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Financial Sustainability in Animal Shelters: Insights from Public Records, Interviews, and Existing Research

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ABSTRACT

Animal shelters are organizations that take care of stray, abandoned, or surrendered animals, primarily cats and dogs, through temporary housing, medical treatment, and the facilitation of their adoption. These organizations serve to benefit both the animals and members of the local community by caring for animals that have nowhere else to go. In addition, they help to prevent the spread of disease and other community problems caused by stray animals. Despite these benefits, shelters often face instability and risk being shut down. This paper asks: What strategies help animal shelters remain financially sustainable while improving animal welfare outcomes? Answering this question is important because shelters provide essential services to both animals and communities, yet many struggle to stay financially sustainable while maintaining strong welfare outcomes. This study utilized a mixed-methods approach that combined a focused literature review, analysis of publicly available shelter data and financial documents from the Dallas-Fort Worth region, and interviews with representatives from both a municipal shelter and a nonprofit shelter. These methods were specifically chosen in order to compare existing research with real operational and financial patterns as well as on-the-job professional insights. At the conclusion of this study, it was clear that animal shelter sustainability must include not only funding but also positive animal outcomes, such as reducing euthanasia, increasing live-release rates, and maintaining humane care standards. It was evident that this is best achieved through the combination of several factors including stabilized and diversified funding, active length-of-stay (LOS) management, foster and volunteer capacity, and adoption practices suited to the shelter's intake structure.

INTRODUCTION

To begin, the animal welfare ecosystem has multiple different types of organizations, of which animal shelters are only one type. Other than animal shelters, there are animal rescues and non-sheltering service providers (Shelter Animals Count, 2024). Animal rescues house animals only in the homes of volunteers, and don't have a sheltering facility to house the animals. Non-sheltering service providers don't provide any kind of sheltering services and instead focus on other services such as medical treatment or grooming for owned pets. The types of organizations explained here are often not the only types of animal welfare

organizations that exist in communities, but they are the most similar to animal shelters. In this paper, the focus is primarily on animal shelters that have ongoing intake, provide housing facilities, and offer adoption services.

Animal shelters themselves usually are of 2 types: Government and nonprofit. Government animal shelters are city-or county-operated, and are usually open intake. Open intake refers to admitting every animal in need. Due to the open-intake policy, government shelters are more prone to facing a scarcity of resources and overcrowding. Nonprofits are unaffiliated with government organizations and operate independently, and therefore have more control over the animals they choose to accept and other policies, such as no-kill and limited intake. There are some types of nonprofits that have contracts with government entities for certain animal welfare services, as well (Shelter Animals Count, 2024). The scope of this paper includes both types of animal shelters, excluding other types of animal welfare organizations such as animal rescues or non-sheltering service providers.

The services that are provided by these animal shelters are extremely beneficial to the community. They help control the populations of stray animals, prevent the spread of disease, reunite lost pets with their owners, give homes to animals that have nowhere else to go, and provide opportunities for adoption of these animals, improving the lives of both animals and their human owners. Additionally, many shelters also offer other public services like low-cost vaccinations, spay/neuter programs, and educational initiatives for the local community.

However, the funding landscape for animal shelters is often unstable. Municipal shelters rely primarily on taxpayer funding provided by the backing city, while nonprofit shelters must build multiple revenue streams, including individual donors, foundation grants, government contracts, and service fees, in order to sustain themselves. The existing research shows that shelters with diversified revenue portfolios are more financially resilient (Carroll & Stater, 2009). As a strategy of revenue diversification, some shelters also pursue social enterprise models, such as operating retail stores or training services to generate additional revenue that supports operational needs (Thomsen et al., 2021).

These operational demands in animal shelters are extensive. Daily routines include intake processing, veterinary care, housing and sanitation, enrichment, behavior assessment, adoption counseling, and public engagement through events and community outreach (ASPCA, n.d.-b). Shelters also face seasonal surges and resource constraints that can strain staff and facilities, further adding to the operational demands.

Despite their essential services, many shelters close each year due to financial instability, veterinary shortages, or unsustainable intake levels (Bissell Pet Foundation, 2025). These closures cause more chaos, where animals are displaced and pressure increases on neighboring shelters. Little empirical research exists on what separates stable shelters from those at risk of collapse.

The existing research has identified several factors having to do with shelter sustainability and animal outcomes. First, Carroll and Stater (2009) found that revenue diversification in nonprofits was associated

with lower fluctuations in revenue, therefore stabilizing income. Relating specifically to animal shelters, Thomsen et al. (2021) identified professionalized management, social-enterprise activities, and more efficient daily operations to be factors that can ultimately lead to improved animal outcomes. Additionally, Reese (2021) used a survey of 370 U.S. shelters and rescues to identify that robust foster programs, adoption matching, and avoiding breed labels for non-purebred dogs were all factors associated with higher live-release rates and lower return rates. Furthermore, Gunter et al. (2023) used data from 51 shelters and found that brief outings and temporary foster stays were associated with greater adoption likelihood.

