Keeping the vets we have:

shelter veterinarian retention as a core strategy to support Access to Veterinary Care

Executive Summary

Lack of access to veterinary care (AVC) has been widely identified as the greatest modern-day threat to companion animal welfare. This lack of access to care is crippling shelters, both in their ability to provide for the animals in their care and by hurting the communities that rely on them for services.

In the last several years, critical work has been done to define the impact and extent of the AVC problem. In our research to identify strategies, addressing veterinary retention rose to the top. The alarming rates of veterinarian attrition point to deeper issues that will not be solved by simply bringing more veterinarians into the field.

The three most common factors cited as having a negative impact on job satisfaction were: a lack of support staff, the inability to provide for animal welfare due to overcrowding, and misaligned working relations with shelter leadership. Interestingly, most shelter veterinarians do not cite compensation as the core factor in their retention. In this white paper, we explore factors with the greatest potential to develop practical, critical, and near-term solutions to address veterinary retention in shelters. This will require attention and support from the entire community, from external stakeholders to policymakers to funders.

> The harms resulting from lack of AVC in shelters do not end there: veterinary services provided within shelters are interwoven with the health of animals in the community.

Current Landscape

Context

A national shortage of veterinarians has severely exacerbated preexisting barriers to animals receiving care[1]. As demand continues to outpace veterinary capacity and AVC further declines, the consequences for animals, people, and communities are far-reaching—and dire.

This paper builds on the findings of several surveys related to the AVC crisis. The first survey in 2022, Access to Veterinary Care in California Animal Shelters, highlighted how severe the lack of AVC is in California shelters and details some of its impacts. A similar survey was carried out at a national scale in 2023, National Access to Care Research Study. Finally, a third survey in 2024, California Shelter Veterinary Job Satisfaction, dove deeper into the factors most felt by California shelter veterinarians. For clarity in this paper, we will refer to the surveys as the California AVC survey, the national AVC survey, and the California veterinary job satisfaction survey.

Animal welfare impact

While all sectors of veterinary care have been affected by the pervasive workforce shortage, the non-profit and animal welfare sectors have been hit especially hard. Steady progress in the provision of accessible spay/neuter was abruptly halted when clinics temporarily closed in 2020 in response to the COVID pandemic, resulting in a shortfall of an estimated 2.7 million surgeries[3]. Since that time, many clinics have not been able to return even to baseline productivity let alone catch up on the substantial spay/neuter backlog—fueling increasing pet overpopulation and adding to the AVC problem. Affordable and accessible spay/neuter, a bedrock of humane pet population management, has become widely unavailable, with waiting lists at clinics frequently stretching from weeks to months.

