

THE VETERINARY PROFESSIONAL'S ROLE IN ANIMAL ADVOCACY: How to Maximize Your Impact in Improving Animal Welfare in the Clinic, the Community and Beyond

Veterinary professionals play a key role in advancing animal advocacy, given the leadership position the profession holds on issues pertaining to animal health and welfare.

This session will offer ideas on how veterinary professionals can maximize their impact to improve animal welfare in their veterinary clinics, their local communities, and at the local, state and national levels via legislation, public policy and education. A variety of examples will be provided, ranging from simple steps to more in-depth actions with far-reaching impact.

Presenters:

Dr. Gary Block, DVM, MS, DACVIM – Co-Owner, Ocean State Veterinary Specialists, Rhode Island; HSVMA Board of Directors member; HSVMA RI State Representative

Dr. Kate Maher, DVM – Old South Veterinary Services, LA; HSVMA LA State Rep

Dr. Barbara Hodges, DVM, MBA – HSVMA Veterinary Adviser

How a Practice Owner/Internist Maximizes His Impact in Improving Animal Welfare in the Clinic, the Community and Beyond

Dr. Gary Block, DVM, MS, DACVIM

Before talking about specific examples of how veterinarians can maximize animal welfare while doing their job as a private practitioner, I must state the obvious: You have to want to. Although I am a firm believer that all veterinarians pursue their careers in small animal veterinary medicine with the best of intentions and a real commitment to improve the lives of animals, once some get into clinical practice, they lose some of their idealism when they are faced with the often daunting financial realities of trying to run a successful veterinary practice. Admittedly, there are some vets who for a variety of reasons may end up putting “money before medicine” but I think they are a small minority. For those interested, I share the following examples and suggestions to help those who need us most.

The first recommendation is to genuinely commit to practicing good medicine and staying on top of the literature since advances and developments in medicine and surgery often reveal less expensive and more efficient ways to treat certain conditions.

Another way that I think we can provide care to more patients is by promoting the concept of “spectrum of care” rather than the outmoded and often nebulous concept of

“standard of care”. The former acknowledges that the care we provide to our patients has to ideally be grounded in evidence-based medicine but that we must take into account circumstances such as the client’s expectations, living situation and financial means when determining a course of care. (See *A New Look at Standard of Care*; G. Block; JAVMA June 1, 2018)

The “Cool Hand Luke” philosophy, which as the movie suggested, means sometimes doing nothing is the coolest thing to do. That means tests should never be run if it is not going to change the way you treat your patient and sometimes the best course of action is doing nothing and letting “tincture of time” cure your patient.

More concrete examples include:

- Having a hospital financial assistance program that has clear and well-defined criteria for identifying recipients so that available funds are used in a fair and judicious manner. Alternatively, use an organization such as the AVMF that supports veterinarians by serving as their umbrella 501(c)(3) for charitable donations and disbursement of funds.

- Making sure your hospital offers a variety of payment options such as checks, cash, credit cards, as well as financing options such as CareCredit and ScratchPay. Encourage clients to have an emergency credit card just for their pets.

- Some veterinarians have created successful, for-profit veterinary practices that specifically cater to pet owners with limited income. These practices often utilize a sliding scale fee structure.

- Although I have some reservations about the long-term impact of veterinarians closely partnering with pet insurance companies, the current third-party payment system does often allow clients with pet insurance to obtain treatment for their pets they might not otherwise be able to afford.

- Make sure you avail yourself of the many state and national financial assistance funds that are available to pet owners and veterinarians.

- Crowdfunding such as GoFundMe and Waggle are becoming an increasingly utilized option for clients and pets in need.

- Stay abreast of the work of organizations such as the Access to Veterinary Care Coalition and their recently published “Barriers, Current Practices and Public Policy”(<https://avcc.utk.edu/avcc-report.pdf>) and AlignCare which just launched a 3-year pilot project that will use community-based financial support to selected low-income families to help their pets receive health care when they need it.

- Consider having your state VMA and interested vets set up a means testing, non-profit clinic specifically geared to help low-income pet owners (See <http://www.pinclinic.org/>).

- The CAF (<http://www.companionanimalfoundation.org/>) has been a very successful model for distributing funds to help subsidize the care veterinarians provide to low-income pet owners. Over the last 13 years close to \$1 million has been used to help thousands of animals in my home state of Rhode Island.

