



ASV Member Survey Reveals Profound Concern with Shelter Veterinarian Retention and Offers a Glimpse into Solutions

Executive Summary

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) conducted a member survey and virtual townhall in early 2022 to provide veterinarians with an opportunity to discuss current challenges facing animal shelters and potential solutions to those challenges.

A significant take home point of this survey was that 53% of respondents (ASV member shelter veterinarians) were considering leaving their job in the next 1-3 years, and 27% were considering leaving shelter medicine as an industry.

Based on ASV member feedback, we recommend the following for the animal sheltering industry:

- Work toward equitable wages that place shelter veterinary professionals on par with private practice counterparts
 - Factor in the cost of staff turnover if wages are not increased and these professionals are lost to the industry as part of this analysis
- Provide benefits that match private employers or cater to the specific needs of shelter veterinary professionals: flexible scheduling, an attractive benefits package including funding and time off for continuing education and professional association dues, mentorship for new graduates or those new to shelter medicine, tuition reimbursement or debt forgiveness, provision of staff training opportunities, and regular performance reviews (e.g. 30-60-90 day reviews for new hires).
- Include shelter veterinarians in the executive leadership team and management decisions in shelters
- Continue to utilize foster care programs and volunteers in order to extend the walls of the shelter; provide oversight and management of foster care providers to avoid exceeding the capacity of that program.

- Support managed admissions/ appointment-based intake as a means of operating within the shelter's capacity for care.
- Promote a positive workplace culture. This can not be in place of operating at one's capacity for care, or in place of equitable wages, but many organizations that reported lingering positive impacts from pandemic practices included more developed workplace support systems as playing a role in their ongoing ability to respond to challenges. Consider hiring for culture rather than specific skills or experience if on-the-job training is possible.

Introduction

Animal welfare industry discussions have been focused on the challenges facing shelters in 2021 and 2022, including staffing shortages, staff burnout, and shelters operating beyond their capacity for care. The Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) is committed to supporting its members, and thus is working to find ways to support veterinarians working in and with animal shelters currently facing these challenges.

A recent survey and virtual town hall provided ASV members with an opportunity to discuss how those challenges were directly affecting them and to explore potential solutions with others facing those same challenges. The ASV hosted its first virtual member discussion on February 3, 2022. A survey was conducted prior to the discussion so that organizers could obtain an overview of challenges and gauge what topics mattered most to participants. The results of that survey and the subsequent member discussion are summarized here.

Survey Results

Respondents

A survey was sent to all ASV members and available from January 14, 2022 to February 3, 2022. 73 responses to the survey were received, representing multiple geographic regions across the U.S. and Canada, and one international respondent. States with the most responses included California (11 responses, 15%) and Florida (10 responses, 13.7%).

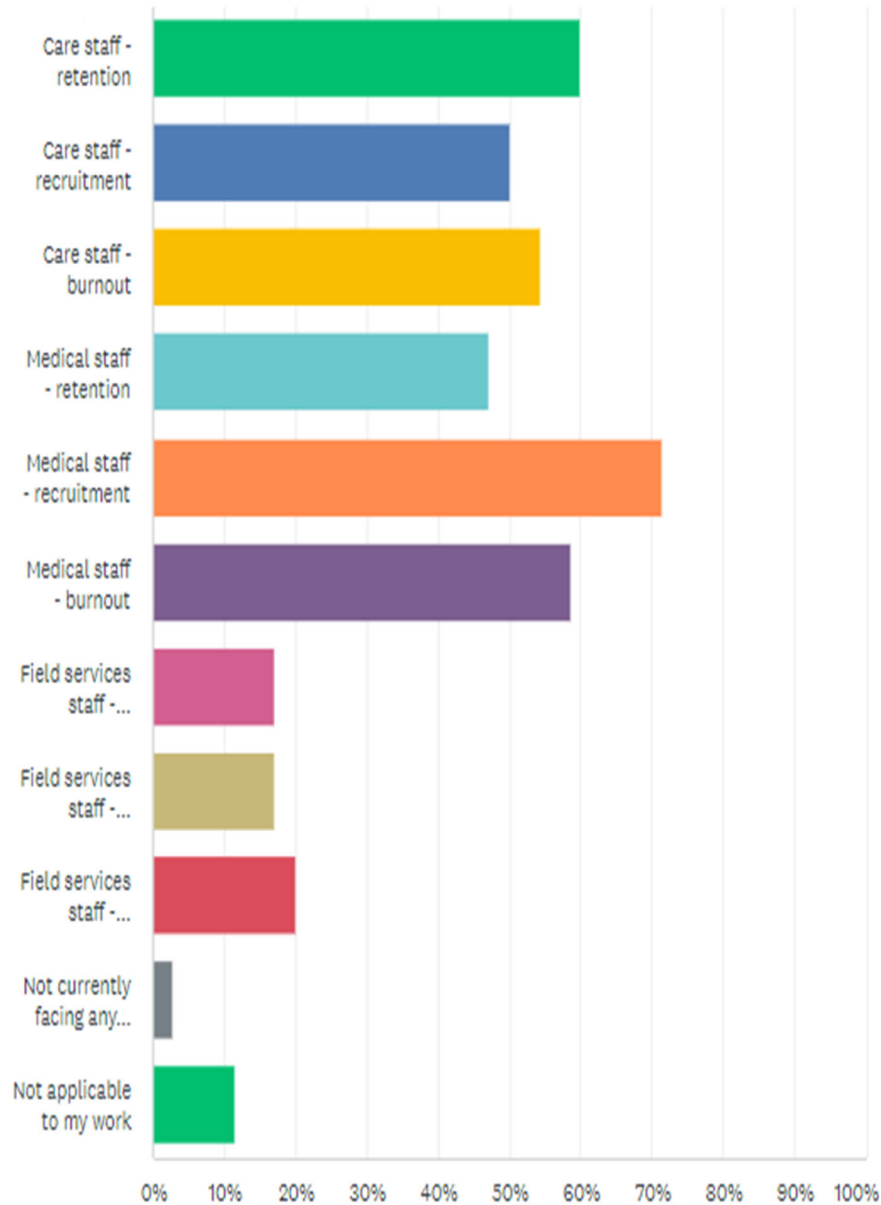
Most respondents worked for a non-profit agency (42 respondents, 57.53%), followed by municipal/government agency (15 respondents, 20.6%). Others worked in academia or for national animal welfare organizations (not in clinical shelter practice). 63% of respondents were in a leadership position within their organization. 35% of respondents perform direct clinical care only, 46% perform a mix of clinical care and management duties, 4% perform management only, 19% perform consulting, and 11% primarily teach.

