

# How are dogs, cats faring in California shelters?

Column: 'How can you spend all this taxpayer money, blinded?' sponsor says



A young puppy plays outside its cage as it's being cleaned at the Redlands Animal Shelter in Redlands on April 15, 2019 (File photo by Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

By **TERI SFORZA** | [tsforza@scng.com](mailto:tsforza@scng.com) | Orange County Register

PUBLISHED: March 12, 2023 at 7:30 a.m. | UPDATED: March 13, 2023 at 8:44 a.m.

Once upon a time, California collected numbers on how many dogs and cats wound up in animal shelters — and how many perished there.

In the most gruesome years, 6 of 10 shelter dogs were killed, and 8 of 10 shelter cats met the same fate, according to that data.

Bleak, bleak stuff. And, as the state never *required* this reporting, and there were no penalties for blowing it off, there were years when a quarter of California's counties didn't even bother.

So it makes sense that the state didn't have great confidence in the numbers. But rather than addressing the reporting issues, it simply stopped collecting and publishing the information.

This data desert has been a huge thorn in the side of [animal welfare folks who want hard numbers on what appears to be a growing problem of shelter crowding and euthanasia](#) — data that can be compared, apples to apples, across counties.

Enter now [Assembly Bill 332](#) from Assemblymember Alex Lee, D-San Jose, which would finally make data collection and reporting the law.







The Long Beach Animal Shelter is so overcapacity that staffers are keeping animals in their offices, and conference rooms. This room, meant for kittens, is now holding dogs, in Long Beach on Friday, February 3, 2023. (Photo by Brittany Murray, Press-Telegram/SCNG)

Dubbed the “Shelter Animal Collection Data Act,” it would piggyback onto rabies reporting mandates and require the Department of Public Health “to resume collecting important information about shelter animals so resources are better optimized to help pets find their furever homes,” Lee’s office says.

### **Apples, oranges, dollars, cents**

Now, to be fair, many shelters collect and report their own numbers on their own websites. And those numbers suggest that a great many more animals are exiting the shelters alive and kicking than back in the direst days — and kudos for this!

We thank the new laws banning puppy mill sales and pushing shelter pet adoptions, and the rescuers who take oodles of homeless lovies into their homes as fosters.

But ... are the 60-plus California shelters counting intakes and euthanasia the same way? Are they counting foster exits the same way? Can we compare Los Angeles County to Orange County to Riverside County to San Bernardino County with confidence?

We at the Southern California News Group have endeavored to do this. We get that squishy feeling in our bellies. We would dearly love standardized, centralized data.

This should be a no-brainer. It's a public purse issue involving hundreds of millions of public dollars, not to mention furry little lives.

To wit: Los Angeles County spends some \$62 million a year on animal control. The city of Los Angeles, \$27 million a year — and wants an additional \$15 million next year. Orange County spends some \$25 million, Riverside County, some \$28 million, San Bernardino County, \$9.9 million plus \$35 million to build and renovate shelters — and so on.

“How can you spend all this taxpayer money, blinded?” asked Judie Mancuso of Social Compassion in Legislation, which is sponsoring the bill.









OC Animal Care took custody of 46 cats and kittens hoarded in an apartment on March 7. It's asking for the community's help finding them forever families. The first 35 became available for adoption on Saturday, March 11. Most are young adults in good health, shy at first, but quick to warm up, officials said, with friendly, gentle personalities. "With patience and care, these cats will make wonderful lifelong friends." More info at <http://ocpetinfo.com>. (Photo courtesy OC Animal Care)

"There are games that are played in the data — the shelters don't want to look bad," she said. "They don't want to admit, yes, we are killing for space, so they classify them as 'aggressive' or 'sick.' If we didn't have the overpopulation problem, we'd be able to make most of those sick animals well. We could give training to address aggression problems."

A test for aggression is to stick a fake arm into a dog's kennel, she said. Of course, an animal that has been mistreated and/or wandering the streets is going to strike at it — "I'd strike at it, too!" Mancuso said. "They don't really give them a chance."

## **History**

The California Department of Public Health, which would get this data job if the bill passes, doesn't take positions on pending legislation. But spokesman Ronald Owens explained the history of the situation to us this way:

"As part of a statewide rabies control program, CDPH requires that dogs be vaccinated against rabies, and state regulations require local health officers to submit reports pertaining to rabies control activities to CDPH.

"CDPH has no authority over city and county animal shelters. Historically, some local jurisdictions voluntarily included animal shelter intake and outcome data with their rabies control activities reports to CDPH. CDPH collated and included these auxiliary data, when available, in its annual rabies control activities reports.

"However, shelter operations data on 'how many animals came into shelters, were adopted, returned to owners, or euthanized' are not relevant to statewide rabies control and would not affect the requirement for dogs to be vaccinated against rabies.

"CDPH stopped reporting data on shelter intake and outcome for several reasons. The data were incompletely reported and CDPH did not have the means to verify the

data. In addition, because the data were not related to the statewide rabies control program, CDPH determined that we should no longer collect, analyze or publish them.”

So, there you have it. The bill goes first to the business and professions committee, but likely won't get a hearing until next month. There's no opposition on file yet.

It's hard to fathom what the objections would be. And we'll note that [March 12-18 is Sunshine Week](#) — “an enduring initiative to promote open government.”

Standardized data on what happens in California's animal shelters will help everyone do better, Mancuso said. It should save lives, and money.