

Record-Keeping Practices in the Massachusetts Animal Sheltering Community

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—in collaboration with—

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Executive Summary

Recognizing the important role of comprehensive data in the animal sheltering community, the Massachusetts Animal Coalition (MAC) commissioned a Shelter Statistics Task Force whose stated goal is to create a reporting mechanism through which shelter and rescue organizations across the state can share their canine and feline statistics. Prior to collecting the data, the MAC Shelter Statistics Task Force designated a working group to create, distribute, and then analyze an online survey of the state's animal shelter and rescue organizations. The objective of this research project is to learn more about the characteristics of Massachusetts' animal shelter and/or rescue organizations and the logistics of their record-keeping practices. This will enable MAC to gain a better awareness of the strengths and weaknesses in the community's data collection procedures and gain insight into what resources might help these groups to more effectively collect, analyze, interpret, and use data in order to better serve the animals in their care and throughout the animal sheltering community.

The Survey

- The intended population for this research project comprised all animal control operations and private animal shelter and/or rescue organizations headquartered within the state of Massachusetts that shelter and/or foster cats and/or dogs.
- The online survey contained both closed and open-ended questions pertaining to the topics of organization characteristics, record-keeping practices, information collection, information reporting and analysis, and participant details.
- The survey was sent via email to 471 potential respondents in the summer of 2015. The final analysis included 119 surveys, equating to a 25% response rate.
- Limitations: The survey was only sent to those organizations with an available email address. It was furthermore expected that less tech-savvy recipients would be less likely to respond to an online survey.

Key Findings:

- Organization type: 62 (52%) private organizations, 44 (37%) public organizations, 13 (11%) private organizations with municipal contracts
- Personnel: 30 (25%) paid staff only, 42 (35%) volunteers only, 47 (39%) both paid staff and volunteers
- Species: 84 (71%) shelter and/or foster dogs, 76 (64%) shelter and/or foster cats
 - 26 (22%) cat-only, 34 (29%) dog-only, 50 (42%) both, 9 (8%) neither
 - 60 (50%) provide TNR services for feral/free-roaming cats
- Organization size (determined by the number of paid staff, volunteers, and animals served): 47 "small" organizations (39%), 30 "medium" organizations (25%), 23 "large" organizations (19%), 19 "extra-large" organizations (16%)

- Age of organization: 19 (16%) less than 6 years, 43 (36%) 6-20 years, 53 (45%) more than 20 years, 4 (3%) did not know
- Record-keeping methods: 85 (77%) paper documentation, 42 (38%) electronic file, 36 (33%) software, 3 (3%) also used another method
 - 40 (36%) organizations utilized only paper documentation—12 out of 62 (19%) private, 3 out of 13 (23%) combo, 25 out of 35 (71%) public
- Level of satisfaction with record-keeping process: 39 (35%) very satisfied, 42 (38%) somewhat satisfied, 12 (11%) neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 13 (12%) somewhat dissatisfied, 4 (4%) very dissatisfied
 - 69 (64%) interested in resources to help improve record-keeping process
 - Common theme revealed by open-ended responses: organizations felt that they frequently lacked the time, expertise, or an adequate number of volunteers or staff for proper record-keeping and data entry
 - 61 (56%) interested in resources to help summarize and analyze data
- As a whole, respondents indicated a favorable attitude towards the idea of data analysis and sharing the resultant information.

Key Discussion Points:

- There is a lack of consensus regarding the definitions of various terms within the animal sheltering community.
- Cumulative total of animals reportedly served by the survey population in 2014:
 - 84 organizations sheltered and/or fostered 15,678 dogs
 - 76 organizations sheltered and/or fostered 27,087 cats
 - 60 organizations provided TNR services for 8,818 cats
- Private organizations handled a disproportionately greater number of animals and public organizations handled a disproportionately smaller number of animals.
- Over half of the animals reportedly handled by the survey population in 2014 were accounted for by only 9 organizations (8 private, 1 public).
 - The five organizations that sheltered and/or fostered the largest number of dogs accounted for 47.2% (7,402 out of 15,678).
 - The five organizations that sheltered and/or fostered the largest number of cats accounted for 52.3% (14,173 out of 27,087).
 - The five organizations that provided Trap-Neuter-Return services for the largest number of cats accounted for 50.1% (4,418 out of 8,818).
- Organizations with an electronic record-keeping system were more likely to:
 - Be a private or combo organization.
 - Have nonprofit status, a foster care program, a base of volunteers, and a non-local focused geographical reach.
 - Be larger in terms of staff, volunteers, and the number of animals provided with shelter and/or foster care services.

- Record certain species-specific information, date of birth, reasons for owner surrender, and the dates for both intake and outcome.
- Use their data to create reports for Board Members and donors, share information on their website, revise and update procedures, implement and modify programs, and apply for grants and awards.
- Summarize their data.
- Express a more favorable attitude towards the idea of sharing and reporting animal sheltering data and statistics.

Recommendations:

1. Establish definitions for key terms
2. Focus on the larger organizations first
3. Collaborate with MDAR and/or the Animal Control Officers Association of Massachusetts (ACOAM)
4. Offer MAC grants related to record-keeping and data analysis
5. Offer classes and/or create online tutorials
6. Find / create / distribute instruction manuals
7. Solicit and provide reviews of software options
8. Create and pilot a centralized reporting mechanism for sharing canine and feline statistics from the Massachusetts animal sheltering community

Conclusion:

The results of this survey will enable the Massachusetts Animal Coalition to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of organizations in the Massachusetts animal sheltering community and to learn more about their record-keeping practices. With this increased knowledge, the Shelter Statistics Task Force should be better equipped to help organizations improve their record-keeping procedures and subsequently allow them to more effectively collect, analyze, interpret, and use their data in order to better serve the animals in their care. As the individual organizations strive to better their own systems, the Task Force can use the additional information obtained in this survey to pursue its ultimate goal of creating a centralized reporting mechanism for the state. Working together, organizations and individuals can thus continue working toward the overarching mission of reducing the number of homeless, neglected, displaced, and abused companion animals.