



# **Hill's Pet Nutrition**

## **2023 State of Shelter Adoption Report**



Transforming Lives



## Getting to the Heart of America's Shelter Crisis

We continue to be in awe of the animal welfare community who heroically provide unwavering support and care to animals in need. But despite this relentless commitment, animal shelters are in a state of crisis. Shelters and rescues continue to see more animals coming in than leaving, which is a heartbreaking reality facing cats and dogs across the country.

According to Shelter Animals Count, shelters nationally are in the third consecutive year of having too many animals and not enough adoptions - especially for dogs. The decrease in adoption rates has created a heightened sense of urgency that requires action.

Understanding the current consumer perspective about shelter adoption is an important piece in solving the problem. To lend our support, we've collected consumer insights to help shed light on why adoptions have slowed, what barriers exist and how the crisis is impacting the animal care community.

*Hill's Pet Nutrition State of Shelter Adoption Report* taps into pivotal areas of consumer sentiment toward pet adoption and fostering and includes real-world insights from key thought leaders within the animal welfare community. These trailblazers offer a unique, first hand perspective of those who are on the frontlines each and every day.

At Hill's Pet Nutrition, we recognize that the shelter crisis isn't one we can solve on our own. But it is one we can raise awareness about and together with our partners, can collaboratively identify workable solutions to help end pet homelessness.

We hope this report provides actionable insights surrounding pet adoption, and equips animal welfare professionals with information to create new strategies and initiatives that ultimately will encourage consumers to become part of the solution.

Even small actions can be life-changing for pets in need. We encourage everyone to join the fight to end pet homelessness. Together, we can make a difference in the lives of these pets.

Sincerely,

Nicki Baty  
President, Hill's Pet Nutrition US

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## INTRODUCTION

Animal shelters are currently wrestling with crisis conditions. In fact, shelters reportedly are in their third year of having too many animals and not enough adoptions, especially when it comes to dogs, according to Shelter Animals Count.<sup>1</sup>

Shelter intakes for January-September 2023 for cats and dogs combined were up nearly 10% compared to 2021. That number is expected to climb to a 3-year high by the end of this year, according to the organization. At the same time, while cat adoptions are steady, dog adoptions are down 1.2%.<sup>2</sup>

With no discernible solution in sight, the *Hill's State of Shelter Adoption Report* uncovers some of the root causes behind shelter overcrowding and decreased adoption rates from a consumer perspective in hopes of discovering opportunities for intervention. We listened to feedback from animal shelter professionals who shared that they do not have access to enough information about consumer sentiment and consumer behaviors - this was as a key driver in developing this report.

While 82% of consumers agree there are too many homeless pets, they are hesitant to adopt and/or are postponing their adoption plans. Why? Our survey sought to uncover the reasons behind this consumer hesitation.





# Discovering Barriers to Shelter Pet Adoption

# BARRIERS TO SHELTER PET ADOPTION: FINANCIAL

Unpacking the barriers to pet adoption involves looking at what is keeping consumers from seeking a shelter pet. The *Hill's Pet Nutrition State of Shelter Adoption Report* data shows costs, housing restrictions and not being able to find the 'perfect pet' at shelters represent the most common barriers to animal adoption.

In terms of financial barriers, the annual inflation rate - 6.5% in 2022 - has impacted both consumers and the veterinary community. The cost of veterinary care was cited as the top factor making pet ownership difficult, followed by maintenance (the overall costs of owning a pet) and the impact of the overall economy.

Not only has inflation made it challenging for pet owners to afford veterinary bills, but it has also put a strain on the veterinary profession as well. Veterinarians are facing elevated work hours and worker shortages, along with increased costs to run the business.



**71%** Cost of pet ownership, with veterinary care as the top expenditure



**16%** Economic downturn



**15%** Access to veterinary care

"Veterinary care has increased at an annual inflation rate of over 10%, so caring for a pet's medical needs has become difficult for many people. In addition, housing costs have increased which has resulted in many people not only delaying adoption, but also facing giving up their beloved pets. The combination of these issues is leading to increased numbers of animals in shelters."



**Apryl Steele**

DVM, CAWA,  
President & CEO, Dumb Friends League

"Lack of equitable access to veterinary care is a crisis impacting pet owners and animal welfare organizations. The combination of a nationwide veterinarian shortage along with rapidly rising costs make even the most basic care a barrier to pet ownership for many families. While lower income families are disproportionately impacted, even middle-class pet owners are feeling the pinch."



