

SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS SHELTERING TENET CONSIDERATIONS

Socially Conscious Sheltering is a compassionate, transparent and thoughtful model outlining how animal shelters and rescues can best support vulnerable animals in their care and community. Socially Conscious Sheltering is a shared set of beliefs, defined by a framework of “tenets,” that help ensure the best results for pets in shelters and rescues. Shelters across the world have committed to this way of caring for animals and, as a result, animals in these shelters and rescues are having increasingly positive outcomes.

Socially Conscious Sheltering understands that each community is unique and faces different. The questions and considerations below are designed to facilitate organizational conversations regarding the operationalizing of each tenet. Because of the unique challenges each community faces, the expression of the nine tenets may look different from organization to organization and community to community. The tenets are meant to be tailored to each shelter and each community and to honor these differences.

It is also important to note that the tenets are used as guiding principles instead of a measurement tool. The model is aspirational and more about having a common goal and a shared set of values than meeting specific guidelines.

In the questions and considerations below, you will find two common themes:

Collaboration: Making the largest impact for your community and their animals can only happen through collaborative efforts and relationships.

Curiosity: Asking questions without judgment to truly explore all perspectives is a required skill when discussing and embracing Socially Conscious Sheltering tenets. This curiosity can be directed toward yourself as you answer the questions below and explore the potential within your organization, as well as toward others in your community, from stakeholders to partner organizations.

1. Ensure every unwanted or homeless pet has a safe place to go for shelter and care

Every community must have a safe place for companion animals in need. It’s important for the community to know they have resources available to them and their companion animals.

What are the needs of your community?

- Consider designing your intake model to meet the needs of your community. A few examples may include:
 - In-person intake procedures at the shelter (e.g., walk-in and/or appointment based)

- Being, or partnering with, an open admission shelter
- On-call foster homes to provide a safe place after-hours
- Partnership with a 24-hour veterinary clinic to provide a safe place after-hours
- Partnership with foster-based rescues or other local organizations
- Partnering with local law enforcement to ensure they have access to safe place for stray or neglected animals
- Consider conducting ongoing conversations with local partners (i.e., rescue, shelters, human-service organizations, trainers, veterinarians) about the community's needs.
- Understand the existing resources in your area. How can you collaborate with them to ensure community needs are being addressed?
- What services do you have the capacity to offer that will complement the existing community resources?

How can you support patrons at the time of relinquishment?

- Consider a customer service-focused intake process. A few examples may include:
 - Treating patrons and animals with kindness, curiosity and lack of judgment.
 - Providing ongoing programs and resources to maintain the human-animal bond and keep families whole.

2. Place (at least) every healthy and safe animal

The sheltering community has come a long way in how we support the animals in our care. This tenet is a commitment to focus on developing the connections and resources to place every healthy and safe animal in our care. Healthy means either having no signs of clinical disease or evidence of disease with a good or excellent prognosis for a comfortable life. Safe means that the animal has not exhibited behavior that is likely to result in severe injury or death to another animal or person. This tenet does not preclude placing pets who have medical or behavioral conditions that can be safely managed while not allowing the animal to suffer.

This tenet does not suggest all feral cats should be placed in homes. A shelter and home environment can be very stressful for feral cats and is often not the best outcome for these animals. Developing trap-neuter-return programs within your community will help increase positive outcomes for these animals.

- How can you work together with existing community partners to ensure everyone is placing all healthy and safe animals?
- Are there enough community resources to ensure these animals' placement, or do you need to expand this network to prevent organizations from facing euthanasia decisions due to time and space limitations?
- What other programs (e.g., foster, transfer) can be developed or enhanced within your community to support healthy and safe animals' best outcomes?

3. Assess the medical and behavioral needs of homeless animals and ensure these needs are thoughtfully addressed.

The health and medical needs of animals housed in shelters and rescues must be assessed and treated so the animal does not suffer. These animals must also have their behavioral needs assessed and met, including providing enrichment sufficient to make them comfortable and prevent self-destructive, obsessive-compulsive coping behaviors.

