JOURNAL OF
SHELTER MEDICINE &
COMMUNITY ANIMAL HEALTH

OPINION ARTICLE

Ethics Committees for Animal Shelters

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Animal shelters face a host of ethical challenges and dilemmas in their work. The most pressing of these arguably arise from the competing interests of the shelter's animal residents that cannot all be met in a severely resource-limited setting. In addition, many shelters must consider other relevant interests, such as those of free-roaming animals living in the surrounding community, individuals who interact with the shelters as they surrender or seek to adopt an animal companion, and existing or would-be donors who may have their own views about how the shelter should operate. Responding to these many challenges requires time, energy, and ethics expertise that staff do not always have, and may create tension and conflict among already overburdened employees.

In this article, we argue that in response to these ethical challenges, animal shelters should consider creating ethics committees. Hospital Ethics Committees (HECs) have become crucial for addressing ethical issues in clinical practice. They support healthcare professionals in navigating the ethical complexities of their work by providing ethical consultation on specific cases, reviewing and developing hospital policies, and offering ethics training to healthcare professionals and committee members.[1] Indeed, HECs are now widely considered crucial for ensuring fairness and effectiveness within human healthcare institutions, and we believe that such committees can play the same valuable role in animal shelters.[2]

The aims of this article are twofold. Firstly, we explain why a permanent ethics committee is a valuable asset for an animal shelter. Secondly, we detail key steps in the design and creation of such a committee. Specifically, we explain the different roles such a committee could play, how it might be created and staffed, its relationship to the shelter and the status of its recommendations. While there can be no 'one size fits all' approach to establishing an ethics committee, our discussion can guide shelters wishing to explore this option. We finish with a brief discussion about the ways in which animal shelters differ from human healthcare institutions and the potential implications of those differences for ethics committee work.

Why does an animal shelter need an ethics committee?

Animal shelter staff often experience their work as meaningful and rewarding, but the stress of working in a shelter environment puts staff at an increased risk of poor mental and physical health.[3] While euthanasia is perhaps the most consequential decision shelter staff must make with respect to individual animals (a unique source of stress and trauma for staff),[4,5] shelters face a host of moral dilemmas in their day-to-day operations.[2,6] For example, shelters may face the moral challenge of navigating the tension between stricter adoption policies that ensure a good fit but reduce placement timeliness on the one hand and more relaxed policies that increase the risk of failed placements and traumatic returns on the other; grappling with the ethics of commodifying animals in adoption promotions; managing questions regarding the allocation of funds for optimal medical care for one animal versus preventative care for many; and addressing the conflict over shelter diet cost and quality when resources must be freed for critical care.

The range and type of questions an organisation will have to tackle may vary widely depending on the characteristics of the organisation and the constraints imposed by local legislation. While smaller organisations will primarily be concerned with issues concerning the 'core' activities around sheltering animals, larger organisations may also face other issues, such as around awareness raising campaigns or enforcement of animal welfare legislation. Moreover, some organisations may have greater discretion over certain aspects of their operations (such as the shelter's admissions policy) than others.

Shelter environments typically leave staff with little time and resources to think through these issues and to articulate and resolve the disagreement that such issues may create. Available guidelines for shelters often don't address the ethical dimensions of shelter practice in any detail,[7-9] leaving individual shelters having to develop their own 'best practices' and policies in response to ethical challenges, or staff having to make ad hoc judgements about how best to deal with specific problems as they arise.

Received: 15 October 2025; Revised: 16 December 2025; Accepted: 16 December 2025; Published: 17 February 2026
Reviewers: Clare Palmer & Lisa Moses

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Citation: Journal of Shelter Medicine and Community Animal Health 2026, **5**: 154 - http://dx.doi.org/10.56771/jsmcah.v5.154

An ethics committee can alleviate these burdens by handling the often taxing and time-consuming process of developing proposals for how to address ethical challenges. In the human context, ethics committees are seen as helping organisations balance different, potentially conflicting values across a range of different situations and to respond fairly to the needs and interests of relevant stakeholders. While this is, of course, valuable in itself, such support might also help to alleviate moral distress among staff by working with organisations to develop 'structures and policies that help [staff] navigate the challenges of ethical care for… patients'.[10] Moreover, they can help mediate disagreements by facilitating communication, recommending dispute-resolution strategies, and negotiating resolutions to conflicts among various parties.