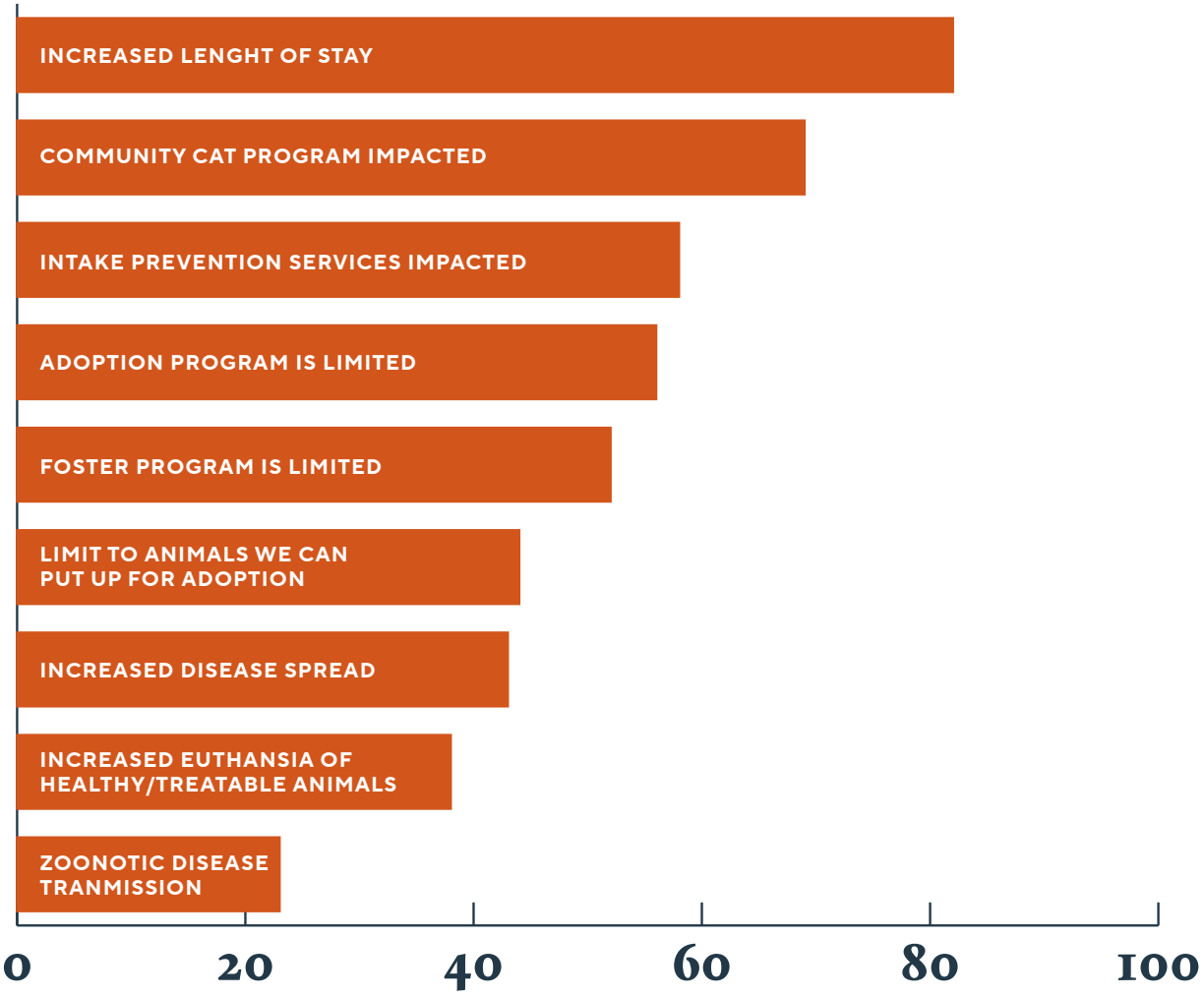
Now shelters find themselves facing rising intake at a time when veterinary services are

more difficult than ever to obtain[4]. The national AVC survey found that more than 70% of shelters reported being short-staffed for both veterinarians and veterinary support staff[5]. Consequences are far-reaching, from severe backlogs of animals awaiting spay/neuter surgery to difficulty ensuring even the most basic preventive care for pets admitted to shelters.

The California AVC survey mirrored the national picture: 60% of respondents reported unfilled veterinary positions, resulting in over 340,000 shelter dogs and cats lacking consistent access to veterinary care[6]. The impact ranged from increased length of stay (82%), to limits on adoption programs (56%) and increased euthanasia (37%) (Figure 1). As one survey respondent stated, lack of access to veterinary care "is our biggest problem at present, more than any other problem, and impacts all things."

In addition to threatening decades of progress towards lower euthanasia rates in shelters, the shortage of veterinarians working in animal shelters has profound implications for the larger picture of access to veterinary care. Importantly, the harms resulting from lack of AVC in shelters do not end there: veterinary services provided within shelters are interwoven with the health of animals in the community.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents indicating that lack of AVC had a "moderate" or "major" negative effect on aspects of shelter operations.



Impact on communities

Most obviously, community-directed programs have been decimated as shelters struggle even to provide the necessary care for their resident animals. More than half of respondents to the California AVC survey reported lack of veterinary staffing has led to decreased services to keep pets safe with their families instead of entering the shelter, while over two-thirds reported that community cat and trap-neuter-return programs have been negatively impacted[6].

In addition to hampering community programs, loss of AVC for animals passing through shelters gets passed directly on to the community the shelter serves. Ensuring that animals adopted from shelters are spayed/neutered, vaccinated, and provided with basic wellness care has been key to stabilizing pet populations and supporting healthy communities. However, in the California AVC survey, only two-thirds (63%) of shelter leaders reported being able to consistently provide spay/neuter services for adopted or reclaimed animals. At best, this leads to prolonged length of stay while shelter animals await scarce spay/neuter appointments; at worst, euthanasia rises at shelters while members of the public obtain pets from other, less healthy sources, and preventable illness and unwanted litters become more common at a time when they can least be afforded.