What is your capacity for care?

- Consider determining your organization's capacity for care. How many animals can you sustainably and responsibly house without compromising the level of their care?
- How can you create a culture of vigilance to identify and address ways in which individual animals may be suffering both medically and/or behaviorally?

How can you support the medical needs of the animals in your care?

- All animals must have timely and appropriate veterinary care throughout their entire stay within the organization (i.e., foster care and on-site animals).
- Take this welfare requirement into account when determining your capacity of care.
- What common medical concerns do you encounter with your animal population? What resources exist within your community and organization to address those needs?
- Are there private practice veterinarians and/or shelter veterinarians in the community to ensure all protocols and procedures are best practice? This conversation may include:
 - Vaccination protocols
 - Cleaning protocols
 - Contagion control protocols
 - Treatment protocols
- Consider implementing medical foster programs to support these animals in the comfort of a home environment.

How can you support the behavioral needs of the animals in your care?

- Consider offering all animals timely and appropriate behavior support, low-stress handling techniques and enrichment opportunities to prevent suffering and deterioration.
- What common behavioral concerns do you encounter with your animal population? What resources exist within your community and organization to address those needs?
- Is there a process to identify animals that need additional support and implementation of behavior modification protocols using LIMA-based techniques? Consider hiring staff with relevant certifications (i.e., IAABC, CCPDT, KPA-CTP) or collaborate with other resourced shelters or certified behavior professionals.
- Consider implementing behavior foster programs to support these animals in the comfort of a home environment.

Example of a pathways for an animal:

When an animal enters a shelter, the staff gathers information from various sources to determine if the animal is healthy and safe for adoption. Upon intake, staff requests behavioral and medical information from the previous guardian or Good Samaritan who brought the animal to the shelter. During the medical intake examination, the animal's health, vaccination history and behavior are documented. Subsequently, volunteers and staff who interact with the animal during daily care document the animal's response to people and other animals and health concerns. Standardized behavior evaluations may also be conducted to gain additional insight into the animal's behavior. Shelter professionals use all available information to make an informed decision on the placement of healthy and safe animals into an adoption program. The following are taken into consideration when decisions are made:

- *Non-Intervention:* If you choose not to or are unable to treat a behavior or medical condition, what will the impact be on this animal? Will the animal have the freedom to express normal behavior and freedom from fear and distress?
- *Benefit of Treatment:* If you treat a behavior or medical condition, what will the impact be on this animal? Will treatment result in freedom from pain, injury or disease and result in a comfortable life for the animal, both physically and behaviorally?
- *Reasonable for an Average Adopter to Manage:* Can you expect an adopter to take on the medical or behavioral issue with average knowledge, resources and skill set? What follow-up will be required? What is the chance for long-term success? Can you appropriately message the concern to prospective adopters? Does this animal have an advocate (e.g., staff/volunteer/ supporter) who is willing to take responsibility beyond what the average adopter is willing or able to assume?
- *Resources:* If you treat the animal's behavior or medical condition what is the impact on the ability to help other animals?
- *Liability/Reasonable Risk:* Will this animal be safe in the community? What is the risk to the community by placing this animal?

4. Alleviate suffering and make appropriate euthanasia decisions.

A Socially Conscious Shelters works to place every healthy and safe animal that comes through their doors. However, sometimes an animal is facing an impossible medical diagnosis, or has a behavior issue that makes it unsafe for the community. In those instances, euthanasia may be considered as the most compassionate option.

Socially Conscious Shelters work to make sure that they have a discussion and policy around humane euthanasia and that it is reflective of the needs of the community. Not every Socially Conscious Shelter has the same philosophy, but all of them have an open discussion about the best way to prevent and alleviate suffering for the animals in their care. Each euthanasia decision is difficult and taken seriously to ensure the welfare of the individual animal.

