

Disposition of Animals (Basic)

This Chapter Covers:

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- ◆ Reclamation
- ◆ Adoption and Sterilization
- ◆ Euthanasia
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Introduction

After an animal is impounded, there are a number of ways that the animal can leave the shelter. The action that is taken to end an animal's impoundment (the final outcome) is called the disposition of the animal. A shelter's options for disposition of impounded animals depend on the animal's health, shelter policy, space and budget for housing animals, municipal or county ordinances, and state laws. Three of the most common outcomes of impoundment are:

- having the rightful owner reclaim the animal,
- adopting the animal to a new owner, or
- euthanatizing (also called euthanizing) the animal.

Reclamation

Animal reclamation (the animal is returned to its owner) benefits both you and the owner. The owner gets his or her pet returned, and you have one less animal to euthanatize or place for adoption. You need to make every effort to match the animal with the rightful owner when it is reclaimed.

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Methods for identifying the correct animal owner include:

- rabies vaccination tag,
- animal license tag,
- animal identification tag,
- microchip, and/or
- photograph or written description of the animal from the owner.

Scanning for microchips in animals at shelters or releasing agencies is required by state law. Some tips for effective scanning are:

- Scan the animal over its entire body several times as microchips can migrate or be difficult to find.
- If possible, use more than one kind of scanner because some scanners may not detect certain types of microchips.
- Locate and contact the owner if a microchip is found.

It is important to document the release of the animal in writing and collect any unpaid fees or fines **before** the owner takes the animal home. If it is not currently vaccinated, provisions must be made to assure the animal is vaccinated against rabies.

Adoption and Sterilization

Adoption places suitable animals with responsible owners. A good animal adoption policy can improve the public's view of the animal control agency. **Considerations for adoption policies include:**

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- Pre-adoption holding for observation is the period an animal is held before it is placed for adoption. This period allows time for incubating diseases to develop in the animal. This helps to ensure that only healthy pets are adopted. Make the pre-adoption period long enough to cover most disease incubation periods, but short enough to minimize disease exposure that can occur within a facility. A 5- to 8-day period usually works well.
- Animals placed for adoption must be healthy and have good temperaments. However, because the animal could become ill shortly after adoption, have prospective owners sign a “waiver of liability” in order to protect your agency.
- Animals should be sterilized according to Chapter 828, Dog and Cat Sterilization, Texas Health and Safety Code (for sterilization information, see Document 1 in chapter appendix).

Again, it is important to document the release of the animal in writing. If the new owner refuses to comply with any of the adoption terms, you have written proof that the adoption process can be ended.

Euthanasia

Euthanasia is defined as the act of inducing humane (rapid and painless) death. Some of the euthanasia methods recommended by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) include:

- injectable euthanasia solution,
- carbon monoxide (CO) chamber, and
- inhaled anesthetics.

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Injectable Euthanasia Solution:

- Sodium pentobarbital (a barbiturate) is commonly used by veterinarians for euthanating animals. A denatured form is available for animal control and humane society shelter personnel to use for euthanating animals.
- To prevent its abuse, denatured sodium pentobarbital contains a poison that will **kill humans**. The recommended use of combined products, like the denatured form of sodium pentobarbital, is interchangeable with those of a pure product. These products induce euthanasia rapidly, smoothly, and with minimal discomfort to the animal. However, this method requires individual handling of each animal, plus training and skill in administering injections.
- The intravenous (IV or into the vein) route is best. The intraperitoneal (IP or into the abdominal cavity) route requires a dosage 3 or 4 times the IV dose. The intra-organ routes, such as intraosseous (into bone), intracardiac (into the heart), intrahepatic (into the liver), intrasplenic (into the spleen), and intrarenal (into the kidney), inject sodium pentobarbital directly into the respective organ. Only use intra-organ routes **after** the animal has been anesthetized so it is unable to feel pain.
- One animal control officer (ACO) should hold the animal while another injects the solution. Pictured is a technique for restraining a dog for intravenous injection. Hold the animal's head with one arm (wrap your arm around the animal's neck and press it near your body). With your other hand, press the vein near the animal's elbow with either your index finger or thumb. Once the needle is inserted in the vein, release the vein so the solution can be injected.



