



# Access to Veterinary Care & Animal Welfare Organizations



## 2023 National Study

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The Association for  
**Animal Welfare**  
Advancement



**PROGRAM** for  
**PET HEALTH**  
**EQUITY**

## **Acknowledgements**

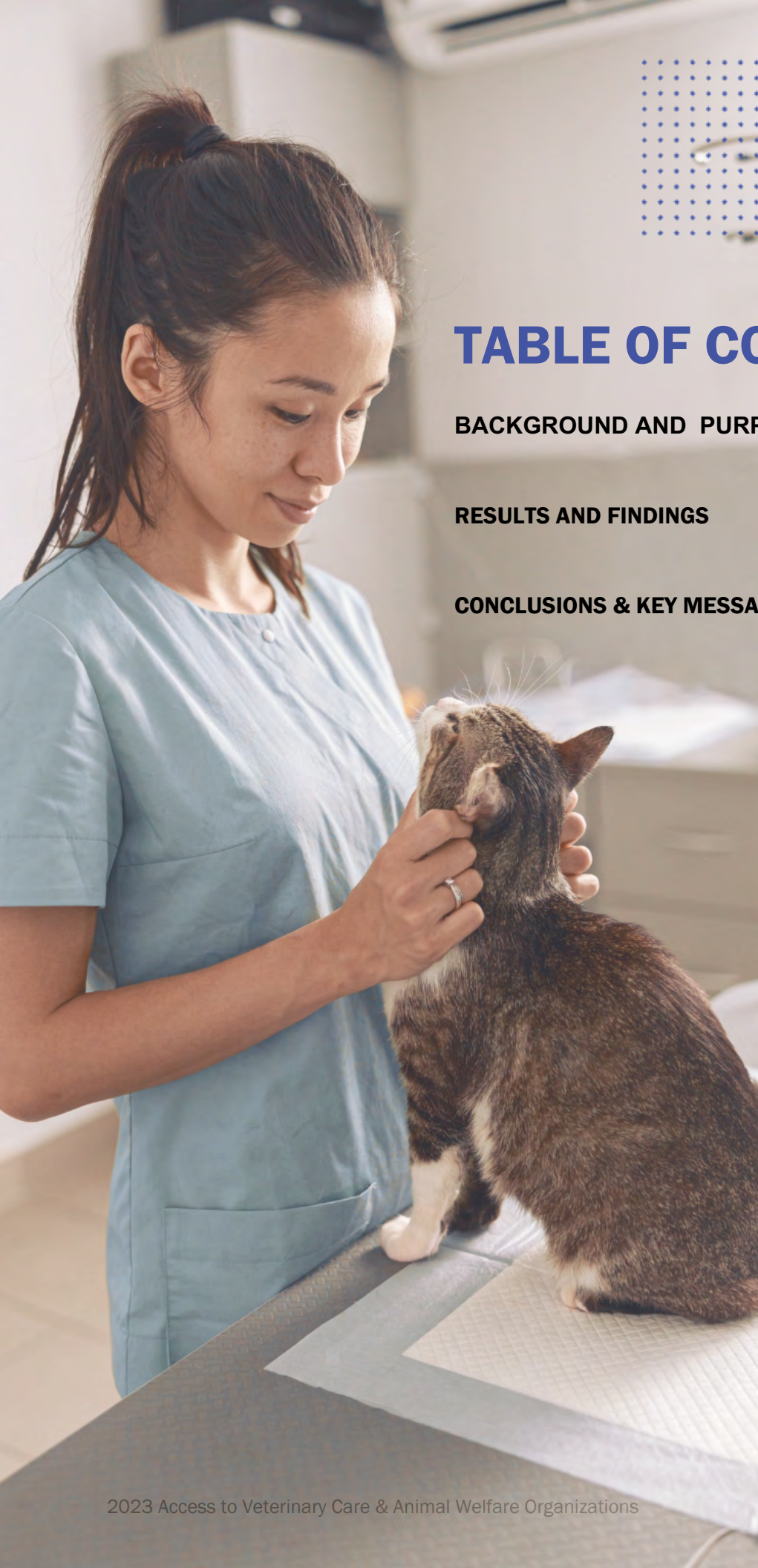
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# BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to better understand the challenges animal welfare organizations face around access to veterinary care and how these challenges impact the animals in their care. The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement (AAWA) and Program for Pet Health Equity (PPHE) at the University of Tennessee joined forces to conduct a survey of shelters and rescues at the national level. This study grew out of a project completed for the California Access to Care Working Group (CACWG) by PPHE that explored challenges experienced by animal shelters in California due to inequitable access to veterinary care. The CACWG study found that lack of internal and external access to veterinary care negatively impacts shelter animals, shelter staff and volunteers, and the community at large.



## Methodology

The study was conducted using a web survey designed to seek input from shelter and rescue leaders.

The survey included questions focused on the following broad topics:



**CAPACITY** to provide care in 6 care categories & services



**REASONS** for inability to consistently provide care



**CHALLENGES** for veterinary recruitment



**IMPACT** of inadequate access to care on Length of Stay (LOS) & meeting the needs of animals in their care & in their community



**Potential SOLUTIONS** for improving access to veterinary care

Invitations to participate in the survey were sent on October 2, 2023, to AAWA’s membership list and a distribution list provided by ASPCA. This list included animal welfare professionals in a wide variety of roles. Invitations were sent to 7,174 individuals that included a unique web link to be used to complete the survey. Two reminder emails were sent to those who had not yet completed the survey. The survey remained open for responses until November 27, 2023. Five hundred twelve (512) responses are included in the analysis for this report.

# RESULTS AND FINDINGS

## Profile of Organizations

The majority of those who responded to the survey hold executive positions or non-medical upper-level management positions (Table 1).

Table 1. Position in Organization

| Primary Position in Organization              | %    |
|---|------|
| Director, CEO, Executive Director, or similar | 62.3 |
| Non-medical Upper-level management            | 14.6 |
| Medical Director or Shelter veterinarian      | 8.4  |
| Mid-level manager                             | 6.4  |
| Line level employee                           | 0.4  |
| Animal Control Officer                        | 1.2  |
| Other   | 6.6  |



A majority of responses (75.4%) represent brick and mortar animal shelters - government and nonprofits, while the remaining responses represent foster-based rescue organizations, spay/neuter clinics, and other types of animal welfare organizations (Table 2).

