

SHELTER MED GAZETTE



IN THIS ISSUE

**BC SPCA SHELTER
STATS AND ANIMAL
HEALTH TRENDS**

**TREATING
BEHAVIOURAL
CONDITIONS IN
SHELTER ANIMALS**

BC SPCA 2023 Health Trends, Intake & Outcome Statistics

BC SPCA recently released the [2023 Annual Asilomar Report](#), providing insights into the organization's efforts to enhance animal health and welfare. The [Asilomar Accords](#) were established in 2004 in a collaborative effort to establish a uniform method for collecting and reporting shelter data with the goal of saving the lives of all healthy and treatable companion animals entering shelters. In 2016, the BC SPCA implemented the Asilomar Accords data collection system at all BC SPCA sheltering facilities. This process is part of ongoing efforts to save more companion animals, assure consistent operational practices, utilize resources to help the greatest number of animals possible, and promote transparency and collaboration. In 2024, we are updating the BC SPCA Asilomar Accords and Adoptability Guidelines, adding almost 100 new conditions, creating more comprehensive and updated descriptions and working towards making more conditions treatable in shelter care. Check out the guidelines [here](#).

Here's an overview of key findings and trends that may interest veterinary professionals:

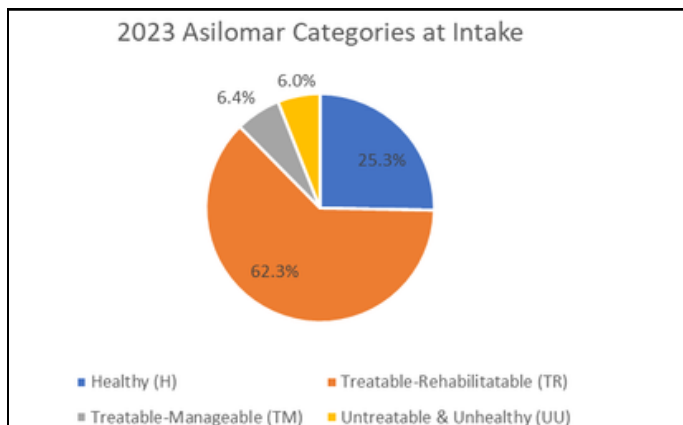
Incoming Animals

Our animal intakes have increased 15.7% in 2023 compared to 2022, as we continue our rebound towards pre-COVID 19 numbers. In line with [Shelter Animals Count's reports](#) of American animal sheltering data showing a surplus of animals in the system, BC SPCA shelters had 20% more animals remaining in shelter care as we moved into 2024 as compared to 2023.

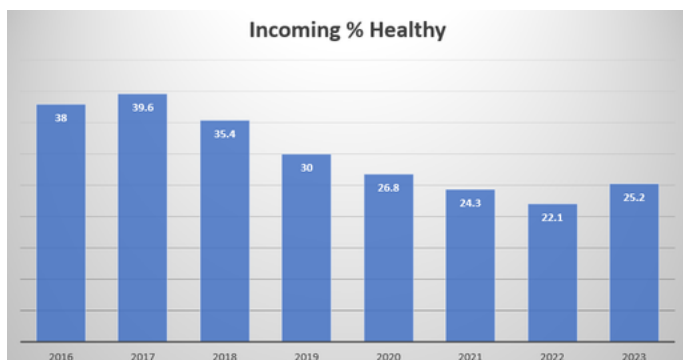
Health Status

Animals Categorized as Healthy at Intake

Only 25.3% of incoming animals were categorized as Healthy, emphasizing the need for special care for animals with treatable medical or behavioral conditions, constituting 68.7% of incoming animals.

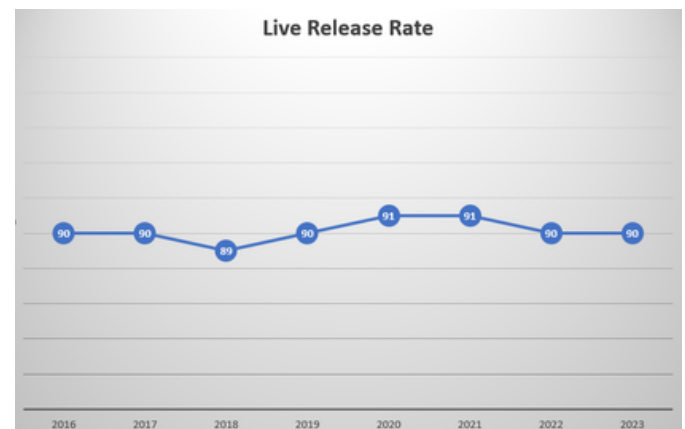


There has been an overall decline in incoming animals assigned a status of Healthy over time. The slight increase in 2023 may be attributed to economic factors and an upsurge in puppy admissions.