All of these studies can be used to show that financial structure and operational choices matter to shelters. However, they examine different parts of shelter performance rather than providing one model of long-term sustainability. For example, Carroll and Stater studied nonprofits in general, rather than animal shelters. Thomsen et al. compared only two large shelters in their study. Reese and Gunter focused mainly on animal outcomes rather than long-term finances. This study adds a local perspective and consolidates relevant factors by examining financial records, operating outcomes, and shelter staff perspectives together across DFW shelters.

Accordingly, this study asks: What strategies help animal shelters remain financially sustainable while improving animal welfare outcomes? To address this question, this study conducted a focused literature review, analyzed public records and documents from municipal and nonprofit shelters across the Dallas–Fort Worth metroplex, and interviewed shelter staff. These conversations explored day-to-day challenges, trade-offs, and the direct insights of people directly involved in the work.

At a glance, findings from the literature, interviews, and publicly available shelter data together suggest that the financial sustainability of animal shelters is shaped by a combination of structural and operational factors rather than a single golden strategy. While the funding model matters greatly, the evidence also suggests that how effectively this money is managed also affects sustainability. Shelters that combined financial support with deliberate operational strategies that reduced pressure on the shelter while improving animal placement tended to have stronger outcomes.

This paper is divided into four sections. First, the methodology section explains how the research was conducted through a focused literature review, analysis of public shelter data and documents, and interviews with representatives from two local shelters: one municipal and one nonprofit. Next, the interviews section presents each interview separately and in more detail in order to show how each shelter interviewed describes sustainability from their own structural perspectives. The findings/observations section then synthesizes the major themes and insights that emerged across the literature, interviews, and data analysis. Lastly, the recommendation section identifies practical strategies that shelters can use to strengthen both financial sustainability and animal outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a mixed-methods research approach with the intent of examining how animal shelters can remain financially sustainable while still improving animal outcomes. The goal is to understand what strategies actually work in practice for animal shelters instead of just comparing their numerical performances. In order to do this, the study combines three forms of evidence: a focused review of related existing literature, analysis of publicly available shelter documents and data in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex area, and interviews with shelter representatives in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex area.

First, a focused literature review of existing research related to the financial sustainability of animal shelters was conducted, which included topics such as nonprofit finance, shelter pricing strategies, animal shelter operations, and animal outcomes. The review mostly helped in the understanding of which factors are widely regarded as the most significant in the context of animal sustainability. These factors included revenue diversification, adoption pricing, volunteer reliance, foster programming, and fundraising efforts. Ultimately, the literature review served as an initial guide for interpreting future findings from local publicly available data and from interviews.

Next, publicly available documents and data from shelters in the Dallas-Fort Worth Area were analyzed, including those of both municipal and nonprofit shelters. These included municipal annual reports and statistical dashboards, along with nonprofit annual reports, IRS Form 990 filings, audited financial statements, and public-facing impact reports. Specifically, the municipal shelters reviewed were Dallas Animal Services, Fort Worth Animal Care & Control, and Arlington Animal Services. The nonprofit shelters reviewed were the SPCA of Texas, Operation Kindness, and the Humane Society of North Texas. From these sources, data were collected on metrics including intake (the number of animals entering shelter custody), live-release rate (the percentage of animals leaving the shelter alive), adoption volume, foster use, volunteer contribution, revenue, expenses, and revenue sources. This data was used to compare shelters across several measurements related to financial sustainability and animal outcomes. They also helped to identify broader patterns, such as the differences between municipal and nonprofit funding models, and the role of fostering and transfers in improving outcomes. Using these public documents also helped to ground the study in concrete numbers and evidence rather than interview perspectives alone.

Lastly, interviews were conducted with shelter representatives to gather insights that may not appear in online data. The interview format was intentionally semi-structured, with all questions asked being open-ended, and the respondent was encouraged not to limit their answers to each question. Questions focused on topics including shelter finances, community/volunteer support, challenges to sustainability, and any unique insight or recommendations to struggling shelters. Two shelter representatives were interviewed, one from a municipal shelter, Dallas Animal Services, and the other from a nonprofit, SPCA of Texas. The representative interviewed from Dallas Animal Services was the Assistant General Manager of Shelter Operations, Erika Bennett. The representative of the SPCA of Texas was the Vice President of Development, Justin Banta.

Each source had its own role in the analysis. First, public records were used to identify patterns in revenue, intake, live-release rates, foster use, volunteer hours, euthanasia, and animal transfers. The interviews helped explain shelter decisions and constraints that the records could not show, including approaches to funding, length of stay, adoption fees, fostering, and volunteer support. Lastly, Existing studies were used to compare these Dallas-Fort Worth specific findings with results already reported in existing research. In the Results section, the sources are brought together when there are recurring themes across sources.

This research has several limitations. Firstly, it focuses primarily on the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, so findings may not equally apply to shelters in other regions. Additionally, not all shelters publish the same level of financial information, with many public shelters providing limited financial data as compared to nonprofits. This can make exact comparisons difficult. Furthermore, only two shelter representatives were interviewed. This means that their perspectives provide detailed examples rather than representing all municipal or nonprofit shelters as a whole. The findings should be treated as patterns from the shelters studied, not as proof that the same strategies will produce the same results in every shelter. The goal is therefore to identify practical strategies in addition to these patterns that can help explain why some shelters are more sustainable than others.