Long-term solutions are underway, and short-term tactics are needed

Nationally, a number of tactics have been proposed or are underway to alleviate the AVC crisis. These include the establishment of additional veterinary training programs and expansion of class sizes for existing programs; increased accessibility of training (e.g., through tuition support/debt relief); increased scope of practice for veterinary support roles; policy changes such as licensing reciprocity between states; greater use of telemedicine and other technology; and incorporation of incremental care/spectrum of care concepts and practices into veterinary training and practice[7,8].

While these tactics hold great potential to both increase accessibility of care and diversify participation in veterinary medicine, the time horizon for many of these efforts to have a significant impact is years or even decades away. In concert with these long-term efforts, there is an urgent need to identify interventions that can support AVC in shelters in the interim. This brings the authors to our primary focus: an immediate and prioritized effort to retain existing veterinary staff.

Retention of Existing Veterinary Staff

Increasing the retention of veterinarians and medical staff already working with shelters has a number of potential benefits as a strategy to address the AVC crisis. By retaining existing staff, there is no need to await major policy changes, the development of new practice categories, or the establishment of new schools of veterinary medicine to tap into the talent of professionals already engaged in the field. Conversely, no amount of new veterinary professionals being turned out by any number of new programs will alleviate the AVC problem if shelters are unable to attract and retain these individuals.

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Retention of medical staff minimizes the vicious cycle of increased length of stay and disease caused (in part) by a lack of continuity of care and adequate veterinary coverage. Additionally, retaining veterinarians saves the cost of recruitment and training, and prevents protracted periods without a veterinarian that can lead to loss of other critical staff and potential problems with regulatory compliance and access to appropriate medications and drugs. Last, the benefit of addressing factors to improve retention of veterinarians will also likely improve overall retention of staff and future recruitment efforts.

Identifying key factors influencing veterinary attrition

A membership poll conducted by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians in 2022 highlighted just how significant a threat veterinary attrition is. A majority of respondents were considering leaving their current role in the near future and one-third were considering leaving the field of shelter medicine completely.[9]

The California veterinary job satisfaction survey evaluated the most important factors associated with positive and negative job satisfaction for shelter veterinarians. Broadly, the most significant factors leading to negative job satisfaction were a lack of support staff, an inability to provide for animal welfare due to overcrowding, and a challenging working relationship with leadership.

When comparing surveys on factors leading to attrition, we found a marked gap between what shelter leaders perceive as the negative factors and what shelter veterinarians reported[10,11]. This disparity in perception is a dangerous barrier to shelter success and one that can be addressed with concerted effort.

In the national AVC survey, shelter leaders ranked the top three causes of veterinarian attrition as: (1) disparate pay between shelters and private practice, (2) compassion fatigue/exposure to victims of animal abuse/euthanasia, and (3) lack of support staff. While there is certainly overlap, the differences in priority are striking. Shelter leaders were about twice as likely as veterinarians to identify private practice salary comparison as a leading concern. Veterinarians were more likely to report inadequate support staff and inability to provide for the welfare of animals as the most pressing concerns.

