Animal Shelter Safety Self Assessment

Instructions: *Briefly read each item and answer "yes," no," or "sometimes" to each question. Questions are in no particular order of importance and span a range of policies, practices, and resources. It is unlikely there is any organization who can say "yes" to all of these, but there are many organizations fulfilling half or more. Each question represents a factor that can positively or negatively impact safety in your animal services organization. All of these together add up to a culture of safety.*

1. Does your shelter provide comprehensive behavior and medical notes avoiding shelter jargon or confusing terminology?

2. Does your shelter track data on bites in the shelter and bites of adopted/fostered dogs? (both quantity and severity over a multi-year period)

3. Are staff members and volunteers able to interact with/provide enrichment to dogs from early in the morning to late in the evening?

4. Do staff and volunteers have a safe way to communicate in a safety emergency with other people in the building? (radios are most common)

5. Are volunteers empowered to and supported in providing a range of mental health support activities for dogs? Eg. enrichment, exercise, day trip, foster, counseling for adopters?

6. Are dogs given chew toys like Nylabones, Benebones, and/or stuffed Kongs in their kennels? (outside of the "exceptions" like dogs who resource guard, dogs who are co-housed, etc)

7. Is there a variety of appropriate handling equipment for dogs, including martingale collars, flat leashes, front-clip harnesses, head halters, and other walking equipment to make walking strong and jumpy dogs easier to handle?

8. Do veterinary staff have appropriate handling equipment for medical exams, including muzzles, towels, and e-collars?

9. Are medical staff and veterinarians trained in Fear Free handling?

10. Are there two-sided kennels so dogs can move from one side to another? (bonus if one side is outdoors)

11. Does the shelter have a written safety protocol and secure housing for dogs who pose an immediate safety risk to humans or other animals?

12. Does each kennel row have a safety bucket that includes fight interruption tools including an air horn, bite stick, and leash as well as a catchpole for safety emergencies and have volunteers and staff been trained in how to use them?

13. Are there first aid kits in each dog housing area and do staff and volunteers know how to quickly locate them?

14. Is there enough space for dogs to safely walk down kennel rows without redirecting bites to the handler or getting into 'fights' at the kennel front with other dogs?

15. Do most dogs get out of their kennels at least one time each day?

16. Are dog-friendly dogs co-housed?

17. Does your shelter provide guidance to the public on how to safely interact with dogs at the shelter?

18. Does your shelter ensure dogs can rest by turning off lights at night and providing beds, blankets, and other comfort items?

19. Do staff and volunteers meet regularly to discuss challenging/concerning/long stay dog cases and work together to identify activities that can lead to outcomes?

20. Are 80% of dogs going to playgroups five times per week or more?

21. Does your shelter have an internal communications system so all volunteers and staff know the specific handling needs of each dog and which dogs have known history or observed behaviors that indicate they may pose a significant safety risk? (Walk Boards are recommended).

22. Are volunteers able to walk dogs and/or take them to play yards?

23. Do volunteers receive introductory and ongoing training to handle various difficulty levels of dogs?

24. Do staff and volunteers understand and follow basic safety procedures?

25. Does every dog get outfitted with a martingale collar upon arrival at the shelter?

26. Are catch poles reserved for truly aggressive dogs who pose an immediate threat of harm to people? (as opposed to being used for routine movement of dogs among kennels)

27. Can staff and volunteers access behavioral information in your shelter software system?

28. Does your organization support specialty volunteer groups to focus on more challenging dogs like 'long-stay' dogs, dogs with behavioral histories, or fearful dogs?

29. Do staff members conduct daily rounds to determine the next step to move each dog forward towards an outcome?

30. Does your shelter have a written protocol for determining behavioral euthanasia decisions shared openly with staff and volunteers?

31. Does your shelter have an adult dog foster program that includes dogs with behavioral histories or challenges?

32. When a pet's behavior has begun to deteriorate due to stress, are they immediately prioritized for placement in foster care?

33. Are there clear, reliable lines of communication among various departments including animal control, veterinary care, admissions, and adoptions?

34. Do field notes from animal control get entered in shelter software notes?

35. Do volunteers know they can report minor or moderate safety incidents and bites without fear the dog will be automatically euthanized due to their report?

36. Is your shelter free of barriers that lead to increased length of stay

37. Does your shelter have a defined process for reviewing and evaluating case notes of dogs with known histories of causing harm to people or animals?

38. Does your shelter have a safety audit process and quality assurance measures in place to ensure safety protocols are followed?

39. Does your shelter have a process for ensuring complete transparency with adopters and with foster caregivers?

Things that are NOT shown to improve safety in animal shelters:

- Restricting volunteers
- Prohibiting volunteers from handling all but the 'easiest' dogs
- Euthanizing more dogs in general
- Temperament testing dogs using standardized assessments (no test has been validated)
- Euthanizing dogs based on results of temperament tests
- Blanket euthanasia policies based on behavior in shelter
- Euthanizing every dog with a bite history
- Barriers that prevent people who want to help from helping
- Holding dogs outside of public view

What DOES make shelters safe?

- Dogs have their needs met. Exercise, enrichment, comfort, sleep, food, water
- Culture of safety
- Good communication among teams, staff and volunteers, and the public
- Common sense approach to assessing dog behavior in the shelter
- Policies and protocols - everyone gives input, everyone knows them, accountability to following them
- Lots of people helping
- Dogs don't stay in the shelter any longer than absolutely necessary