

Working with Veterinarians

A Shelter Guide to Success

One of the most comprehensive studies to look at why people surrender their animals to shelters found that the presence of a relationship with a veterinary provider mitigates against shelter abandonment. In other words, the better the relationship between a client and his/her veterinarian, the less likely that person will be to surrender their pet to a shelter. Moreover, when sick animals are taken to veterinarians after adoption from a shelter, how a veterinarian frames the issue will go a long way to protecting a shelter's image or hurting it. A veterinarian's casual remark that "animals I see from the shelter are sickly" can harm a shelter's reputation. Finally, veterinarians can help with spay/neuter, treatment, and other support which can go a long way to achieving a No Kill Community. Good relations with the veterinary community are therefore key to saving lives.

Unfortunately, too often the relationship between veterinarians and animal shelters is non-existent or adversarial. While a partnership with the veterinary community is readily available to many shelters nationwide, it is one of the most untapped resources today. These relationships can lay the groundwork which will improve delivery of animal care services, provide cost-effective treatment for sick or injured shelter animals, and allow for training of shelter staff and volunteers.

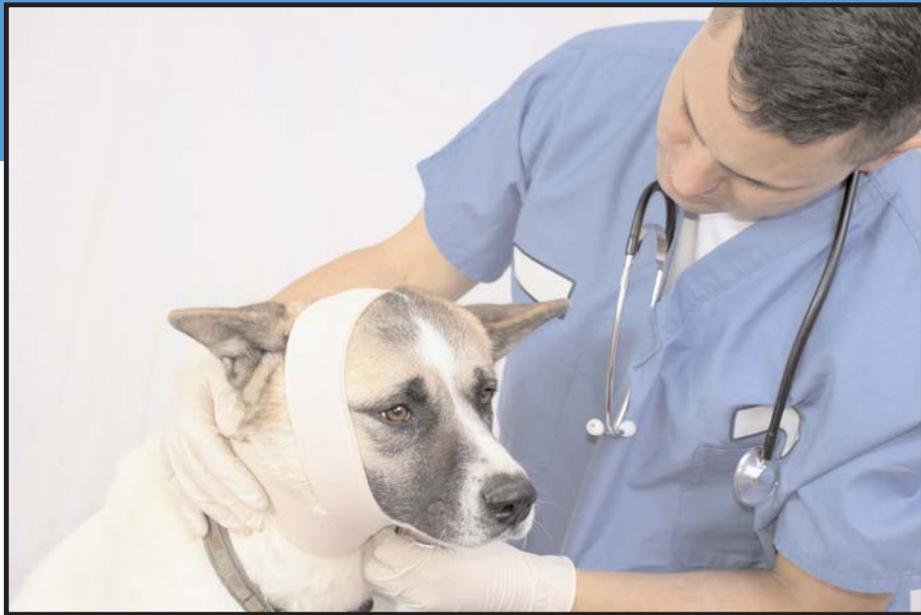
In a shelter in the same city as one of the nation's most prestigious veterinary colleges, animals were being killed for something as simple as the common cold. In another community, shelter administrators claimed they didn't have the knowledge or ability to care for sick or injured animals although a veterinary college not twenty minutes away was able and willing to help in the lifesaving endeavor.

In the former case, the shelter had declined to work with the veterinary college. In the latter example, the shelter never bothered to approach

college administrators and ask for help. With the hiring of new leadership at both shelters, all of that changed. In both cities, animals now make their way to the college, and in some cases, veterinary students make their way to the shelter. The shelter gains in terms of subsidized spay/neuter, diagnosis and treatment of shelter animals. And the college gains in terms of cost effective training in animal handling, physical examination, diagnosis, treatment and surgery skills for the students.

Furthermore, the relationship allows veterinary students to volunteer at the shelter on a regular basis, providing the

students with real life “on-the-job” training, while shelter animals receive high-quality care under the direction of the college faculty. It is a classic “win-win” for all involved. (These programs can also be developed with veterinary technician schools.)



In addition, working with shelters allows local veterinarians to gain clients among the shelter’s newly adopted animals while the shelter receives high quality care at very little cost.

Developing the Relationship

How can a shelter tap into the many lifesaving resources of the veterinary community? The first rule for shelters is not to ask for a “hand-out,” but to promote the program as providing benefits for both parties. The second rule is for shelter directors to be reasonable in expectation and accommodating where necessary. But the most important rule is that the shelter must be willing and able to follow-through on agreements.

When approaching the veterinary community, a well written “white paper” which outlines the benefits to both parties and the scope of the potential relationship can provide the

game plan for success. While many shelters seek veterinary partnerships for spay/neuter and treatment, this is only the beginning. And while initially focusing on spay/neuter and treatment can be used to build the relationship for further services, comprehensive programs should be developed which cover all of the following areas:

Veterinary colleges

- A student organization to learn hands-on diagnostic skills under the oversight of a clinician while doing rounds at the shelter.
- Primary care for shelter animals.
- Spay/neuter of shelter animals.
- Development of temperament evaluation and behavior modification protocols.
- Expert witnesses for cruelty cases.
- Train shelter staff in animal behavior, handling, cleaning and other care.
- Emergency service provider for injured animals who are beyond the shelter’s ability to treat.
- Identify strains of viral infections and modify vaccination/cleaning/containment

protocols as necessary.

- Shelter medicine residency program using the shelter for training.

Veterinary technician schools

- Student organization to learn hands-on veterinary technician skills under the oversight of a clinician while doing rounds at the shelter.
- Primary care and spay/neuter services for shelter animals.
- Shelter veterinary technician training program at the shelter.

Private veterinarians

- A free health exam within 30 days of a shelter adoption to encourage veterinary care for recently adopted animals.
- Rounds at the shelter (one day a week for one month of the year) in exchange for a modest stipend (e.g., thirty dollars) and referral for people who adopt animals they have treated at the shelter.
- A fixed-fee spay/neuter voucher program, or otherwise assist in



providing a sliding scale low-income spay/neuter program.

- A bid based system of treating shelter animals.
- Donate recently expired drugs that are still efficacious to the shelter.

- Forum where private veterinarians are made aware of viral strains and other issues in the shelter and provide that information to clients in a positive manner.
- Continuing education module for private veterinarians revolving around shelter medicine issues, such as pediatric neutering.

Programs at Cornell, University of Pennsylvania, and the University of California at Davis provide

opportunities to emulate existing models.

