Managing Emotions: The Fear Free Shelters Program

Background

Today, an estimated 13,000 "sheltering organizations" (including both government agencies and private groups) care for an estimated 6-7 million homeless animals annually—mostly cats and dogs. Organizations run the gamut in size from those that are very large, handling tens of thousands of animals per year, to those that are very small, including grass-roots groups and private individuals. Similarly, shelters vary tremendously in their physical structure, ranging from those with modern buildings equipped with state-of-the-art animal care facilities, to small, outdated buildings lacking adequate climate control and plumbing. In contrast, some organizations operate without facilities and instead utilize networks of foster homes to house and care for animals. For some animals, the amount of time spent in the care of a sheltering organization is brief. Others however spend extended amounts of time, ultimately remaining in shelter facilities for months, years, or even for the duration of their lives.

Admission to any shelter is a stressful event for animals because of the attendant abrupt change in their environment. The strange sights, smells, and sounds combined with the presence of unfamiliar people and animals trigger apprehension, thus almost all animals experience at least some degree of fear and anxiety following admission. Confinement in an unfamiliar environment makes coping difficult because it is generally challenging for cats and dogs in shelters to simply engage in normal every day behaviors. The day-to-day interactions they receive may be inconsistent and unpredictable, making it difficult for them to learn what to expect, and therefore more difficult for them adapt. For all of these reasons, even short-term confinement in an animal shelter can induce severe stress, anxiety, fear and frustration. Long-term, animals can suffer from social isolation, inadequate mental stimulation, lack of exercise, and chronic anxiety—all of which can adversely affect their physical and emotional health and lessen their adoptability. Furthermore, in tight confinement cats and dogs have little control and few behavioral options that might serve as effective outlets for their needs. With inadequate physical and mental stimulation, animals may experience increasing anxiety and frustration in the days and weeks following admission. If un-ameliorated, the negative emotional states that animals in shelters experience result in poor emotional health and compromised welfare. Tragically, some animals ultimately develop persistent or even life-long emotional problems as a result of experiencing chronic stress during a long-term shelter stay.

Fear Free Shelter Program: Goals and Objectives

The overarching goal of the Fear Free Shelter Program is to improve the emotional experiences of animals by educating shelter personnel about the emotional needs of dogs and cats and empowering them to apply broad based concepts, strategies and techniques designed to reduce the negative emotional states that are commonly experienced by shelter animals, including fear, anxiety, stress (FAS), and frustration. The Fear Free shelter program aims to

provide training suitable for all of the individuals involved in the care and oversight of shelter animals—from medical and behavioral staff, to intake, reception, kennel, and cattery staff to animal control officers, adoption counselors, foster caregivers, and shelter volunteers. As such, modules will ideally be written for all members of the shelter team in mind; they will be clear and straightforward to follow, and will be limited in length to approximately 30 minutes each.

To meet the needs of the shelter team, the Fear Free Shelter program will consist of a variety of modules that can be mixed and matched to provide necessary core training for shelter workers depending on their particular role(s) in animal care. Some modules will provide instruction in basic core concepts applicable to all shelter workers (mandatory modules), while other will provide more specific content that is more relevant to specific aspects of shelter animal care (optional modules). The Fear Free Shelter Program will begin with a broad foundation of modules in its initial course, and will build with increasingly specialized content. Fear Free shelter certification may be earned by individuals who complete the mandatory modules and a designated minimum number of optional modules in the initial course.

The Fear Free shelter program is intended for all types of sheltering organizations with the goal of achieving a Fear Free culture through the united actions and attitudes of shelter team members. For many shelters, improving available animal housing facilities will also be an important consideration, but even so embracing a Fear Free culture will improve welfare until such changes in the physical plant can be made.

The original Fear Free certification program for veterinary professionals enumerates many crucial core concepts that will be replicated in the Fear Free Shelter course. Utilizing a consistent means of explaining these concepts and describing techniques will provide important continuity across various Fear Free programs and courses as they are developed. This course will maintain a similar "look and feel" for the Fear Free shelter program to that which was developed in the original Fear Free certification program for veterinary professionals. If you are familiar with the original Fear Free program, you will know that there is outstanding content that has already been developed, some of which has been adapted for the Fear Free Shelter course.

Broad objectives have been defined for the Fear Free Shelter Program as listed below. More specific objectives can be found defined at the level of each individual module. The initial course modules will begin to address these broad objectives, giving highest priority to the development of foundational training materials which are most relevant to the day to day care of animals in shelters.

The following are broad objectives for the Fear Free Shelter Program:

       a. Describe emotional health of animals within the context of the sheltering environment (shelter context)

b. Interpret canine and feline body language, behaviors, and motivations (shelter context.) This will include a discussion of fear, anxiety, stress (FAS) and frustration versus contentment behaviors.

c. Understand how animals learn (with examples in shelter context)

d. Understand and assess the impact of housing and environment (physical and emotional environment) on behavior and learning (shelter context)

e. Learn how to minimize FAS and Frustration:

   i. At intake
   ii. During daily care and husbandry procedures
   iii. During medical procedures
   iv. During the adoption process

f. Learn strategies to optimize behavioral wellness and provide enrichment

g. Use basic principles of psychopharmacology to design a medication protocol for sheltered animals and monitor effectiveness

h. Begin to design protocols to maximize behavioral health and minimize risk to physical health

i. Learn how to monitor behavior and welfare of sheltered animals

j. Learn implementation and leadership skills (shelter context- includes brief overview of capacity for care and standards of care in shelters)

As mentioned in the last objective, an implementation module will also be included, similar to the Fear Free certification program's module 8. This module will include basic information on population management and capacity for care for animal shelters because understanding these concepts is necessary in order to optimize the behavioral health of shelter animals. This module will also contain information to address shelter specific barriers to implementation. Specifically, it will address the following common "excuses" for not utilizing treats, toys, and other creature comforts in shelters: treats will give the dogs/cats diarrhea; toys/bedding will clog the drains in the kennel and/or result in GI foreign body obstructions; it is too expensive. Finally, it will emphasize that "every animal matters, and every action matters." Recognizing that creating change can be difficult in shelters, whatever the path to major change it usually occurs one important baby step at the time.

Brenda Griffin, DVM, MS, DACVIM
Sheila D'Arpino, DVM, DACVB
Sara Bennett, DVM, MS, DACVB