**Jim Tedford**

President & CEO,  
The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement

## BARRIERS TO SHELTER PET ADOPTION: HOUSING



**73%** Housing restrictions may prevent owning any pet



**19%** Limit number of pets allowed



**15%** Limit size of pets allowed



“The vast majority of renters, roughly two thirds, are below the age of 35. Monthly “pet rent,” substantial deposits and size and breed restrictions contribute to significant adoption barriers for Millennials and Gen Zers. While there seems to be no shortage of large, adult dogs in shelters, the fact that we are seeing fewer puppies and small dogs coming into our care also contributes to prospective adopters acquiring pets from sources other than shelters. Focused national and local efforts to change the community mindset on large adult dog adoptions could reduce their length of stay and change their future.”

**Patricia Mercer**  
President & CEO, Houston SPCA



## BARRIERS TO SHELTER PET ADOPTION: EXPECTING THE PERFECT PET

Financial and housing constraints aren't the only barriers to adoption. Sometimes consumers themselves can be the barrier, either not considering a shelter pet or holding preconceived ideas of the "perfect pet."



**41%** of pet owners elected to acquire a pet from a non-shelter source



**23%** couldn't find desired age, breed or size of pet at a shelter



**35%** are concerned about health or behavior issues of shelter pets



"What people often don't consider is that shelters usually have a good understanding of an animal's behavior. Being flexible on the exact breed of a dog often helps the best match for the adopter and the new pet, and it helps a shelter animal find a home."

**Apryl Steele**  
DVM, CAWA,  
President & CEO, Dumb Friends League

"Shelter personnel are uniquely positioned to offer prospective adopters the advice they need to make the best choice for their families. The animals adopters are seeking to adopt may not necessarily be the most conducive to their lifestyles. Adoption counselors can steer adopters towards pets that are most likely to work for them."

**Jim Tedford**  
President & CEO,  
The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement



## THE “FOSTER FAIL” DILEMMA

While fostering is a viable alternative to adoption that could help soften the adoption crisis, many consumers report they don't trust themselves to foster a pet because they are afraid of “foster failing,” otherwise known as fostering an animal on a temporary basis, but ultimately falling in love with that pet and adopting the pet as a permanent member of the family.



**76%** who have fostered ended up adopting a pet they fostered



**38%** of pet owners say they do not trust themselves to not adopt their foster animal







“Fosters provide a critical bridge to alleviate the impact of slow adoptions and an increase in incoming animals. I see an opportunity to reframe the foster “failure” narrative into a foster “superhero” story. Fosters don't fail, they magnify the impact when an animal goes into a foster home temporarily or forever - the foster family, the animal going into the foster home and the organization that is able to help another animal in need all WIN - and what a great story that makes.”

**Ana Zorrilla**

CAWA, Chief Executive Officer of Louisiana SPCA

## TIPS TO AVOID “FOSTER FAILING”

*If you really want your fostering experience to be temporary, here are some ways you can prevent foster failure:*

-  Set realistic expectations and understand the goal of fostering is not adoption
-  Set a timeline for fostering and stick to it to prevent the temptation to adopt
-  Play an active role in promoting the pet for adoption
-  Connect with other foster parents for support

## REHOMING PETS

Further contributing to the volume of pets entering shelters, a portion of current pet owners are considering rehoming for a variety of reasons:

1. Behavior or training issues (**21%**)
2. Financial difficulties (**13%**)
3. Moving/not being able to bring their pet with them (**23%**)

Of these, respondents reported their top preference would be to rehome their pet with friends or relatives followed by surrendering the pet to an animal shelter.

## WAYS TO HELP BEYOND ADOPTION

Adopting a shelter pet is just one way people can help pets in need. Here are three easy ways to help if adoption isn't an option right now:



### Volunteer

Shelters often need dog walkers, photographers, laundry, and animal rescue support



### Foster

Fostering a dog or cat helps shelters save space while socializing a pet in a loving environment. Many organizations will pay for vet care, while others also provide supplies, such as food and bedding. Call your local shelter ahead of time to see what their policy is



### Donate

Most shelters often need supplies such as blankets, pet treats, gently used chew toys, office supplies, and garbage bags

# What Consumers Want in a Shelter Pet



## WHAT CONSUMERS WANT IN A SHELTER PET

Consumers also shared valuable insights about what type of pet they are most likely to consider adopting.



