Keeping Our Eyes on the Prize: Thriving in Shelter Medicine

Whenever someone asks me where I work and I answer, “The Humane Society,” I’ve become accustomed to 2 types of responses. “Awesome!” is, of course, the reply I hope to hear. But more often it’s along the lines of, “That must be so hard.”

As frustrating as this can be, it is also understandable. The general public’s perception of animal sheltering has long been a gloomy one. In the 1970s, the estimate of dogs and cats euthanized in U.S. shelters was more than 20 million per year.¹ The most recent estimates are 2–3 million annually.² Much work remains, but the strides made through public awareness, education, spay/neuter campaigns, and incredibly hardworking shelter teams are apparent.

Although the path is not easy, veterinary professionals in shelter medicine across the country consider themselves fortunate to work in a field so full of passion, rewards, and challenge.

A Day in the Life

The shelter where I work in Colorado Springs takes in about 18,000 animals each year. Approximately 200 cats and 150 dogs are housed in the shelter at any given time. Every morning, I can expect to find 20–30 patients being moved into the surgery center kennels, a priority medical check (or 2) taped to my office door, and an ongoing list of animals needing veterinary attention. Triage skills, which are acquired through experience, education, and mentorship, are critical, as is an efficient yet complete approach.

Given the large daily case load, our team works quickly. Our technicians and assistants have all completed at least some formal training, including Certified Veterinary Technician internships at our shelter. Many of us have spent a significant part of our careers in shelter medicine and are comfortable and confident in our skills.

As in any veterinary job, there is no typical day, but there are many intense situations that involve fast decision-making. Having a cohesive, compassionate team and supportive environment is essential. Open humor, praise, respect, and sympathy keep us
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Compassion fatigue and burnout are problems, as they are throughout the veterinary profession. I believe shelter staff are more susceptible not only because of the stress of euthanasia decisions, but also the feeling that there is so much more to do. Going step-by-step and staying positive is not always easy, and the ultimate goal—to end the euthanasia of healthy or treatable pets—will require exceptional focus and determination. Long-term efforts will make the greatest impact, and even the smallest changes add up.

The animal shelter team is a finite resource and each member’s mental, emotional, and physical energy must be maintained and budgeted for the sake of the animals. Incredible positive changes in animal sheltering continue to take place every day. Given the leadership, knowledge, and spirit of community in shelter medicine, it will only get better.

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references & suggested reading.

THE FACTS

• In the 1970s, an estimated 20 million dogs and cats were euthanized in U.S. animal shelters each year.
• The Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV; sheltervet.org) now has more than 700 members and an active online community.
• In 2010, the ASV published the first-ever Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters; sheltervet.org/about/shelter-standards/
• As of 2014, veterinarians can be board certified in Shelter Medicine through the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners.
• The most recent estimates of pets euthanized in shelters are 2–3 million annually.

It Will Only Get Better

The field of shelter medicine has advanced exponentially over the past 15 years. Most large shelters (ie, intake of 5,000-plus animals per year) now have veterinarians on staff. Many U.S. veterinary schools now offer classes and student rotations in shelter medicine, such as humane society externships, internships, and residencies.5

Resources for the management of animal shelters—from infectious disease protocols to grant writing workshops—are readily available.4,8 Although nationwide organizations (eg, American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Humane Society of the United States) are not affiliated with individual shelters, they do provide tremendous support through resources, training, and creating a community for professionals with the same mission and challenges. The internet has helped form a community where animal shelter professionals can exchange information.