

# What's Happening to Cats at HAS

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A Report Prepared by Rescue Hamilton Cats February 2016

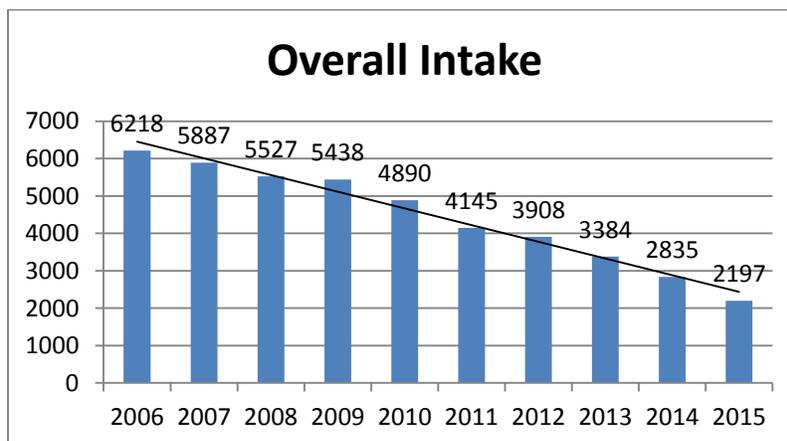
Based on an analysis of data provided to Rescue Hamilton Cats (RHC) by Hamilton Animal Services (HAS), this report focuses on changes from 2014 to 2015, provides graphs illustrating trends over the past 10 years and discusses how internal changes at HAS are affecting Hamilton cats both inside and outside the City shelter.

## Executive Summary

- Intake reached a 10 year low due to increasing limits and restrictions on admissions.
- As intake declined, Euthanized Rate dropped from the 50% range prior to 2012 to levels now being maintained in the 20% range.
- The majority of cats are discharged now to the HBSPCA and other independent organizations that, at no cost to the City, assume responsibility for their vet needs, rehabilitation and adoption.

## INTAKE

The decline by 23% (from 2835 in 2014 to 2197 in 2015) marked the single largest percentage drop in a 10 year period of declining intake. As illustrated below, it has taken the total intake number down to almost 1/3 of what it had been in 2006.



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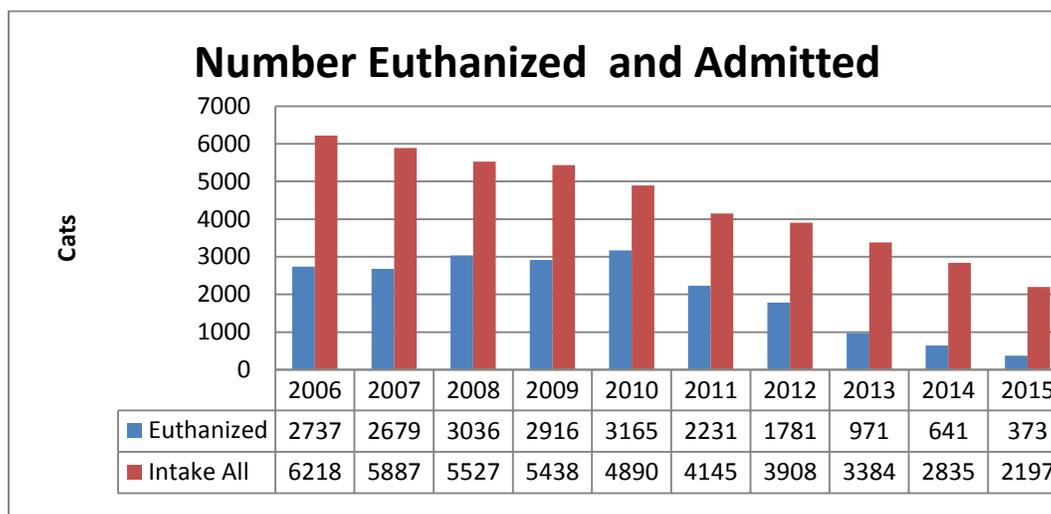
This dramatic drop can be attributed to:

- progressively more stringent limits having been put on the non-emergency pick-up service which, prior to 2011, had been provided on request 24/7. By 2014 that service had come to be restricted to specified times within business hours and, by 2015, was being provided only in special situations as determined on a case-by-case basis.
- the former 'Open Admission' policy having been modified to the point where a 2015 information brochure prepared by the City states that only strays that are "sick, injured or aggressive" should be brought to the shelter. Healthy ones, including cats who seem "lost", should not be brought in. <sup>i</sup>
- the increasing use of the option to close the shelter to all but emergency admissions at times when capacity is reached or the threat of contagious illness is high. The frequency and duration of these times when people arriving with, or calling about, cats were being turned away was particularly noticeable in the spring/summer of 2015. One reason for these service interruptions was the significant further reduction to capacity resulting from ongoing efforts to improve shelter standards.