Ethics committees in shelters can play a similar role, enabling staff to focus on their daily duties while a dedicated group handles complex ethical dilemmas. An ethics committee can also help shelters communicate the rationale behind contentious decisions to the public. This can reduce negative feedback and thereby lessen a further source of stress for shelter staff.[11] More broadly, by helping to identify and clarify the core values that guide a shelter's mission, an ethics committee can provide an essential ethical framework to which the organisation and its staff can anchor themselves.

While ethics committees can be a valuable tool for shelters, their successful implementation requires careful consideration. In the following sections, we outline some of the key questions shelters must answer before establishing an ethics committee.

Basic function: Consultation, policy, and education

When establishing an ethics committee, one of the first tasks is to define its function(s). An ethics committee can serve several roles, including: (1) ethics consultation on individual cases, (2) ethical review and development of shelter policy, (3) ethics training for staff and committee members, and (4) research ethics review.[1] Clarifying the committee's purpose is crucial, as this will determine the issues it handles, its day-to-day work, required resources, and its composition. We'll now examine these four functions to illustrate the range of roles an ethics committee can serve in an animal shelter.

Ethics consultation on individual cases

A committee may be designed with the sole function of providing ethical consultation on individual cases. Such consultation has four primary goals:

- To promote an ethical resolution of the case at hand.
- To establish comfortable and respectful communication among the parties involved.
- To help those involved understand and navigate the ethical uncertainties and disagreements about the case.
- To identify patterns that might call for a review of shelter procedures and policies.

While the primary purpose of the ethics committee is to ensure the ethical acceptability of shelter decisions, practices and policies, access to such a committee for consultation on individual cases has significant potential for a positive impact on shelter staff well-being. By giving staff a forum in which to express their anxieties and concerns about a particular case, an ethics committee can relieve individuals of the sense that they must bear full responsibility for what should be done. Moreover, making use of an ethics committee can help to put minds at ease about particular decisions and give staff moral confidence in the outcome. On some occasions, the committee may recommend one specific solution to the issue at hand. There may also be cases where it is more appropriate for the committee to offer several ethically justifiable routes forward. Both of these possible approaches can help staff better understand, and move beyond, the sources of their uncertainty or disagreement. While tragic choices will continue to be a mainstay of shelter work, an ethics committee can ensure that such choices are open to discussion, decisions are shared, and reasoning is transparent.

Ethics consultation on individual cases can be either *retrospective* or *prospective*.[12] Retrospective consultation reviews what was done in a particular case to determine whether, for instance, shelter policy was adhered to, whether the outcome was ethically optimal, and whether there were other options available that might have been better. A retrospective consultative review can identify ways of improving the care and treatment of animals in the future. By contrast, prospective consultation reviews active cases and tries to reach an ethical resolution for the animal in question. Newly established committees typically concentrate on retrospective consultation while they find their footing, but the scope for prospective consultation increases 'as members gain knowledge, skill, experience with each other, familiarity with the ethical norms of their organization, and comfort with reflective analysis, and as ethics intervention becomes a well-established and valued institutional resource…'.[12]

Policy review and development

Ethics committees may also be tasked with 'produc[ing] policies that guide the hospital and those who work within it to ethically optimal decisions, acts, and outcomes'.[13] This involves reviewing existing policies and any proposed new initiatives to ensure that all enacted policies are well-justified, reflect up-to-date science, and have a low risk of causing harm. A committee may develop new

policies to address emerging challenges or new research. It may also devise decision-making tools that enable staff to effectively implement these policies.

