Kill rates vary widely at Ohio dog shelters

By Mary Beth Lane

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The fate of more than 100,000 dogs impounded annually in Ohio's county-run animal shelters depends largely on where they wind up.

The animals stand a better chance of leaving some shelters alive because others euthanize dogs at higher rates, a *Dispatch* analysis of county pound data shows.

Lawrence County in southeastern Ohio euthanized 81 percent of its shelter dogs last year, by far the highest rate in the state. Carroll County in northeastern Ohio destroyed 1 percent, the lowest rate.

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Alaina Stephens, 13, with Stratus, a dog adopted from the Franklin County shelter

The *Dispatch* analysis used figures obtained from 85 of the 88 counties to review what happened to dogs impounded in county shelters statewide last year. The analysis compared the number of dogs killed with the number that left the shelter through redemption by their owners or by adoption.

The statewide average showed that 70 percent of the dogs were redeemed or adopted, and 30 percent were euthanized.

INTERACTIVE MAP

County shelter outcomes for dogs

Some wardens are seeing an increase in adoption rates at county dog shelters. Hover over a county to see its dog-shelter rates of adoption and euthanasia from 2011:
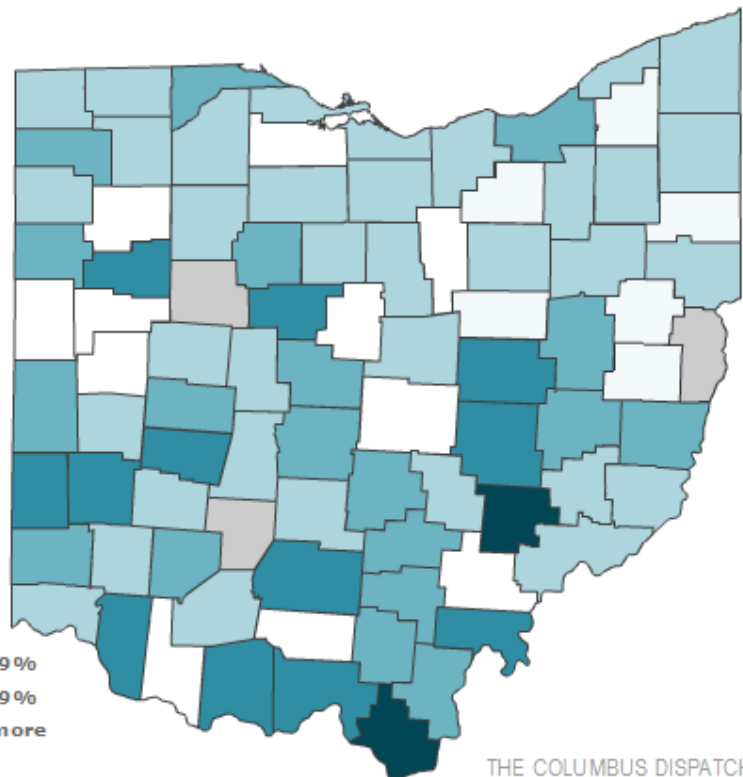
Lawrence County
Total outcome: 2,158

Killed: 81.4%
Lived: 18.6%

COUNTIES BY PERCENT KILLED
1-10.9%
11%-30.9%
31%-50.9%
51%-75.9%
76% or more

Sources: County dog shelters

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

View interactive map of dog shelters' rates of adoption and euthanasia

Thousands more dogs were transferred from the county shelters to privately run Humane Societies and rescue organizations. The *Dispatch* analysis didn't include transfers in the comparison because there was no way to track what happened to those dogs.

Dog wardens and other shelter professionals note, however, that the tremendous growth in the number of rescue groups willing to pull dogs from the county shelters to find them homes has played a significant role in reducing euthanasia rates.

Lawrence County Dog Warden Bill Click said the large number of dogs euthanized at his shelter was not unusual, and that last year was a normal year.