INTERVIEWS

The purpose of the interviews was to gather insights that could not be gathered from annual reports, dashboards, or financial statements alone. They were meant to provide a more in-depth and direct view of how shelters think about sustainability, how they make trade-offs, and which strategies they believe matter most and are most practical when actually put into practice.

The two interviews were selected to provide perspectives from each of the two types of animal shelters discussed, ensuring both types are covered. One interview was conducted with Erika Bennett, Assistant General Manager of Shelter Operations at Dallas Animal Services, a municipal shelter. The other was conducted with Justin Banta, Vice President of Development at the SPCA of Texas, a private nonprofit shelter. Because these organizations are so different in terms of funding structures, constraints, and unique outcome goals, interviewing both allowed for the capture of contrasting perspectives on the same broader question of how shelters can remain financially sustainable while still improving animal outcomes. The interviews were open-ended, with questions focused on shelter finances, community/volunteer support, challenges to sustainability, and any unique insight or recommendations to struggling shelters.

Dallas Animal Services

The interview with Dallas Animal Services was useful for understanding the perspective of a large municipal shelter dealing with high-intake volume and public-service obligations, factors that may not apply to nonprofits. Additionally, DAS is an open-intake municipal shelter, which means that many of its

perspectives on operations are shaped by the pressure of having to accept a wider range of animals that would also be harder to place.

A major theme in this conversation was that Dallas Animal Services does not view itself as an organization that needs to fund itself through fees, often having extremely low or even zero adoption fees. Bennett says, "We're seen as a public service. We're not looking to recoup our budget." As a municipal shelter, DAS is publicly funded and does not depend on adoption or licensing fees to support its survival, which gives it a level of stability that many nonprofits would not have. However, Bennett also made it clear that city funding alone is not enough to cover all shelter needs, as she mentioned that they rely heavily on an affiliated nonprofit support group that raises more than $1M annually to cover expenses such as medical costs, supplies, and emergencies that the city budget alone cannot handle as quickly or flexibly. However, this also suggests that city funding alone may not be enough in practice, since even a publicly funded shelter still depends on outside nonprofit support.

A second major theme in this interview was the importance of the length of stay metric in day-to-day operational decisions. Length of stay refers to the amount of time an animal is in the shelter (Best Friends Animal Society, n.d.-a). Bennett directly stated that "The shorter the animal stays, the lower the cost per animal," incentivizing the shelter to make decisions focused on reducing this time. This idea shapes the shelter's emphasis on foster programs, intake diversion, and reducing unnecessary barriers to adoption. According to Bennett, Dallas Animal Services was caring for approximately 1,500 animals in foster compared to around 600 housed on-site, showing how heavily it relies on fostering to lower length of stay, also lowering crowding and cost as a result. When it comes to barriers to adoption, Bennett references the little to no adoption fees. She notes that strict adoption fees/rules can backfire if they keep animals in the shelter longer. This likely reflects the shelter's open-intake structure, which creates a constant pressure on the shelter to move animals efficiently. In such a situation, even relatively small barriers may have a larger impact than they would in a more selective shelter.

Additionally, this interview highlighted the importance of volunteers in the municipal shelter, estimating that they save DAS about $300,000 per quarter in labor costs. The volunteers engage in cleaning, helping out with social media, photography, adoption promotion, and animal handling, which saves the shelter team time and money.

Overall, the interview illustrates DAS as a shelter model centred on public funding, low-barrier placement, heavy foster program reliance, and operational efficiency under the pressures of being an open-intake municipal shelter.

SPCA of Texas

The SPCA of Texas interview presented a comparatively different perspective, centered on private philanthropy, donors, and organizational flexibility. At the same time, it is important to note that this perspective comes from a large, well-established nonprofit with a strong donor base and significant

community visibility. This means that some of its strategies may be easier for such an organization than for a smaller shelter.

Justin Banta stated that the SPCA receives no government funding at all, and added, "We're 100% supported by philanthropy." The organization relies on a wide range of fundraising channels, including individual donors, major gifts, corporate giving foundations, planned giving, fundraising events, and peer-to-peer fundraising. According to Banta, the shelter received 17 gifts over $200,000, totaling approximately $15 million. Nevertheless, he emphasized that small donors remained essential, noting that the SPCA has about 20,000 donors giving under $1,500 annually, and they also contribute volunteer time, fostering, adoption, and community advocacy. This high number of donors suggests that the shelter already has an established broad base of public trust and engagement that may be difficult for newer or smaller shelters to replicate.

Banta also described that private funding allows the shelter to have organizational flexibility as compared to public funding. In his view, government money often comes with restrictions and limitations that wouldn't quite align with the goals of the SPCA. He used a metaphor to describe this difference: government funding asks for a plain hamburger, while the SPCA wants to provide a "deluxe hamburger" with a higher standard of care. In fact, according to Banta, the shelter had even rejected a government contract in the past because "our standard was higher than what the government was asking for," framing the decision as a matter of autonomy and values over just funding. However, this preference for private funding may also reflect SPCA's strong and well-established donor structure. For shelters that don't yet have such an extensive fundraising capacity, rejecting public funding may not be a practical option.

