

Position Statement:

Depopulation

(Updated March 2020)

Depopulation: the rapid destruction of a population of animals (including both diseased and healthy) in response to urgent circumstances.¹

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians believes that **depopulation** of shelters should be a technique of last resort employed only under extraordinary circumstances, such as a bio-terrorism attack, nuclear disaster, or massive community-wide emergency. This intervention should only be used when morbidity, mortality, infectivity, injury, or risk of zoonotic disease is uncommonly severe.

Depopulation is not considered an appropriate response for disease outbreaks in shelters because it results in the euthanasia of healthy animals and generally fails to resolve any underlying issues that led to the outbreak. Veterinarians experienced in shelter disease outbreak management² and familiar with the species affected should be consulted before deciding to depopulate. In the rare instances where depopulation is deemed necessary, shelter leadership should communicate the decision to key stakeholders and the public. The reasons for the disease outbreak must be fully investigated and steps taken to prevent recurrence.

In cases of animal shelter depopulation, euthanasia by injection as outlined in the current AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals (2020)³ should be utilized whenever possible, rather than using other methods of destruction described in the AVMA Guidelines for Depopulation of Animals (2019)¹. In a shelter setting, the number of animals involved will generally be much smaller than in production animal scenarios, which allows for the employment of euthanasia by injection. Veterinarians and shelter staff who are exposed to the depopulation process may experience psychological distress or compassion fatigue, and sheltering organizations are encouraged to take steps to mitigate these effects and provide access to appropriate support services.

References

1. AVMA Guidelines for the Depopulation of Animals, 2019 Edition. Leary et al, AVMA, 2019
2. Infectious Disease Management in Animal Shelters. Lila Miller and Kate Hurley, Eds, July 2009, Wiley-Blackwell, Ames, IA
3. AVMA Guidelines for the Euthanasia of Animals. Leary et al, AVMA, 2020