Live Release Rate (LRR)

The overall LRR for 2023 was 90%, reflecting a plateau phase in the LRR trend. LRR tends to follow a parabolic trajectory over time. As animal welfare services are introduced, it typically rises, levels off, and eventually declines when communities achieve a state where healthy animals no longer enter shelters. Our current data suggests we are in a plateau phase.



Treatable Animals Euthanized

Of the total euthanized animals, 18% fell into treatable categories (TR, TM), showcasing a significant improvement over the years. This data indicates a positive trend in minimizing euthanasia for treatable conditions.

Euthanasia Statistics

Euthanasia of Healthy Animals

The report reveals a commendable achievement – no healthy companion animals were euthanized in 2023. This aligns with the BC SPCA's commitment to saving the lives of all healthy animals entering our shelters.

This report serves as a valuable resource for veterinarians, providing insights into the BC SPCA's efforts, successes, and challenges in animal welfare.

The organization's long-term goal is to align decisions regarding shelter animal treatability and adoptability with community opinions, ensuring the rehoming of all healthy and treatable animals without posing a risk to public safety. For further details and a comprehensive understanding of the Asilomar Accords and Adoptability Guidelines, veterinarians are encouraged to visit the BC SPCA website:

<https://spca.bc.ca/programs-services/leaders-in-our-field/professional-resources/for-veterinarians/>

Navigating Clinical Behavior Cases in Shelter Animals: A Guide for Veterinarians

by Hannah Weitzenfeld, DVM

Kayla, an animal care attendant, brings in Spike, a 2-year-old male neutered shepherd cross who came into their shelter three weeks ago, transferred in from another shelter. Spike is here for an ear infection. She also requests a refill for the trazodone Spike has been on for kennel stress since just after his initial intake. Kayla notes it doesn't seem to have made much of a difference, and Spike has started showing some reactivity to dogs. He has a meet-and-greet with a potential adopter in a week or so.

These types of scenarios present commonly in shelter settings. As veterinarians in private practice, understanding the unique challenges of behavioural health care for shelter animals is essential for providing effective and compassionate care.

Shelter environments present distinct nuances that require a tailored approach, but with the right knowledge, veterinarians can make a significant impact on the well-being of these animals.



This article aims to shed light on the unique considerations of shelter animal behaviour. Shelter animal behavioural care presents distinctive challenges for veterinarians, including limited histories, environmental stressors, resource constraints, frequent transitions, and other challenges. Understanding these differences can help veterinarians to tailor approaches and interventions to effectively address the behavioural needs of shelter animals.

What objective, common languages do we use to define behaviours?

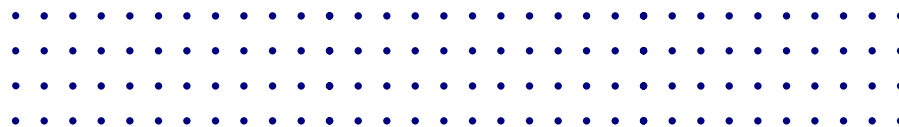
Knowing the specific behavioural signs an animal is displaying, such as tense body posture, stiff tail wagging, can aid in painting an accurate picture of the animal's psychological state and behavioural condition.



coming soon...

RACE CE WEBINAR: CLINICAL BEHAVIOUR FOR SHELTER ANIMALS!

Keep an eye on [this website](#), as we will soon announce date, time and registration information for RACE CE webinar on Veterinary Behaviour coming this spring!



Familiarizing yourself with tools like the [Ian Dunbar Bite Scale](#) and [Fear Free FAS Spectrum](#) is helpful for obtaining an objective understanding of the animal's condition. These tools aid in assessing and communicating behavioural concerns effectively, fostering a shared language with shelter teams.

What information is collected about shelter animals?

Developing an understanding of behavioural information throughout an animal's journey in the shelter is paramount. Learning about the animal's environment, what their day is like, what's in their enclosure, other animals around them, noise levels, etc. can be integral to understanding the condition and providing recommendations.

Leveraging this information allows for more targeted and comprehensive care plans, ultimately improving outcomes.

Social and Behavioural History: Appreciating the significance of gathering social and behavioural history, particularly for surrendered pets, helps differentiate between pre-existing issues and those developed in the shelter environment. This understanding informs more tailored interventions.

Behaviour and welfare monitoring: this entails monitoring for and recording specific behavioural indicators of positive and negative welfare, and taking daily observations to monitor behavioural trends, eating habits, and overall welfare. This monitoring looks different in different shelter systems; at the BC SPCA we use two forms, one for monitoring and another for daily observations. Inquiring about an animal's interactions with familiar and unfamiliar people and animals at the shelter can also be insightful. These insights serve as the foundation for adapting care plans and enhancing the overall well-being of shelter animals.