**Table 2. Organizations Represented in Survey**

| Type of Organization*  | %    |
|--|------|
| Brick-and-mortar government animal shelter   | 21.3 |
| Brick-and-mortar nonprofit animal shelter WITHOUT a government contract for animal control or housing services | 29.5 |
| Brick-and-mortar nonprofit animal shelter WITH a government contract for animal control or housing services    | 24.6 |
| Foster-based animal rescue organization  | 10.4 |
| Spay/neuter clinic   | 5.7  |
| Other  | 8.6  |

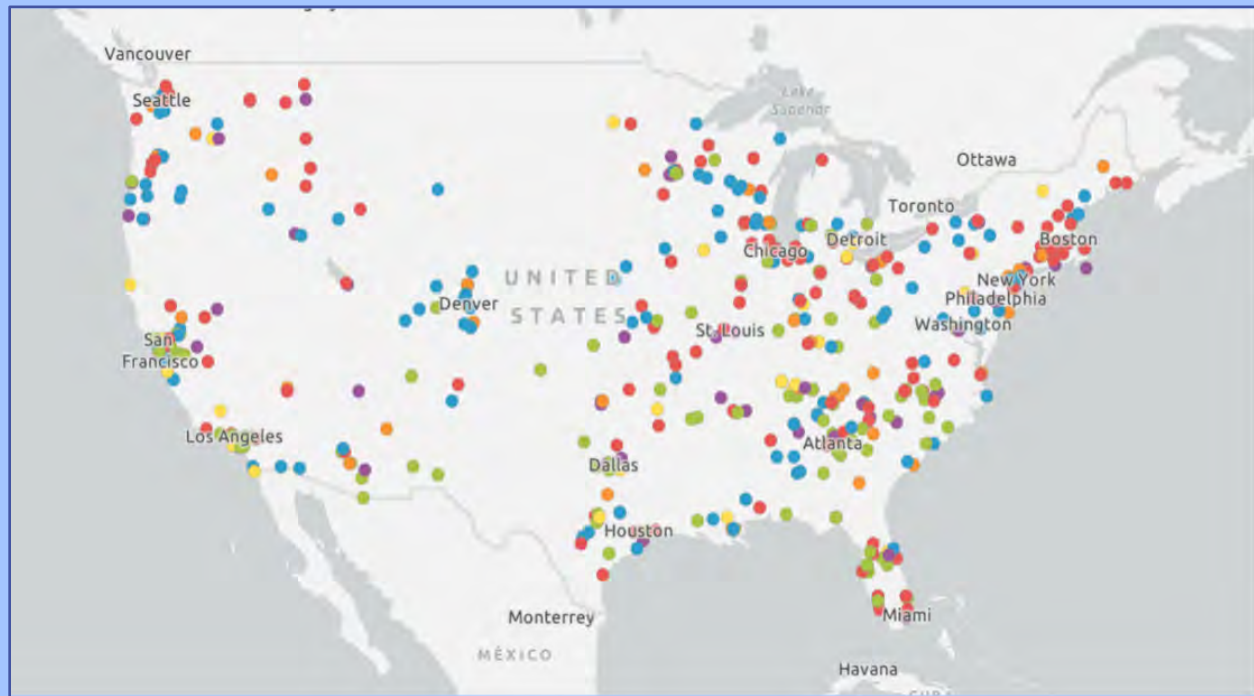
\* For the remainder of this report, titles for organizations will be shortened to Government Animal Shelter; Nonprofit Shelter with Contract; Nonprofit Shelter without Contract; Rescue Organization; and Spay/ Neuter Clinic.

All regions of the country except the northern plains are well represented in the survey. Several organizations in Alaska and Hawaii completed the survey but are not included in the map below to protect the confidentiality of those who responded.





**Figure 1. Organizations that Responded**



- Brick and mortar nonprofit shelter WITHOUT contract
- Brick and mortar nonprofit shelter WITH contract
- Brick and mortar government shelter
- Foster based organization WITH contract
- Spay/Neuter Clinic
- Other

The Rural-Urban Continuum Code (RUCC) was derived from the responding organizations county to measure whether differences emerge based upon the type of community. The RUCC score uses 9 categories to delineate counties by population size and proximity to a metropolitan area (Rural Urban Continuum Codes). Most organizations (81.4%) represented in the survey are in “metro” areas (Table 3).

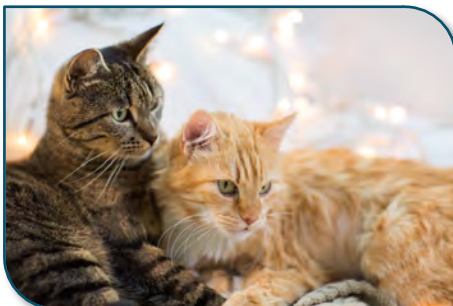
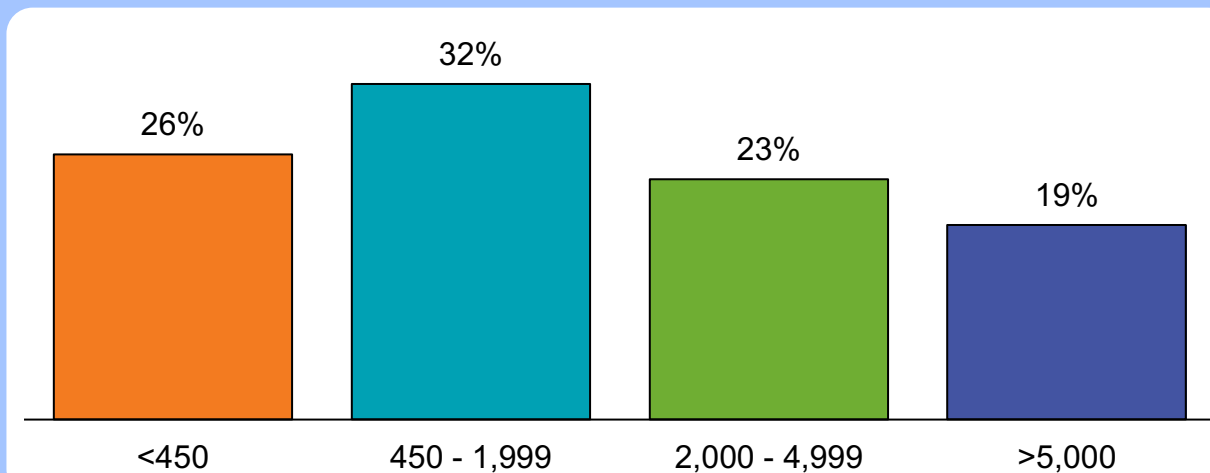


**Table 3. RUCC Categories for Respondents**

| Population of Counties in Metro Areas |       | Population Adjacent to Metro Area |      | Population NOT Adjacent to Metro Area |      |
|---------------------------------------|-------|-----------------------------------|------|---------------------------------------|------|
| 1,000,000 or more                     | 45.9% | 20,000 or more                    | 6.1% | 20,000 or more                        | 2.1% |
| 250,00 – 1,000,000                    | 25.0% | 5,000 – 20,000                    | 3.9% | 5,000 – 20,000                        | 2.5% |
| < 250,000                             | 10.5% | < 5,000                           | 1.8% | < 5,000                               | 2.1% |

A total of 882,869 cats and 819,360 dogs were taken in during the 2022 calendar year by the organizations who responded to the survey. More than half of the organizations (58.0%) report total intakes of less than 2,000 and almost one out of four (23.2%) report between 2,000 and 5,000 intakes (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Total Intakes in 2022**



The average annual intake per organization was 1,799 cats and 1,750 dogs. These numbers vary significantly across organizations and the types of organizations. Organizations also provided the number of live outcomes. This information is used to calculate the Live Release Rate (LRR) intakes divided by live outcomes. Government animal shelters and nonprofit shelters with a government contract report the highest number of intakes, and also the lowest LRR (Table 4).