How a Busy Shelter Veterinarian/Consultant and House Call Practitioner Maximizes Her Impact on Animal Welfare by Advocating for Animals in the Shelter, on the Road, in the Community and Beyond

Dr. Kate Maher, DVM

Support the cause:

- Shelter vets:
 - o Attend shelter fundraising events
 - Be an educated, respected figure
 - o Local business events that benefit shelter programs
 - o Local news stations – info sessions, advertise adoption events, season-specific pet hazards, etc.
 - o Host kid camps at shelter, teach pet care classes in elementary schools, have field trips for middle/high schoolers
 - o Host dog/cat yoga, shelter pet reading programs
 - o Attend local town hall sessions, comment/support/oppose new legislation affecting community, i.e. TNR, shelter policies, funding
 - o Sponsor/Volunteer/Attend rabies clinics or microchip clinics in underserved communities
- Private/House Call/Mobile practitioners:
 - o Advertise for shelter - provide handouts, support low cost programs for those in need, wear support apparel
 - Host shelter events in clinic – behavior sessions for newly adopted dogs, info sessions on pet insurance for adopted dogs, puppy classes, lessons on environmental enrichment
 - o Discount programs for shelters or newly adopted shelter dogs as incentive to start relationship at practice
 - o Foster relationships with other businesses that support shelter and direct clients
 - Trusted animal trainers
 - Pet retail establishments that donate partial profits to shelter
 - o Volunteer during national disaster events
 - Provide in-clinic info for disaster preparedness (good advertising)
 - Prevents pet abandonment, promotes proper treatment
- Shelter vets and private practitioners:
 - o Join boards, associations, business networks, leagues, MG krewes, non-profits, etc. with professional affiliations
 - LSART, LVMA, JLA, BNI, COC, WC
 - Attend local politician events, fundraisers, balls (governor, commissioner)
 - Be an ever-present, polite figure
 - Establish yourself as community leader and trusted advisor
 - o Respected opinion

How a Veterinarian Animal Advocate Maximizes Her Impact on Animal Welfare through Legislation, Public Policy, and Engaging Veterinary Colleagues in Animal Advocacy via Outreach and Education

Dr. Barbara Hodges, DVM, MBA

Veterinarian-as-Advocate Roles

- Experts in animal health and welfare-
scientists, clinicians, educators, business professionals
- Compassionate health professional advocates for animals
- Opinion shapers on animal issues
- Spokespersons for the animal-friendly public
- Coalition members
- Engaged community members
- Constituents
- Voters
- Legislators ourselves!
 - US Rep Kurt Schrader, DVM (OR)
 - US Rep Ted Yoho, DVM (FL)
 - US Rep Ralph Abraham, DVM (LA)
 - TX Rep Charles Anderson, DVM
 - Others

HSVMA Advocacy Partners

- HSVMA members
- Non-member veterinary professional colleagues
- HSVMA State Representatives and Co-Reps (we are always recruiting!)
- HSVMA Leadership Council members
- HSVMA Board members
- Animal protection groups, including the Humane Society of the United States
other like-minded stakeholders: state VMAs, national affinity groups
(ASV); coalitions (AVCC)
- Professional subject experts

Advocacy Activities

Support Animal Welfare Legislation

- Submit HSVMA organizational letters
 - Send alerts to members/non-members asking to contact legislators
 - Collect veterinary endorsements for issues, specific legislation or state ballot initiatives
 - Recruit veterinarians to testify at hearings, submit written testimony
 - Activate veterinary professionals for annual district, state and federal Humane Lobby Days lobbying teams, press conferences, media interviews, LTEs, op-eds, etc.
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- Federal Legislation Examples
 - State Legislation Examples
 - Local Legislation Examples

Challenges to Veterinary Legislative Advocacy

Many of these are self-imposed and based on incomplete information or a misunderstanding of the process:

- Valuable time taken away from professional duties
- Lack of interest in non-medical issues
- Concern about lack of detailed knowledge of veterinary and/or legislative issues/processes
- Concern about being perceived as 'political'
- Disappointment with meeting legislative staffers/surrogates instead of legislators
- All-or-nothing rather than incremental approach

Support Veterinary Welfare via Organizational Initiatives and Legislation

- Hosted compassion fatigue and veterinary student debt management webinars—now archived in on-demand library
- Offer practitioners liability and disability insurance
- Support federal student loan forgiveness programs
- Support the Veterinary Nurse Initiative
- Support state mandatory good-faith veterinary reporting of suspected animal cruelty/neglect/abuse with immunity provisions
- Supported CA statewide provision allowing veterinarians to annually waive rabies vaccination for patients whose health might be compromised by it