Deciding which policy areas the committee will review is another key step. A shelter might want the committee to focus exclusively on policies concerning medical treatment, or it might also want to include those relating to shelter living conditions. Alternatively, the committee could be tasked with reviewing a broader range of policies that impact daily operations, such as those related to waste management, staff contracts, fundraising, and finances.

Whatever the chosen scope of the ethics committee, two points are worth stressing about its work in policy review and development. Firstly, this work will be conducted over much longer periods than is the case for individual ethics consultations. For example, if a working group is set up to review an existing policy in the light of new evidence, this will involve evaluating the evidence, consulting with relevant stakeholders, and assessing the moral case for each policy option. Secondly, as we address further below, how precisely the committee's conclusions and recommendations feed into the shelter's work requires the shelter to specify the authority of the committee vis-à-vis the shelter.

Ethics training

In human healthcare contexts, very few people working in hospitals or serving on ethics committees have had formal ethics training[14] – a fact that is very likely also true for people working in animal shelters and those who might serve on their ethics committees. To remedy this, an ethics expert can offer training to committee members, or to shelter staff more broadly, to help them more effectively navigate complex ethical problems and evaluate possible solutions.

This training could fulfil this function in a number of ways. Firstly, it could equip staff with an understanding of how to identify ethical issues and distinguish these from other types of questions, such as empirical ones. Being able to disentangle how ethical and non-ethical questions play into particular challenges that shelters face is a crucial step to understanding the problem at hand and can also be helpful in identifying sources of disagreement. Secondly, the ethics training could be used to help organisations (and staff) identify the values they are already committed to. Often, an organisation's mission statement reflects value commitments that can be an important source of guidance when ethical issues arise. One task of the ethics training is to unpack, clarify, or develop the mission statement so that the ethics committee, and organisation more broadly, has a set of clear and consistent set of principles to guide their decision-making. Relatedly, the training could address how such values might apply to particular cases; here, discussion of specific cases, either hypothetical ones or cases the shelter has actually dealt with, will be particularly helpful. The training should also make staff more sensitive to how relevant values come into conflict in particular cases, and that different values may have to be traded off against one another.

The educational function of the ethics expert – and the ethics committee more broadly – may also extend to the wider shelter organisation. This can be helpful in a number of ways. Firstly, it may enable the committee to engage more regularly with staff at the shelter, which can help foster a relationship of trust. Secondly, empowering staff to better understand the ethical dimensions can improve outcomes for the animals in their care because it encourages an ethical sensitivity to issues that may previously have gone unnoticed. Thirdly, when staff have a better understanding of the justification for shelter policies and the values of the organization, it may prevent disagreements about what to do in particular cases or enable staff to manage the situation without escalating it to the ethics committee.[1]

The committee's educational role might also extend beyond the shelter, reaching the wider community. This offers many opportunities, such as sharing resources with other shelters, engaging the public, collaborating with community organisations, and other activities that support and enhance the educational work that many shelters already do.

This brief discussion highlights the fact that the educational objectives of an ethics committee can be more or less ambitious. Of course, the more ambitious one is, the more resources one is likely to need to realise those ambitions. Given that, we think that in the first instance, ethics committees in shelters should prioritise ethics training for its members.

Research ethics review

Another function the ethics committee could serve is to provide ethics review of research conducted at the shelter. The core function of this Research Ethics Review is to ensure that any study involving human or nonhuman animal subjects adheres to the highest moral, scientific, and legal standards. This capacity is particularly valuable for shelters wishing to conduct internal studies – for example, on new best practices – when none of the involved researchers have access to an external institutional ethics review or similar ethics body.