Like DAS, this interview also emphasized the significance of length of stay, but in a somewhat different way. Banta stated that the SPCA's average LOS is about 30 days, and claimed that shelters are not to be long-term environments: "A shelter is not… the best environment for anybody." To address this, Banta described an appointed 11-person behavior team whose role is to protect the animals' mental well-being and maintain their adoptability. This suggests that the SPCA views LOS reduction not only as a matter of moving animals out faster, but also as a matter of preserving animal mental health while they remain in care.

The interview also revealed the adoption strategy of the SPCA of Texas, which significantly varied from that of DAS. Banta explained that their team is constantly evaluating details such as pet photos, names, descriptions, website presentation, customer service, and the general adoption experience to maximize adoption rates. Additionally, he mentioned that the shelter brings in about $2 million annually from adoption and clinic-related fees, but that these fees are not critical to shelter survival. The SPCA uses variable pricing based on animal age and adoptability, and waives fees when needed. At the same time, Banta noted that once the fee is in the $50–$100 range, it usually is not the main barrier to adoption, and at that point, most adopters would have already accepted that pet ownership would involve ongoing costs. This creates a slight contradiction within the interview, wherein, despite mentioning that the importance of fees beyond a certain point doesn't matter, Banta still states that the shelter actively uses variable

pricing for each dog. This suggests that pricing is still seen as meaningful to an extent, even if it's not the main barrier once fees fall within a moderate range. In other words, Banta's words imply a trade-off between revenue generation and using price as a tool to improve placement outcomes. This difference may also reflect SPCA's greater control over intake compared with an open-intake municipal shelter like DAS, which makes direct comparisons between their pricing experiences difficult.

Finally, the SPCA interview emphasized the importance of volunteers, consistent with DAS. Banta reported that the organization had logged almost 45,000 volunteer hours in the previous year, which he estimated was worth roughly $1.5 million in labor value. Volunteers assist with walking dogs, cleaning, enrichment, fostering, surgery support, and advocacy.

RESULTS: FINDINGS & OBSERVATIONS

Ultimately, three broad patterns emerged across the literature, publicly available shelter data, and interviews. Shelter sustainability is shaped by:

1. Structural factors: funding models, intake types
2. Operational choices: length of stay management, adoption pricing strategies, foster programs
3. Organizational capacity: volunteer infrastructure, regional partnerships, established community trust

Together, they illustrate that the financial sustainability of these shelters is not just a matter of funding alone, but it is shaped by how a shelter's financial structure, daily operations, and surrounding support systems interact. This helps explain why shelters with very similar goals can still function very differently in practice, and why sustainability appears to depend more on overall fit between these factors rather than on any single strategy by itself.

Funding structure shapes what kind of sustainability is possible.

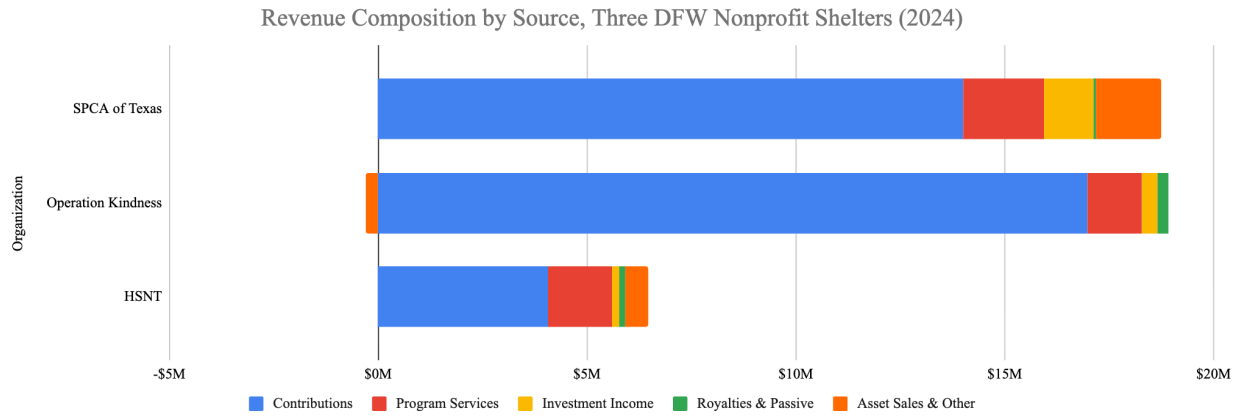


Fig. 1: Different Revenue Sources for Nonprofit Shelters. Data courtesy of SPCA of Texas (2025b), Humane Society of North Texas (2026), and Operation Kindness (2025d).