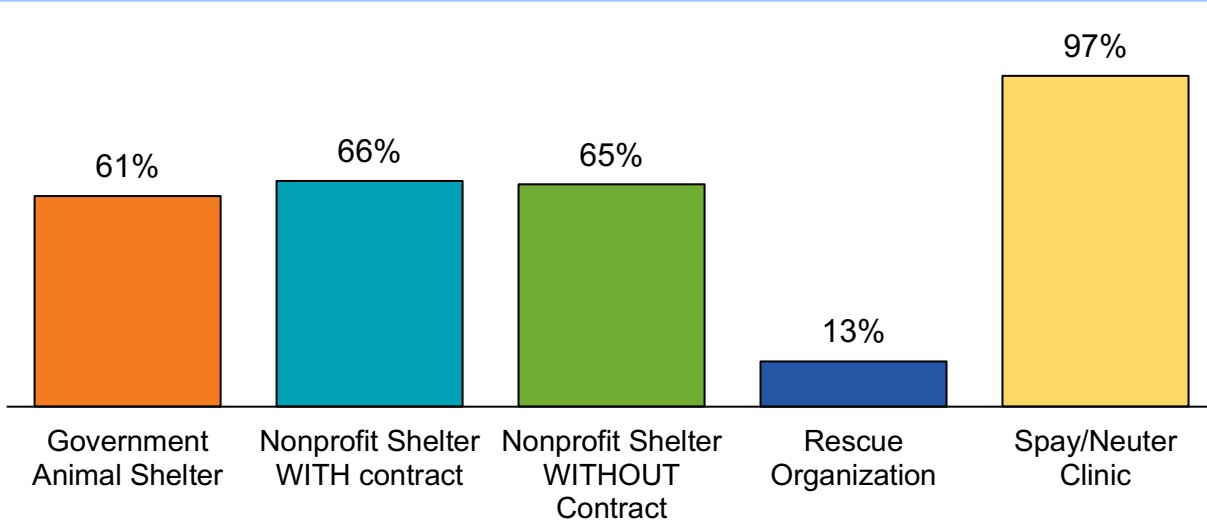
**Table 4. Intake and Live Release Rate**

| Type of Organization*              | Average Cat Intakes | Live Release Rate (LRR) | Average Dog Intakes | Live Release Rate (LRR) |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Government Animal Shelter          | 2,432               | 83.0%                   | 2,744               | 85.3%                   |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITH Contract    | 2,172               | 88.5%                   | 1,837               | 89.0%                   |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITHOUT Contract | 1,153               | 95.4%                   | 870                 | 95.9%                   |
| Rescue Organization                | 416                 | 95.3%                   | 453                 | 96.3%                   |

\*Spay/Neuter clinics are not included because these statistics are not relevant to their mission.

## Staffing

Organizations were asked whether they have a veterinarian on staff. Overall, most organizations (59.8%) report they have at least one full-time or part-time veterinarian currently on staff. However, there are predictable variations between different types of organization. Few foster-based animal rescue organizations (13.2%) have a veterinarian on staff compared to 65.9% of nonprofit shelters with a government contract (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Organizations with at Least One Veterinarian**

Several reasons are given for the lack of a veterinarian position. The ability to contract with a local clinic as an alternative to having a veterinarian on staff and limited budgets are the most common reasons given.

- Use a local clinic for veterinary services - 71.8%
- Budgetary constraints - 45.6%
- Use independent veterinary contractors - 25.7%
- Indicated they cannot recruit a veterinarian - 24.3%

Only 5.6% of those who do not have a veterinary position indicate that it is due to a lack of need.



The comments below illustrate some of the challenges being experienced by shelters and rescue organizations in meeting the veterinary needs of their animals.



*"We contract with one vet. It has been difficult to find other vets to work with us. They want more money than what we can offer, and they are busy with their own clients are the two main reasons we hear."*

*"The cost of increasing veterinarian hours means budget restrictions for other staff/programs."*



Organizations were also asked to report the number of support staff – Registered or Licensed Veterinary Technicians and Veterinary Assistants – that are currently employed. Patterns of employment for support staff are similar to those that emerge for veterinary positions. Comparing the different types of organizations, Spay/Neuter clinics are most likely to employ support staff while foster-based programs are least likely. Moreover, Spay/Neuter clinics are more likely to employ Veterinary Assistants than Registered/Licensed Vet Techs. Government shelters are also less likely to have veterinary staff when compared with other brick and mortar facilities (Table 5).

**Table 5. Staffing**

| Type of Organization               | At Least One Veterinarian | Registered/ Licensed Vet Techs | Unlicensed Vet Assistants |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Government Animal Shelter          | 61.5%                     | 60.6%                          | 60.6%                     |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITH Contract    | 65.9%                     | 77.0%                          | 76.2%                     |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITHOUT Contract | 65.9%                     | 71.5%                          | 69.5%                     |
| Rescue Organization                | 13.2%                     | 20.8%                          | 17.0%                     |
| Spay/Neuter Clinic                 | 96.6%                     | 75.9%                          | 93.1%                     |

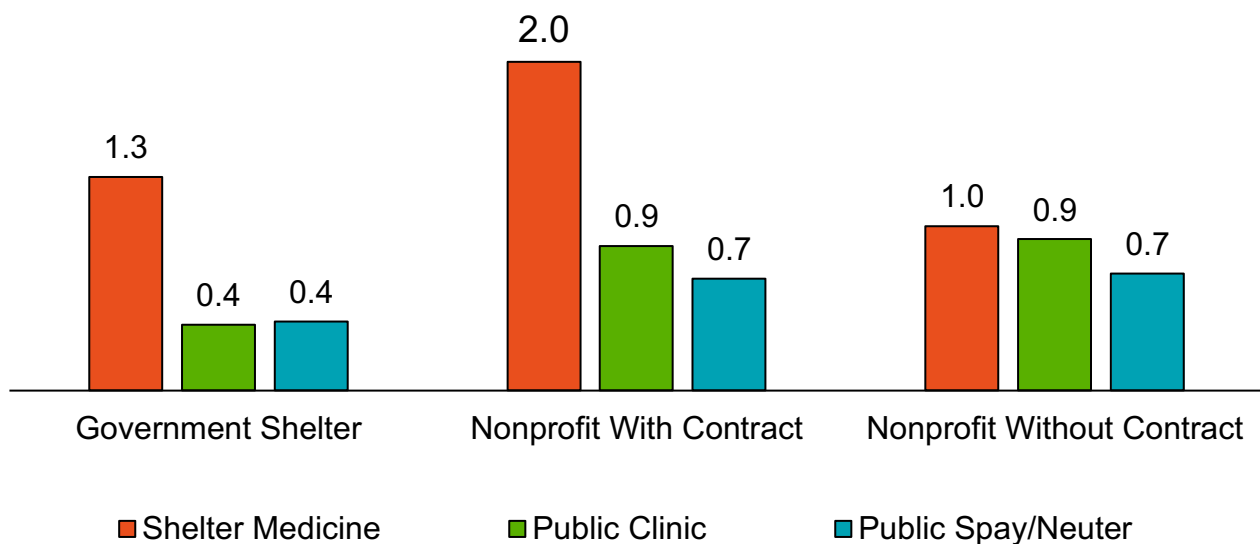
Respondents provided the total number of hours that veterinarians work each week. The reported hours are converted to Full Time Equivalent (FTE) based upon the assumption that 40 hours per week is equivalent to 1 FTE. For those organizations who have veterinary and support staff positions, nonprofit shelters who are funded through a government contract report the highest level of staffing for all veterinary care positions. Veterinary needs vary by volume of animals and types of services provided so is a confounding factor in interpreting these results. (Table 6).