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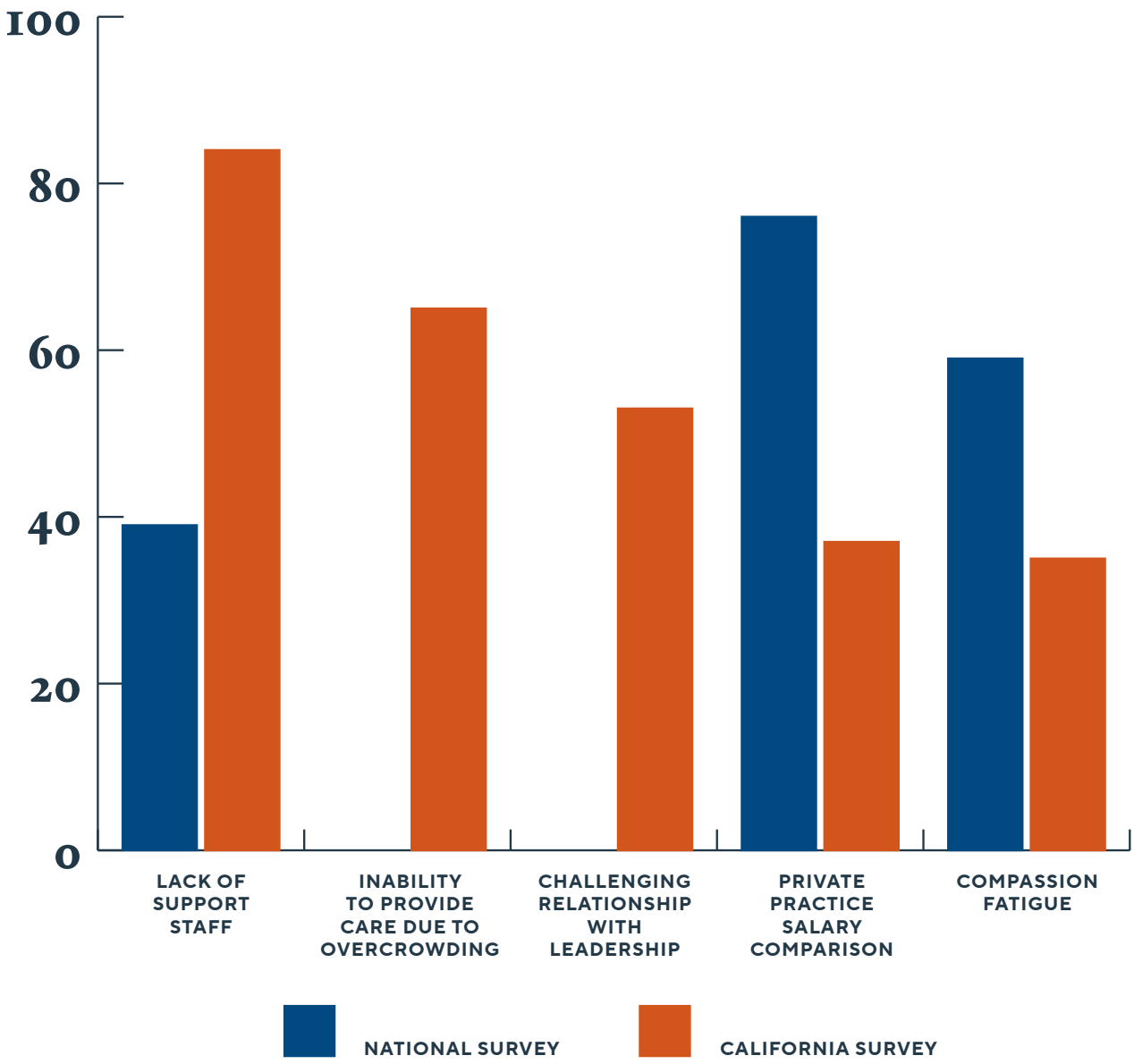
Resolving this disparity in perception and aligning solutions with the most urgent issues identified by shelter veterinarians will provide a crucial underpinning for the success of efforts to increase veterinary recruitment and retention.

To do so, authors recommend a clear and coordinated focus on four main factors that influence veterinary retention: support staff, shelter overcrowding, organizational alignment, and the overall compensation package and work-life balance.

SUPPORT STAFF: RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, AND SKILL EXPANSION

In order to effectively manage the number and variety of cases and species under their care, shelter veterinarians must be able to confidently delegate routine care and monitoring to veterinary medical support staff (Registered Veterinary Technicians/Veterinary Nurses (RVT), and Veterinary Assistants (VA)). Yet, even for

Figure 2: TBD



shelters with budgeted positions for RVTs and VAs, the difficulty in recruiting and retaining registered veterinary technicians is equal to, or even greater than, retaining veterinarians. As illustrated in the CA Shelter AVC survey, it is not uncommon for California shelters to have unfilled RVT and VA positions[12].

While the focus is on veterinary staff, a functional system requires adequate numbers of trained shelter staff, including animal care attendants, front desk staff, and volunteers, to ensure appropriate animal care and effective communication between the medical team and other interconnected departments. In this context, it is helpful to consider strategies to boost recruitment, retention, and efficiency both of veterinary support staff and staffing at all levels of the shelter, as exemplified by this response from a California shelter veterinarian to the question, "What is one thing that would most improve your job as a veterinarian?":

"It is much harder to monitor population health and prevent disease transmission if the kennel staff isn't fully and consistently helping to monitor appetites and eliminations and for other clinical concerns and following proper cleaning procedures. It is hard to initiate treatment plans and provide medical care if vet staff aren't doing their jobs. It's hard to set up the adopters for success if adoption staff is not appropriately counseling and communicating with adopters. Having a stable and well-trained staff that is good at communicating between departments would make my job infinitely easier."