However, for the committee to effectively fulfil this role, significant challenges must be addressed. Foremost, if an ethics committee is to adequately perform this function, research ethics expertise needs to be represented on the committee. This is because conduct of research raises a host of ethical and scientific issues that are distinct from the expertise required for

the assessment of ethical questions arising in the day-to-day operations of a shelter. Moreover, existing principles of research ethics concerning animals are often oriented towards human benefit and very permissive about harms done to animals. This means that ethicists evaluating research within the shelter will have to determine what they consider appropriate ethical standards for research within the shelter, rather than being able to rely on established and widely accepted principles, as exist in the context of research involving humans.

Even if the committee does not have the expertise to conduct research ethics review, it may nonetheless be helpful for shelters interested in conducting research. Firstly, if some members of the committee have a university affiliation, this might give them access to relevant Ethics Review Boards that could evaluate the proposed research. Secondly, an ethics committee could be instrumental in providing a more informal review processes, such as that suggested by this journal,[1] to establish an ad hoc committee to assess the ethical acceptability of the proposed research.

Overall, while performing a Research Ethics Review is desirable, it requires significant specialised expertise and careful definition of appropriate ethical standards. Therefore, as a point of pragmatism and resource management, the Research Ethics Review may not be a priority function for many shelters in the first instance.

The structure and authority of the ethics committee

When forming a committee, two further questions must be addressed: Where does it sit in the organisation? And how powerful will it be?

With regard to the first question, the committee can be an integrated part of the shelter, or it can be an independent body.[15] An integrated model has the distinct benefit of selecting committee members who possess a deep, working knowledge of the shelter and its operational realities. However, this close relationship might lead to conflicts of interest or an unconscious bias where the animals' interests are not prioritised as highly as the organisation's immediate needs.

A more independent model, which could still include some shelter staff, can foster a greater degree of impartiality. With the inclusion of members who are not financially or professionally tied to the shelter, an independent committee is positioned to provide recommendations based solely on ethical principles. This distance reduces the potential for internal conflicts of interest and can significantly increase public trust, especially when dealing with controversial issues. However, an independent model may be more difficult to resource in terms of volunteer recruitment – though perhaps it could be shared across shelters in a region. It may also involve additional bureaucracy, which can lead to slower decision-making, and its members may be less cognizant of the organisational reality of the shelter, potentially leading to impractical recommendations. Shelters must weigh these considerations to determine what level of integration or independence best suits their needs and allows the committee to fulfil its desired function(s).

Now to the committee's power: a crucial decision is whether its recommendations are binding or merely advisory. A binding mandate ensures that the committee's findings are always implemented, which, if things work well, will guarantee high ethical standards. However, this approach has the potential to create significant friction with shelter leadership by forcing them to implement recommendations they may have sound operational or financial reasons to reject. Moreover, if the committee is an independent body, it might not be fitting for them to have a binding mandate since they will ultimately not bear the burden of implementation and accountability for the resulting actions.

Even if the recommendations aren't binding, a shelter should consider committing to a clear procedure for responding. This could involve formally replying to the committee, explaining why a recommendation was not followed, or detailing any modifications made.

Creating a formal record of the shelter's response—whether it adopts, rejects, or revises a recommendation—is also beneficial. This not only documents decision-making but also ensures that committee members receive valuable feedback, fostering a dialogue between the committee and shelter leadership. For instance, the leadership might have specific reasons for rejecting a recommendation that could inform the committee's future work. A clear record also makes it easier to revisit decisions if circumstances change.

Composition and expertise of the committee

What should the membership of the ethics committee look like? While ethics consultations in organisations such as hospitals are sometimes provided by individuals (e.g. a Clinical Ethics Consultant in hospitals),[16] selecting a group of people to constitute a committee allows the shelter to bring together different areas of expertise, knowledge, and perspectives; this 'complementary and cumulative experience and expertise of individual members within the group'[17] is a key advantage of a committee over individual ethics consultants. Relying on a group also facilitates a deliberative process among individuals with different backgrounds, resulting in decisions that reflect relevant ethical commitments and empirical facts, and give weight to a broader range of interests.

