



# The ASV Guidelines in Real Life

Part Two: Serving Up Enrichment  
to the Dogs at the Austin Humane Society

BY SANDRA NEWBURY, D.V.M.

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 second in a series of stories 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 creatures we care for.



When you walk into the dog adoptions area at the Austin Humane Society (AHS) these days, you may notice a funny sound. If you’ve spent too much time in dog kennels, you may find this sound mysterious, and try to remember when you last heard it—or more specifically, *didn’t* hear it.

It is quiet. Nobody is barking. Almost every dog is sitting on their behind, looking at you expectantly.

This is a pleasant environment for humans and dogs. There are no discombobulated visitors, reeling back after approaching a dog’s kennel and being sprayed with water, or worse, from the flailing happy paws and other enthusiasms on the opposite side of the enclosure door. No one has their hands over their ears.

Many shelters’ dog areas are deafening. Why is this so different? Could it be possible there are only well-behaved dogs in Austin, Texas?

Obviously, that’s not the answer. The dogs in Austin are no more naturally quiet or obedient than they are anywhere else (in fact, if the city’s reputation holds, they may be a little weirder). The peace and quiet at the Austin Humane Society isn’t magical; it was achieved because shelter staff implemented practices that brought it into being.

### Focus on canine enrichment

According to the ASV Guidelines, “Enrichment should be given the same significance as other components of animal care, such as nutrition and veterinary care, and should not be considered optional. At a minimum, animals must be provided regular social contact, mental stimulation and physical activity.”

Austin Humane Society is one of a group of shelters that have started a hand-feeding, enrichment, and training program for their adoptable dogs. Begun in 2009, theirs is based on the Open Paw program created by Dr. Ian Dunbar and Kelly Gorman. Leading the charge at AHS was animal care/facility supervisor Crystal Tysz, who had great support from the shelter director, administrators, and all the shelter veterinarians.

### Better Times in the Kennels

Tysz had been watching behavior, animal and human, in the shelter. She realized that dogs seemed to get rewards only when they were outside of the cage.

The shelter was looking for “a way for volunteers to interact with all the dogs, even for new volunteers with



As the ASV guidelines state—and the Austin Humane Society recognized—“Regular, positive daily social interactions with humans are essential for both dogs and cats. These interactions are crucial for stress reduction and are a powerful form of enrichment.”



Staff at the Austin Humane Society follow the philosophy that “a bowl of food is a wasted opportunity,” because staff, volunteers, and visitors could instead be using food to train the dogs.

limited training,” says Tysz. Austin Humane Society has a tiered-level dog walking program and, as happens in many shelters, the “easy”-level dogs were getting taken out for walks over and over while the upper-level, more challenging dogs—who may actually need *more* attention—often got less.

Tysz also noticed that dogs’ jumping and barking was a major turnoff for adopters, and that the dogs who were sitting quietly were more likely to get attention and more likely to get adopted. The shelter wanted to do something for all

the dogs to enrich the time they spend in their kennels as well as increase their “kennel appeal.”

As the ASV guidelines state, and AHS recognized, “Regular, positive daily social interactions with humans are essential for both dogs and cats. These interactions are crucial for stress reduction and are a powerful form of enrichment.” The ASV Guidelines also point to research that shows training programs for dogs and cats (e.g. to condition or teach basic obedience commands or tricks) also serve as an important source of stimulation and social contact. For dogs, such training has been shown to increase chances for rehoming.

### Defining Programs and Setting Goals

Tysz had been to several conferences and trainings and done her homework on canine enrichment programs that others had outlined, implemented, and tested. She’d learned that “a bowl of food is a wasted opportunity”—because staff could instead be using food to train the dogs.

As recommended in the guidelines, AHS created a clear, written protocol that outlined the program and provided training for staff and volunteers to introduce the enrichment program before they began. They worked from the Open Paw protocol that was created by experts in the field and had been reviewed by veterinarians at the University of California-Davis Koret Shelter Medicine program. They realized because of all the great resources available, there was no need to re-invent the wheel.