From *Restraint of Animals*, by Leahy and Barrow

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- Denatured sodium pentobarbital is a controlled (scheduled) substance (drug). You must register with the federal Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to purchase this drug. More detailed Information about obtaining denatured sodium pentobarbital, plus storage and record requirements, can be found in the chapter on controlled substances in this manual.
- Standards for the administration of sodium pentobarbital can be found in the Texas Administrative Code, Sections 169.81 - 169.84 (rules for Chapter 821).
- Important to note: **sodium pentobarbital is the only legal way to euthanize dogs and cats in the custody of an animal shelter** (Texas Health and Safety Code, Chapter 821, Treatment and Disposition of Animals, Subchapter C).

Carbon Monoxide (CO) Chamber:

- Carbon monoxide is a good method when large numbers of animals must be euthanatized or when there is not enough manpower to properly restrain animals for IV injection. The use of CO to euthanize dogs and cats in the custody of an animal shelter is prohibited by Texas state law.
- **Commercially compressed CO is the only legal source of CO to use in CO chambers.**
- Carbon monoxide works by preventing red blood cells from carrying oxygen. The animal becomes unconscious (lacks awareness) when oxygen levels fall below normal.
- Carbon monoxide is a colorless and odorless gas that **can cause death in humans**. Keep a CO chamber outdoors or in a

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ventilated (good air flow) area with a CO alarm system. Maintain the equipment in perfect operational condition. Train shelter personnel on the proper operation of the CO chamber.

- Just prior to losing consciousness (awareness), animals may become agitated and sound distressed. However, it is thought that these animals are not in pain or distress when this occurs.
- In order for this method to be humane, the animal must have lungs capable of inhaling the right amount of CO. Therefore, this method must not be used on any animal thought to have decreased respiratory function, such as elderly, young, sick, injured, or pregnant animals.
- Standards for CO administration and chamber operation can be found in the Texas Administrative Code, Sections 169.81 - 169.84 (rules for Chapter 821).

Inhaled Anesthetics:

- Veterinarians use various anesthetic gases (usually through a machine) to anesthetize a patient before surgery. Examples of inhalant anesthetics (or agents) include halothane, enflurane, isoflurane, sevoflurane, methoxyflurane, and ether. **These gases are sometimes used to euthanize very small animals, such as rodents or bats.** In euthanasia, the animal is given an overdose of inhalant agent, but a machine is not used.
- Place the animal in a closed container, such as a jar, that has a gauze pad or cotton ball soaked with an inhalant agent in it. Make sure that there is enough oxygen in the container to prevent hypoxemia (low oxygen in the blood) and allow a humane death. For instance, a rat may need a larger container than that used for a mouse.

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- As with CO chambers, do not use this method to euthanize elderly, young, sick, injured, or pregnant animals.
- Only expose the animal to the vapor (gas) form of the inhalant agent because the liquid form can be irritating. Escaped gases can cause health problems in humans. Be sure to work in a ventilated area.
- Consult with a veterinarian about proper use of inhalant anesthetics.

Important factors for successful euthanasia include:

- Handle and restrain all animals in a humane way. Be patient with the animal. This minimizes the animal's fear and helps promote a gentle and quiet death.
- Choose the best method of euthanasia for each animal and for the staff performing this task.
- Use AVMA species-specific euthanasia methods, recommendations, and procedures when euthanizing an animal (other than a dog or cat) in the custody of an animal shelter. Only sodium pentobarbital can be used for dogs and cats.
- Always check the animal's vital signs (heartbeat and reflexes) to make sure that it is dead before you dispose of the body. Make sure it does **not** have a heartbeat (hold your hand against the chest wall to feel for a heartbeat). Touch the cornea (transparent front portion) of its eye to make sure it does **not** have a blink reflex. You can also check for reflexes by pinching a toe or the skin between the toes. After an animal has died, its body will eventually undergo rigor mortis (become stiff).

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- Remember that euthanasia is a necessary and important function in animal control.
- Have two people available to conduct IV euthanasia unless the animal is already sedated.

If you need more guidance or information about euthanasia, ask a local veterinarian or the veterinarian in your Regional Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Zoonosis Control office. Additionally, a person (except for a veterinarian licensed to practice in Texas) may not euthanize an animal in the custody of an animal shelter unless he/she has successfully completed a training course in the proper methods and techniques for euthanizing animals not later than three years before the date that he/she is euthanizing the animal (refer to Texas Health and Safety Code, Section 821.055, for details on this training requirement).

