



Research to **protect, treat & cure** animals.
100% of donations fund animal health.

Canine Behavior

Investigator: Dr. Janet Scarlett

Cornell University

Status: Year 2 of 2

Dr. Scarlett is studying shelter enrichment programs to determine how effective they are in improving adoption. She is a professor of epidemiology and director of the Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program at Cornell University. She also serves as a member of the board of directors of the Tompkins County SPCA. She received her DVM at Michigan State University, and her MPH and Ph.D. (epidemiology) from the University of Minnesota.

How does inappropriate behavior lead to abandonment/relinquishment of pets to shelters?

Dr. Scarlett: While the estimates vary of exactly what proportion of animals is relinquished to shelters for behavioral issues, all studies agree that behaviors that people find unacceptable are a leading cause of relinquishment of both dogs and cats. In one large national study of 12 shelters in four regions of the country, 40 percent of owners relinquishing dogs and 29 percent of owners relinquishing cats cited a behavioral problem as at least one reason they were surrendering their pet.

Are there any estimates as to how many healthy pets are euthanized in shelters due to limited space?

Dr. Scarlett: Limited space is a major reason for euthanasia in open-admission shelters (i.e., those not restricting the numbers of animals admitted to their facilities). Getting accurate estimates of those euthanized for space is complicated by the fact that many shelters, lacking space for all of the animals presented to them, often list even a minor illness or a minor behavioral issue as the reason for euthanasia, when if they had the space, these animals would be treated.

Could these pets have been saved had something been done to improve their behavior and make them more desirable to potential pet owners?

Dr. Scarlett: Yes. Many of the pets being relinquished because of "behavioral problems" to shelters are, in fact, just displaying behaviors normal for their species. Hyperactivity, chewing and digging holes are

normal behaviors for dogs. Too many dogs displaying these behaviors are bored, lack physical exercise, or haven't been taught how to behave in the company of humans. For example, they jump up on visitors or children, or they drag their reluctant owners down the street. Many of these "problems" can be addressed with obedience training and provisions for adequate exercise.

Why have shelters begun behavior enrichment programs?

Dr. Scarlett: Most shelters have enrichment programs to keep dogs (and to a lesser extent cats) from developing behavioral problems as a consequence of their residence in the shelter. Traditional dog runs, for example, are noisy, frustrating places from a dog's point of view. Dogs become bored (with little to do but stand in a run) and frustrated by fencing that enables them to see other dogs, but doesn't allow them contact with others of their species. Housetraining can regress, separation anxiety can develop, and some dogs begin to exhibit stereotypic behaviors such as circling or other abnormal repetitive behaviors. The other reason that some shelters develop behavioral intervention programs (such as obedience training) is to make dogs more adoptable by teaching them to be mannerly.

What do you hope to learn from your study?

Dr. Scarlett: This study is designed to evaluate the benefits for dogs of various enrichment approaches on reducing stress, enhancing adoptability, shortening shelter residence and improving behavior and retention in homes following adoption. These enrichment approaches include daily walking, offering food-filled toys, providing focused human contact and obedience training.

Understanding the relative effectiveness of various enrichment strategies is essential to providing optimum care for dogs in shelters, minimizing behavior problems that may lead to failed adoptions, and utilizing shelter resources wisely. We hope that this information will help shelters improve the welfare of dogs in their care, enhance adoptions and minimize behavioral problems after adoption.