- Consider developing an organizational euthanasia policy, including several elements:
 - Medical euthanasia criteria
 - Behavioral euthanasia criteria and organizational risk tolerance
 - The process around making these decisions
 - The process of performing euthanasia
- What is your desired euthanasia culture for your organization? How can you promote self-care, collaborative conversations and transparency regarding the outcome decisions made for each animal? Consider intervening when unhealthy behavior, such as blaming and shaming, is being displayed by staff or volunteers.
- Build a culture that understands that euthanasia is not the worst outcome for that animal when an animal is suffering and cannot be healed. These organizational decisions should not be shamed. Building an open and transparent culture that encourages communication regarding these decisions is critical

5. Align shelter policy with the needs of the community.

The Socially Conscious Sheltering framework recognizes that one-size-doesn't-fit-all in animal welfare. Shelters in every community serve a diverse range of needs and have different challenges and opportunities. Socially Conscious Shelters tailor their policies and philosophies to the unique needs of their community in order to best support homeless pets.

Does the community allow trap-neuter-return programs? If so, seek to offer them. Will members of your community adopt animals with chronic disease, and are they willing to assume the time and expense of managing that disease? If so, with full disclosure, place them in these homes. Socially Conscious Shelters listen to their communities.

Getting curious with your community is the best way to understand their needs. Talk to your adopters, have candid conversations with stakeholders and send out surveys to your constituents to find out more. You can also learn a lot about your area by collaborating with other organizations to understand the trends they are experiencing. Once you determine the needs of the community, you can align your policies, procedures and programming. The community's needs are sometimes a moving target, so maintaining that curiosity and engagement with stakeholders is critical to meet their needs and measure the success of your programs.

- What other organizations are supporting the community? How can your services complement one another? Are there opportunities to collaborate to maximize your efforts?
- Proactively communicate your policies and philosophies to your community.
- Assess the medical and behavioral capacity of the community. Which medical and behavioral concerns are adopters willing to support? How do you know this?
- When placing animals for adoption, fully disclose their medical and behavioral concerns, so the adopter is aware of the animal's needs.

- Report back to your community about the work you are doing to support their needs. Ask those you work with if your work is still relevant and timely. Make sure you update policies and procedures as the community changes.

6. Enhance the human-animal bond through thoughtful placements and post-adoption support.

Integrating a new pet into a home can be difficult. As adoption agencies, Socially Conscious Shelters have a responsibility to support the adopting family, which, at a minimum, means the shelter will accept the animal back without shaming the adopter. Other ways organizations can provide post-adoption support include behavior advice, classes for new pet caregivers and addressing shelter-related medical needs. It also means not placing animals into homes that disrupt the human-animal bond by injuring children, other pets and people. Many behavior issues can be addressed through behavior modification and positive experiences. Other behaviors are dangerous and cannot be mitigated.

How can you make the adoption process collaborative with the community?

- How are you matching the needs of the adopter with the needs of the animal?
- When placing healthy and safe animals, how can the adoption process be customer service-focused to ensure a quality experience for the patron and the animal?
- Is there a way to conduct the adoption process without judgment of the patrons? Consider developing an open adoption process, cultivating curiosity, trust and compassion with the community.
- Accept animals back without shaming post-adoption if the patron determines that the animal is not the right fit, even if there are medical and behavioral conditions that need to be treated.

How can you help the patrons and animals adjust to their new home?

- What post-adoption support resources are available in your community and through your organization? Services may include:
 - Post-adoption medical support
 - Post-adoption behavioral support using LIMA-based techniques
- Consider providing pet-retention services or collaborating with existing resources (e.g., human-services):
 - Pet retention programs
 - Humane education

7. Consider the health and wellbeing of animals for each community if transferring animals.

Shelters save lives when animals are transferred from a community that has limited resources and more healthy and safe animals than adopters, giving them the best chance to find a new home. However, bringing pets into a community is a responsibility. It is a responsibility to the animals not to bring in infectious diseases that would make them sick. It is a responsibility to those living within the community to bring animals that will live in harmony. And it is a responsibility to the community from which animals transferred to address that community's animal welfare struggles through humane education and spay and neuter programs.