"It looks bad," he said. "That's awful."

Click said he is trying to reduce the number of dogs destroyed. He attributed the high rate to the large number of dogs he handles at his shelter compared with other county shelters in his region.

The figure stunned Matt Granito, president of the Ohio County Dog Wardens Association. "Oh, wow," he said. "That's awfully high."

The euthanasia rates at individual county shelters varied tremendously. Some dog wardens cautioned that it is difficult to compare urban and rural dog shelters because they take in vastly different numbers and types of dogs.

Other shelter professionals noted that there is no standard system for tracking the intake and outcome of shelter dogs in Ohio or nationally, making it difficult to gauge progress toward saving adoptable dogs.

Most counties operate their own shelters, including a few that have put their sheriff in charge. Some have contracts with their local Humane Society to run the county shelter. In southeastern Ohio, the Monroe County shelter also handles dogs picked up in Noble County, which doesn't have a shelter.

Dog adoption, euthanasia rates

A *Dispatch* analysis of surveyed dogs impounded at county dog shelters showed a large disparity in the rates of euthanasia. The analysis compared the number of dogs that left the shelter through redemption by their owners or by adoption with the number killed. Lawrence County euthanized 81.4 percent of the dogs in its shelter in 2011. The statewide average was 30 percent.

HIGHEST EUTHANASIA RATES	TOTAL DOGS	LEFT SHELTER	EUTHANIZED
Lawrence	2,158	18.6%	81.4%
Morgan	173	22.5%	77.5%
Preble	238	26.5%	73.5%
Meigs	420	27.1%	72.9%
Coshocton	1,241	34.3%	65.7%
CENTRAL OHIO			
Franklin	**11,050**	**52.7%**	**47.3%**
Delaware	468	54.9%	45.1%
Fairfield	1,487	65.6%	34.4%
Pickaway	554	70.4%	29.6%
Union	641	88.8%	11.2%
Madison	298	88.9%	11.1%
Licking	1,116	89.3%	10.7%
LOWEST EUTHANASIA RATES			
Morrow	192	94.8%	5.2%
Ashland	333	97.0%	3.0%
Geauga	573	97.6%	2.4%
Harrison	124	98.4%	1.6%
Carroll	931	98.8%	1.2%

MORE ONLINE
Visit Dispatch.com to see statistics for all Ohio counties.

Sources: county shelters

The *Dispatch* analysis didn't include Fayette County (whose dog totals weren't broken down by category) and Hardin County (which doesn't euthanize at its shelter and transferred 325 unadopted dogs to the Wyandot County Humane Society. The director there recalled that many, if not most, were put down). Jefferson County did not respond to repeated requests for its shelter data. How well a shelter performs in saving the most dogs reflects the outlook and philosophy of the individual dog warden, Granito said. The best ones promote adoption, welcome volunteers and visitors into their shelters, and work with rescue groups, thereby reducing euthanasia rates, he said.