The protocol identified several goals, explained the Open Paw model for the program, and included a set of FAQs anticipating questions from staff and volunteers. Their goals were to provide mental stimulation and decrease stress for shelter dogs; increase kennel appeal; help dogs form positive associations (for example, between the appearance of visitors and the presentation of snacks!); decrease length of stay by increasing speed of adoptions; maintain behavioral wellness for dogs who would be at the shelter for longer stretches; and prepare dogs to transition into a home environment.

The protocol for the enrichment program included information on how to answer potential questions from adopters. The shelter staff hoped that adopters would continue hand-feeding after the dogs went home; hand-feeding may help to cement the bond between a dog and his new person and provides just as many great training opportunities at home as it does in the shelter. The program helps counselors open a dialogue with adopters about human/animal bonding and the benefits of hand-feeding after adoption.

### You Can Feed the Animals!

Allowing visitors to take part in giving treats provides positive reinforcement for the dogs, and engages the humans.

Here’s how it works: The daily food allowance for each dog is put into a bin at human-eye level on the front of each dog’s kennel. Signage instructs visitors, “Please feed the

dogs! It's OK to feed the animals here! Help us train our dogs. Toss a handful of kibble into the dog's cage." Staff and volunteers are trained to be part of the program, rewarding dogs with food when they come to the front of their kennels or whenever they perform a desirable behavior. Their protocol encourages everyone to participate, noting that everyone's responsible for making sure the dogs get enough to eat.

The staff make sure each dog gets an appropriate amount to eat every day. Volunteers may feed the dogs directly by hand, without tossing the food, but they are trained to sanitize their hands between dogs.

Since puppies may be more susceptible to infectious disease or compete with littermates for food, they are still fed via bowls. Sick dogs aren't currently part of the program.

While Tysz wants to do even more enrichment, the changes AHS has made so far have gotten wonderful reviews from shelter visitors. Adopters say they really enjoy the interactions with the animals. Kids especially love to be able to have a safe, fun way to interact with the dogs. The program seems to work well from the dog's-eye view as well. Shelter staff report dogs spend more time settled and calm during visitor hours, and those who are shy come up to the front of the cage more often.

## Challenges

Some of the biggest challenges in getting the program on track have been about training, staff time, and acceptance of change. Getting staff and volunteers the training and the time they need is really important to getting things right with the dogs.

Shelter staff report that it can be difficult to get to all the dogs often enough during the day; it is a big responsibility on top of their other duties. Dogs on special diets require extra signage so the public doesn't take food from one bin and toss it in the wrong kennel. Also, the dogs still go crazy and happily lunge at the doors when volunteers come in to collect them for outside playtime. Excitement runs high for dogs and humans, and it takes a lot of patience to balance trying to get walks in for everyone with waiting for good behavior before opening that kennel door.

Some people were concerned that there would be too many germs on visitors' hands. Asking people to toss the food (rather than feed it directly) really helps prevent animal-to-animal spread. But if that doesn't allay your fears, at the University of California Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program, we've been able to actually measure the amount of organic material on the hands of visitors compared to what's on the shelter staff during cleaning



Allowing visitors to take part in giving treats provides positive reinforcement for the dogs, and engages the humans.

or animal care. As we have long suspected, the viral load is usually volumes higher on staff and volunteers than it is on the hands of visitors. That makes good training on hand sanitation doubly important.

What's more, the shelter seems friendlier to visitors; signs saying "Please feed the dogs!" instead of "DON'T touch the dogs!" put out a welcome mat and engage visitors in the shelter's work. Some staff have raised concerns about dogs eating directly off the floor, so the shelter is going to try using bowls at the front of the kennel as a target.

## What's Next?

Tysz wants to start a program for volunteers to enter the kennels and quietly read to the dogs, a practice that's been implemented elsewhere with great success. She has already identified some helpful resources for reading programs. Dogs in shelters get so accustomed to frenetic bursts of excitement and activity every time people show up—but most adopters (and most shelter staff) don't want that all the time. Sharing some down time with dogs gives them a chance to unwind and trains them that good things can happen even without all the rambunctiousness. **AS**

## Resources

For info about the Open Paw protocol, check out [openpaw.org/about/shelters.html](https://openpaw.org/about/shelters.html).