

BOX 6.1

Understanding animal shelter terminology and roles

What's in a name?

The thousands of organizations that include “SPCA” or “Humane Society” in their name typically function as private, 501(c)(3) organizations with independent operations, budgets, and governance. It is a common misconception that local shelters and humane societies exist as chapters of national organizations (e.g., HSUS and ASPCA). National organizations vary in mission and activities and provide programmatic and grant support for shelters and broader animal welfare interventions and education.

What are the animal-related activities funded by municipalities?

The only services commonly mandated to municipalities in the United States are stray dog management, dog licensing, and mandatory rabies vaccination enforcement. Depending on the community, municipal animal control and humane investigative services may be performed by government entities or contracted to private nonprofits or individual kennel operators. In many cases, a single organization has both private and municipal functions. The jurisdictions shelters serve may change with annual contract negotiations. Admission policies, scope of care, and other policies vary widely. Leadership of organizations can change abruptly, and organizations in the same community may have similar names but be independent entities.

Shelter versus rescue?

“Shelter” is generally applied to a brick-and-mortar organization; “rescue” is often reserved for home-based foster networks and breed-specific organizations often purely staffed by volunteers. However, some rescues do have facilities, and some organizations that call themselves shelters do not operate facilities. The Association of Shelter Veterinarians takes a broad approach and considers “shelter” to include “foster-based rescues, nonprofit humane societies and SPCAs, municipal animal services facilities, and hybrid organizations.” The ASV Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters can be a useful starting point for understanding sheltering best practices.

ASV Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, 2nd ed. *J Shelter Med Community Anim Health*. 2022;1(S1).

The 2024 Community Care Guidelines for Small Animal Practice are available at aaha.org/community-care.

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