[1]https://jsmcah.org/index.php/jasv/editorial_policies

Citation: Journal of Shelter Medicine and Community Animal Health 2026, **5**: 154 - http://dx.doi.org/10.56771/jsmcah.v5.154

Identifying the relevant expertise and perspectives to be represented on the committee is a crucial step. While we highlight here some of the perspectives and areas of expertise that should have a place on the committee, individual shelters may find that this list needs to be changed or supplemented in the light of their specific needs. We recognise that for many shelters, securing volunteers to take on these different roles could be very challenging. Even if not all areas of expertise can be represented on a committee, it may be helpful for the shelter to proceed with a more limited range of perspectives, keeping in mind that this will likely affect what functions the committee can be expected to fulfil and make it even more important that the committee's recommendations are discussed with shelter staff.

Firstly, at least one person on the committee should have *practical experience with the day-to-day operations of the shelter*. A staff member, ideally someone with experience across different areas of the shelter, would be suitable for this role. For larger shelters, it may be necessary to have more than one person playing this role.

Secondly, we recommend that at least one member of the committee be someone with substantial *ethics expertise*, ideally in animal ethics. This person would lead the ethics training activities outlined above, providing knowledge about relevant ethical questions to shelter staff as well as to the rest of the committee.[18] They can also help shelter workers identify the ethical questions pertinent to an individual decision or ethical issues arising within the organisation more broadly. Importantly, this may require some 'translation': for example, instead of asking 'what are the ethical challenges you face?', it can be helpful to raise questions like, 'what keeps you up at night?'.[19] Ethics experts can then help distil the ethical questions from those responses. The ethics expert can also offer guidance on how these questions might be approached. For example, the ethics expert may help committee members to consider how the organisation's core commitments might apply to a particular case. Local universities and colleges will be good first points of contact to identify individuals trained in ethics or applied philosophy.

Thirdly, it is crucial to have a *veterinarian* on the committee. Their expertise is necessary to understand many of the challenges arising in the shelter, such as those involving animals with particular health conditions. More broadly, their understanding of animal welfare and how it is affected by arrangements in the shelter will be crucial for organisational and structural questions around the shelter or aspects of shelter policy that affect its residents.

Fourthly, at least one person on the committee needs to have a thorough understanding of *applicable regulations* and by-laws of the relevant locale and, where applicable, the regulations of accreditation bodies and recommendations issued by sector associations. This will ensure that the committee's recommendations are consistent with those constraints. However, as we discuss below, there can be challenges here as the applicable legal frameworks and relevant accreditation bodies may not adequately recognise the moral standing of non-human animals.

Fifthly, we recommend that at least one member of the committee should be an *advocate for the interests of shelter residents*. Since shelters' primary task is to serve the interests of the animals under their care, it is crucial to explicitly represent these interests on the committee. Where appropriate, more than one person may be recruited to play this role. For some decisions, it may also be important to have a representative for animals *outside* the shelter (e.g. community cats).

If the shelter wants the committee to perform research ethics reviews, we recommend that the committee include at least one person with relevant expertise in research ethics. While the committee's general ethicist may have such expertise as part of their training, this is not guaranteed, and it may be necessary to add a research ethics expert who can join the committee when research proposals need to be evaluated.

Finally, the *local community* ought also to be represented appropriately on the committee. Members of the local community interact with the shelter in different capacities, for example, adopting or surrendering animals, or raising concerns about stray animals in the community. The fact that shelters are often located in deprived neighbourhoods[20] and that marginalised communities are often more vulnerable to having to surrender their animal companions,[21] heightens the importance of taking their interests into account. At the same time, the committee will need to balance concern for the local community against the needs and interests of shelter residents, which, we contend, remain its primary constituency.

