

Purpose of study

The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement (AAWA) and the Program for Pet Health Equity (PPHE) at the University of Tennessee joined forces to conduct a national survey to better understand the challenges animal welfare and animal care & control organizations face and their effects on the animals in their care. Questions included in the survey focused on the following topics:

- Capacity to provide care in six broad care categories and services
- Reasons for inability to consistently provide care
- Challenges for veterinary recruitment
- Impact of inadequate access to care on LOS and meeting the needs of community animals
- Potential solutions for improving access to veterinary care

Study participants

PPHE sent survey invitations to AAWA members and an email distribution list provided by ASPCA. Five hundred twelve (512) responses are included in the analysis for the study. The majority of responses (75.4%) represent brick and mortar animal shelters while the remaining responses represent foster based rescue organizations, spay/neuter clinics, and other types of animal welfare organizations. The average annual intake per facility was 1,799 cats and 1,705 dogs.

Unable to consistently provide care

Shelters and rescue organizations indicate their organizations could consistently provide basic intake care and care for routine illnesses that can be treated based on protocols. However, reported inability to provide care increases as the scope of services expands beyond basic care. Shelters and rescue organizations are less able to consistently provide more advanced care for animals in their facilities or to address community veterinary needs that might lead to diversion of shelter intakes.

Types of care often or consistently NOT provided	Government shelter	Nonprofit shelter with contract	Nonprofit shelter without contract	Rescue organization
Euthanasia when health or behavior necessitates	3.7%	4.8%	10.0%	26.4%
Spay/neuter surgery	17.4%	4.0%	2.6%	5.7%
Treatment for nonroutine illness or injury	43.1%	18.3%	7.3%	15.1%
Medical diagnostics beyond heartworm and FeLV/FIV testing	28.4%	17.5%	11.3%	17.0%
Non-spay/neuter surgery	40.2%	18.3%	11.3%	22.6%
Dental procedures	62.4%	35.7%	25.2%	36.5%
Community safety net programs	77.1%	68.3%	65.6%	80.8%
Community cat programs	54.1%	44.4%	58.3%	62.3%

Four themes emerged that explain why organizations are **not able to consistently provide veterinary care**.

- Lack of access to a veterinarian
- Cost
- Inadequate space or equipment
- Lack of support staff

Impact on animals

Animal shelters are experiencing adverse consequences due to lack of access to veterinary care. The following consequences are reported to happen often or consistently:

- Stop intake of animals from the public due to their shelter being full (42.9%)
- Exceed animal housing capacity for care best practices (33.6%)
- House animals for longer periods of time (31.9%)
- Delay spay-neuter surgery (27.5%)

Animals housed in organizations without a veterinarian on staff experience significantly longer Length of Stay (LOS) than those in organizations with a veterinarian on staff.

Average LOS in days	Brick and Mortar Shelter		Non- Brick and Mortar Rescue	
	Veterinarian on staff	No veterinarian on staff	Veterinarian on staff	No veterinarian on staff
Cats	25	55	37	96
Dogs	25	45	19	57

Open veterinarian positions

More than **one out four** shelters currently have at least one open position for a veterinarian. Nonprofit shelters with a government contract most frequently report they are currently hiring. Based upon reported unfilled hours, **151 veterinarians** are needed to fill open positions currently being advertised by shelters.

Frequency of open Veterinarian positions			
Government shelter	30.3%	Nonprofit shelter without contract	27.2%
Nonprofit shelter with contract	39.7%	Rescue organization	9.4%

Organizations agree that the following factors most commonly make it difficult to recruit veterinarians:

- Private practice offers a higher salary – 76.2%
- Stressful nature of the work – 62.6%
- Burn-out, compassion fatigue, and chronic exposure to animal abuse/neglect cases – 58.6%
- Lack of training in shelter medicine – 49.4%

Potential solutions for helping to meet veterinary care demands

Organizations were provided with three potential solutions for meeting the current demand for veterinary care. Considerable support is expressed for increased utilization and expanded scope of practice for veterinary technicians and for creating a role for midlevel practitioners.

- Increased utilization of veterinary technicians – 78.5%
- Creation of midlevel practitioner similar to a physician’s assistant in human medicine – 75.1%
- Increased scope of practice for veterinary technicians – 58.8%