holding, the shelter staff selected the largest cages they had on hand and reconfigured them in that quiet room.

Because cats are less stressed and feel instinctively safer at higher vantage points, the staff elevated the cages off the floor. They also maximized the separation between the areas for food, urination and defecation, and resting. The provision of hiding boxes and other creature comforts greatly improved the cat intake experience. Small changes, but a world of improvement—and no barking dogs!

The smaller cages that were left over did not go to waste—they were set up in a new isolation room for sick cats. By creating portals, two cages could be joined to create a double-sided enclosure for separation of living space and to facilitate cleaning with a cat still safely inside, minimizing the spread of germs. (For instructions on how to make a portal in a cat cage, go to sheltermedicine.com/printpdf/68.)

The Adoption Room Environment

As noted in the guidelines, “The structural and social environment, as well as opportunities for cognitive and physical activity, are important for all species of animals. An appropriate environment includes shelter and a comfortable resting area, in which animals are free from fear and distress and have the ability to express normal, species-typical behaviors.”

To address these issues at Chemung County, staff outfitted the adoption room with a variety of housing styles to meet the widely varying needs of the various felines who would occupy it. Chain-link runs, with top panels, were constructed for pair-housing of familiar or well-matched compatible cats. A variety of inexpensive shelves and perches



Veterinarians Brenda Griffin and Stephanie Janeczko not only advised Chemung County on how to improve cat housing, they checked out a local dollar store to get creative ideas for enrichment. Janeczko studies a dangling wind chime that might tickle a cat's fancy.

were set up to allow for many behavioral options, including climbing, playing, perching, hiding, and jumping. Using donated funds, staff purchased condo-style cage units to house litters of kittens and single adult cats. The large, double-sided enclosures ensured separate functional living spaces, and permanent shelves provided a convenient place for cats to perch. For all enclosures, cardboard, carpet squares, or rope were used to provide surfaces for scratching action, and boxes or other cubbies were provided to ensure cats would have a secure place to hide should they choose to do so.

Behavioral Care and Monitoring to Ensure Welfare

An animal's environment is more than purely physical. As the standards note, shelter staff "must be trained to recognize body language and other behaviors that indicate animal stress, pain, and suffering as well as those that indicate successful adaptation to the shelter environment. When animals are well adjusted and their behavioral needs are satisfied, they display a wide variety of normal behaviors including a good appetite and activity level, sociability, grooming, appropriate play behavior, and restful sleeping."

The staff knew firsthand the importance of spending daily time with animals outside of the routine of cleaning and feeding in order to detect problems as well as to spend quality time with each individual. In order to ensure that the needs of their cats are met, they established a daily routine for monitoring and enrichment, calling it their "cat enrichment hour."

Staff training focused on understanding the normal feline behaviors that well-adjusted cats should display—such as soliciting attention, grooming, play, and exploration—as well as those that are signs of stress, such as persistent hiding, social withdrawal, or feigning sleep.

Staff members were assigned to monitor all cats daily, as well as to provide social interaction, toys, treats, and a variety of creative and fun forms of mental stimulation each day. They visited the local dollar store for inexpensive trinkets that could help—items such as bubbles, wands, catnip, disposable cat toys, and anything that dangled, rolled, or otherwise looked like a cat might enjoy it! Their purchases kept things interesting for both the cats and the people in the cat room.

The staff saw the success of their efforts in the behavior of the cats—cats "being cats" as never before in the shelter—indicating that they are coping well in their new environment. The changes in the cat room had a tremendous impact, not only on the animals, but on the people as well. Several volunteers and staff members involved in the project were moved to tears by the transformation. It created many new, positive circles of compassion, and ultimately resulted in the sort of intangible benefits that we truly cannot measure, but that are very real and simply invaluable. Indeed, as the cats became happier, so did the people. There is nothing like a bunch of happy cats to increase staff pride and morale and attract volunteers, donors, and adopters! 🐾