In situations where shelters are unable to hire adequate levels of RVT and VA support, we recommend shelters expand the skills and tasks of animal care attendants (ACA) and volunteers so that they can perform basic and routine monitoring and treatment. For example, ACAs and trained volunteers, because of their close working relationship with the animals, can be trained and empowered to monitor animals for valuable data, perform routine intake exams, administer vaccinations and preventatives, report on health/behavior, carry out biosecurity protocols, administer medications, and assist the medical team in animal transport and restraint.

ADDRESSING OVERCROWDING AS A BARRIER TO PROVIDING CARE

It is not surprising that a major factor affecting job satisfaction for California shelter veterinarians is the inability to provide quality care due to overcrowding, and the lack of time and expertise to address the special behavioral needs that arise in the shelter setting.

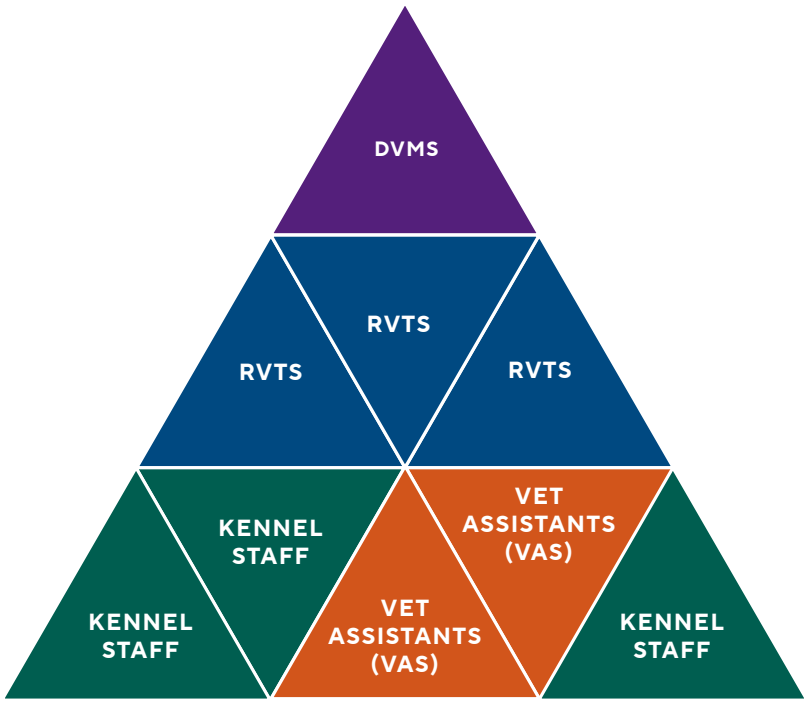
Overcrowding in our nation's shelter system is at historic levels. Shelters that are chronically operating above capacity for care routinely fall short of the basic goals of humane housing and animal welfare. This results in a high potential for disease, injury, and suffering for the animals and a decrease in positive outcomes.

In California, and throughout the nation, many shelter leaders are under enormous ideological, financial, moral, and political pressure to perform the impossible: prevent euthanasia at all costs while being forced to continue to intake animals in need from the community. Shelters in this position chronically struggle with insufficient resources in every area – financial, spatial, and staffing. The mismatch of shelter expectations and available resources is straining California animal shelters to the brink of collapse.

This is an untenable work environment long term and is a significant factor in staff (including veterinary) burn-out, which raises real safety and liability concerns for all stakeholders, in and out of the shelters. To truly get to the root of veterinarian attrition, shelters need to be empowered to operate as a functional system where workload is in balance with organizational resources. This includes managing intake to align with capacity, removing barriers to live outcomes (such as cost and process), and the ability to make timely, thoughtful, and humane euthanasia decisions.

Resolving this disparity in perception and aligning solutions with the most urgent issues identified by shelter veterinarians will provide a crucial underpinning for the success of efforts to increase veterinary recruitment and retention.

Figure 3: TBD



ORGANIZATIONAL ALIGNMENT

The quality of the relationship between staff and supervisor is a significant factor in job satisfaction and retention This was reflected in the California Shelter Veterinary Job Satisfaction Survey: most respondents identified challenging working relationships with leadership as a significant negative factor in job satisfaction. While most shelter leaders undoubtedly work to cultivate positive working relationships with medical staff, there is a gap in perception of the overall effectiveness of the relationship between shelter leaders and staff veterinarians, with leaders reporting significantly greater satisfaction than veterinarians do[12]. There was broad agreement between both groups that communication is a crucial factor in building a successful relationship. However, shelter leaders perceived both the frequency and quality of communication between themselves and veterinarians more highly than veterinarians themselves reported.

