PART 5:
Staff Training Saves Lives

How Frederick County Animal Control keeps its staff up to speed

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In 2010, the Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) released a document several years in the making: *Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters*. Developed by a roster of veterinary experts, the guidelines are designed to “balance animal welfare science with practical and realistic recommendations for shelters,” and to provide a vision based on the needs of animals—which, the authors noted, remain the same regardless of how individual organizations’ missions and resources may differ. Here, we feature the fifth in a series of stories using real-life shelter examples to demonstrate how the ASV guidelines can be applied within the sheltering and rescue field to create better and more humane outcomes for the creatures we care for. To read other stories in the series, go to animalsheltering.org.
Anyone who has worked in a well-managed shelter will tell you: Caring for a population of shelter animals is a tall order. There is so much more to animal care than filling a bowl with dog chow or dumping out a litter box. Every day brings new challenges and situations you don’t expect.

Some shelters meet those challenges better than others. In facilities where animal care isn’t ideal, the problem is often inadequate staff training. Given the many elements of sheltering that require careful attention to detail, proper training, standard operating procedures, and staff experience are necessary to ensure high-quality care.

Turnover in shelters can be high, so many shelters constantly have new staff in need of training. Indeed, even the most seasoned staff and qualified caregivers need to keep learning to stay on top of new developments that will help them provide better care for their animals. Even staff who are highly motivated to do good work cannot do so unless they are empowered with the proper training and experience.

According to ASV’s guidelines, “Adequate training is required to ensure humane animal care, as well as staff and public safety. This includes allocating time and resources for employees and volunteers to complete training prior to undertaking responsibility for tasks. The skills, knowledge and training to accomplish each task must be successfully demonstrated before proficiency is assumed. Continuing education should be provided in order to maintain and improve skills. Documentation of training should be maintained.”

To meet these needs, shelters should develop and embrace a culture of continuous learning that includes all administrators and staff members. Providing suitable orientation, background materials, access to appropriate resources, and specific training can go a long way toward ensuring that the shelter personnel responsible for animal care are qualified for their jobs. With so many topics and skills to master—including regulations, guidelines, husbandry practices, medical and behavioral health care, species-specific training, and more—the task of developing training materials may seem daunting.

But don’t be afraid to dig in deep: Knowledge is empowering, and finding existing resources may be easier than you think. Plus, the payback is huge. Not only does training have the potential to enhance animal care and help us do better work, it often makes the work we’re already doing less stressful and more fulfilling.

The director of Frederick County Animal Control (FCAC) in Frederick, Md., recently shared a few of his agency’s best practices for ensuring effective staff training. Following his retirement from the city of Frederick’s police department in 2002, former police chief Harold Domer was hired to direct the county shelter. Domer became attached to both the challenges and rewards of animal sheltering; ten years later, he is still on the job.

When Domer first started at the shelter, few written policies and protocols were in place, and the management structure was poorly defined. Domer used his background and training to change that. Today, the shelter possesses a strong management team, detailed protocols, and an extensive training program, with checkpoints to ensure competency, safety, and attention to detail every step of the way. From guidelines for animal care, to facility cleaning and maintenance, to protocols for officers handling cases in the field, FCAC has created integrated systems for learning the ropes.

**A Place to Start**

Shortly after Domer came on the job, he tasked staff with creating written standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the shelter. This document would serve as a roadmap for streamlining operations, training staff and volunteers, and assisting management with decision-making. This was the first step toward providing a solid infrastructure for the organization and ensuring that staff—paid and volunteer—would know what was expected of them, how to accomplish it, and how they would be held accountable.

Using The HSUS’s Guidelines for the Operation of an Animal Shelter as a template, FCAC staff members customized and tailored the SOPs to address their organization’s mission and resources.

Domer supplemented the operational SOPs with a structured on-the-job training program to provide staff and volunteers with the information and skills necessary to carry out their assigned tasks. His plan also included defining a clear management structure, and he developed and documented personnel policies with a system of checks and balances to ensure effective implementation of the operational SOPs.

“Accountability, responsibility, and lines of authority are essential, but teamwork is the most important ingredient for success,” Domer says. “If you are not together in the teamwork concept, you are going to fail.” At FCAC, Domer says,
Shelter staff can’t know the ins and outs of proper cleaning unless they’ve been provided with adequate training. Here, kennel tech Jennifer Norbury of Frederick County Animal Control cleans a litter pan.

the management team meets weekly, and the agency holds monthly staff meetings to ensure the entire team is up to speed. Officers receive incident command system training to ensure that, should disasters or emergencies occur, the agency will be ready to respond.

Training in Action
Since creating the original SOPs, the shelter has made many updates and additions. That’s as it should be: A shelter’s SOPs are always a work in progress—and keeping them updated and available is crucial.

The master SOPs, Domer says, are electronic; employees access them on a shared drive. All staff are required to read the SOPs that are keyed to their positions, and supervisors sign off indicating that employees have fulfilled the requirement. Afterward, Domer says, those learning new responsibilities work with experienced staff, performing tasks together until the trainee achieves competency. Senior employees and supervisors must sign off on an employee’s abilities before they can do a task alone.

“There is no set time for this because some take longer than others to be ready,” Domer says. “It is always done on an individual basis. This process ensures that the job is done properly and safely and that no one is ever ‘thrown to the wolves.’ It doesn’t matter if we are talking about cleaning a cage or vaccinating an animal—training, attention to detail, and teamwork must happen.”

