ACTION STEPS

Conference participants shared both concerns with current evaluation methodologies and research in the field of animal assisted interventions and a strong commitment to enhance the field through improvements in research design and directions, program best practices, and collaboration between program administrators and researchers. The conference and subsequent expert group meeting produced a variety of recommendations to improve research, evaluation, and programs in the field of animal assisted interventions.

Conference speakers provided a critique of research in the field of animal assisted interventions. Lack of definition of target populations, diffuse applications of animal assisted interventions, and faulty assumptions about therapeutic change have marred prior research efforts. Animal assisted interventions are not ready to compete in the therapeutic realm. Evidenced-based treatments require randomized controlled trials with sufficient statistical power, which are very expensive and must meet very high standards.

However, smaller and less expensive research designs can be used to build the case for animal assisted interventions. These methods include single-case experimental research, rigorous qualitative research, and laboratory studies of human functioning such as neuro-imaging. Research should use controls (e.g. comparing contact with animal with contact with no animal contact or contact with a stuffed animal). An accumulation of case studies also could help build the case for animal assisted interventions.

Program administrators and researchers need to identify what we are trying to accomplish with animal assisted interventions, populations whom would be most responsive, and conditions under which these programs would likely be the most beneficial. Measurement of non-specific outcomes may be more manageable than therapeutic change. Studies could measure concentration, sociability, knowledge acquisition, or neurological responses. Researchers also could look at retention in treatment. Research needs to address the durability of behavioral changes into the future and generalization of skills beyond therapeutic and program settings.

The conference and expert group meeting identified several promising new research directions. Quality of life of participants is one such viable research focus. Qualitative studies in this field lend support for pursuing research in this area. Quality of life has hard end-points. Measures of participant quality of life could include retention and compliance with treatment. Improvements in quality of life for staff also could be measured. Measures of staff quality of life could include staff turnover and morale, which have important implications for quality of care.

Another fruitful research area might be animal assisted reading programs. Reading programs are more standardized and the literature shows that teaching skills can transform behavior. Reading programs also have a variety of well-established outcome measures. A controlled study could be done, allowing comparison of interventions with and without the presence of animals.
Contagion is often a problem in youth violence prevention programs involving group activities. In animal assisted interventions, another avenue of research could examine the possibility that dogs, along with handlers, theoretically are the equivalent of the “good people” in a group of youth with behavioral problems and that this dynamic could prevent the dangers of contagion. In general, research design needs to examine the totality of factors involved in the program, including the contributions of animals, youth, and staff.

Animal assisted programs also need to be evaluated in terms of their impact on animals. We need to look at animal behavior in the context of animal assisted programs. Data should be collected on outcomes for shelter dogs. Ethologists could contribute to an understanding of animal experiences in these programs.

Administrators, clinical staff, staff who work with animals, referring agencies, and researchers should be involved in the development of institutional research agenda Referring agencies of youth are a source of evaluation criteria and data.

Conference discussions also pointed to the relationship between best practices and evaluation. The HSUS Best Practices Survey of Dog Training Programs and best practices discussion groups illuminated important practices in the areas of staffing, management, and training, participant selection, program content and structure, dog selection and care, community partnerships, and funding. Three key recommendations were made concerning best practices. First, programs need to be safe and beneficial for both children and animals. Second, interventions should be developmentally appropriate, multi-sensory, and interactive. Third, program impacts may be greater if both children and caregivers are involved.

Implementation of these recommendations and future research in the field depend upon collaboration among programs, referring agencies, researchers, and funders. In particular, cooperation between non-profit organizations and researchers at universities and research institutes maximizes both funding opportunities and successful evaluation.

The conference identified several possible collaborative endeavors for the future. First, research could be advanced by the development of a research agenda and acquisition of funding for an RFP program to pursue these research directions. With a small amount of funding, RFPs could be generated and grants disseminated to research partnerships between animal assisted programs and university-based researchers. An initial stage could support graduate students to work with programs.

Second, conference participants expressed support for the establishment of a National Technical Assistance Center for Animal Assisted Interventions. A National Technical Assistance Center for Animal Assisted Interventions would be a powerful resource for both researchers and practitioners. The Center could be the repository for published and unpublished research, conference proceedings, and instrumentation.

A third collaborative effort could involve submission of a R18 request for funding to support a series of subsequent conferences to develop the field to take us to the next
step. At subsequent conferences and meetings, practitioners and researchers could work together to define research strategies.

Conference participants viewed the December 6-7 meeting in Baltimore as a historic juncture in the field of animal assisted interventions. The unprecedented representation of program administrators, researchers in the field, and evaluation experts created a foundation of knowledge, ideas, and networks that have the capacity to advance the field in new and exciting directions.