If you perform euthanasia as an ACO, it may cause you to experience severe stress, anxiety, and feelings of guilt. Listed below are some tips to help you deal with these feelings:

- Conduct active adoption and responsible owner education programs.
- Try to understand that it is better to euthanize animals than to allow them to roam.
- Remember that euthanasia reduces the population of unwanted pets.
- Understand that you are not responsible for the death of these animals. You are responding to a public that allows random pet breeding and irresponsible pet ownership.

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Selling Animals to a Research Facility

Some shelters feel that it is better for the animal to serve a purpose in research than to be euthanized. However, some members of the public believe animal research is cruel and unnecessary, so they may be critical of a shelter that sells animals to a research facility. A decision to sell animals for research purposes should be made by an agency only after thoughtful discussions with city or county officials or the shelter's advisory committee or Board of Directors.

Carcass Disposal

Never allow the public the chance to observe an animal control vehicle with visible animal carcasses (dead bodies) in it. Place the carcasses in dark plastic bags before transport. Methods used to dispose of carcasses can include:

- **incinerating (burning):** incinerators are expensive to purchase and require a permit from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (<https://www.tceq.texas.gov/>). However, they provide an effective method of carcass disposal.
- **using a landfill:** special arrangements must be made with the landfill operator before you can use the landfill area for carcass disposal.

It may be necessary to freeze or refrigerate carcasses until they can be incinerated or taken to a landfill so they do not decompose (decay) prior to their disposal.

Reference:

American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). *AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals: 2020 Edition*: <https://www.avma.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/2020-Euthanasia-Final-1-17-20.pdf>

Leahy, John R., and Barrow, Pat. *Restraint of Animals*, 2nd ed. New York: Cornell Campus Store, Inc., 1953.

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Chapter Appendix

Document 1 – Important - Sterilization of Your Dog or Cat

Sterilization information sheet prepared by the Texas Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners (TBVME) under Texas Health and Safety Code, Section 828.0035 and can be accessed at <https://www.veterinary.texas.gov/forms.php>

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IMPORTANT - STERILIZATION OF YOUR DOG OR CAT

If your adopted dog or cat is not already sterilized, Texas law requires you to have it sterilized. You should have this done no later than the date specified in your Adoption Contract.

WHAT IS STERILIZATION?

"**Sterilization**" is the surgical removal of the reproductive organs of a dog or cat or the use of nonsurgical methods and technologies approved by the U.S. F.D.A. or the U.S. Department of Agriculture to permanently render the animal unable to reproduce. Following sterilization, the female dog or cat will not be able to have puppies or kittens, and the male dog or cat will not be able to make a female dog or cat pregnant.

WHAT METHODS OF STERILIZATION ARE AVAILABLE CURRENTLY?

Surgical Sterilization - spaying and neutering: the removal of the reproductive organs (ovaries and uterus of the female; testicles of the male)

Chemical Sterilization - the use of chemical compounds which, when injected, will sterilize the animal (currently available only for male dogs)

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF EACH METHOD?

Advantages of Surgical Sterilization:

- previously was the only approved method and is widely used by veterinarians
- considered safe in most cases
- may reduce hormone-related diseases such as testicular cancer or prostate disease
- may decrease unwanted secondary behavior characteristics such as roaming, marking or aggression

Disadvantages of Surgical Sterilization:

- involves risk of complications from anesthesia and surgery
- longer recovery times and the need for post-operative care and observation
- side effects, such as vomiting, loss of appetite, lethargy, and diarrhea, are possible

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Advantages of Chemical Sterilization:

- relatively painless (usually used with sedation) and quick procedure
- eliminates risk of complications from anesthesia and surgery
- need for post-procedure care and observation is minimal
- considered safe in most cases

Disadvantages of Chemical Sterilization:

- may not reduce hormone-related diseases such as testicular cancer or prostate disease to the same extent that surgical sterilization may do so
- allows for some continued testosterone production that may not decrease unwanted characteristics such as roaming, marking, or aggression and fighting to the same extent that surgical sterilization may do so
- side effects, such as vomiting, loss of appetite, lethargy, and diarrhea, are possible

REMEMBER - Only a licensed veterinarian can legally sterilize your adopted dog or cat. We provide this information paper to assist you in discussing with your veterinarian which sterilization method is better for your pet. We wish you and your pet many happy years together!