According to kennel supervisor Linda Shea, FCAC’s staff is offered in-house training in a variety of subjects every few weeks. Topics include everything from the basics of cleaning cages to animal body language. Training topics are primarily developed by Shea, but she actively solicits input from staff. When a staffer indicated the team could use more info on rabbit handling, FCAC brought in shelter volunteer Carla Pickett, who also works with rabbit rescue, to demonstrate the secrets of bunny-taming.

Each training session is held during the workday, at the shelter, and is typically kept to half an hour. To keep kennel staff on their toes in a fun, semicompetitive way, manage-

ment also gives homework assignments on a regular basis. One of Shea’s favorite assignments for staff is to ask them to verify cleaning solution recipes—proper dilution of disinfectants is crucial for effectiveness, and Shea keeps this at the forefront of the staff’s mind with these assignments.

Shea notes that staff sessions focused on animal handling and training are favorites of both staff and shelter pets. “Everyone has had experiences with muscle-bound, intelligent canines who pose a challenge in the behavior department,” she says. Staff and volunteers often want to work with these dogs and are motivated to learn how. “Teaching staff to improve animal handling and training skills is a win-win situation for everyone: the staff, the animal, and—maybe most importantly—the potential adopter,” says Shea.

Mixing it Up
In addition to SOPs and on-the-job training, other great ways to infuse knowledge into an organization include conferences, meetings, webinars, publications, instructional videos, and textbooks.

It is no secret, of course, that shelters operate on tight budgets—and training can be expensive. In the current economy, with agencies watching their budgets get slashed to the bone, utilizing low-cost or no-cost training opportunities is especially important.

Resources
Being an information junkie is getting easier. Check out these free or low-cost resources that can help you provide training for your staff.

- Animal Sheltering magazine’s online complement, animalsheltering.org, has a resource library with a wealth of information, including back issues of the magazine, guidelines for shelter operations (animalsheltering.org/shelter_operations) and guidelines for creating shelter SOPs (animalsheltering.org/sops).
- The UC Davis Shelter Medicine program has health information sheets and a reference library at sheltermedicine.com.
- The ASPCA’s site for animal sheltering professionals provides great training materials and ongoing webinars (ASPCApro.org).
- Petsmart Charities provides ongoing webinars for animal care professionals (petsmartcharities.org/resources/).
- Tawzer Dog (tawzerdog.com) has videos and seminars on dog behavior.
Domer notes that shelters can often supply training for less than they’d expect, and recommends the following approaches: Have students become teachers. Send one employee to a seminar or conference with the expectation that she will return to the shelter and train other employees. You can also leverage the experts you already have: Paid and volunteer shelter staff members often have unique expertise to share. For example, if one employee possesses specialized knowledge about clicker training for cats and another can put together a PowerPoint presentation, working together, they can provide training for a staff meeting.

Domer provided a few examples of how FCAC utilizes these approaches.

In 2005, office manager Clara Bowens and animal control officer Deborah Norris attended The HSUS’s Animal Care Expo; ACO John Teal went in 2007. When they returned, they shared information gleaned from the workshops they’d attended with other staff members.

In 2009, The HSUS provided a compassion fatigue class to FCAC’s veterinary and kennel technicians, as well as other shelters in the area.

Last summer, staff veterinarian Sharon Thomas prepared instructions for officers handling dogs in cars during hot weather. Another staff member prepared a PowerPoint presentation using the veterinarian’s suggestions, and provided the slides to animal control supervisor Dave Luckenbaugh. Luckenbaugh presented the slides at a regular staff meeting; overall cost to the shelter was minimal.

When Pickett spoke to the staff about rabbit handling, she prepared handouts and a 20-minute presentation. Shea says new employees and volunteers who work with rabbits receive this briefing; the only costs to the shelter are staff time and use of the copy machine.

Volunteer coordinator Shawn Snyder delivers training to groups of new volunteers. He provides copies of relevant instructions to attendees so they have a take-home, reviewable version of their training. He also designates specific volunteers to serve as trainers and go-to substitutes in his absence. Signs on cages indicating “Staff or approved volunteers” allow pets with minor health or behavior issues to receive extra attention beyond what staff can provide—and the signs motivate other volunteers to seek additional training.

**Be a Squeaky Wheel**

Don’t be afraid to ask for help and advice! Domer and Shea also recommend checking the Web or asking local rescue groups and trainers for advice on go-to people. That’s how the shelter found dog trainer Janet Flanagan, the certified professional dog trainer who now provides a free seminar covering housetraining and basic manners for recent and potential adopters. Staff members may also attend, to sharpen their knowledge and improve their adoption counseling and animal handling skills.

The shelter archives numerous training resources and makes them available to staff. Topics range from foster care to determining the age of puppies and kittens, to animal cruelty; dedicated resources are available for every position.

The old adage “training never ends” is true—there’s always more to learn. Shelters that want to be prepared for new challenges will ensure their staff are up to speed on the knowledge that’s already out there, and keep an eye out for what they’ll need to know next. The return on the investment makes it well worth the ongoing effort.

These days, multiple organizations offer great webinars for shelter staff. Many of them are free and allow folks to study on their own time—if they can get to their computers!