Take This Job and … Improve It

Study examines effects of euthanasia and HR procedures on shelter turnover

BY CARRIE ALLAN

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Let's not kid ourselves: Working in an animal shelter is never going to be easy. The high employee turnover at shelters reflects the difficulties of the work: Shelter jobs are physically and emotionally demanding, requiring an ability to move seamlessly from cleaning cages to interacting with the public to nursing the wounds of abused animals. And the salary of most shelter employees wouldn't pay Paris Hilton's annual dry-cleaning bills.

But most people aren't in it for the money—and that's all the more reason to give them other incentives to stay. A recent special report published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* ("Impact of euthanasia rates, euthanasia practices, and human resource practices on employee turnover in animal shelters," Vol. 230, No. 5) finds that certain work practices improve retention—thus helping preserve the accumulated knowledge and commitment that trained staff bring to their work.

Led by Steven G. Rogelberg, Ph.D., and Charlie L. Reeve, Ph. D., researchers surveyed 36 shelters in 20 states; surveys were answered by senior members of management familiar with overall shelter operations.

Demographics of participating shelters varied: 63 percent were private and 36 percent public; the smallest had six full-time employees, and the largest had 75. Eleven percent of the shelters had operating budgets of less than $500,000; 58 percent had budgets between $500,000 to $1.5 million; and 31 percent had $1.5 million-plus budgets.

All participating organizations had two factors in common: They had at least five full-time employees and they performed euthanasia. The authors hypothesized that high euthanasia rates would be positively related to turnover; that use of the most humane methods for euthanasia would be associated with decreased turnover; that shelters euthanizing for reasons other than behavior and health problems would have greater turnover; and that use of certain professional and science-based employee selection and appraisal systems would be related to lower turnover rates.

The findings about the relationship between euthanasia rates and employee turnover were an oddly mixed bag: While a higher euthanasia rate for dogs was linked to increased employee turnover, the euthanasia rate for cats was not.

That inconsistency is noteworthy, the researchers wrote. Follow-up interviews with experienced shelter staff suggested that euthanasia of dogs may be more difficult psychologically because shelter workers—due to the nature of their day-to-day work with each species—tend to form greater attachments to them. Dogs require more care, cleanup, and exercise than cats do.

Two euthanasia practices—use of a designated euthanasia room and removal of animal bodies from the euthanasia area before bringing in another animal—were linked with decreased employee turnover. Two other practices—the presence of other animals while euthanasia was performed and euthanasia for reasons other than health or behavior problems—were linked with increased employee turnover. Overall, results suggested that using the most humane and progressive euthanasia practices was rewarding not only "from an ethical or humane perspective, but from the perspective of employee retention," the researchers wrote.

The increase in turnover related to euthanasia for non-behavioral or health reasons was not surprising, they wrote, since reduction of euthanasia of healthy animals is a positive goal for animal shelters. But, they added, such reduction often depends on resource levels and other factors outside the control of shelter management.

Examination of human resource practices produced surprising data: While careful screening of job candidates through standardized tests and other structured measurements correlated to lower employee turnover, rotation of euthanasia responsibilities among employees did not.

"Overall," the researchers concluded, "our data have provided important insight into the turnover of employees with euthanasia responsibilities at shelters and perhaps suggest several specific avenues that can be pursued to mitigate this turnover. … Furthermore, by more widely adopting advocated euthanasia practices and human resource systems, employee retention at shelters should be greatly improved, which serves to help the organization and its ability to promote animal welfare." AS