Dogs are still the top species choice when it comes to shelter adoptions



The most popular age range for shelter pets is “young adult” or 1-3 years



Vaccinations, spay and neuter services, and ongoing vet care are top factors in incentivizing adoption



Small and mid-size are the most preferred size of dogs



Pet personality/ behavior and health are the top two factors pet owners consider when thinking about pet adoption



# The Positive Impact of Shelters



## THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF SHELTERS

While times are tough within the animal welfare community in 2023, there is still good news. Of the consumers surveyed, 87% stated they wanted more pets and 68% of pet owners indicated they are likely to adopt from a shelter when they are ready for their next pet.

Consumers not only recognize the challenges that animal shelters are facing in today's environment, but of those who have engaged with shelters, they have had overall positive interactions in their pet ownership journey.

Consumers also possess positive views on the health and care provided by shelters to the animals under their guardianship, with 57% stating they believe shelter pets are more likely to be vaccinated, as well socialized and trained.



**83%** of pet owners who have visited a shelter had a good or excellent experience



**42%** view shelters as the No. 1 source of trusted information about pet adoption



**57%** have engaged with a community shelter via adoption, donation or volunteering

“Animal shelters have become the heart of the animal-loving community, and we must continue to engage everyone in our community. Animal wellness organizations now have wrap-around services that engage pet lovers before they acquire a pet and throughout that pet’s life. By making these deeper connections, animal shelters ensure that we’re the first place people will look when thinking about a new pet.”

**Brad Shear**

CAWA, CEO, The Potter League for Animals



“Marin Humane constantly reminds our community that we are more than just an animal shelter; we are an animal resource center for the community that wants to be the trusted partner for any animal-related need. Raising funds and adding resources to expand our Pet Safety Net program demonstrates our ability to assist where needed the most – pet guardians/owners in crises. Pet Safety Net is keeping families together and thus, reducing the number of animals at-risk from being surrendered into our shelter.”

**Nancy McKenney**

MNPL, CAWA, CEO and President of Marin Humane



# Caring About the People Who Care for Pets

## CARING ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO CARE FOR PETS

The relentless strain of the animal shelter crisis has not only affected animals, but also the mental health of the caregivers and veterinary teams who care for these animals. Each day they face the realities of overpopulation, overcrowding, limited resources (both in terms of funds and staff) and navigating endless difficult decisions.

Even prior to the shelter crisis, the veterinary profession has grappled with suicide rates three times higher than the general population. According to a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one out of six veterinarians has considered suicide.<sup>3</sup>

Survey respondents are aware of the impact of the animal shelter situation on shelter professionals and veterinarians, and the majority also believe the mental health of animal caregivers to be important.



**54%** of pet owners are aware of mental health issues impacting veterinarians and shelter professionals



**86%** view the mental health of veterinarians and shelter professions as important or very important



“Working in animal welfare is tremendously rewarding, but can also be extremely stressful. Shelter professionals see both extremes: animals treated terribly by people on the one hand and animals rescued and adopted on the other. It is incumbent upon shelter leadership and the community to provide support to these everyday heroes.”

**Jim Tedford**

President & CEO,  
The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement

“The amazing people working in shelters are under incredible public pressure to always do more and in some cases, the heroic work we do is heavily scrutinized, not just by our communities, but from colleagues within the animal welfare field. We need to recognize that communities, resources, and animal populations vary drastically across the nation. Many times, the intense pressure to meet lofty “goals” set forth by colleagues outside of our own organizations result in intense public pressure and shelter overcrowding. The mental health of shelter staff and overcrowded shelter animals is negatively impacted by that pressure. The animal welfare field could and should do better.”



**Patricia Mercer**

President & CEO, Houston SPCA

## HELP WHEN NEEDED

If you or **anyone** you know **from the animal care community** is in need of **mental health support**, please **contact the Veterinary Hope Foundation** for resources, information and a community to help better handle the unique challenges of the profession. For urgent situations, **contact the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline**, available 24 hours a day, by calling **1-800-273-825** or texting “Home” to **741-741**.

**FEEDING THE LOVE  
ALL YEAR LONG  
SINCE 2002**



# Working Together for a Brighter Future

Together with Colgate-Palmolive, Hill's Pet Nutrition is a caring company that is reimagining a healthier future for people, pets and our planet. For decades, Hill's has been on a mission to help end pet homelessness. In 2002, we created the Hill's Food, Shelter & Love (HFSL) program in partnership with animal shelters across the country to help address many of the challenges facing animal welfare organizations. Since its inception, the program has provided more than \$300 million of science-led nutrition to more than 1,000 animal shelters across the U.S.

