

Overview of Capacity for Care (C4C)

Capacity for care (C4C), considered holistically, means meeting the needs of every animal admitted to a shelter, regardless of how they came in, when they came in or their age, health status and personality. Every sheltering organization must acknowledge their C4C and function within it to allow them to be the best resource for the animals and people in their community.

Achieving capacity for care involves creating humane space as well as developing and implementing programs that allow the shelter to function at a level where every animal has the Five Freedoms of Animal Welfare and staff is provided an environment where they can do a good job – all while helping just as many, if not more animals.

Assuring C4C also supports meeting a Sixth Freedom, the freedom from euthanasia for animals that are neither terminally ill nor dangerous. Providing high quality housing and optimizing [length of stay](#) (LOS) through pro-active management are two key factors in assuring C4C for every animal in the shelter.

The Five Freedoms of Animal Welfare, developed by the Farm Animal Welfare Council for livestock in an agricultural context, provide a compelling simple framework to define the minimum level of care expected for any animal in confinement:

- Freedom from hunger and thirst
- Freedom from discomfort
- Freedom from pain, injury, or disease
- Freedom from fear and distress
- Freedom to express normal behavior

The first four freedoms must be met with humane housing and pro-active population management and thoughtful medical protocols. The fifth freedom, freedom to express normal behavior, is extremely difficult to meet in the shelter setting, even with the best housing and care and thus limiting the amount of time an animal is in the shelter further supports providing this freedom.

The [Association of Shelter Veterinarian's Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters](#) warns:

Every sheltering organization has a maximum capacity for

care, and the population in their care must not exceed that level.

On the surface, this seems like a simple and logical statement. Operating within an organization's C4C is the foundation on which all other guidelines for care rest. If more animals are admitted at any one time than can be provided with an environment that meet their needs; or if more animals are admitted over time than can be released alive, inevitably animals' mental or physical welfare will be compromised. This also creates an environment where staff are not able to do their best work, which often results in staff feeling less fulfilled and frustrated in their daily work.

Once a shelter is operating within their C4C, human resources (staff, volunteers, others) are often freed up to do any of a number of other important shelter tasks to further serve the shelter animals and/or community outreach programs. This system feeds positively on itself. Meeting C4C allows animals to remain healthy with good welfare during their stay and move through the system quickly without delays from illness. Since animals arrive at their appropriate outcomes more quickly, resources are freed up to further serve the mission and goals of the facility – often with an ability to serve more animals. The organization can thus be an even better resource for the community to improve welfare of animals within and beyond the shelter walls.

“It is working so well I am completely blown away. The response from the public with regard to the lack of crowding has been very positive, and our volunteer retention for cat volunteers has improved with the improved housing conditions for the cats. Capacity for Care is a win win win program I wish we would have started years ago!”

Laura, Shelter Manager, Placer SPCA

“Outcome capacity”, such as number of adoptions per day and rescue transports per month, also drives the optimal number of animals to have in the building for maximum life-saving, even when there are adequate housing units available. Functioning within outcome capacity will enable an organization to give genuine chances to the most animals over time, by expanding the community safety net as well as releasing the most animals alive through the shelter.

Learn more about [calculating your shelter's capacity for care](#) and [adoption driven capacity](#).