The policy changes affecting Intake were initiated as part of an effort to bring down the euthanized rate.

## EUTHANIZED

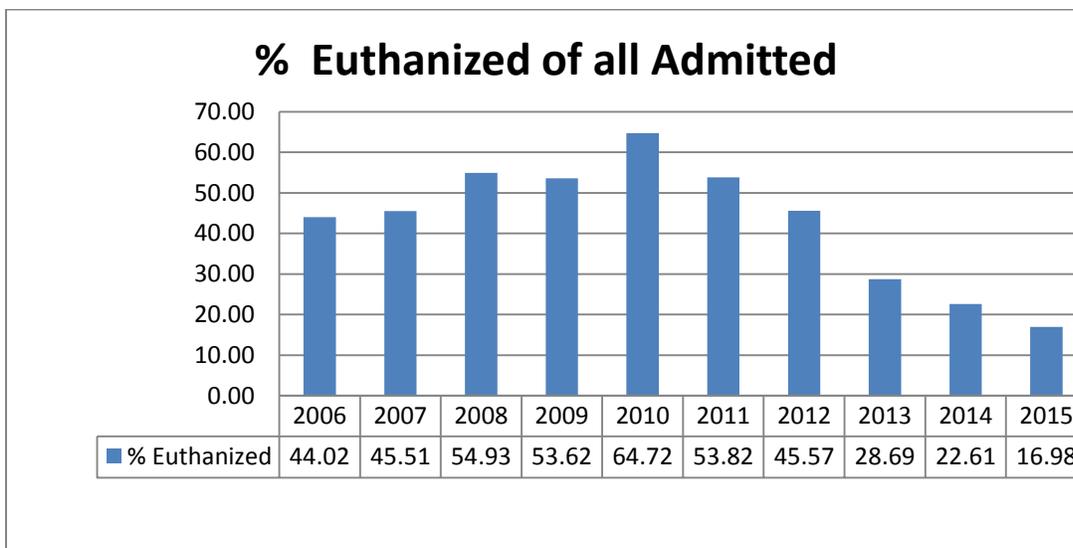
It was expected that, as the Intake numbers (and the volume inside the Shelter) declined, the euthanized numbers would drop as well. As illustrated, they had fluctuated in the period from 2006 to 2011 (with the 2010 number at 3165 being higher than the 2006 number of 2,737) before starting to steadily decline. With the significant drop from 641 in 2014 to 373 in 2015, this parallel downward trend continued through a 5th consecutive year.



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A decline in the euthanized #, while giving the appearance that things are getting better, does not automatically signal a real improvement. It was only in 2013, when the odds on "getting out alive" started to improve, that it came to mean something to the cats inside.

For many years, HAS had been identified as the worst "high-kill shelter" in Ontario and, with the odds hovering around 50/50 and, in 2010, reaching 65% (the highest point ever), that reputation was deserved. With the drop to 29% in 2013 and then to 23% in 2014, it had reached a level comparable to shelters in other cities. A further drop to 17% in 2015 followed from the significantly high drop in Intake last year.



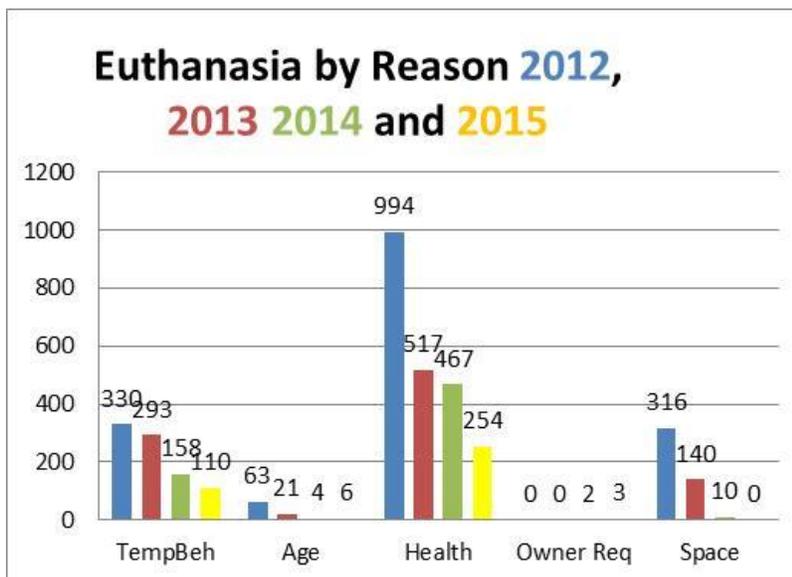
Still often used as THE measure for shelter performance in city-to-city comparisons, the % euthanized can be seriously misleading, without a clear understanding of how the services are delivered. For instance, Calgary Animal Service (CAS) is often cited as a shelter that euthanizes startlingly fewer than any other. What is ignored is that CAS is mandated to take in only "strays" with ID while another organization, the Calgary Humane Society (CHS), is contracted to admit all the rest – and, of course, euthanizes more.<sup>ii</sup> Any meaningful comparison would require a combination of the data from both organizations.

