

Recommendations for Kitten Intake during COVID-19 Pandemic

In order to support human and animal health in the midst of the current pandemic, healthy kittens of any age should not be admitted to animal shelters; intake is only appropriate for kittens that are sick, injured, or are in immediate danger.

Kitten season is approaching and, in many places, has arrived – and this year we have additional challenges in terms of intake, care and outcomes – everything that we do in response to helping these little ones.

This year more than ever we must acknowledge that:

1. Healthy, unweaned kittens do not fall into the category of sick or injured.
2. Healthy, unweaned kittens are unlikely to be orphaned – and only become so when they are removed from where their mother is likely nearby.
3. Kittens are healthiest, short and long term, when raised by their mother.
4. Healthy cats/kittens of any age found/seen outside are not an emergency for shelter intake; intake is only appropriate for cats that are sick, injured, dangerous, or are in immediate danger, as in the case of cats that are victims of neglect or cruelty.

As we make decisions and write protocols for this kitten season there are many additional factors that we have to keep in mind so that we balance human and animal health and safety:

1. COVID-19 risk for staff coming to the shelter to intake and care for animals, especially kittens because juveniles require greater intensity of care in shelters:
 - Close contact and/or prolonged exposure (> 10 minutes) to people shedding virus, even if not apparently sick, are the biggest risk factors for spread leading to infection with COVID-19.
 - People can shed virus, although lower amounts compared to when sick, up to three days before being symptomatic.
 - Care of kittens in a shelter setting will be difficult if not impossible to perform with appropriate social distancing (>6 feet) between caregivers and sufficiently frequent hygiene (hand washing, hand sanitizer application, avoiding touching one's face).
 - Infection control between litters of kittens is also critical to prevent spread of infections such as panleukopenia. Meeting these needs often requires use of scarce PPE resources. Compromises in infection control due to limited staffing or supplies will place kittens at increased risk.
 - The more kittens are in care, the more difficult it will be to meet the requirements for human and animal safety. Any available shelter capacity should be reserved for sick and injured kittens and other animals as described above.

2. One of the needs of juveniles is a prompt positive outcome. In addition to the risks to staff described above from providing care facilitating adoptions and/or foster care increases contact and thus exposure between people.