The right nutrition can transform how a pet feels, looks and acts, helping make pets happier, healthier and more adoptable. But nutrition is just one piece of the puzzle. Hill's also supports animal welfare organizations through a variety of initiatives.

## FUELING PET ADOPTIONS

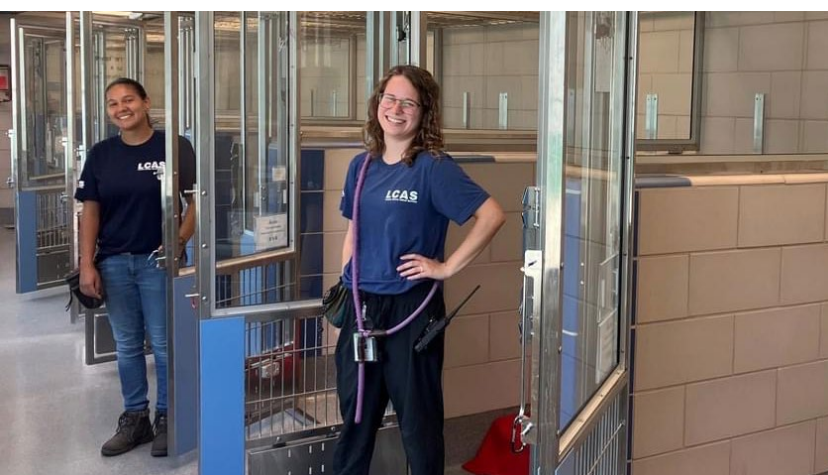


### Hill's Food Shelter and Love

Supporting 14 million shelter pet adoptions through the HFSL program, the largest number of adoptions supported by any pet food manufacturer; we plan to reach 15 million pets saved by 2025

### Life-saving Airlift Missions

Helping transport at-risk shelter pets to geographic locations to increase their chances of adoption through an annual collaboration with Greater Good Charities' Good Flights program



### Clearing the Shelters

Working with NBCUniversal Local to support its annual Clear the Shelters adoption and funding campaign, which in 2023, reached a record milestone of 1 million pets adopted since the program's inception



## Helping Pets and Shelters in Times of Need

Responding in times of crisis through the Hill's Disaster Relief Network; over the past 10 years Hill's has responded to 160 disasters, supported over 900 shelters, veterinary clinics and non-profits caring for pets, and donated 2.7 million pounds of food to feed pets in need

## Providing Training for Future Veterinarians

Supporting the training of future veterinarians through the unique partnerships between Hill's and shelter partners such as Houston SPCA and the Dumb Friends League to offer veterinary extern programs to provide valuable, hands-on experience in caring for pets under the expert supervision of the shelter's veterinary healthcare team



## Championing Animal Welfare

Collaborating with industry leaders, who make up the Hill's Shelter Advisory Board, to create impactful change in the animal welfare industry; members include **Dr. Apryl Steele** from Dumb Friends League (Denver, CO), **Brad Shear** from Potter League from Animals (Middletown, RI), **Jim Tedford** from the Association for Animal Welfare Advancement (Maryville, TN), **Nancy McKenney** from Marin Humane (Novato, CA), **Pam Takhar** from BC SPCA (British Columbia, CA), **Patti Mercer** from Houston SPCA (Houston, TX), **Sharon Harvey** from Cleveland SPL (Cleveland, OH), **Dr. Steve Hansen** from Arizona Humane Society (Phoenix, AZ) and **Ana Zorrilla** from Louisiana SPCA (New Orleans, LA)

For more information on these programs and more, visit [hillspet.com/shelter](https://hillspet.com/shelter).



All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,505 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 22-28 June 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all US pet owners (aged 18+).

[hillspet.com/shelter](https://hillspet.com/shelter)  
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<sup>1</sup> Pets likely affected as 40 million people face restart of student loan payments." Shelter Animals Count, 6 Sept. 2023, <https://www.shelteranimalscount.org/pets-likely-affected-as-40-million-people-face-restart-of-student-loan-payments/>. Press release

<sup>2</sup> Q3 2023 Analysis - January - September 2021, 2022, 2023.. Shelter Animals Count, <https://www.shelteranimalscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Q3-Report.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Witte TK, Spitzer EG, Edward N, et al. Suicides and deaths of undetermined intent among veterinary