Supporting communication between shelter leaders and staff veterinarians could improve retention as well as build beneficial mutual understanding between individuals each holding an important perspective on overall organizational functioning. Given the gap in perception of frequency as well as quality of communication, explicitly and routinely checking in with veterinary staff about their perception and preference regarding communication may be a simple and effective intervention leaders can make.

Improved understanding from both groups about the pressures and constraints faced by shelter leaders and veterinarians would also likely be helpful. More than 80% of respondents to the California Shelter Veterinary Job Satisfaction Survey perceived that leadership has limited understanding of the specific challenges they face, and fewer than 40% of shelter veterinarians indicated they were greatly or extremely aligned with management regarding shelter policies. Veterinarians in leadership roles within shelters

might provide helpful balanced perspective to promote greater understanding could be built from both sides. Leaders could also be supported by accessible training to ensure they understand the many roles as well as the legal and regulatory responsibilities veterinarians hold, including their liability for healthcare-related activities in the shelter, legal and operational obligations around the use and administration of controlled drugs and pharmaceuticals, and responsibility for the legal and regulatory compliance by all staff involved with care.

Engaging veterinarians in policy development and ensuring the interests and goals of the medical and nonmedical sides of sheltering are aligned may help increase shared understanding as well as meaningfully boost retention. Further, policies and procedures that are reliant on a veterinary license or permit should be developed in partnership with veterinarians; doing so will improve management's understanding of the veterinarian's role and likely lead to greater appreciation and support for the veterinary staff.

COMPENSATION PACKAGE AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE

In a highly competitive job market, and with the overall supply of veterinarians insufficient to meet demand, the totality of a compensation package remains a key factor in retaining (and recruiting) veterinarians to shelter medicine positions. Providing compensation packages that reflect the realities of the current workforce is critical, yet often municipal and government employers have compensation limitations that make it difficult to retain highly competitive professionals. Competitive benefits such as comprehensive health care insurance, retirement plan, loan forgiveness, generous continuing education, and personal time off should be considered as part of that package. Exploring non-monetary and flexible benefits may even be levers that cash-strapped shelters and municipalities can pull.

There is an opportunity for shelter management to give thoughtful consideration to the daily requirements for veterinarians, and carefully map out shifts and on-call timing, to allow veterinary staff an appropriate work-life balance. The importance of rest and taking time off work cannot be underestimated for people in high-stress occupations, of which veterinary shelter medicine is near the top of the list. Shelter medicine can be extremely stressful on a constant basis; shelter veterinarians are often on call on their days off. In order to protect veterinarians wellbeing and create balance, we encourage shelter leaders to establish clear protocols on when to contact on-call veterinarians and/or utilize local private practices or telemedicine services for overnight, holidays and weekends rather than automatically calling veterinarians on their days off.

Conclusion

The shortage of shelter veterinarians has left millions of pets at risk, with limited access to care posing one of the most pressing challenges to animal welfare. Without urgent action to retain shelter veterinarians, the well-being of pets, families, and communities hangs in the balance.

The authors have aimed to provide specific, actionable tactics to improve veterinary retention in this document. These include supporting staff training and efficiency at all levels, optimizing the overall compensation package and using technology and partnerships to offer greater worklife balance, and improving communication and understanding between veterinarians and leaders, While these interventions hold promise to provide at least some short term relief, the unfortunate reality is that the struggles many shelters are experiencing are an expression of an inherently unworkable system. Simply put, shelters today are expected to do too much with too little. Communities depend on them to intake,

house, and care for all animals, provide services to the community, and more, with limited and often dwindling budgets. Inevitably shelters will struggle to meet these expectations in a safe and humane way. As long as shelters are required to admit all animals without regard to what they can humanely manage, animals will suffer and veterinary burnout and turnover will continue to accelerate. To truly get to the root of the issue, shelters must be empowered and adequately funded to balance the needs of animals coming in with the resources they can provide. This includes thoughtfully regulating intake, maintaining the population in care at a safe level, removing barriers to live outcomes, and making thoughtful and humane euthanasia decisions as needed.

Shelters, or more aptly shelter leaders, cannot address this crisis alone. To appropriately address the retention of veterinarians—and to make key steps in increasing AVC widely—the community must join together to enact change. The authors encourage the shelter community, external stakeholders, policymakers, and funders to work to align the expectations of shelters with the resources they can access. We have an opportunity, and an obligation, to create the foundation for the level of welfare and outcomes desired in our communities. ■

Acknowledgements

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