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At Risk Dog Flow Process

BEFORE YOU START

FIRST, take the dog flow outcomes self-assessment.

SECOND: Are you planning to euthanize dogs to reduce risk or prevent future bite incidents? Take this quick animal shelter safety assessment first.

THIRD: Not sure if your current practices are increasing your risk of future bites? Take this short risk assessment to evaluate if your current practices may be part of the problem?

HOW TO USE THE AT-RISK PROCESS

Step 1. Initiate the process using this form.

Step 2. Take these action steps

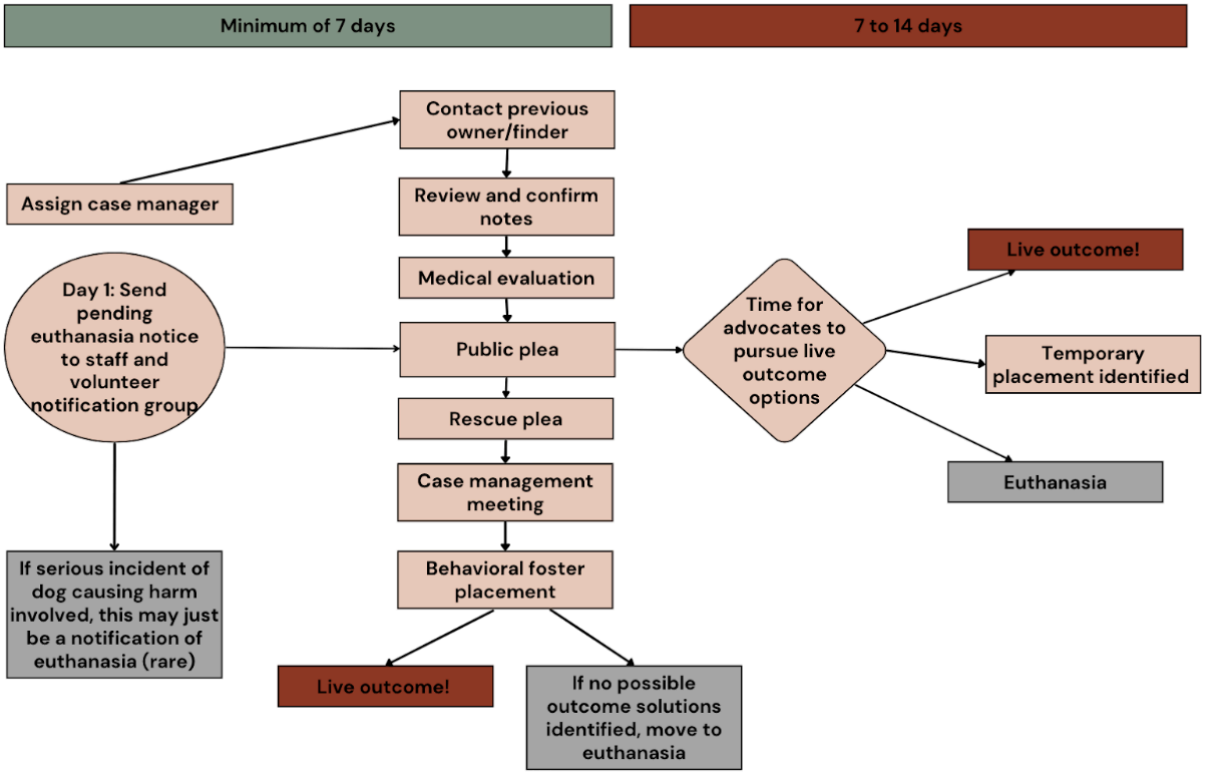
- ☐ Contact the previous owner or finder to let them know the dog is at risk of euthanasia and why. Confirm any information provided by the owner that is the dog's notes.
- ☐ Alert the opt-in volunteer and staff group of the at-risk status and deadline.
- ☐ Alert rescues and/or the public (you will not always alert the public).
- ☐ Pursue short-term foster placement with a trainer or behavior foster if further assessment is needed.
- ☐ Collect a paper copy of the form along with the dog's notes to be reviewed upon request.
- ☐ Respond to inquiries and ideas from staff and volunteers.
- ☐ Ask the veterinarian to examine the dog for signs of illness or injury which could explain unsafe behavior.

