

Staffing Levels and Capacity for Care

Simple formulas can be found online to help shelters come up with a basic estimation of staff needs for general things such as kennel cleaning and feeding. However, depending on your shelter's mission and resources, staff needs will need to be adjusted to remain within your capacity for care. Avoiding bottlenecks at key flow-through points is of critical importance.

Question:

How many staff members are needed for a given number of animals in order to operate within one's capacity for care?

Answer:

Hello, and thank you for your question!

The question "How many staff members are needed for a given number of animals in order to operate within one's capacity for care?" is an important and complex one. Maintaining an organization's C4C requires adequate staffing (paid or volunteer) with appropriate training in addition to appropriate housing and flow.

As you mentioned, the National Animal Care and Control Association (NACA) publishes guidelines for agencies that include the following formula for minimum kennel staffing levels in animal shelters, number of animals x 15 minutes = minutes of staff time. The assumption in this formula is that cleaning takes 9 minutes per animal and feeding takes 6 minutes. The shortcoming of this calculation is that it accounts for only cleaning and feeding. If shelters are to ensure The Five Freedoms of animal welfare as recommended in the ASV Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, more time is needed to meet essential needs beyond the tasks of cleaning and feeding.

As you note, it also does not take into account the fact that additional staff hours may be necessary at key flow-through points. These points include

intake, spay/neuter, behavioral evaluation/modification, medical evaluation/treatment, movement of animals, adoption, and other outcomes depending on the shelter. These tasks, if not staffed adequately, can become bottlenecks. For example, if you do not have enough staff to perform necessary intake procedures, animals may wait in holding areas for longer than desired, prolonging length of stay (LOS) and increasing the population. This has a domino-effect; crowding is a risk factor for disease, disease leads to longer LOS while treatment is implemented, and will increase the overall cost per animal for housing and care (See "Population Management" chapter in Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff).

Additionally, what makes staffing calculations so complex is that no two animal shelters operate exactly alike due to variety in facility, mission, population served and services offered. Because of this, one useful way to determine staffing needs is to do a time study to determine the average amount of time needed to perform each task during a typical animal's stay. These tasks should be categorized into the needed services for each animal, e.g. medical care, daily care, intake, surgery, reception, adoption, behavior, enrichment, daily monitoring. This can be done by broad category or broken down to specific duties within. A spreadsheet can be created with categories/tasks and staff time by job description.

Using intake as an example we can estimate staffing needed:

Average daily staff time required for intake = Minutes per intake x average
Monthly Daily Intake #

If a shelter is taking in 5 dogs per day on average, and each intake takes 15 minutes, the required staff time would be: 15 minutes x 5 dogs/day = 75 minutes per day

A point worth making about this calculation is that if you know you will need 75 minutes of staff time to intake the dogs each day, it is advantageous to schedule these intakes so that your staff is available and on-site when the intakes take place (a strong case for Managed Intake - a topic for another day, see below for a link to a great resource). It is likely to take much longer to do intakes with only one staff member working than if there were two at the time

when animals arrived.

Another juncture at which staffing is critical for moving animals through the shelter is spay/neuter. At the end of the “Calculating Shelter Capacity” article referenced below, there is an Appendix with an example of how to estimate the number of surgeries required per day. Once you have determined this number, it is important to also determine how many veterinarian and support staff hours are needed to successfully complete that number of surgeries. The tasks performed by each medical staff member should be included in the time study to help determine this. Shelter software can often be used to demonstrate graphically a summary of required staff for flow-through points (see p.112 Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff 2nd Edition for an example of a graph with staffing hours overlaid).

One other consideration is the use of volunteers. Many shelters are able to maintain or expand their staffing level through the use of volunteers. Volunteers can be trained to do many jobs throughout the shelter and can alleviate demand on staff time. It is important to have backup systems to ensure these duties are still completed if no volunteers are available on any given day, as you would with staff who may be out sick. Job descriptions should be developed for each volunteer position (as for staff), training and management should be provided and accountability required. A robust volunteer program also has the additional benefit of community engagement beyond simply alleviating staff time.

I hope you find this helpful. Please let me know if you have additional questions!

Deb Yannessa, DVM
Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Intern
University of Wisconsin Shelter Medicine Program
Dane County Humane Society

Helpful resources –

[Calculating Shelter Capacity](#)

[Capacity for Care/Magic Number calculator](#)

[Managed intake Learning Track by Maddie's Fund](#)