



Statement on our "No-Kill" Mission and Euthanasia

Introduction

The Tompkins County SPCA is an open-admission, "no-kill" shelter. We admit any companion animal from Tompkins County, New York, brought to our shelter through owner surrender, animal control services, and law enforcement. Although an appointment for intake may be scheduled to optimize services, no animal is turned away for age, health, behavior, breed, adoptability or any other reason. Once in our shelter system, an animal is provided with food, housing, grooming, medical and behavioral care, with the goal of reuniting families or finding each animal a forever home. From time to time, a shelter animal comes in with, or develops, significant health or behavioral concerns, and the SPCA staff is faced with the difficult responsibility of providing euthanasia. This statement has been prepared to offer our community greater transparency into the use of euthanasia at the Tompkins County SPCA.

What does no-kill mean?

A "no-kill" shelter provides necessary care and a safe temporary home for all healthy, treatable, manageable, or rehabilitatable animals until that animal finds a permanent home. "No-kill" does not mean "no euthanasia," merely that animals are not euthanized for space or time constraints. Although the term "no-kill" is used nationwide, many in the animal welfare community prefer the term "adoption guarantee" as a more accurate reflection of this shared mission. While there is no national organization or governing body that determines what "no-kill" means, the experience of the US animal welfare industry suggests that around 90% of animals entering an average shelter are generally "adoptable." This "live release rate" is used as a benchmark for measuring life-saving achievements. The Tompkins County SPCA has consistently met this goal of 90%, or greater, annual live release rate since we became a "no-kill" shelter in 2001.

When necessary, at the Tompkins County SPCA, animals are euthanized to provide relief from pain, emotional suffering, or chronic debilitation. Like with our own companion animals, euthanasia can be the kindest, most humane decision for a shelter animal suffering from severe illness or injury. On rare occasions, an animal demonstrating serious aggression or diagnosed with reportable infectious diseases may be euthanized as well. It is the duty of the SPCA to consider public health, safety and welfare before releasing animals into our community.

How does the SPCA decide whether to euthanize an animal?

All decisions about euthanasia are made after thorough assessment and input from the shelter's animal care, medical, and behavioral staff, as well as veterinary experts. The final approval in all non-emergency situations is given by the Executive Director, or the Associate Director in the Executive Director's absence. Veterinarians and medical staff may make independent euthanasia decisions in the case of a medical emergency in which suffering cannot be alleviated and the Executive Director cannot be reached.

The Tompkins County SPCA uses the Asilomar Accords, a set of nationally recognized guidelines established with the goal of reducing euthanasia of healthy and treatable companion animals. Under these guidelines, animals exhibiting medical and/or behavioral issues are categorized as either "treatable/rehabilitatable", "treatable/manageable", or "untreatable/unmanageable." The Tompkins County SPCA, in conjunction with Maddie's® Shelter Medicine Program at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, co-developed a Pet Evaluation Matrix (PEM) based on the Asilomar guidelines and our local community standards. This matrix identifies hundreds of potential medical and behavioral conditions and designates the appropriate category for an animal in each condition. As recommended by the Asilomar Accords, only those animals categorized as "untreatable/unmanageable" are considered for euthanasia. Our PEM is reviewed and modified periodically to ensure that we are operating in line with the resources of our community while making the most humane decision for each animal.

The Tompkins County SPCA is committed to saving lives even when animals fall into the "untreatable/unmanageable" category. As long as the animal is not suffering nor an imminent threat to the public, all avenues are explored as alternatives to euthanasia for these animals. These avenues include medical treatment and surgery, behavior modification at the shelter, the use of foster care, targeting adoptions to community members willing to provide a home for a special needs animal, and reaching out to rescue partners that regularly rehome particular breeds or special needs animals.

What happens when a euthanasia decision is made?

The Tompkins County SPCA, as the guardian of the animals in our care, believes that euthanasia must be carried out with the utmost care and respect for the animal. We provide the calm, compassionate presence of highly trained staff to ensure that the animal's life ends humanely without pain, emotional distress or fear, in accordance with the Association of Shelter Veterinarians' Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters (2022).

We also recognize that our volunteers and staff, many of whom work hard over long periods of time to care for our population, may have developed a special bond with an animal. The SPCA makes all reasonable efforts to inform volunteers and staff who have worked closely with an animal of the decision to euthanize prior to the process taking place. Communication occurs through email, staff or volunteer meetings, and personal conversations, as appropriate. To protect our euthanasia certified staff from undue stress at a difficult time, we are generally unable to accommodate owner or volunteer requests to be present with the animal at the time of euthanasia. Timely pre-euthanasia visits may be requested in advance.

Adopted by the Board of Directors 9.9.24