Step 3. What to do on the day of the initial deadline

- ☐ If no viable outcome options exist for the dog, proceed with euthanasia process.
- ☐ If any viable outcome options are being pursued by staff,volunteers, rescue groups, or potential adopters, extend the deadline for no less than 3 days and no more than 14 days.
- ☐ At the end of the extended deadline, there should be a firm plan in order to extend further.

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Frequently-asked questions

Who should be involved in the process?

1. **The person who identifies the dog as at-risk of euthanasia**. May be a manager, a veterinarian, a director, a member of a 'behavior' team, or anyone else in the organization.
2. **A neutral case manager and 'dog detective.**' This person will be the main point of contact for volunteers, staff, and other advocates and will have to justify the decision to or not to euthanize. In large organizations, this person should have a role dedicated to long-stay and more challenging dogs. This person also facilitates a weekly "at-risk dogs" meeting to discuss each case and determine viable pathways forward.
3. **Staff and volunteer opt-in notification group**. This can be anyone who wants to know when dogs are at risk and agrees to be a proactive part of finding alternative outcome options. This can be as simple as an email group called "atriskdogs@youranimalshelter.org."
4. Communications staff member, animal caretaker, volunteer/foster coordinator, and any other staff who will have insight into the animal and/or may be able to pursue live outcome options.
5. Rescue groups, members of the public, foster caregivers, local trainers, and anyone else who can offer an alternative to euthanasia.

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What makes a successful case manager?

- They are objective, neutral, and can provide an objective assessment of future risk. They should not be heavily biased in either the direction of 'never euthanize,' or 'euthanize more dogs.'
- They are non-defensive and open to hearing critical and helpful feedback.
- They are comfortable with the many human emotions surrounding a dog being euthanized or not euthanized for behavior.
- They set expectations up front and do not change the rules midway through.
- They ensure advocates for at risk dogs can easily and quickly reach them or another point of contact at the shelter

What are the rules for the opt-in group?

- It's open to any staff member or volunteer who can agree to follow the rules.
- No one can merely say, "don't euthanize." Members of the group must be able to offer or pursue alternatives to euthanasia within defined timelines.
- Follow the organization's organizational culture agreement including assuming good intentions of everyone involved.
- Maintain confidentiality within the group.

What if the dog poses a true public safety threat?

Decide ahead of time what that means in your organization. As this journal article points out, most dogs are somewhere in the gray zone and your level of risk tolerance depends on your organizational culture. If the dog has seriously harmed a person, you may move straight to a notification of euthanasia and not allow for any lifesaving options to be pursued. It's still a good idea to send out a notification and to explain why you made the decision to move immediately to euthanasia.

Troubleshooting common problems

- Start the process earlier and allow for plenty of time between the notification and the actual euthanasia (7 to 30 days).
- Meet weekly at first with the opt-in group to reduce miscommunication and build trust.
- Follow your own protocol. Once you set an expectation, create opportunities for face-to-face discussion before making changes.
- Make space for constructive and critical feedback from volunteers and advocates.

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- Don't feel like you have to have a retort for every hard question. This comes off as defensive and in truth, there is no science to this stuff.
- Be fully transparent.
- Complete the checklist for every at-risk dog. Keep these so they can be viewed by volunteers and advocates upon request.
- Provide structured emotional support for everyone involved. Euthanasia decisions involve high levels of trauma exposure and people will need ongoing support and care.

How do you establish behavioral guidelines for the opt-in group?

1. Make it a one-way communication tool (email list without the ability to 'reply-all')
2. Set the rule that advocacy always has to involve pursuing viable alternatives to outcomes
3. Show gratitude for volunteer time and effort
4. Listen when they have a complaint and find the kernel of truth.

What about sanctuary placement or placement with a rescue group that specializes in behavior dogs?

You should thoroughly research any long-term or lifelong institutional placement option. Sanctuary Watch ceased operating in 2017 but their Facebook page is still well worth visiting. There are only a handful of organizations that house behavior dogs that provide adequate care standards and most simply cannot sustain operations over time.

Resources and References

Resources to help you with at-risk dogs

At-risk dog case manager job description

At-risk dog outcome process presentation

Eight ways to reduce bites in your shelter

Can we get sued for that? Managing liability and risk in animal shelters.

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