



The Pet Rescue Foundation

Creating a Pet Evaluation Matrix for the Asilomar Definitions

Most shelters that adopt the Asilomar Accords will want to create a Pet Evaluation Matrix (PEM) that gives greater specificity to the definitions. A Pet Evaluation Matrix, which may take the form of a simple set of guidelines, a comprehensive table of medical and behavioral conditions, or any combination in-between, can be indispensable to shelter staff who must apply the definitions and categorize the animals who come through the shelter's doors. Because the PEM will be written for all to see, it can also be helpful in giving the public a greater sense of confidence in the shelter's operations and professionalism.

Creating a Pet Evaluation Matrix for the "healthy" category may be relatively straightforward. However, shelters have found the task more daunting for the "treatable" and "unhealthy & untreatable" categories, in part because these categories require that the shelter determine what level of care is *"typically provided by reasonable and caring pet owner/guardians in the community."* Many shelters are confused about how to make this determination. Should they conduct extensive surveys of pet guardians and veterinarians in their community? If that's not feasible, should shelter managers simply make a decision on their own and issue whatever guidelines they think best? Or should they just adopt what another community has come up with and hope that will work for them too? Some of these approaches may work in some communities, but none is likely to work in all. Surveys, for one, are expensive and time-consuming, and they don't always yield useful results: if half the community would treat a given condition and half wouldn't, what then? Nor are shelter managers and other staff members always in the best position to judge what the community standard is – after all, their focus is on abandoned, mistreated, and neglected animals. They see the worst the community has to offer, and so may set the bar too low. Even if this weren't the case, the public may have little confidence in a Pet Evaluation Matrix issued unilaterally by a few "insiders," and even less in a matrix formulated in another community with different demographics, agencies, and problems.

One solution that's cost effective and provides for broad-based community input is to put the question to an advisory panel, have them create a draft PEM, and then invite the community to participate. The following six steps are intended to offer a rough road map for shelters that feel this approach would work in their community. Not every community will want or need to use all six steps, and many may find that other approaches work better for them. For examples of matrices and guidelines developed in different communities, visit www.maddies.org/organizations/euthanasia.html.

Six Steps:

- 1. Convene an Advisory Panel.** Invite those who work with pet guardians in your community and who are in a position to know the level of care provided. Veterinarians would be high on the list, along with behaviorists, feral cat advocates, kennel owners, rescue group members, shelter volunteers, pet sitters/dog walkers and others with close contact or strong interest in companion animal welfare. Your panel might also include a staff member from each of the different shelters in the community, and, if appropriate, a representative from local city or county government.

When you ask prospective panel members to volunteer, be sure to tell them what they'll be asked to do, how often you expect them to meet, and when you expect the panel's deliberations to begin and end. Arrange for a place for the panel to meet and have someone from your staff attend the meetings to answer scheduling questions and provide assistance.

You may have too many volunteers, or too few. You'll probably want at least three to sit on your panel, but more than a dozen may be unwieldy. A working panel is not a substitute for a public hearing, so keep the number manageable and don't let your panel get so big it can't get anything done.

- 2. Make the Task Clear.** The panel needs to know what its task is. Once your panel is seated, make clear that its goal is to create a practical document that helps shelter staff and volunteers in day-to-day shelter operations. The panel shouldn't attempt to rewrite the definitions, or produce an abstract study or a highly technical set of guidelines that staff can't understand or apply. Instead, the panel needs to choose a basic framework for the Pet Evaluation Matrix and then get down to specifics. For instance, will the panel frame its matrix in terms of conditions or treatment levels? In other words, will they create a list of specific medical and behavioral conditions that occur in shelter animals and then determine whether pet guardians in the community would typically treat such conditions in their own pets? Or will the panel look at different levels of treatment (e.g., a few pills given orally vs. extensive surgery with prolonged follow-up therapy), and determine whether local pet guardians would typically provide these levels of treatment? Different shelters have used both these frameworks, alone and in combination. There's no reason you can't use one framework for medical conditions and another for behavior problems, and there's no reason your panel can't invent a different framework altogether—one that suits your community and the animals in your shelter.
- 3. Offer Information and Resources.** Give the panel the information it needs to do its job. Make sure you provide the Asilomar definitions and the Animal Statistics Tables, so the panel will have a clear understanding of the definitions and how they relate to each other. The panel needs to know, for instance, that "treatable" isn't the same as "savable," and that many animals categorized as "unhealthy & untreatable" may still be saved. The panel must also appreciate that the definitions of "treatable" and "unhealthy & untreatable" rely upon a community standard, and that the care "typically provided" in one community isn't necessarily the care "typically provided"

in your community. That said, the panel may still find it useful to see what other communities have done. For examples of matrices and guidelines, go to www.maddies.org/organizations/euthanasia.html. You may also want to give the panel a list of resources, contacts, and websites such as the UC Davis Shelter Medicine Website, Cornell University, the American Veterinary Medical Association and the Association of Shelter Veterinarians.

4. **Solicit Comments from Stakeholders.** Once the panel has produced a draft PEM, it's time for the public to have an opportunity to comment. Public participation is critical to maintaining transparency and achieving community buy-in, so distribute your draft Pet Evaluation Matrix as widely as possible. You will want to reach your members, staff, volunteers, donors, and the public at large. Avenues for publication include your Shelter bulletin board, your website, newsletters, local pet chat rooms, veterinary office/groomer bulletin boards, and neighborhood newspapers.

Invite the public to submit written comments within 30 to 60 days and give them the time, date, and place of the public meeting you've scheduled to take oral comments. You may get helpful comments that you want to incorporate into your Pet Evaluation Matrix, and you will probably get many negative comments. Remember that the purpose of your public meeting is not to accept, reject, or argue against different views. It is simply to hear what the public has to say. Have someone from your staff take notes on each comment, and treat everyone politely. Let people know that all comments will be reviewed by your panel, and that comments will be addressed when the final Pet Evaluation Matrix is published.

5. **Respond and Revise.** After the public comment period has ended, have your advisory panel meet again, along with shelter representatives, to consider the comments you have received. Make sure you send the panel minutes of the public meeting and all written comments before your meeting, and designate a panel member or staff person who will be responsible for writing up the final responses to the comments. Comments may be considered individually, or as a group if they make the same point. In some cases, the panel may decide to revise the draft Pet Evaluation Matrix in response to a comment. Whether the draft is revised or not, each point made in the comments deserves to be considered. To show the public that you have considered these points, include a written response to the comments when you publish your final Pet Evaluation Matrix.
6. **Adopt and Publish.** The draft Pet Evaluation Matrix has now been revised and all that's left is to have it formally adopted and published in final form. Most shelters will want to present the revised draft to their boards for approval. Once you have gone through your shelters' internal approval process, you're ready to publish the final, "official" Pet Evaluation Matrix. Be sure to include the panel's responses to public comments, as well as a description of the process you went through to develop the PEM. You will want to be sure that all staff and volunteers who work with your shelter's animals receive copies and have a chance to ask questions as they implement the new Pet Evaluation Matrix. And publish this whole package through the same avenues you used when you published the original draft. However, now that you have a final product (a news item), you can aim for wider distribution. Put out a press release. Consider a press conference. See if you can arrange to meet with your

newspaper's Editorial Board to get support via an Editorial. Finally, don't forget to send a copy to Maddie's Fund, so we can share your achievement with others.

To read additional materials related to this topic, go to
<http://www.maddiesfund.org/organizations/asilomar.html>