Shelters in the DFW region operate under very different financial structures, often depending on whether they are a nonprofit or municipal shelter. These differences shape what kind of sustainability is possible because they face different types of risks and constraints. As a municipal shelter, Dallas Animal Services is publicly funded and does not rely on adoption fees for its survival. In the interview, Erika Bennett described DAS as a public service, stating that the shelter is "not looking to recoup our budget." However, at the same time, she also mentioned that city funding alone is not sufficient since DAS relies on an affiliated nonprofit support group that raises more than $1 million annually to cover medical costs, foster support, supplies, and other urgent expenses. This suggests that although public funding provides stability, it may not come with the full flexibility that leads to reliance on other forms of funding.

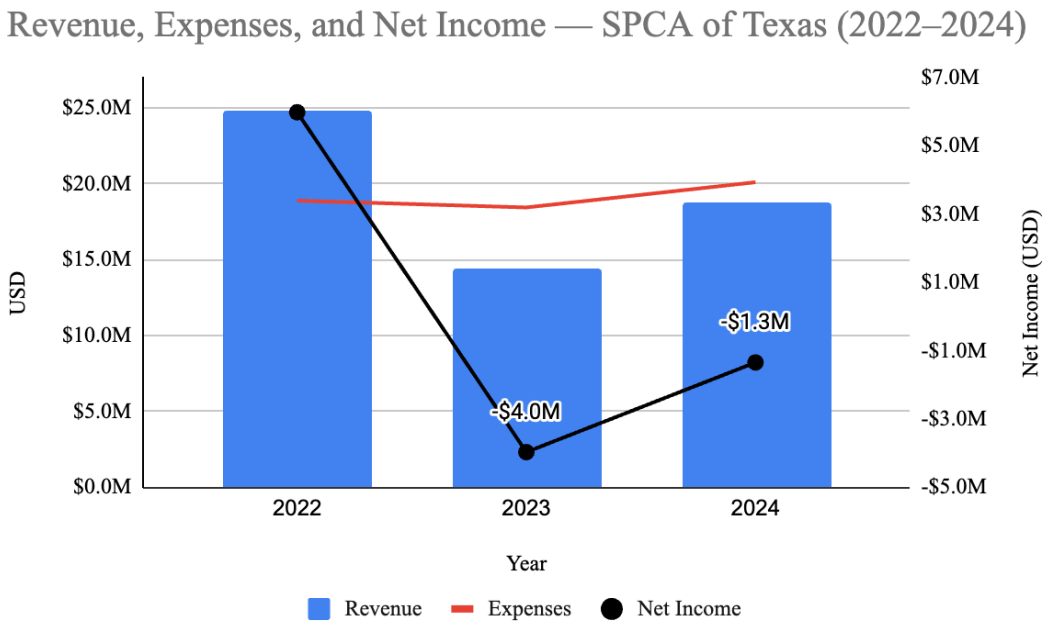


Fig. 2: Revenue, Expenses, and Net Income of SPCA of Texas (2022–2024). Data courtesy of SPCA of Texas (2023, 2025b).

The nonprofits, on the other hand, show a different pattern. SPCA of Texas reported $18.7 million in revenue in 2024, but also $20.1 million in expenses, producing a -$1.35 million net income for the year (SPCA of Texas, 2025b). Figure 2 places this result in context, showing SPCA's shift from a surplus in 2022 to deficits in 2023 and 2024. Similarly, HSNT reported $6.48 million in revenue and $8.59 million in expenses in 2024, resulting in a -$2.11 million net income (Humane Society of North Texas, 2026). By contrast, Operation Kindness reported a positive net income in all three years shown, including +$3.03 million in FY2024 (Operation Kindness, 2024b, 2025d). These numbers show that even large and

seemingly successful nonprofit shelters are not automatically financially stable just because they generate relatively higher amounts of revenue.

Figure 1 compares the revenue sources of the three nonprofit shelters, showing that contributions make up the largest share for each organization. In 2024, SPCA of Texas received $14 million in contributions but only $1.95 million in program service revenue (SPCA of Texas, 2025b). Operation Kindness received $16.97 million in contributions and $1.31 million in program services (Operation Kindness, 2025d). HSNT received $4.07 million in contributions and $1.52 million in program services (Humane Society of North Texas, 2026). In other words, donations and philanthropy are significant to these nonprofit shelters, while adoption and other service-related fees are secondary. This pattern is also supported by nonprofit finance literature. For example, Carroll and Stater's study of a large sample of U.S. nonprofits found that organizations with more diversified revenue streams were generally more financially stable and less vulnerable to shocks, making their findings especially useful here because they are based on broad empirical evidence rather than a single case (Carroll & Stater, 2009). At the same time, the interview with Justin Banta at SPCA of Texas suggested that private funding also gives shelters more autonomy over public contracts and funding.

Intake structure strongly influences outcomes.