"More and more, progressive dog wardens are coming in and realizing that it is not the old way of capture, hold and kill," said Granito, the dog warden of Geauga County in northeastern Ohio. Some people still think of dog wardens as mean dog catchers who kill impounded dogs after a state-mandated, three-day stay and that only Humane Society shelters offer adoptable dogs. Both Granito and John King, assistant dog warden in Delaware County, said they are frustrated by that characterization.
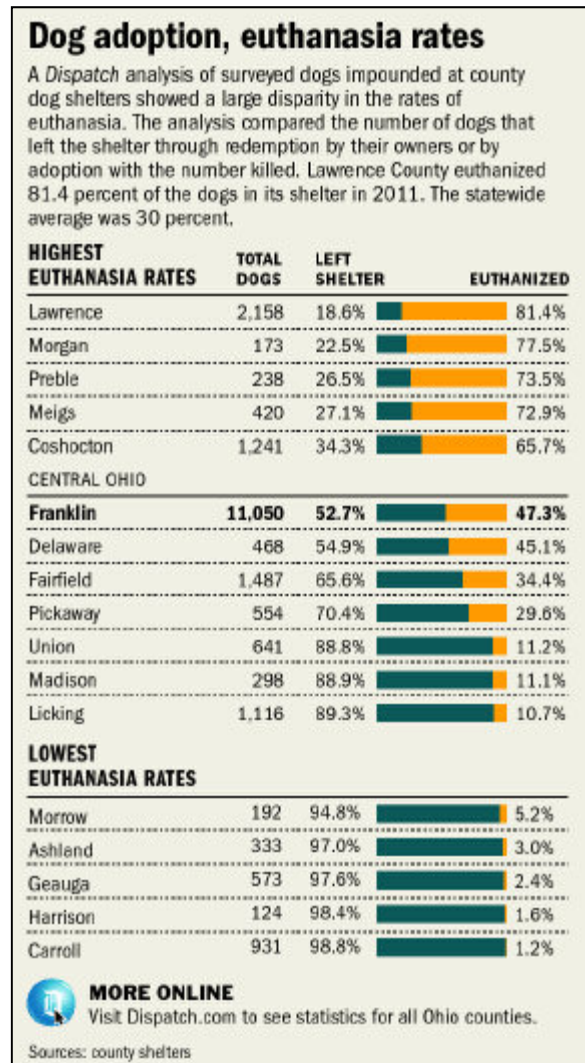
The best wardens, they said, publicize their county shelters by working with the community to post photos and profiles of their adoptable dogs everywhere from online sites to the bulletin boards in local grocery stores.

Practices vary. The dog wardens of Franklin County, which euthanized 47 percent, and Delaware County, which euthanized 45 percent, said they strive to get adoptable dogs into new homes and do not euthanize when space gets tight.

Lawrence County does, Click said. So does Fairfield County, which euthanized 34 percent last year. About half of the 512 dogs killed were destroyed for space, and the rest for aggression or sickness, Dog Warden Mike Miller said.

The Athens County shelter handled about the same number of dogs as Fairfield County last year, but euthanized just 11 percent. Miller said that sounded too good to be true. Athens County Dog Warden Jeff Koons said his numbers are accurate.

"We all want to have good numbers," Koons said. "We are not competing with each other. We strive to do better than last year's numbers."

It's not surprising that Ohio's urban areas have higher euthanasia rates, said Joe Rock, director of the Franklin County Department of Animal Care and Control. His shelter's rate compared with 46 percent in Cuyahoga County, 57 percent in Lucas County and 58 percent in Montgomery County. The rate in Hamilton County, which has a contract with SPCA Cincinnati, was 30 percent. Reduced adoption prices, extended foster care that includes heartworm treatment to restore dogs to health and other steps contributed to the low euthanasia rate, SPCA Cincinnati spokesman Scott Puryear said.

Urban shelters take in higher numbers of aggressive animals that have been trained to guard property or fight other dogs, or that have been injured by cars. All of that contributes to the euthanasia rate, Rock said.

Pit bulls, in particular, are destined for euthanasia. Of the 5,225 dogs euthanized at the Franklin County shelter last year, 2,291 were pit bulls.

State law didn't require pit bulls to be euthanized, but because the law branded them as vicious dogs, county shelters usually did. A new state law that took effect in May stripped the automatic branding from pit bulls and set new standards to declare dogs a nuisance, dangerous or vicious, regardless of breed.

Animal-welfare campaigners successfully pressured the county commissioners in Athens and Fairfield counties this year to change the shelter euthanasia method from the carbon-monoxide gas chamber to lethal injection, and to allow nonprofit rescue organizations to pull pit bulls for adoption.

Animal advocates who demonstrated outside the Hocking County courthouse this month asked the county commissioners to use injection rather than gas, and to allow rescue groups to take pit bulls from the shelter. The commissioners denied both requests.

