

## **What is Shelter Medicine?**

Shelter Medicine is a field of veterinary medicine dedicated to the care of homeless animals in shelters or other facilities dedicated to finding them new homes.

## **How does Shelter Medicine differ from Private Practice?**

Private Practice Veterinarians focus mainly on the health care of individual animals with owners. Shelter Veterinarians provide a unique blend of individual and population level care for homeless animals, including a strong focus on physical and behavioral wellness. Caring responsibly for a shelter population presents challenges rarely faced in private practice. Many of the animals entering shelters arrive with little to no medical history and may be stray, feral, or victims of cruelty. Arriving from many locations with different life experiences and exposure histories makes this a population at higher risk for infectious diseases and problem behaviors. This is compounded by high-density housing and the stress associated with confinement, making proper behavioral care a crucial part of shelter animal health.

## **What does high quality care mean in a shelter setting?**

Shelter Medicine has emerged as a specialty field in order to elevate and promote a better quality of life for shelter animals. All veterinary disciplines, whether managing livestock, pets or other species, make treatment and diagnostic decisions within the framework of resources available to the veterinarian and owner. Shelters, as temporary “owners”, must continually balance the needs of the individual animal, the shelter population, and the sustainability of the organization. High quality care in a shelter combines individual and population health management to optimize wellness and prepare animals to enter the community for a lifetime of care.

## **What areas of learning are employed by a Shelter Veterinarian?**

Although medicine and surgery play a large role in Shelter Medicine, Shelter Veterinarians must also have a thorough understanding of epidemiology, preventive medicine, infectious disease control, policy development, facility design, public health, animal behavior, and veterinary forensics. Shelter Veterinarians must be innovative and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to adapt traditional medical protocols to meet the special demands encountered in shelters.

## **Do veterinary medical guidelines for animal sheltering exist?**

Yes. Animal shelters are located in almost every community caring for millions of animals each year in unique and challenging environments, creating a need for appropriate veterinary care guidelines. Recognizing the differences between caring for a pet in a home setting and caring for a pet in an animal shelter setting, professional guidelines for the vaccination of cats (AAFP) and dogs (AAHA) address specific recommendations for sheltered animals. The Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) has also released two professional documents providing medical guidelines for shelters: [\*The Association of Shelter Veterinarian's Veterinary Medical Care Guidelines for Spay-Neuter Programs\*](#) and [\*The ASV Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters\*](#).

## **Why do shelters need a veterinarian?**

Veterinarians play an integral role in ensuring the health and wellness of all animals. Most modern shelters provide a variety of community programs as well as medical and surgical services to care for the thousands of animals passing through their doors each year. The proliferation and diversity of sheltering programs has created a growing need for veterinary guidance. And, recognizing the benefits that veterinarians bring to animal health and wellness, an increasing number of shelters are choosing to employ veterinarians. Some shelters employ veterinarians directly while others contract for care from private practitioners. Regardless of the relationship

between the two parties, it is strongly recommended that veterinarians working with shelters have a thorough understanding of population medicine and the challenges of providing veterinary health care in a shelter setting.

### **What are the benefits of a Shelter Medicine Specialty?**

Recognizing Veterinarians with additional training, skill, and experience in Shelter Medicine will create a pool of experts who can serve as practitioners, educators, researchers, and consultants. It will also promote research and excellence in the field, thus expanding the knowledge base, which will ultimately result in increased animal welfare and better service to sheltered animals.

### **What does a Shelter Medicine Specialist do?**

A board certified shelter medicine specialist can serve in a number of capacities. There is a growing demand for experts able to provide consultation services for animal shelters. Some may choose to work in animal shelters, while others will pursue an academic role performing research or educating veterinarians and other shelter professionals. Others may focus on a specific component of Shelter Medicine such as veterinary forensics and animal cruelty investigations, high quality, high volume spay neuter, or infectious disease outbreak investigation. Through a demonstrated commitment to excellence, all will help advance the field of Shelter Medicine.

### **Where can I learn more about Shelter Medicine?**

Although it is still a relatively young field, intense community and veterinary interest has led to several ways to learn more about shelter medicine. Two textbooks, [\*Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff\*](#) and [\*Infectious Disease Management in Animal Shelters\*](#), are excellent resources for Shelter Medicine practice. [\*Veterinary Forensics: Animal Cruelty Investigations\*](#) is another excellent textbook that addresses a crucial area in

the field. Most major veterinary conferences offer continuing education in Shelter Medicine, while most US veterinary colleges currently address it in their curricula. Veterinary student externships are available in many shelters across the country, and several post graduate internship, residency and fellowship programs are available for those wishing to continue their education beyond veterinary college. Some veterinary colleges also offer online educational resources, distance learning programs, and shelter consultations as well as a variety of other outreach services. In addition, the Veterinary Information Network (VIN) offers shelter medicine courses, webinars and consultation for veterinarians. Additional information about Shelter Medicine, including a listing of veterinary college programs, can be found by visiting the Association of Shelter Veterinarians website at <http://www.sheltervet.org>.