- Consider developing relationships with other shelters and rescues to transfer animals to increase positive outcomes. When transferring animals between organizations, it is ideal to consider:
 - The additional resources the animal could benefit from at the receiving shelter to minimize disease risk.
 - The geographical distances between shelters when possible, keeping the distance limited.
 - The comfort and safety of the animal and the transporter during the relocation process.
 - The systemic impact on the source and receiving organization and community, including the associated economic impact.
 - The ability to prevent and disclose health risks for animals and people in the community that receive the transfer animals. How might the infectious disease risks impact your community, and how can you manage these risks?
 - The ability to provide the source shelter with collaborative, educational efforts to support best practices.
- Consider the current supply of healthy and adoptable pets in your community and if there are an adequate number of adopters for both the current population and the animals being transferred.

8. Implementing inclusive policies and practices

It is important that Socially Conscious Shelters adopt and implement policies and practices that include and are representative of the diverse voices in their communities. This includes prioritizing equity when making decisions about how best to support pets and their people. It involves humbly seeking and embracing diverse viewpoints, collaborating with a variety of community partners, and striving to embed equitable principles and practices throughout the organizations. When shelters have community programs that embrace and elevate different perspectives, ideas and beliefs, the outcome is that pets thrive. And communities thrive when opportunities and resources are shared in an equitable and inclusive manner.

Consider how your policies and practices promote inclusivity:

Internally at your organization:

- Does your leadership team understand diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as an integral component to your mission?
 - How can you support both board and leadership level thinking and planning about how systemic inequality impacts your organization's work?
 - Are inclusive policies integrated into your organization's strategic plan?
- Have you examined implicit bias in your organization's policies and practices?
- How can your organization challenge assumptions about leadership qualifications and create a more diverse and inclusive pipeline for leadership roles?
- Do your staff, board and volunteers reflect the diversity of your community? Do you practice inclusive recruiting practices?
 - Consider training your hiring team on equitable practices and including a salary range with all job postings.
- Are your inclusivity policies included in your onboarding process for new employees and volunteers?
- Does your team feel heard and included in the creation and implementation of your plans around inclusion?
- Consider regular check-ins to get feedback on your organization's efforts and track progress.

In the communities you serve:

- Do you have policies in place that create or perpetuate inequity in your interactions with community members? What are the opportunities to make changes in these areas and improve access?
 - Do you offer resources and services in the languages spoken in your community?
 - Does your team practice cultural competency when working with the public?
 - Does your customer service philosophy reflect values of respect, listening and nonjudgment?
- Are you aware of segments of your community that have historically been disconnected from your organization? What are ways you can work on reaching out to those community members?
 - Do you offer transportation options for those without access to reliable transportation?
 - Do you offer extended hours or non-traditional hours for those who are unable to come for services during traditional business hours or during the week?
- Are there opportunities to collaborate with other organizations to expand offerings and better meet the needs of your community?

9. Foster a culture of transparency, ethical decision making, mutual respect, continual learning, and collaboration.

Socially Conscious Shelters are committed to full transparency, including reporting accurate statistics, sharing policies, and fully and quickly admitting mistakes. Integrity must be the foundation of all decisions. Every shelter can learn something from every other shelter—it is important to be curious and share innovative solutions to common problems. Only by working together can we ensure the best outcomes for all animals. When discussing this tenet:

- What are your networking opportunities to stay connected with local organizations? Are there existing networks, or can you start the conversations?
- Consider freely disclosing information about your operations, statistics, philosophy, successes, and mistakes. How does integrity drive your decisions to support a Socially Conscious Animal Shelter and community? When unsure, call your colleagues and ask.
- How can you engage in interactions, recognizing that we are all working toward the same goal, creating best outcomes for all animals?
- How can you foster a culture of caring that extends to the people involved in animal welfare work and the people in your community?
- Who are the trusted voices in your community? How can you partner with them so they will advocate on your behalf?

Thank you for taking the time to learn more about Socially Conscious Sheltering. If you have additional questions, please visit scsheltering.org.