**Table 6: Veterinary and Support Staffing Levels**

|                                    | Average Veterinary FTE | Average # of Registered/ Licensed Vet Techs | Average # of Unlicensed Vet Assistants |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|---|--|
| Government Animal Shelter          | 1.7                    | 4.1   | 3.5                                    |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITH Contract    | 3.6                    | 5.9   | 6.4                                    |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITHOUT Contract | 2.6                    | 5.1   | 5.9                                    |
| Rescue Organization                | 1.2                    | 2.8   | 2.4                                    |
| Spay/Neuter Clinic                 | 1.6                    | 3.9   | 6.6                                    |

Those organizations that have at least one veterinary position were asked to report the average salary for veterinarians and to indicate the total number of hours per week that are spent providing three types of veterinary care and duties: shelter medicine, a public clinic, or a public shelter spay/neuter clinic. The overall average salary for current veterinarians was \$117,274. Salaries range from \$111,991 for a veterinarian working in a nonprofit shelter with a contract to \$118,376 for those employed by a government shelter. Government shelters allocate fewer hours of veterinarian time for public clinics, shelter clinics, or spay/neuter clinics than do nonprofit shelters, regardless of whether the non-profit has a government contract (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Average Veterinarian FTE Allocated for Care Types by Organization\***



\* Rescue organizations were not included in this chart because of the small sample size. Spay and neuter clinics were not included because shelter medicine is outside of their mission.

## Open Veterinarian Positions

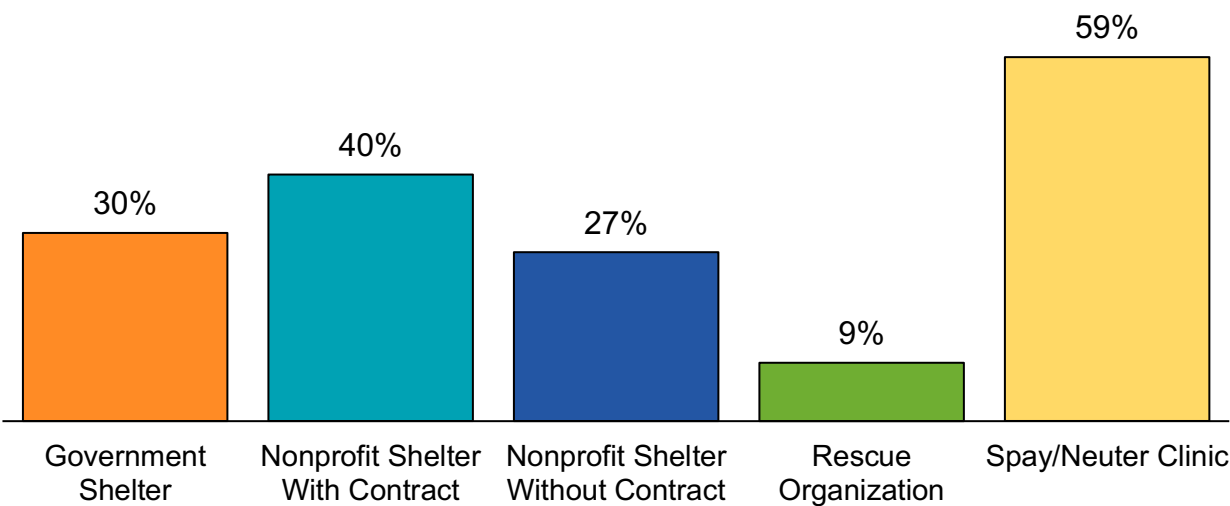
More than one out of four shelters and organizations currently have at least one open position for a veterinarian. Nonprofit shelters with a government contract are most likely to report they have an open position and are currently hiring (Figure 5). Based upon reported unfilled hours for all shelters, 151 full-time veterinarians are needed to fill open positions currently being advertised by shelters who participated in the survey. The number of open positions exceeds the size of one graduating class from the largest





veterinary colleges in the United States. The patterns generally reflect the volume of veterinarians employed in each type of shelter response category. For example, spay and neuter clinics report the highest number of open positions for veterinarians, but they also nearly universally employ a veterinarian on staff.

**Figure 5. Organizations with Open Veterinary Positions**



Organizations who are currently seeking to fill a veterinarian position were asked to provide information about the salary and benefit package that are currently being offered to fill the position. The average salary being offered ranges from \$96,297 for spay/neuter clinics to \$116,550 for government shelters. Benefits of Personal Time Off (PTO), health insurance, and paying for annual Continuing Education (CE) credits are most frequently offered. Other benefits commonly offered are listed in Table 7. A full listing of the benefits and the rate at which they are offered can be found in the [Appendix](#) to this report.

**Table 7. Benefits for Open Veterinarian Positions**

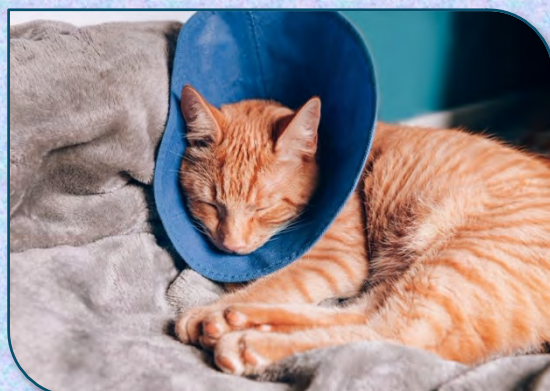
| Benefit                              | % of all organizations |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| PTO                                  | 83.6%                  |
| Health insurance                     | 75.4%                  |
| Paying for annual CE credits         | 71.7%                  |
| Paying professional association dues | 70.5%                  |
| Conference attendance                | 67.2%                  |
| Retirement/401K payments             | 65.0%                  |
| Employee Assistance Program          | 57.1%                  |
| Flexible work schedule               | 57.8%                  |
| Merit based raise                    | 43.8%                  |
| Annual cost of living raise          | 47.7%                  |



Benefit packages vary significantly depending on the place of employment. For instance, government shelters are more likely than other organizations to be able to offer a retirement plan (82.2%) and access to an Employee Assistance Program (79.5%). This compares to 58.1% of nonprofit shelters without a contract report they offer a retirement plan and 52.4% of these shelters can provide access to an EAP. However, government shelters are less likely than nonprofit shelters and spay/neuter clinics to be able to offer merit-based raises. Furthermore, nonprofit shelters with a contract and spay/neuter clinics are more likely to offer a signing bonus. ([Appendix](#)). Only 1 out of 5 organizations offer student loan repayment as a benefit. According to comments by the respondents, they perceive that private and corporate practices routinely offer incentives for newly hired veterinarians and that this contributes to the hiring challenge.

