

Stress Reduction Protocol for Shelter Dogs

The shelter is a very stressful place for dogs and efforts should be made to reduce stress whenever possible. Stress reduction procedures should be implemented from the very first minute the dog enters the facility.

1. All dogs should be provided with as comfortable an environment as possible by providing soft bedding and/or raised beds in their kennels.
2. All efforts should be made to reduce the noise levels in the kennels from the barking dogs using the below strategies:
 - a. Sound baffling should be hung in kennel (professional grade or home made).
 - b. Visual barriers should be placed over cages of barking dogs especially during busy times (ex: when dogs are being walked).
 - c. “Click for Quiet” - this program involves shelter staff and volunteers carrying clickers and treats at all times. Any time they walk up to a kennel they should “click” if the dog is not barking and then deliver a treat (the clicker is the marker signal that tells the dog he/she earned a reward). If the dog barks the person should simply walk away. This program teaches the dogs that they earn reward for NOT barking at someone in front of their cage.
3. Play soft soothing music in the kennels during the day. Music has been shown to reduce stress in dogs. The music should be turned off at night as dogs need quiet and darkness to sleep well.
4. Social contact with humans is important for stress reduction. Try the following strategies:
 - a. Calm interactions at the cage front (example: reading to the dogs).
 - b. Sit quietly with the dogs in their cages (if safe), in a quiet room away from the kennels, or outside. Petting a dog has been shown to reduce cortisol levels in dogs. Fifteen minutes of petting daily reduces stress considerably.
5. Maintain a predictable routine (cleaning, feeding, walks, cage enrichment, etc.) – dogs feel better when they know what to expect in a day.
6. Physical exercise goes a long way to reduce stress. The dogs should be walked daily and encouraged to run and play as often as possible.
7. Pheromone Therapy - Adaptil® pheromone collars can be helpful in shelter dogs.
8. Thundershirts® worn for 20-30 minutes each day can reduce stress.