To understand what the rate means, one needs to examine how decisions to euthanize are made. Since 2012 HAS has been consistently providing data on five reported reasons. Of these, three categories are so small that combined they account for only 3%:

- "Space," while in the era prior to 2011 having accounted for rates in the 30% range, declined rapidly. At 316 (18%) in 2012 it dropped to '0' in 2015, and has been eliminated as a possible reason.

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- “At owner request” has remained consistently small with the # in 2015 at “3.” Some cities (e.g. Calgary), have eliminated this category because they view the decision to euthanize to be based always on the cat's current condition as determined in a thorough veterinary examination. Other cities (e.g. Toronto) show higher numbers than Hamilton because they have elected to offer euthanasia services at a low fee to owners who can't afford to have their sick/injured pets humanely “put to sleep” and might otherwise abandon them.



- “Age” has declined from 63 in 2012 to single digit #s as of 2014. This continuing decline may simply reflect a change in record keeping. Older cats are more likely to have medical issues or be stressed/frightened in the shelter environment, and simply be recorded under the ‘health’ or ‘temperament/behaviour’ categories.

"Temperament/Behaviour “and “Health” together accounted for the remaining 97% of all the reported decisions to euthanize in 2015.

- “Temperament/behaviour,” remaining the second most frequent reason, accounted for 29% of the decisions to euthanize last year. Factors including aggression, shyness and depression are often temporary reactions to being caged - and frightened. A breakdown into “feral,” depressed, “kennel stressed” etc., such as other shelters are providing, would be needed to determine if something could be done to lower this rate.

- “Health” by far the most frequently reported reason, accounted for 68% (254) of the total euthanized last year. As is the case with city shelters generally, a significant number of cats admitted to HAS are seriously sick or injured on arrival. Current data does not show how often the decision is made to humanely end their suffering. Without this information, it is not possible to know how much further the euthanized % could be reduced and what measures would be required. Some city shelters already break the Health reason down into “untreatable, treatable, contagious, physical condition, unweaned.”

To some extent it is possible that the decline in the overall euthanized rate is the result of:

- improvements in shelter conditions, increased efforts to curtail the spread of contagious illness (through quarantine and health protocols), introduction of preventive measures (e.g. FVRPC booster on arrival), and diversion of some vet services/meds to addressing health care needs.

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- continued efforts to discharge as quickly as possible to the HBSPCA and other independent organizations the cats most in need of urgent emergency vet care, high cost procedures (e.g. amputations, diagnostic testing, treatments), and intensive or long-term care (e.g. orphaned kittens, pregnant, chronically ill and seriously injured cats.)
- continued efforts to transfer out contagious cases (e.g. Ringworm) threatening to endanger the health of the shelter population.

However, the major factor accounting for the significant overall drop in the euthanized rate has been the dramatic cut in intake - fewer in; fewer killed. Once described as a “euthanasia production process”<sup>iii</sup> where cats, including large numbers of healthy, friendly ones, had to be killed to make room for new admissions, HAS now discharges the vast majority of cats admitted alive.

## DISCHARGED

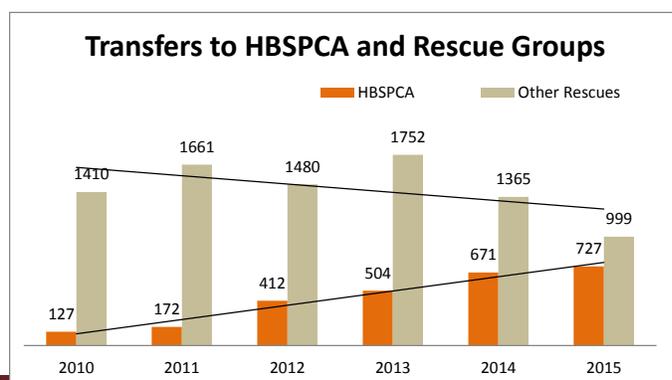
In 2015, as in all previous years for which data is available, a small proportion of the cats were discharged back to owners while most went to independent organizations committed to their welfare.

The 95 cats re-claimed by owners put the Returned-to-Owner (RTO) rate at 5% compared to the 3.9% rate based on the 96 total of 2014. While RTO has fluctuated year-to-year, it remains in a relatively low range.

This is not unusual as return rates from city-run shelters are often low. These rates are not indicators of how many lost cats in a city make it back home. The onus is on owners to actively search and to provide ID with up-to-date contact info. (For cats, given the likelihood of losing collars, microchips matter and, for those that will wear collars, there is no data to support the notion that license or registration tags are more effective than store-bought ones.)