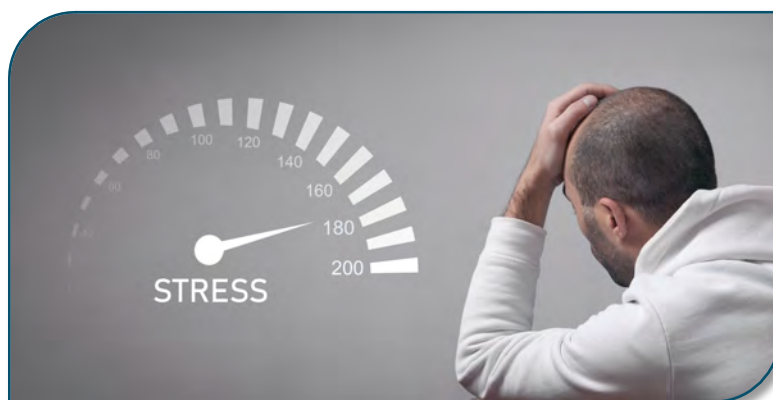
*“Private corporate practices can offer loan payment, huge sign on bonuses; have a lot of cash to give up front.”*

*“Many younger veterinarians .... are more inclined to take positions that include substantial student loan repayment programs as a part of the position.”*



Respondents were asked about factors that make it difficult to recruit veterinarians. The most common reasons selected include:

- 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%

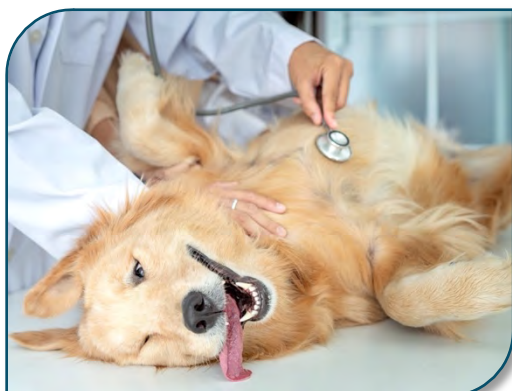


Comments from respondents further highlight these factors.

*“Grasping the concept of shelter medicine is hard for vets who have been in private practice for a long time.”*

*“Government salary and schedule may not be ideal in comparison to private practice flexibility.”*

*“Our geographic area has a huge shortage of veterinarians, so we are competing with multiple organizations when trying to recruit a veterinarian. Also, many vets think that shelter medicine has a lack of funding and ability to treat animals. Our shelter is offering excellent support, but we are lacking any initial interest to even try to recruit due to the myth of shelters having no medical equipment, supplies, etc.”*



Variability in other possible factors impeding recruitment emerges based on the primary role of the person responding to the survey. Medical Directors and Shelter veterinarians are more likely than Directors to agree that the mandate to practice medicine within a budget, being restricted in treatment options because of policy restrictions, and challenging or difficult relations with organizational leadership or board members are recruitment barriers. Almost half of Medical Directors or Shelter veterinarians (48.8%) agree that providing care within budget and policy



constraints impede recruitment efforts while one-third of Directors (34.8%) have a similar perspective. Furthermore, one-third of Medical Directors or Shelter veterinarians (37.3%) report that challenging or difficult relations with leadership or board members stymie veterinary recruitment efforts compared to 15.2% of Directors.

*“State law states maximum of \$250 that a vet can charge towns for any care provided to stray animals in need.”*

*“Regulations in shelter quality of care.”*

*“Shelter veterinarians often feel like they are on an island and do not have the same level of autonomy that private physicians are awarded.”*



Challenges in recruiting veterinarians also differ depending on the type of the organization. Spay/neuter clinics are more likely than shelters and rescue groups to agree that lack of training in shelter medicine is a barrier.



“I find it challenging to find surgeons equipped to do high-volume surgery day in and day out.”

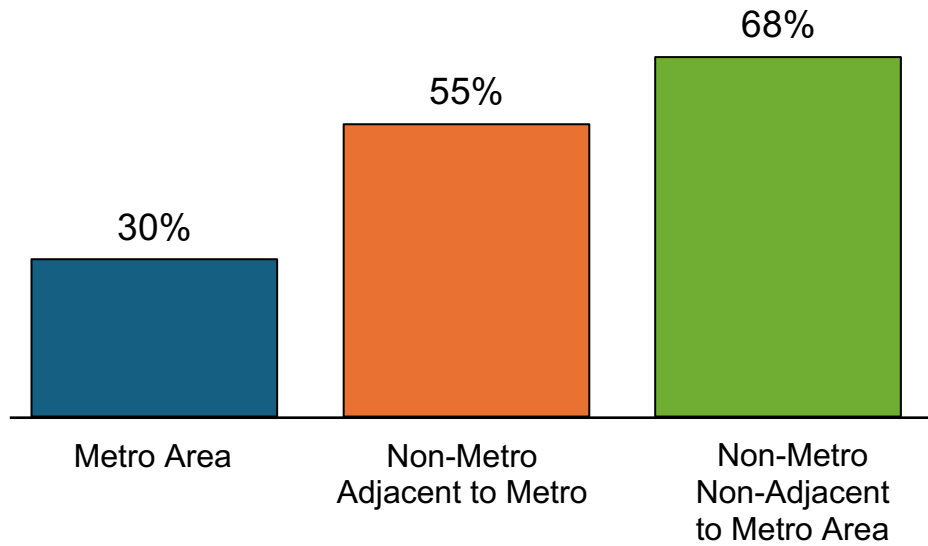
“Lack of high-quality/high-volume spay/neuter skills especially of new vet graduates, who are more affordable to hire.”

“It is a very niche kind of veterinary job that requires a specific type of training. Many veterinarians do not feel prepared to take on these specific tasks.”

The desirability of the geographic area is reported by some to impact their ability to recruit. Organizations located in less populated areas are most likely to report this as a barrier. A pattern emerges of geographic location increasingly being a barrier as the location of the organization becomes less populated and as distance from a metropolitan area increases (Figure 6).

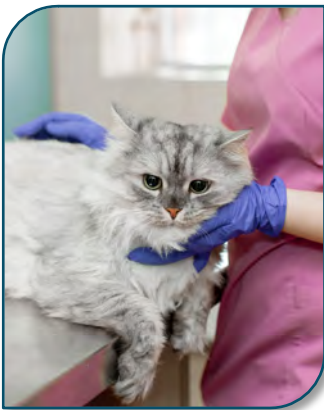


**Figure 6. Agree Geographic Location is a Recruitment Barrier**



*"I think it's because we're close to the bigger cities where they have better quality of life outside of work."*

*"We are in a poor rural area where no one wants to raise a family."*



The constructed list of factors that can potentially hinder organizations' ability to hire a veterinarian provided to survey respondents did not include a shortage of veterinarians. However, an overall shortage of veterinarians emerges as an important factor in the responses shared by organizations about their challenges in filling a veterinarian position.

*"Lack of candidates - demand for veterinarians exceeds supply."*

*"Not enough veterinarians in the US for the amount of jobs available."*

*"Lack of available veterinarians wanting to work full time. It took us more than two years to fill our vacancies but were able to hire part time people throughout that time to do the work."*

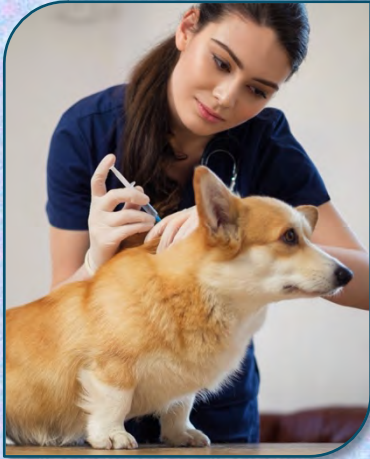
*"We have no veterinarian in our entire county. We have to go to other counties to get our animals vetted. There are no vets in our area. We need help."*

*"There aren't enough vets and as judging by the job boards in sheltering just about every shelter that can afford it is hiring a vet."*



The challenges being experienced by shelters, rescue groups, and spay/neuter clinics to meet the needs of the animals in their care and in the community are varied and multi-faceted. The following comments are particularly illustrative of the common themes that emerge when discussing the challenges being faced by organizations in their efforts to recruit a veterinarian.