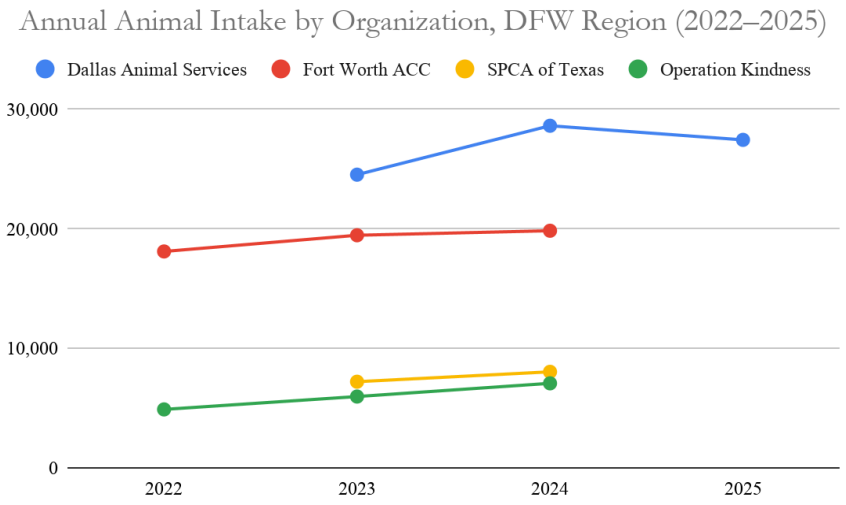


Fig. 3: Annual Animal Intake Across Selected DFW Shelters. Data courtesy of City of Dallas (2026), City of Fort Worth (2023), Lenzen (2025), SPCA of Texas (2025a), and Operation Kindness (2024a, 2025a). Fort Worth's FY2024 intake is approximate, based on the percentage change reported by Lenzen (2025).

Intake structure matters a lot when trying to understand shelter outcomes for animals. As shown in Figure 3, the municipal shelters examined reported substantially higher annual intake volumes than the nonprofit

shelters. DAS reported 24,538 animals in FY2022–23, 28,633 in FY2023–24, and 27,451 in FY2024–25 (City of Dallas, 2026). Fort Worth Animal Care & Control reported 18,111 animals in FY2022 and 19,467 in FY2023 (City of Fort Worth, 2023). By contrast, SPCA of Texas reported 7,209 animals entering care in 2023 and 8,037 in 2024, while Operation Kindness reported intake of 4,890 in 2022, 5,967 in 2023, and 7,074 in 2024 (Operation Kindness, 2024a, 2025a; SPCA of Texas, 2025a). These figures suggest that municipal shelters are operating under much greater intake pressure, which may affect their live release, euthanasia, and pricing strategies.

Organization	Type	2023 LRR	2024 LRR
HSNT	Private nonprofit	97.00%	95.00%
SPCA of Texas	Private nonprofit	-	93.30%
No-kill threshold	—	90.00%	90.00%
DAS — Dogs	Municipal	76.00%	85.00%
Fort Worth ACC	Municipal	77.20%	79.80%
DAS — Cats	Municipal	77.00%	75.00%

Fig. 4: Live Release Rates Across Selected DFW Shelters (2023–2024). Data courtesy of Humane Society of North Texas (n.d.-a, n.d.-b), SPCA of Texas (n.d.-b), City of Dallas (2026), and City of Fort Worth (2023, 2025). The 90% benchmark is from Best Friends Animal Society (n.d.-b). Dallas and Fort Worth figures use fiscal years. "-" indicates that a year-specific figure was not available in the cited source.

Figure 4 compares the shelters' reported live-release rates alongside the 90% no-kill benchmark. In FY2024, DAS reported dog and cat live release rates of 85% and 75%, respectively (City of Dallas, 2026). Fort Worth reported a total live release rate of 77.23% in FY2023, rising only to 79.77% in FY2024 (City of Fort Worth, 2023, 2025). By contrast, SPCA of Texas self-reported 93.3% in 2024, and HSNT reported 95% in 2024 (SPCA of Texas, n.d.-b; Humane Society of North Texas, n.d.-b). These differences could make the nonprofits appear to be more effective at first glance, but the data suggest that they may also reflect the different intake models. DAS and most other municipal shelters generally operate under open-intake obligations, whereas SPCA and other nonprofits have greater control over intake (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [ASPCA], n.d.-b; Reese, 2021). Differences in live-release rates may therefore reflect differences in intake structure and populations served rather than just organizational effectiveness.

Length of stay appears to be one of the clearest links between cost and animal outcomes.

Length of stay (LOS) appears to be one of the most important operational metrics connecting both finances and animal welfare. It was one of the strongest themes in both interviews, with Bennett from Dallas Animal Services stating directly that "the shorter the animal stays, the lower the cost per animal," and Banta describing shelters as places that are "not… the best environment for anybody" over the long term. In both cases, longer stays were illustrated as not only financial burdens on the shelters but also risks to animal well-being and adoptability.

The interview evidence shows that each shelter tries to reduce LOS in its own way. DAS focuses on foster placement, intake diversion, and reducing barriers to adoption and reclaim. Bennett estimated that the shelter was caring for about 1,500 animals in foster, compared to roughly 600 housed on-site, illustrating how heavily DAS relies on moving animals out of the building to control both cost and crowding. On the other hand, SPCA reported an average LOS of about 30 days and described an 11-person behavior team dedicated to maintaining animal mental health and adoptability for the animals in their care.

