Not Just Toolin' Around

Online assessment helps shelters combat infectious disease

It's always helpful to add another tool to your toolbox as you strive to make the animals in your shelter healthier, happier, and more adoptable. And if the tool is free and as close as your computer keyboard, well, so much the better.

In May, Iowa State University's College of Veterinary Medicine and its Center for Food Security and Public Health, supported by Maddie's Fund, launched the Maddie's Animal Shelter Infection Control Tool. The online resource (available at no charge at *maddiesfund.org/sheltertool*) enables shelters to answer questions about their facilities, protocols, and procedures to see how they contribute to infection control. The tool evaluates a shelter's practices, and offers a variety of resources to help it improve—including "best practice" information and links to articles, signs, and instructional videos.

You might get asked if your staff is trained to recognize common contagious diseases in dogs and cats, or if you immediately squeegee away standing water after disinfecting kennels. The questions cover six categories: animal health; animal husbandry; cleaning, disinfection, and sanitation; emergency management; facility environment; and training and public health. Shelters can also create online training for staff.

Believed to be the first resource of its kind, the shelter infection control tool has stirred excitement among the people managing it, who believe it will help address shelters' hunger for information and ultimately reduce the spread of infectious diseases. In the edited interview below, Iowa State assistant professor Christine Petersen (who unveiled the tool in May at Animal Care Expo) and associate professor Claudia Baldwin, codirectors of the Maddie's shelter medicine program at the university, discuss the new tool with *Animal Sheltering* associate editor James Hettinger.

Animal Sheltering: **Why is the Maddie's Animal Shelter Infection Control Tool needed?**

Claudia Baldwin: I have been working with shelters and students in shelters for about the last nine years. Being out there in the shelters, it becomes very clear that there's a lot that people are doing that they shouldn't be doing, or they're not doing it the best way possible. We have really focused on parasites and infectious disease in our research. And boy, making just a few changes can make a lot of difference. When I talk on the phone or when I go into a site, often times it's the sanitation/disinfection that's a problem, or the stress level—the facility itself, and how stressful it is for the animals. And by making a few changes, things can turn around. This gives us a lot of information on animal husbandry, which is essential.

Can you give us a thumbnail description of how it works?

Christine Petersen: The idea is that this is a tool that they can use to assess a shelter in terms of its operation and how that affects the way disease can be managed in the shelter at any time. So it is a comprehensive assessment, but it also certainly can help in times of trouble. The way I presented it was to look at how a shelter in the springtime—that's starting to see an influx of more dogs, and also just having more staff and volunteers—[might experience] an increased incidence of kennel cough. The assessment will flag areas in different topics—animal health, the right kinds of vaccinations, having specific disease descriptions and protocols, cleaning and disinfection and sanitation, general animal husbandry.

There are six different topics. You can either do them all at once, which will probably take about two and a half or three hours, or you can do them one at a time. The things that you're doing well, it will commend you for that. And the things that perhaps you should adapt somewhat, you'll get recom-

Iowa State University veterinary professors Christine Petersen, right, and Claudia Baldwin believe the Maddie's Animal Shelter Infection Control tool, which will enable shelters to assess themselves and improve their handling of infectious diseases.

A few changes in the way a shelter approaches such matters as vaccinations can make a world of difference and help increase live release rates.

mendations on how to do that. It provides you with a list of resources and responses. It tells you, here are some things you might want to think about doing, here are websites, photographs of actual procedures, videos of procedures, handouts, and other things that can be used, both to inform people working in the shelter, but also to train them.

In my presentation, I talked about if you are seeing kennel cough, you probably want to look at what cleaning and disinfection is going on in your shelter, in order to make sure that you are getting rid of those pesky viruses and bacteria that can cause it. Often, implementing some basic vaccination protocols and disease recognition can make a difference in that situation.

Did you have a particular target audience in mind, like big shelters, small shelters, or just anybody and everybody?
Petersen: For larger shelters, most of the information will be familiar, but as a training tool it could be very handy, just because they often have such large staff and volunteer populations. For the smaller shelters, I think that's where it's really going to be important, because often they'll have a veterinarian in the community who's helping them part time, but that veterinarian often will not have [studied] companion animal population medicine. They may not know the things that for most shelter veterinarians are now old hat, like you have to vaccinate on intake.

Would you expect shelters to have a designated person to access the tool, or could anybody on the shelter staff use it?
Petersen: To actually perform the shelter assessment, you need to know a lot about the nuts and bolts of what the shelter has as their protocols and operational procedures. For that I would assume it would be the shelter manager or the person that's in charge of animal health. If the shelter's a smaller shelter but has a veterinarian, certainly the veterinarian might be a good person as well. So the log-in can be shared across two different people. Theoretically, the training tool then could be used by anyone.

The other thing that's completely optional, that people are often reticent about providing, is we do have a part about entering Asilomar Accords data. In order to see if this tool is actually helping anyone, we need to have before-and-after information on adoption numbers, and Asilomar numbers seem to be the most standard way to do that. We're not providing any of the information on a shelter basis to Maddie's. We are just going to break it down as we can,

once we get enough numbers in, so that we can perhaps look at different shelter sizes, and look at different regional areas, and see what kind of changes we see. But we are never going to report it out to a small enough region or type of shelter so that any particular shelter can be identified.

You sense there is a lot of pent-up demand for something like this?
Petersen: I do. Based on what Dr. Baldwin and I see, in talking to our colleagues at Cornell, the University of Florida, and [University of California] Davis, there are just constant requests about how to fix things that are often related to stress, overcrowding, and sanitation and disinfection. So this should allow most shelters to learn about those things without having to get one of us on the phone.

Will you be updating the tool's links to additional websites and resources?
Petersen: Absolutely, so we would love to get feedback if there are any areas that are unclear, if any link is broken, and we will be continually going on and making sure that everything is up to date as much as possible. It's

The new Maddie's Animal Shelter Infection Control tool enables shelters to evaluate their facilities and practices so that animals will be healthier and happier during their shelter stay.

the first tool of its kind, so we're hoping that it is really useful.

It's pretty exciting to finally be able to get something like this out for anybody in an animal shelter. And we believe that not only will it help animal shelters, but anybody who needs to house large numbers of dogs and cats in one place.

Do you have any plans to expand it beyond disease control and prevention?
Petersen: We do. Our content experts went through all of our questions and gave us feedback. And one of the pieces of feedback is, "You guys have great information here, but the one area that you don't talk about a lot is behavior management, and how behavior ties in to infection control." We do say that you need to do enrichment, and you need to think about overcrowding and stress, but we don't really talk about specific ways to assess behavior, and then how to change behavior—because we really think that that's a whole nother tool. So, it's in the works that we put together a behavior tool.

Looking down the road a few years, what is your hoped-for impact in the world of sheltering?
Petersen: Our hope is that basic concepts of hygiene, sanitation, disinfection, and population management would be widely dispersed across the whole sheltering community, so that it's not just the people that make it to Expo or make it to the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators conference that would hold this information, but all the local community shelters would be able to tap in to it, and then we really would start addressing behavioral problems and the slightly more complex issues, and basic infectious disease problems would be eradicated.

Baldwin: If we can eliminate the infections in our shelters, we can increase our live release rates, and that's the bottom line everywhere. *AS*

For more information about the Asilomar Accords, go to asilomaraccords.org.