*"We are not located in a large metropolitan area and our town lacks the amenities of a more populous city. .... We also cannot offer a salary range that is as competitive with local private markets. Veterinarians are not well versed in shelter medicine, especially those that are recent graduates, so their job descriptions can be daunting and intimidating. Having a lack of career support or mentorship from a seasoned resident physician is also a drawback in working within a shelter setting. Shelter veterinarians often feel like they are on an island and do not have the same level of autonomy that private physicians are awarded. Lacking a real sense of doctor-client relation is also an emotional burden, as these animals have no real owner, it is difficult to make care decisions that make sense for the shelter's budget while also abiding by the moral oath that veterinarians ascribe to. The frequent purchase and daily use of scheduled drugs under one license also brings a level of intense pressure and worry to shelter veterinarians, as well."*



*“We provide high volume spay/neuter. Many veterinarians choose other parts of the profession over being focused on being a surgeon. In our area, we find that many of the veterinarians that have done high volume spay/neuter are moving out of it due to back or hand issues. High volume surgery, repetitive motions year over year lead to them leaving. Many younger veterinarians don't have the experience to take on the role or are more inclined to take positions that include substantial student loan repayment programs as a part of the position.”*

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## Unmet Needs

Some shelters and rescue organizations can provide a full spectrum of veterinary treatment for the animals in their care while others are more limited in the scope of care they can offer. This study focused on organizations' ability to provide five broad categories of care. Organizations who completed the survey were asked to indicate how often they can provide specific types of care when care is needed. Those who report they are not able to provide the care often or consistently were asked to indicate the barriers they are experiencing that prevent them from offering the care. The five categories of care and barriers are discussed below. Spay/neuter clinics do not house animals therefore, the spay/neuter clinics are not included in the discussion about unmet veterinary care needs.



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## Essential Care

The first category of care that organizations were asked to report on is Essential Care. Three types of care are included in this category – basic intake care, care for routine illnesses that can be treated based on protocols, and euthanasia when health or behavior necessitates. Overall, shelters and rescue organizations report that they can consistently provide these types of care. (Table 8).

**Table 8. Do Not Consistently Provide Essential Care**

|                                    | Basic Intake Care | Care for Routine Illness Based on Protocol | Euthanasia when Health/Behavior Necessitates |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|--|--|
| Government Animal Shelter          | 0.0%              | 4.6%                                       | 3.6%   |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITH Contract    | 0.0%              | 0.0%                                       | 4.8%   |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITHOUT Contract | 0.0%              | 1.3%                                       | 9.9%   |
| Rescue Organization                | 1.9%              | 1.9%                                       | 26.3%  |

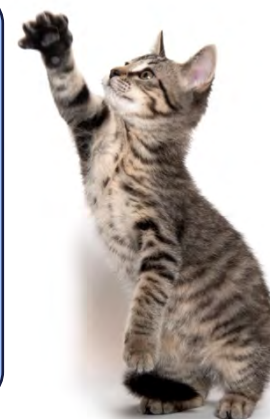
The number of organizations who cannot consistently provide these types of care is quite low. For those who cannot, lack of access to a veterinarian and cost are the barriers most frequently reported.

## Spay/Neuter Surgery

The second category of care included in the study is spay and neuter surgery for animals in the organization's care. Government shelters are most likely to not routinely provide this service.

**Table 2. Do Not Consistently Provide Spay/Neuter Surgery**

|                                    | Spay/Neuter Surgery |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Government Animal Shelter          | 17.4%               |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITH Contract    | 4.0%                |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITHOUT Contract | 2.6%                |
| Rescue Organization                | 5.7%                |





Barriers that prevent Spay and Neuter surgeries from being performed are similar to those for Essential Care - cost and lack of access to a veterinarian. Additionally, about one out of four government animal shelters (42.1%) who cannot consistently provide needed spay or neuter surgeries cite lack of space or equipment as a barrier. Comments from respondents corroborate that lack of space and equipment impedes their ability to offer spay and neuter surgeries.

*“...our facility is not state of the art.”*

*“Lack resources, like appropriate medical space and tools, do not have the capability to perform S/N, medical procedures on site.”*



## Intermediate and Complete Care

As needed care becomes more specialized, organizations are less likely to consistently provide the service to animals in their care. Most organizations are able to provide medical diagnostics beyond heartworm and FeLV/FIV testing but fewer are able to provide less routine care such as non-spay/neuter surgeries and treatment for nonroutine illnesses, neonatal care and dental procedures for animals in their care. Government shelters report a higher incidence of inability to provide these services to animals in their care than other types of organizations (Table 10).

**Table 9. Do Not Consistently Provide Intermediate and Complete Care**

|                                    | Medical Diagnostics | Non-Spay/Neuter Surgery | Treatment for Nonroutine Illness | Neonatal Care | Dental Procedures |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Government Animal Shelter          | 28.4%               | 40.2%                   | 43.1%                            | 54.1%         | 62.4%             |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITH Contract    | 17.5%               | 18.3%                   | 18.3%                            | 21.4%         | 35.7%             |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITHOUT Contract | 11.3%               | 11.3%                   | 7.3%                             | 25.3%         | 25.2%             |
| Rescue Organization                | 17.0%               | 22.6%                   | 15.1%                            | 35.8%         | 36.5%             |

While access to a veterinarian is a factor in not being able to meet the demand for neonatal and dental care, about half of the organizations report that cost (47.4%) and inadequate space and equipment (45.8%) impedes their ability to provide these types of care. Moreover, lack of support staff (27.7%) reportedly plays a role in the inability to meet these veterinary care needs.

## Community Programs

In addition to providing veterinary care for animals in their care, shelters and rescue organizations may provide veterinary services to animals in their community that are not in custody at the shelter. Respondents vary in their ability to provide this type of care. Except for nonprofit shelters with a government contract, more than half of the organizations do not consistently provide a community cat spay/neuter program and nonprofit shelters without a government contract report the lowest level of consistently providing safety net veterinary services for animals in their community.

**Table 10. Do Not Consistently Provide Community Programs**

|                                    | Community Cat Spay/Neuter Program | Safety Net Veterinary Services |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Government Animal Shelter          | 54.1%                             | 77.1%                          |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITH Contract    | 44.4%                             | 68.3%                          |
| Nonprofit Shelter WITHOUT Contract | 58.3%                             | 65.6%                          |
| Rescue Organization                | 62.3%                             | 80.8%                          |

Cost is the most cited reason respondents provided for why these services are not offered consistently. Other reported barriers are lack of access to a veterinarian, inadequate facilities or equipment, and lack support staff.

