

# Decreasing shelter length of stay means animals live, not die

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Categories: *Organizational Management*

(<https://chewonthis.maddiesfund.org/category/management/>), *Shelter Medicine*

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Are you confused about what “reducing length of stay” means for your animal shelter or rescue group?



Few things can save more animals than reducing length of stay. It not only means do more animals get adopted, but increases the number of animals the organization can care for in any given year.

There’s a lot of confusion, however, in the shelter and rescue world about what “length of stay” really means, and the implications of reducing it.

In the literal sense, “length of stay” is exactly what it sounds like: How long pets are in the shelter’s care on average. Keeping the math at its simplest:

- If you have 10 pets and they all stay 1 month each, then your length of stay is 1 month.
- If you have 10 pets and five stay two weeks and five stay six weeks, your average length of stay is still 1 month.

Often, however, when discussions of reducing length of stay come up, animal advocates oppose it because they interpret it to mean “after some amount of time passes, the pet’s out of time and will be killed.” This represents a complete misunderstanding of what managing length of stay is.

As Dr. Kate Hurley writes on the Million Cat Challenge website:

*Euthanasia should never be substituted for a live outcome as a means of reducing length of stay. Rather, systematic efforts should be made to minimize length of stay to an appropriate outcome for every animal, whether that is return to owner, rescue, transfer, adoption, return to location of origin, or in the case of managed intake, perhaps never entering the shelter at all.*

So why does fully understanding what “length of stay” means matter? Because reducing length of stay is how we save more lives!

For instance, the longer pets remain housed in a shelter, the more likely they are to become ill from overcrowding, stress, or exposure to sick pets. This can drive down adoption rates, as well as being hard on the pets and a drain on the organization’s resources.

Even if pets are housed in foster homes, keeping them there longer than necessary is also a drain on the organization, and prevents it from being able to move at-risk pets into those foster homes.

Here are some specific ways in which organizations can reduce length of stay and save more pets:

**Become more organized when pets are taken into the shelter.** This way, pets who need vet care can get it immediately, so those at risk of disease can be appropriately separated from the general population, and so those who are ready to be adopted can go right into the adoption area or to adoption events. Learn more about intake here

(<http://www.maddiesfund.org/topic-admissions.htm>).

**Become better at doing adoptions** so more pets are adopted more quickly. Get tips on improving adoptions here (</category/adoption/>).

**Build relationships** with rescue groups, veterinarians, and other shelters so you can help each other care for more animals. Learn more about collaborating here (<http://www.maddiesfund.org/topic-collaboration.htm>).

**Become better at returning pets to their owners.** Nationally, these numbers are dismally low, resulting in a huge strain on the shelter and rescue system as well as suffering for families and pets. Improving RTO rates can dramatically reduce length of stay. Get more RTO tips here (<http://aspcapro.org/resource/saving-lives-return-owner/return-owner>).

So the next time you hear someone say reducing length of stay means animals die, tell them no, it means they live!