The majority of the cats (1,726 in 2015 or 82% of the total intake-less-RTO) were discharged, as soon as possible after the mandatory 72 hours, to independent organizations which, receiving no funding from the City of Hamilton, assume responsibility for their medical and surgical needs, rehabilitation, ongoing care and adoption.

The # discharged to the HBSPCA has moved steadily upward over the past 5 years. At 727 cats in 2015, it



accounted for 42% of last year's total. This sharp upward trend is due to changes inside the HBSPCA (investment in an on-site companion animal hospital, increased capacity at their on-site shelter, development of a reliable foster home network, the addition of off-site adoption

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locations and innovative adoption campaigns/events).

The increased (and increasing) reliance of HAS on the independent HBSPCA is clearly shown by the data. And the significance is further accentuated by a downward trend in the # (and proportion) being discharged to all other organizations combined. These 15-20 organizations are comprised of local and out-of-town rescue groups, vet offices, as well as some other SPCAs and Humane Societies. The combined number of transfers to them, having dropped substantially again from 1365 in 2014 to 999 in 2015, is clearly trending downward

While there have been fluctuations in the overall #s over the years, these had previously been attributable to changes (reorganizations, closures, & shifts) within individual organizations. This current downward trend, however, reflects other factors that have only recently come into play:

- Several local groups that have long played a large role, rescue also from outside HAS. Recognizing that it is better for the cats to be rescued before entering the shelter, they have, in recent years, been increasing their efforts to rescue from outside (thus helping HAS to reduce their Intake). As HAS has continued to restrict admissions and reduce services, these groups and the HBSPCA have been experiencing a growing volume of requests from the public.
- The measures taken to reduce Intake have led to an increasingly large proportion of the cats "needing rescue" being ones that have high-cost vet needs and/or require long term rehabilitation prior to being put up for adoption. While prior to 2013, there had been significant numbers of healthy, friendly, quickly adoptable cats needing rescue, by 2015 that had ceased to be the case.
- As HAS has ceased to euthanize "for space" and the overall euthanized rate has dropped to levels comparable with other cities, there is no longer a perceived urgency to rescue from Hamilton.
- Several nearby cities have, in recent years, been strengthening their ties between their animal services and local SPCAs, Humane Societies and rescue groups.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

By focussing on curbing Intake, HAS has achieved the goals set five years ago; the killing of cats simply "for space" has been brought to an end and the euthanized rate in Hamilton has dropped to a level comparable to other cities.

These goals could not have been reached without the cooperative effort of the independent organizations - the HBSPCA, local and out-of-town rescue groups, vet offices, and other SPCAs and Humane Societies. These organizations provide access to their own established, effective adoption services, absorbing not only the costs for these services but also for the treatments, surgeries, and rehabilitation that a large proportion of these cat require prior to their becoming adoptable.

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The reality is that HAS would have no way of managing its population and maintaining the goals that have been achieved without their commitment.

As questions are raised about where to go from here and what goals should be set for the next few years, one issue needing to be addressed will be the currently limited veterinary services provided by HAS and how best this city can, as other cities already have, help to mitigate the high costs to these organizations.

It will also need to be acknowledged that the vast majority of Hamilton cats needing help never enter the City Shelter.

The organizations that take cats from HAS respond also to calls from the public for help, take into their care large numbers of abandoned and surrendered cats (before they land inside HAS), and offer programs and services addressing a broader range of city-wide issues.

In Hamilton, as in every municipality where there is a large population of vulnerable cats and kittens, no single-solution approach meets all the needs. Neither the City nor any one person or organization can possibly have all the answers or all the resources. Helping cats requires a co-operative effort and the constructive involvement of pet owners, colony caregivers, veterinarians, adopters, volunteers - and every individual who finds a stray or lost cat and wants to help.

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Recognizing the importance of having accurate, up-to-date information as a basis for decision making and planning we have been, since 2012, preparing reports on what's happening to cats at HAS. Previous reports (including our mid-year 2015 one) are archived in the Information Section & Q/A sections of our web site.

Watch for News Alerts at [rescuehamiltoncats.com](http://rescuehamiltoncats.com) to follow what's happening to cats inside and outside the city shelter.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.hamilton.ca/animals-pets/cats/community-cats> (Jan. 10, 2015)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://rescuehamiltoncats.com/Pages/InfoCalgary.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> Operational review of Hamilton Animal Control Services. Performance Concepts Consulting; September 2007. P.23 <http://www2.hamilton.ca/NR/rdonlyres/4D12C8C0-EF98-4F9A-9AAB-856A67521A2A/0/Oct14Report08002BuildingandLicensingOpReview.pdf>