- Cost (60.7%)
- Lack of access to a veterinarian (42.7%)
- Lack of adequate space or equipment (37.5%)
- Lack of support staff for direct care (31.4%)

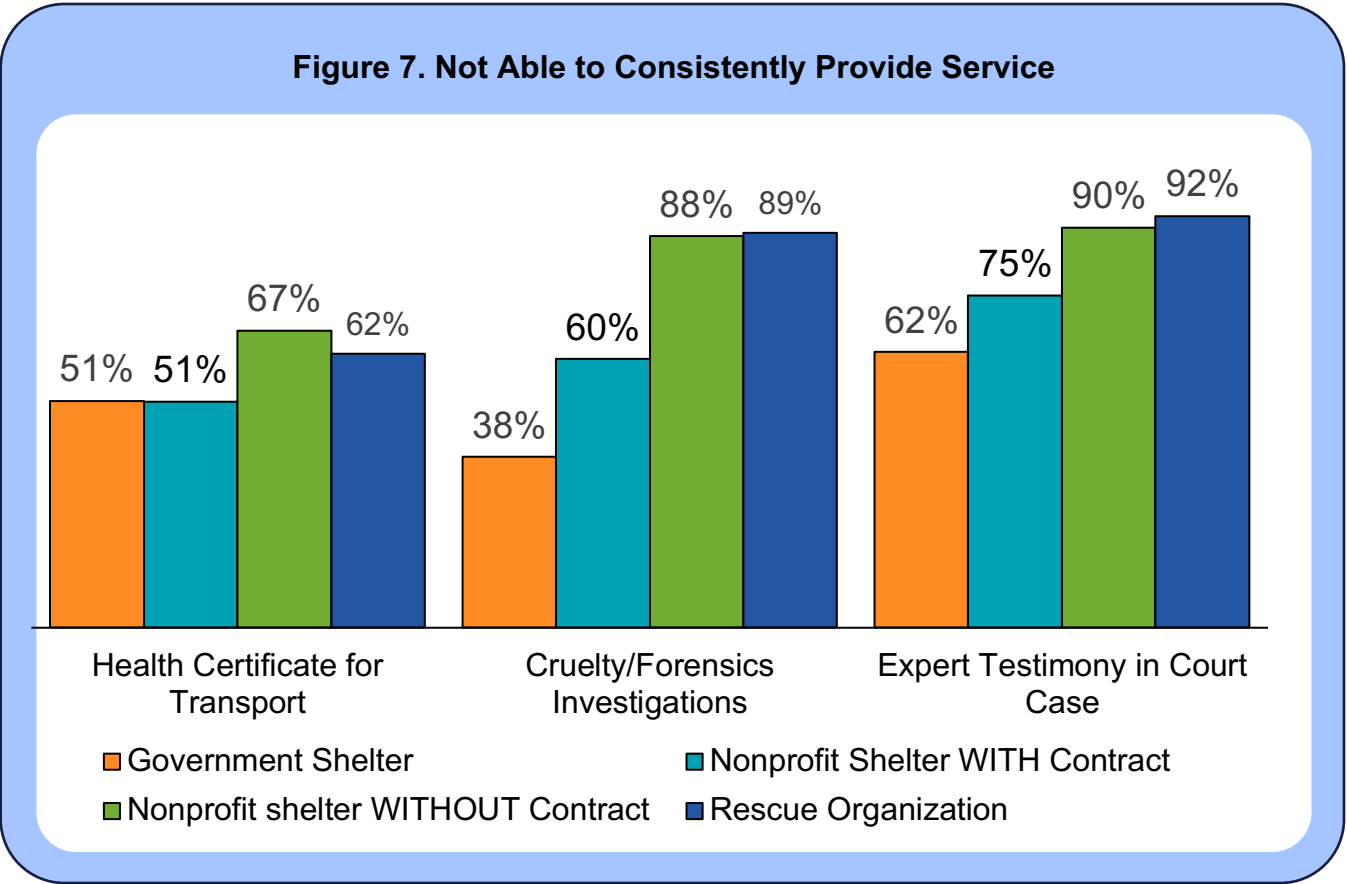


Government animal shelters report being restricted from offering safety net veterinary programs due to local policies and regulations. About one out of every three government shelters responding (29.8%) report that policies prevent them from offering veterinary community programs.

*“Our issue is with regulations that prevent medical professionals to provide reasonable, affordable care to community members offsite.”*

### Additional Services

Shelter veterinarians and staff have additional responsibilities beyond providing direct care for animals. A health certificate for transport is required for transporting animals across state lines. More than half of the organizations report they are not able to consistently provide this service. Veterinary staff may also be called upon to assist with cruelty/forensic investigations or provide expert testimony in court proceedings. More than 6 out of 10 organizations responding report they are not able to provide expert testimony consistently if it is needed (Figure 7).



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## Impact on Animals

Animal shelters and rescue organizations are experiencing adverse consequences due to lack of access to veterinary care. Organizations were asked to report how often adverse consequences had occurred in the past 12 months.

Overall, 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%)



Government shelters are uniquely impacted by lack of access to veterinary care. These shelters are more likely to report a higher prevalence of certain outcomes compared to other organizations.

- Half of government shelters (49.5%) report that they exceed recommended animal housing capacity and 38.3% delay spay or neuter surgery due to lack of access to veterinary care.
- One-third of government shelters (34.2%) report that they co-house or double up occupancy in kennels not appropriate for multiple animals and almost one out of three government shelters (29.2%) report that they often or consistently euthanize animals for moderate medical conditions such as parvovirus or fractured limbs.
- Nearly one out of four government shelters (23.1%) report that they send animals to their new home without being spayed or neutered.



Not having access to a staff veterinarian also results in longer LOS. Animals housed in organizations without a veterinarian on staff experience significantly longer LOS than those in organizations with a veterinarian on staff (Table 12).



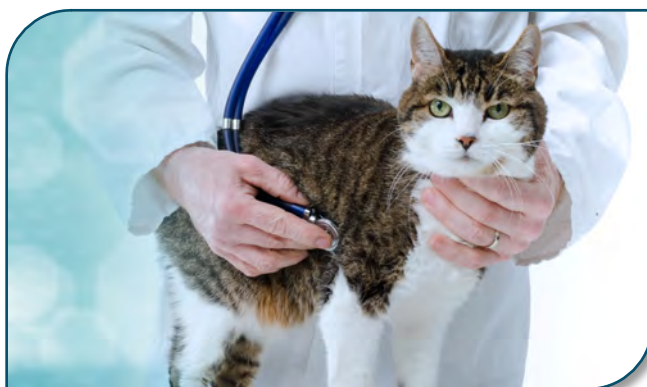
**Table 11. Length of Stay (LOS)**

| Average<br>LOS                        | Cats                     |                                | Dogs                     |                                |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
|                                       | Veterinarian<br>on Staff | No<br>Veterinarian<br>on Staff | Veterinarian<br>on Staff | No<br>Veterinarian<br>on Staff |
| Government Animal<br>Shelter          | 14.9                     | 30.6                           | 19.7                     | 27.5                           |
| Nonprofit Shelter<br>WITH Contract    | 21.4                     | 58.4                           | 18.7                     | 52.3                           |
| Nonprofit Shelter<br>WITHOUT Contract | 34.5                     | 68.3                           | 33.7                     | 51.8                           |
| Rescue Organization                   | 79.0                     | 113.2                          | 30.6                     | 59.4                           |

The higher LOS for organizations without a veterinarian is consistent for all types of shelters and rescue organizations.

## Potential Solutions for Helping to Meet Veterinary Care Demands

Organizations' ability to access veterinary care is becoming more of a challenge. Half of the organizations (51.6%) report that access is more difficult now compared to before the COVID19 pandemic. This belief is reported consistently by all types of organizations although rescue organizations (69.8%) are more likely to report that access has gotten more difficult perhaps due to their heavy reliance on community-based veterinarians.