BEHAVIOURAL INDICATORS OF POOR WELFARE
BEHAVIOURS CAN INDICATE THAT A DOG IS EXPERIENCING STRESS ALTHOUGH THERE MAY BE OTHER MEDICAL REASONS

Day since entry	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
FEAR & ANXIETY															
Fearful Behaviour															Dog adopts a low post accompanied by cowering
Hiding															Dog attempts to hide accompanied by other behaviours
Lack Of Appetite															Dog eats less than 5%
Panting															Dog pants for reason
Escape Attempts															Dog attempts to escape kennel and/or other areas
Listless															Dog is slow and apathetic
FRUSTRATION															
Paw Lifting															Dog lifts forepaw off t
Bar / Cage Biting															Dog repeatedly bites
Chewing Bedding															Dog chews its own bedding
Circling															Dog walks around in circles
Excessive Barking															Dog barks for prolonged periods

What are some considerations around making a behavioural diagnosis in shelter animals?

Ruling out a physical condition is a vital first step in addressing behavioural conditions in shelter animals. In animals assessed to be healthy where a medical cause is not suspected, pre-medication blood work is not universally necessary or possible at the BC SPCA, due to safety profiles and budget constraints. Geriatric or medically complex cases may necessitate blood work, while young and healthy animals may not require routine testing. Most other animal shelters take this conservative approach, while some may opt to test all animals. Documenting a working behavioural diagnosis is vital for shelter teams' understanding of the underlying cause of the animal's behaviour, as well as informing strategies to address it in the shelter.

What are Common Behavioural Diagnoses in Shelter Dogs and Cats, and how are they typically managed?

Some of the most common behavioural diagnoses in shelter animals include kennel stress, fear/under-socialization, aggression, anxiety, frustration, and house-soiling. A resource for medical interventions for the most common shelter conditions can be found [here](#).

What types of treatment are involved in the behavioural care of shelter animals?

Often in cases where veterinary care is sought, medications may be required to address the behavioural condition. Behavioural modification, including desensitization, counter-conditioning and environmental management, is a critical component of behavioural health care for shelter animals. Shelters have varying resources and means of accomplishing this. For BC SPCA animals, providing recommendations and/or advising the shelter team to consult with our internal behaviour team for further support can be extremely helpful for the animal's welfare and pathway.



What types of treatment are involved in the behavioural care of shelter animals?

In most cases where veterinary care is sought for a behavioural condition, medications may be required. Behavioural modification, including desensitization, counter-conditioning and environmental management, is another critical component of behavioural care for shelter animals. Shelters have varying resources in terms of behavioural care. For BC SPCA animals, providing recommendations and/or advising the shelter team to consult with our internal behaviour team for further support can be extremely helpful for the animal's welfare and pathway.

Communication with Shelters: what strategies are effective for achieving timely follow-up and treatment adjustments?

Ongoing communication with the shelter teams is crucial for the behavioural care of shelter animals. Establishing a contact person at the shelter for updates can be very helpful, with specific dates aligned to medication onset times.

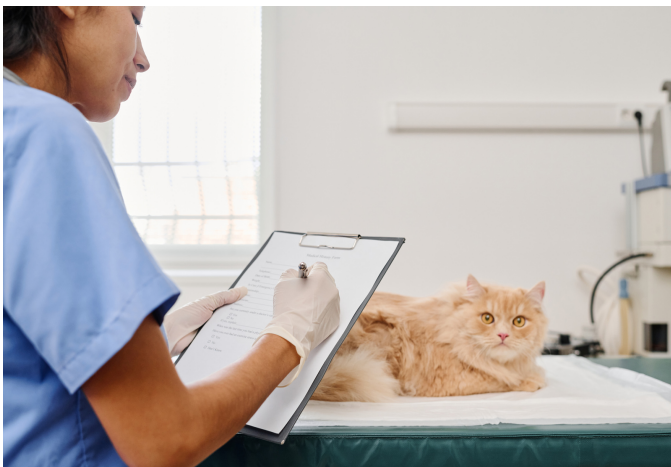
Which medication has been shown to hasten behavioural progression in shelter cats with a known history of fear, such as those from a hoarding environment?