This is supported by the literature, as well, specifically by a large multi-shelter study on brief outings and temporary fostering programs. Using data from 51 shelters and comparing nearly 2,000 dogs who participated in these programs with roughly 26,000 control dogs, the researchers found that even a short outing could increase adoption likelihood about fivefold, which makes the results especially convincing because they are based on a large comparative sample rather than just anecdotal evidence (Gunter et al., 2023).

Together, the evidence suggests that shelters look to LOS as a strategic metric that they actively try to manage because it influences crowding, cost, animal well-being, and final outcomes simultaneously.

Community-based capacity plays a major role in sustainability.

Some of the most important and vital sustainability strategies take place outside the organizations themselves. Foster networks, volunteers, donors, and rescue partners are integral to shelters' operating systems, despite not actually being a part of the organization of the shelters. This is important to note because it complicates any simple financial reading of shelter sustainability. For example, some shelters may appear efficient in part because a significant share of labor is being taken care of by the community.

The strongest example is foster care. SPCA of Texas increased its number of animals fostered from 1,449 in 2023 to 2,235 in 2024, a 54.2% increase in one year (SPCA of Texas, 2025a). DAS also described foster care as one of its most important tools for reducing crowding and cost in the interview. These patterns match those observed by the literature, which suggests that temporary fostering and outing programs can have very positive effects on adoption outcomes while also reducing the pressure on shelters (Gunter et al., 2023). Operation Kindness also demonstrates the importance of community-based capacity through its collaboration with shelter and rescue partners for pet intake, transport, and assistance

(Operation Kindness, 2025a). This indicates that nonprofit shelters also absorb pressure from municipal shelters to help stabilize the broader regional system.

Similarly, volunteer labor is significant. In the interviews, Bennett estimated that volunteers save DAS about $300,000 per quarter, while Banta estimated that the SPCA's 45,000 volunteer hours were worth about $1.5 million annually. The SPCA impact report also recorded 43,364 volunteer hours in 2024, which is close to the interview estimate (SPCA of Texas, 2025a). These numbers show that volunteer labor contributes real operational capacity. Additionally, SPCA mentioned that volunteers often overlap with donors, fosters, adopters, and advocates, suggesting that community engagement itself may be one of the hidden foundations of shelter sustainability.

Adoption outcomes are shaped by strategy, not just availability.

Shelters actively shape their adoption outcomes through a combination of pricing, marketing, behavioral support, and customer experience. The interviews make it clear that neither DAS nor SPCA waits for adopters, but both have deliberate strategies in place to increase adoption rates. DAS emphasized reducing barriers to adoption and focusing on quick movement through the system, while SPCA emphasized variable pricing, behavior support, website presentation, pet descriptions, and post-adoption help.

Banta stated that SPCA generates about $2 million annually from adoption and clinic-related fees, but also argued that once a fee falls into the $50–$100 range, it is usually not the main barrier to adoption. At the same time, SPCA still uses variable pricing and fee-waived promotions when needed. This creates a tension within the evidence: while Banta is downplaying the power of fees past a certain point, SPCA's own practices, as described by him, suggest that pricing is still considered strategically important. This is consistent with the hedonic pricing literature, specifically an economics study that modeled how dog characteristics influence adopter demand and perceived value. The study is useful here because it applies a formal analytical framework to pricing rather than relying only on descriptive shelter observations, and it found that variable pricing based on animal desirability can improve both outcomes and revenue at the margin (Reese et al., 2017).

By contrast, DAS approaches the problem differently, focusing on lowering barriers, which reflects its open-intake structure. Bennett claimed that adoption or reclaim fees can backfire if they lead to an increased LOS and keep animals in the shelter for longer, justifying their little to no adoption fees. This difference between DAS and SPCA may reflect not just different opinions about adopter behavior, but different intake structures. DAS is open-intake, while SPCA has greater control over admissions, so the same pricing strategy may not have the same effect in both settings. This reinforces the finding that adoption strategy is the result of a combination of shelter structure, presentation, and population served.

Outcome metrics matter, but they need context.

The performance metrics, such as live release rate, are important but should be interpreted with caution and a broader context. For example, dog euthanasia at DAS fell from about 3,413 in FY2022–23 to 1,875 in FY2024–25 (City of Dallas, 2026). Most notably, space/capacity euthanasia fell from 1,459 to 302, a 79% decline (City of Dallas, 2026). At the same time, humane euthanasia rose from 497 to 938 (City of Dallas, 2026). This suggests that euthanasia decisions may have shifted away from overcrowding-driven causes and toward cases classified as medically or behaviorally necessary. It also serves as an example of why raw euthanasia totals can be misleading without reason categories.

The DFW shelter system functions as an interdependent network.

The shelter sustainability in DFW appears to be partly regional, with data showing that municipal and nonprofit shelters are deeply interconnected through rescue transfers. DAS's FY2024–25 data shows that Operation Kindness took 865 animals from DAS, while HSNT took 330 and SPCA took 237 (City of Dallas, 2026). Operation Kindness's own data shows that such transfers make up 82% of its intake, indicating that it primarily functions as a major relief option for other shelters regionally (Operation Kindness, 2025a). These numbers, therefore, suggest that sustainability cannot just be viewed at the level of one shelter and should instead be considered as a portion of the broader regional animal shelter network.