Bringing issues to the committee

Another question to address concerns the procedures through which the committee can be 'activated'. Firstly, there should be a process through which shelter leadership can approach the committee with specific requests, such as making a recommendation on how to deal with a new issue that has arisen for the organisation or when responding to a contentious or ethically difficult case. Secondly, there is a case for creating avenues through which other shelter workers, not just its leadership, can bring issues to the committee. Allowing for such requests

to be made anonymously can also help to ensure that staff feel comfortable raising issues. Finally, shelters may also find it useful if the committee itself can initiate discussion about specific issues and bring questions to the shelter. For example, committee members may become aware of new empirical evidence that could require review or adjustment of existing shelter practices.

Concluding thoughts: Distinctive challenges and opportunities

In this article, we outlined how ethics committees can be a valuable resource for animal shelters and provided a framework for their establishment. However, we must acknowledge a critical distinction: much of our guidance is adapted from human healthcare ethics committees, and while there are similarities, significant differences exist that pose unique challenges for shelters and warrant further research.

A key difference lies in the established ethical consensus. Human healthcare operates with a widely agreed-upon set of values, such as those articulated in the Hippocratic Oath, which commit to respecting the dignity, autonomy, and rights of patients. While ethical disagreement may arise, it occurs against a shared understanding of what is fundamentally important and what is off-limits. In contrast, animal shelters lack this clear ethical foundation. The moral status of animals and what they are owed as a matter of justice are widely debated. This uncertainty makes ethical reasoning in shelters far more challenging than in hospitals.

While this ambiguity amplifies the need for an ethics committee, it also makes disagreement more likely, both among committee members and between the committee and shelter staff. Importantly, however, any such disagreement does not indicate that the committee process has failed. Given the complexities that must be dealt with and the different perspectives involved, it is not surprising that there will not always be agreement.

In such cases, disagreement can be a valuable source of information: it can clarify, for example, if certain pieces of information are missing or further consultation is required. It can also be helpful to identify the source of the disagreement at stake – this may include disagreement about basic ethical commitments or relevant empirical questions. In the face of persistent disagreement, we recommend that the committee present the contrasting positions around which the discussion has coalesced and offer the reasoning behind them, leaving the choice between these options to the shelter. Knowing what underlies a particular conflict may facilitate acquiring additional information that will address the impasse, or clarify which more fundamental questions need to be addressed.

A second major challenge is that animal shelters exist within a broader system of injustice towards animals. In most societies, animals are legally considered property and do not have the same rights as humans. Shelters are tasked with caring for a small number of sentient beings while billions more are treated as commodities for human consumption. This places shelters in a difficult ethical position. This background of injustice creates unique challenges for shelters and their ethics committees. For example, shelters may face ethically complex situations due to unjust laws or government policies. The euthanasia of healthy animals can become a necessity due to legislation that prohibits their release or rehoming. In the UK, for instance, it is illegal to release grey squirrels into the wild, meaning shelters are often left with euthanasia as the only option for injured or orphaned squirrels.[2] Similarly, breed-specific legislation that prohibits the rehoming of certain dog breeds can make it nearly impossible for shelters to save these animals, forcing them into difficult ethical compromises.

Thirdly, most animal shelters rely on the goodwill of donors for their survival, lacking the stable funding sources available to hospitals. This has important consequences. Firstly, it means that shelters find themselves in the role of a crisis and triage centre, a role that differs significantly from that of a hospital.[22] Secondly, it means that shelters are highly susceptible to public opinion, as any reputational damage can threaten their financial viability.[23] In a context where public norms may not align with what is ethically optimal for animals, shelters may feel pressured to compromise their ideals to maintain public support.

While these difficult conditions create major challenges, shelters are also uniquely positioned to effect social change.[24] To realise this potential, shelters must critically examine the status quo, question established 'best practices', challenge unjust legislation, and work to shift public opinion and social norms around our treatment of non-human animals, including but not limited to the animals under their direct care. Ethics committees can support shelters in this important work, by providing a structured way to identify and advocate for a more just future for animals.

Conflict of interest and funding

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. This paper draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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