The Humane Society of the United States and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals estimate that between 3 million and 4 million unwanted dogs and cats are euthanized annually. Forty years ago, an estimated 20 million annually were euthanized.

More responsible owners who sterilize their pets have helped reduce the number of strays. And more people are adopting pets from the pound rather than buying from breeders or pet stores, county dog wardens and other shelter professionals said.

"In general, across the country, the adoption rates have gone up. Most people feel like we're making great strides with dogs," said Linda Lord, a professor at Ohio State University's College of Veterinary Medicine who has researched issues associated with dog and cat overpopulation.

County to county, a lot comes down to community resources. Counties with strong volunteer and adoption programs tend to have lower euthanasia rates, Lord said.

The attitude shift can be heard in the language that some dog owners use, introducing their new pet not merely as a shelter dog but, proudly, as a "rescue" dog.

"It's cooler than it used to be," said Rachel Finney, executive director of the Capital Area Humane Society, whose shelter offers its own adoptable dogs along with dogs transferred from the Franklin County shelter and from the Scioto County shelter in southern Ohio.

The Internet and social media have helped spread and market the photos and profiles of shelter dogs available for adoption, making it easier than ever to hook up pooches and people. Petfinder.com is the Craigslist for dogs, said several wardens who use the online adoption service.

Among the volunteers at the Franklin County shelter are photographers who specialize in making adoptable dogs look adorable online. Dog wardens with less help do it themselves, including Van Wert County Dog Warden Rich Strunkenburg, who said he snaps and uploads photos of adoptable dogs in his northwestern Ohio shelter.

Television advertising also has helped shift public opinion toward adopting shelter dogs. The ASPCA's memorable tear jerker that showed abused animals staring poignantly from cages while Sarah McLachlan sings her haunting *Angel* in the background simultaneously raised millions of dollars and public awareness. That one ad probably moved countless people to adopt a shelter dog, said James Straley, director of the Humane Society Serving Clark County, which is contracted to run the county shelter.

"People are proud to have a rescue dog," Straley said. "They are proud that they came in and saved a life as opposed to going to a pet store."

As shelter professionals and animal-welfare advocates look ahead, they want to build a nationwide system to track the animals entering and leaving shelters each year.

The lack of a system with national standards or requirements for shelter care makes it difficult to track how well the shelters in Ohio and other states are doing, the Capital Area Humane Society's Finney said.

The reasons for euthanasia may differ across shelters, for example. One shelter might take in a sick dog and decide euthanasia is best. Another shelter might take in a dog with the same sickness, treat the animal and restore it to health. Another shelter might keep alive a dog that should be euthanized, she said.

Some shelters have started to contribute their numbers to a national, searchable database maintained by Maddie's Fund, a California-based charitable foundation dedicated to making the country as close to "no kill" as possible.

The Montgomery County shelter is the only county shelter in Ohio submitting its data so far. Franklin County shelter officials said they are considering it. The data required is far more detailed than the records that county shelters keep now.

Maddie's Fund requires shelters in the database to track intake and outcome numbers based on standards that emerged from a 2004 gathering of shelter professionals in California.

Animals at intake are recorded as "healthy," or "treatable" or "unhealthy and untreatable," and then are tracked to their departure (via owner redemption, adoption, transfer to rescue group or euthanasia). The net outcome shows the shelter's live-release rate.

Finney said the standard definition of what is healthy and what is treatable and manageable are a step forward in shelter work. It is important that all shelters share the standard definition that heartworm, for example, is treatable, she said.

Animal-welfare advocates were outraged last year when 37 dogs seized from a hoarder were euthanized at the Brown County dog shelter in southern Ohio because they had mange.

County commissioners removed the gas chamber and put the county Humane Society in charge of the shelter in November.

Click, the Lawrence County dog warden, said he is trying to get more dogs adopted this year. He said he doesn't want to be known for having the highest euthanasia rate.

"We hate putting dogs to sleep down here," he said. "We hate it, we hate it, we hate it."

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