Organizations were provided with three potential solutions for meeting the current demand for veterinary care. Overall considerable support is expressed for increased utilization of and expanded scope of practice for veterinary technicians as well as 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%



Potential solutions are not uniformly supported by animal welfare professionals. Medical directors and shelter veterinarians are least supportive of a new mid-level practitioner role (51.2%) but are most supportive of increasing the utilization of veterinary technicians (86.0%). Directors and CEOs are most supportive of a new mid-level role (80.6%) but are least likely to favor increasing the use of veterinary technicians (77.7%).

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## Limitations

Research studies that include survey data collection have certain limitations. The most common limitation is the introduction of non-response bias because 100% participation from the population of concern is not obtained. Sources of the bias can vary but are most attributed to not having access to the entire population. AAWA's membership list and a distribution list provided by ASPCA were used to invite organizations to participate in the study. Though these lists are extensive, not all animal shelters and rescue groups received an invitation to participate. It is possible that representatives of the organizations not represented in this study have different experiences and opinions than those who did participate. This may limit the generalizability of these findings to the entire population animal welfare organizations.



## CONCLUSIONS & KEY MESSAGES

Animal welfare organizations face a myriad of challenges in meeting the veterinary care needs of the animals in their care. This study shed light on some of these key issues as well as the various ways in which they impact organizations' abilities to provide services. A number of important themes emerged from the study.

Open positions for veterinarians are reported by all types of organizations from government animal shelters to animal rescues and spay/neuter clinics and animal welfare organizations struggle to compete with private industry to recruit staff. Further, animal sheltering veterinarians require a special skillset and the ability to work in a highly stressful environment. Not being able to offer competitive benefits packages makes recruiting particularly challenging for shelters.



When organizations are not able to employ a staff veterinarian, they must rely on local veterinarians to meet their needs. This reliance makes organizations particularly vulnerable to their communities' shortage of veterinarians. This sets up a particularly problematic environment where a community is in most need of assistance from animal shelters to find care for their animals, these shelters and rescues may be least able to provide it due to a lack of access to veterinary care for the animals in their own custody.





Lacking access to veterinary care negatively impacts animals in the care of shelters and organizations. This study finds that lack of access results in organizations exceeding capacity beyond standards for best practice, limiting the number of intakes, delaying spay and neuter surgeries or sending animals to their new homes without first being spayed or neutered. The impacts go beyond this and results from this study find that length of stay for animals in the care of shelters and rescues increases considerably for organizations who do not have a veterinarian on staff. Given the many negative consequences of extended length of stays for animals in a shelter environment, particularly one that is crowded beyond capacity, this is a particularly poignant finding.

Finally, findings from this study suggest that most shelters and rescue organizations can provide basic care for the animals in their care but are less able to provide more advanced types of care. In an environment of increasing pressure to provide care for community animals and more extensive care for in-shelter animals, this increases veterinary needs in an already constrained workforce. The current national animal sheltering veterinary workforce is in a precarious position. Without additional resources or ability to successfully recruit veterinarians, the demands on current staff may further exacerbate the lack of access to care for shelters and rescue organizations due to burnout and downstream effect on the rest of shelter and rescue operations. These impacts spread beyond the walls of a shelter, leaving the community and their animals even more vulnerable to a host of problems.





## Appendix

| Benefits offered for veterinarians  | Overall |
|---|---------|
| PTO   | 83.6%   |
| Health insurance  | 75.4%   |
| Paying for annual Continuing Education credits                            | 71.7%   |
| Paying professional association dues                                      | 70.5%   |
| Conference attendance registration and travel expenses                    | 67.2%   |
| Retirement or 401K account payments                                       | 65.0%   |
| Flexible work schedule  | 57.8%   |
| Employee Assistance Program   | 57.1%   |
| Annual cost of living raise   | 47.7%   |
| Merit based raise   | 43.8%   |
| Relocation assistance   | 19.1%   |
| Signing bonus   | 18.2%   |
| Assigned mentor   | 15.5%   |
| Student loan repayment  | 13.7%   |
| Scheduled rotations at different shelters/vet clinics/specialty hospitals | 8.5%    |
| Housing stipend   | 1.2%    |

| <b>Benefits Offered for Veterinarians by Type of Organization</b> | <b>Government Shelter (n=73)</b> | <b>Nonprofit Shelter WITH Contract (n=90)</b> | <b>Nonprofit Shelter WITHOUT Contract (n=105)</b> | <b>Rescue Organization (n =8)</b> | <b>Spay/Neuter Clinic (n=28)</b> |
|---|----------------------------------|---|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Annual cost of living raise                                       | 52.1%                            | 47.8%   | 48.6%   | 12.5%                             | 50.0%                            |
| Assigned mentor   | 9.6%                             | 20.0%   | 16.2%   | 0.0%                              | 14.3%                            |
| Conference attendance registration and travel expenses            | 68.5%                            | 71.1%   | 73.3%   | 12.5%                             | 53.6%                            |
| Employee Assistance Program                                       | 79.5%                            | 66.7%   | 52.4%   | 12.5%                             | 21.4%                            |
| Flexible work schedule  | 58.9%                            | 62.2%   | 52.4%   | 62.5%                             | 57.1%                            |
| Health insurance  | 87.7%                            | 86.7%   | 72.4%   | 25.0%                             | 50.0%                            |
| Housing stipend   | 0.0%                             | 1.1%  | 0.0%  | 0.0%                              | 3.6%                             |
| Merit based raise   | 30.1%                            | 47.8%   | 51.4%   | 37.5%                             | 42.9%                            |
| Paying for annual Continuing Education credits                    | 61.6%                            | 77.8%   | 80.0%   | 50.0%                             | 64.3%                            |
| Paying professional association dues                              | 68.5%                            | 73.3%   | 78.1%   | 50.0%                             | 67.9%                            |
| PTO   | 86.3%                            | 93.3%   | 86.7%   | 37.5%                             | 71.4%                            |
| Relocation assistance   | 11.0%                            | 27.8%   | 20.0%   | 0.0%                              | 10.7%                            |

| <b>Benefits Offered<br/>for Veterinarians<br/>by Type of<br/>Organization</b>            | <b>Government<br/>Shelter<br/>(n=73)</b> | <b>Nonprofit<br/>Shelter<br/>WITH<br/>Contract<br/>(n=90)</b> | <b>Nonprofit<br/>Shelter<br/>WITHOUT<br/>Contract<br/>(n=105)</b> | <b>Rescue<br/>Organization<br/>(n =8)</b> | <b>Spay/Neuter<br/>Clinic<br/>(n=28)</b> |
|--|--|---|---|---|--|
| Retirement or<br>401K account<br>payments  | 82.2%                                    | 75.6%   | 58.1%   | 25.0%                                     | 39.3%                                    |
| Scheduled<br>rotations at<br>different<br>shelters/vet<br>clinics/specialty<br>hospitals | 2.7%                                     | 14.4%   | 6.7%  | 0.0%                                      | 10.7%                                    |
| Signing bonus  | 15.1%                                    | 26.7%   | 13.3%   | 12.5%                                     | 25.0%                                    |
| Student loan<br>repayment  | 20.5%                                    | 15.6%   | 10.5%   | 0.0%                                      | 10.7%                                    |