A 2023 UBC study conducted at the BC SPCA revealed that timely administration of daily gabapentin at 10 mg/kg every 12 hours (generally started within 12-72 hours after intake) had significant benefits in the behavioural treatment of fearful cats from hoarding environments. This was evidenced by faster progression through the behavioural modification program, a decrease in behavioural stress scores, a reduction in the time to emergence from hiding, a reduction in hiding when staff left for the night, and less urine suppression compared to the placebo group. Particularly noteworthy was the halving of the median time to graduation with the administration of gabapentin, which reduces the cat's time in shelter and increases the shelter's life-saving capacity.



What strategies are used for tapering behavioural medications for shelter animals when they transition to new homes?

When an animal moves to an adoptive home, veterinarians generally taper medications based on the behavioural condition and medication properties. In the case of short-acting medications, they can be tapered quickly in most cases following a transition to a foster or adoptive home. For long-acting medications generally prescribed for chronic behavioural concerns, these animals are typically adopted with disclosure of the condition and care needs, and sent home with the medication so they have adequate opportunity to follow-up with their own veterinarian for future behavioural planning. Ensuring a smooth transition for long-term cases contributes to the overall success of treatment plans and adoptions.



How can shelter animals receive additional behavioural support?

Recognizing situations that require additional support, such as long-term medication requirements or a lack of improvement, is crucial. BC SPCA shelters collaborate with our Manager, Behaviour and welfare to provide additional support for complex cases.

This collaboration opens the possibility of using Animal Kind trainers or a veterinary behaviourist to enhance the support provided to shelter animals.

What is involved in adoptability determination, and treatability in shelter care?

The ability to treat behavioural cases in shelters depends on several factors, including community and animal safety, the animal's welfare in care and prognosis, as well as the availability of shelter resources. Shelters will vary in the types of behavioural conditions they can manage, and realistic communication about care needs, safety risks and prognosis is paramount in decision-making. The [BC SPCA Asilomar and Adoptability Guidelines](#) provide information about which conditions are treatable in our shelter system. Complete medical records, including prognostic information for behavioural cases, is vital for the ongoing care of the animal.

Recognizing the important role veterinarians play in our shelter community, we understand the complexities involved in decisions related to euthanasia. We acknowledge the emotional challenges these decisions pose for both shelter teams and veterinary professionals. It's important to emphasize that the shelter's consideration of behavioral euthanasia is a thoughtful process, rooted in our commitment to the well-being of the animals in our care and the safety of our staff and community. We understand the difficulty these situations may bring for veterinary teams, and we genuinely appreciate your understanding of the need to provide a humane and considered option for animals facing conditions untreatable in shelter care, or presenting a risk to public safety.

Chronic behavioural conditions: how are they addressed?

Cases where shelter animals have chronic conditions are often complex to manage in care, and require active management and ongoing behavioural care and communication. Between veterinarians, staff, the behaviour team, fosters and adopters, this can sometimes prove challenging.

At the BC SPCA, our internal behavioural team collaborates with the shelter, and liaises directly with a veterinary behaviourist if necessary. Chronic behavioural issues such as chronic general anxiety or separation anxiety, necessitate a tailored assessment and approach, including assessing risks to welfare, risks, prognosis and shelter resources. Chronic conditions often warrant long-term medications. Ideally, cost-effectiveness is prioritized to avoid imposing financial burdens on future adopters, and controlled drugs are avoided in the shelter due to human health risk.

So, what might this look like in the scenario of Kayla and Spike, mentioned above?

S: Upon further discussion, Spike came from a guardian who did not have access to pet-friendly housing. His guardian shared that he was mildly excitable, very playful, moderately obedient, but no red flags came up as far as aggression or bites. Spike currently lives in a kennel with indoor-outdoor access. The gets put outdoors for 2-4 hours a day, and goes for a longer walk at least once daily. He is not allowed to interact with dogs. Kayla shared from the monitoring information that Spike was jumping and barking excessively almost daily, and had also shown some destructive behaviour.

O: Spike is wagging tail rapidly with tail slightly raised, jumping up on new people, panting. He jumped up to say hello, and was moderately difficult to keep still for examination. HR 120 RR 60 mm/crt pink 1 s. Att = BAR! Chest, abdomen, lymph nodes, neuro, eent, skin, musculoskeletal, urogenital systems WNL

A: kennel stress, minimal response to trazodone at 4 mg/kg BID

P: Continue trazodone, add gabapentin 10mg/kg bid x 14 days. Please check in after 24-48 hours to let us know what changes have been observed since the change to determine if readjustment is needed. Recommend discuss desensitization and counterconditioning plan for dog reactivity with internal behaviour team. Phone for tapering instruction if adoption is pending.



Community veterinarians play a vital role in the behavioural health care of shelter animals. By staying informed about the unique challenges and protocols associated with shelter environments, veterinarians can contribute significantly to the well-being and positive outcomes of these animals and foster successful collaboration with shelter teams.