

These Boots are Made for Protectin’

After OSHA charged it with violations, a New York shelter improved safety procedures

BY KATINA ANTONIADES

When employees at the Stevens-Swan Humane Society in Utica, N.Y., clean kennels, safety comes first. When they apply a quaternary ammonium product, use the power washer, or wash dishes, they wear some combination of boots, goggles, gloves, and a mask. If an employee doesn’t follow the rules, she’ll receive a warning, a suspension, or—if she’s broken the rules before—a pink slip.

Sound excessive? Not according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The federal agency requires measures like these at workplaces where staff use hazardous chemicals—and that includes animal shelters. Stevens-Swan implemented its strict safety policies after an OSHA inspection in April led to citations and a \$1,000 fine.

OSHA found that employees were using quaternary disinfectant without protective gear—the organization’s main violation. The inspector also noticed that the organization lacked material safety data sheets. Known as MSDSs, these documents list the chemicals that staff use and detail important properties of each one, from toxicity to first-aid procedures to storage conditions.

Before the inspection, Executive Director Kathy Contino-Turner didn’t know the shelter was violating OSHA rules. She welcomed the chance to improve safety. “I was glad that they came—and I said that to the [local] newspaper,” says Contino-Turner, who has led the shelter since the summer of 2006. “I said, ‘This is really a non-story; they came, and they educated me.’ [The OSHA representative] spent the whole day with us. ... He was very helpful.”



As a result of the visit, several MSDSs are now displayed prominently throughout the shelter, and when employees don’t wear the required protective gear, Contino-Turner uses the “progressive discipline” that OSHA mandates. She also instituted safety features that exceed requirements. The shelter now has portable eyewash stations at every sink;

before the inspection, it had only one.

The new rules required some adjustment on the part of staff. “They were kind of taken aback because they’d used this chemical for as long as they’d all been here, and there’d never been an incident—nobody even getting as much as a rash,” says Contino-Turner. “I think they thought it was a little extreme. ... I said, ‘You have to do it, folks. It’s for your own protection.’”

After her crash course in safety compliance, Contino-Turner has advice for others: Make sure you know the chemicals you’re using, and label the containers with the contents and safety information. And don’t be afraid to contact your local OSHA office. Contino-Turner seeks advice from representatives at the agency’s Syracuse location. “They’ve been very helpful,” she says. “I can’t say enough about them.”

Contino-Turner recommends OSHA’s free consultation service, which includes a visit to the facility to offer training and look for hazards. It’s almost like getting a “Get Out of Jail Free” card in Monopoly; if violations are found, an organization must agree to correct them, but it can’t be cited or fined. *AS*

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