DISCUSSION

Ultimately, these findings indicate that there is no single formula for financially sustainable sheltering; there are recurring patterns in successful shelters. Stable shelters tend to have either strong public funding or an established donor base, actively manage length of stay, rely on foster networks, volunteers, and rescue partnerships, and use adoption strategy as a deliberate tool. At the same time, the evidence shows that these patterns may vary or work differently depending on the shelter type or intake model. Therefore, animal shelter sustainability is less of a single model to copy and paste, and more of a set of important conditions that shelters must adapt to according to their own structures.

The following recommendations are drawn from the findings of this study, and they are not meant to serve as a universal formula for every shelter. They are instead meant to be practical strategies that support stronger financial sustainability and animal outcomes. It is also important to note that because of differences in shelter size, funding model, intake structure, and community support, some of these recommendations will be more applicable in certain contexts than others.

Diversify and strengthen funding

Carroll and Stater (2009) found that more diversified nonprofit revenue was associated with greater financial stability, while the DFW data showed that contributions were the largest revenue source for all three nonprofits examined. Shelters should reduce their dependence on any one source of revenue and instead seek to diversify revenue streams. For nonprofits, this looks like building a broader mix of small donors, major gifts, grants, events, and service income. For municipal shelters, it could also look like strengthening affiliated nonprofit support groups that can provide a more flexible source of funding than city budgets.

Make LOS a central metric

Both interviews identified length of stay as important for different reasons: Bennett connected shorter stays with lower cost, and Banta emphasized the effects of long shelter stays on animal well-being. Length of stay needs to be treated as a core management metric because of this connection to cost, crowding, stress, and adoptability, all of which are key factors in both financial sustainability and animal outcomes. Therefore, it should be tracked closely and used in decision-making to speed up placement and decrease shelter burdens.

Expand foster and diversion

Foster care appeared repeatedly across the interviews, public data, and existing research. DAS described fostering as a tool for reducing crowding and cost, SPCA's foster count increased 54.2% from 2023 to 2024 (SPCA of Texas, 2025a), and Gunter et al. (2023) found that temporary fostering was associated with greater adoption likelihood. Moving animals into foster homes, or keeping them out of the shelter in the first place, can reduce crowding and lower costs while also improving outcomes. Such strategies are often cheaper than prolonged sheltering.

Remove unnecessary barriers

This recommendation follows directly from the DAS interview, wherein Bennett described adoption and reclaim barriers to be factors that increase length of stay. Shelters should examine whether fees, reclaim rules, or other procedural barriers actually help or hurt animal outcomes. Even small barriers, such as adoption fees, can sometimes increase the length of stay and raise costs, especially in open-intake shelters.

Invest in an adoption strategy

The SPCA interview and the pricing literature both showed that adoption outcomes can be influenced by factors such as pricing, animal presentation, behavior support, and customer experience. Adoption should be treated as an active strategy rather than a passive outcome. Pricing, photos, descriptions, website presentation, customer experience, and post-adoption support can all shape animal placement. Therefore,

shelters should think intentionally about how they present animals and support adopters throughout the process.

Build volunteer infrastructure

Both interviewees described volunteers as important operating capacity, and SPCA reported 43,364 volunteer hours in 2024 (SPCA of Texas, 2025a). Volunteers should be treated as part of the shelter's essential infrastructure and not as extra help because of their integral role in successful shelters. They contribute labor, outreach, fostering, and public support, all of which strengthen sustainability. Shelters should therefore invest in recruiting, training, and coordinating volunteers in a more intentional way.

Build regional partnerships

DAS transfer data showed substantial movement of animals to nonprofit partners including Operation Kindness, HSNT, and SPCA, supporting the importance of regional shelter cooperation (City of Dallas, 2026). Shelters should strengthen transfer and rescue partnerships and view sheltering as part of a broader regional system. The DFW area findings suggest that both municipal and nonprofit shelters depend on one another to absorb pressure and expand placement opportunities. Such cooperation can improve outcomes without requiring each and every shelter to build out the needed capability on its own.

Adapt recommendations to shelter type

The differences between DAS and SPCA throughout this study show why the same strategy may work differently under different funding and intake structures. Shelters should adapt strategies to their own unique structures rather than copying other organizations too directly. For instance, what works for a large donor-funded nonprofit may not work for a smaller shelter, and what works for an open-intake municipal shelter may not fit a selective nonprofit model.

CONCLUSION

Financial sustainability in animal shelters is not determined by funding alone. As the evidence shows, it is instead shaped by the combination of financial structure, daily operations, and community-based support. Additionally, shelter sustainability is not a single model to copy, but instead a set of strategies that must be adapted to each shelter's structure, intake type, and surrounding community.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could build on this study by examining a larger number of shelters across multiple regions in the country. It would also be useful to study defunct or struggling shelters more directly in order to better understand what led them to fail while others remain stable.

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