Staffing Challenges

When asked about staffing challenges in shelter and field services, only 3% of respondents indicated that they were not facing any staffing challenges. Recruitment of medical staff ranked

highest in number of responses indicating this was a challenge at 71%, followed by retention in animal care staff with 60% of respondents, then burnout in medical staff at 59%.

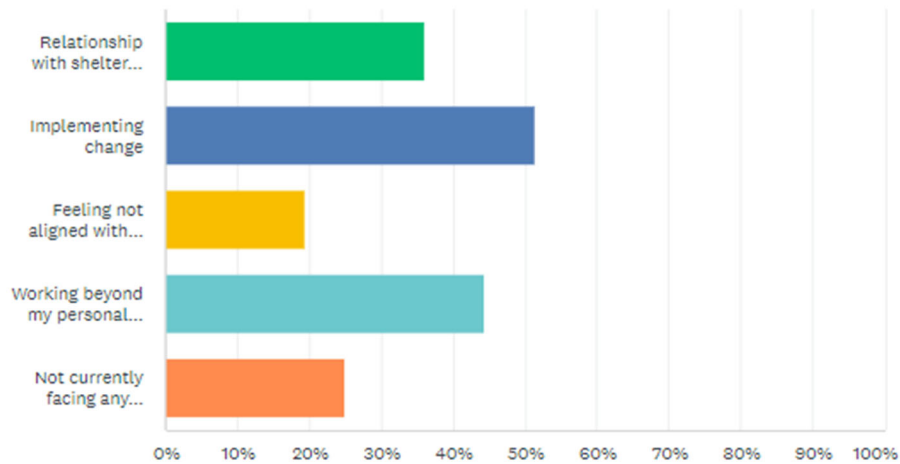
Figure 1. Staffing challenges.



Leadership and Personal Challenges

When asked about challenges working with shelter leadership and other work obstacles, 51% of respondents indicated they were having challenges implementing change, and 44% indicated they were working beyond their personal capacity for care. 25% indicated they were not facing any challenges in these areas.

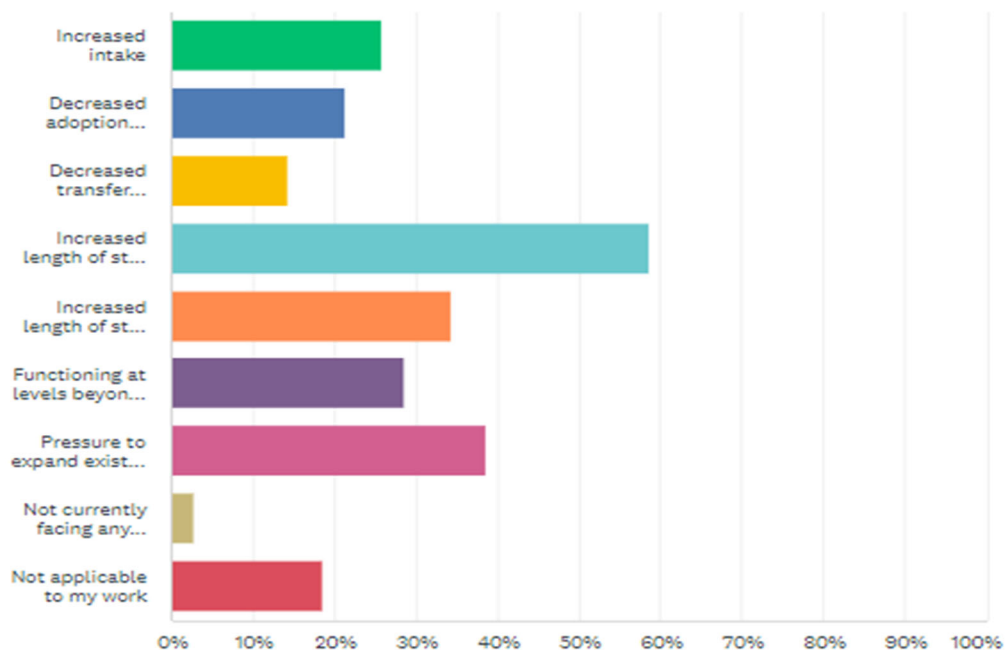
Figure 2. Challenges working with leadership or with personal work.



Capacity for Care and Shelter Operations Challenges

When asked about challenges related to their organization’s capacity for care, length of stay, shelter operations, and resource availability, the highest ranked challenge was increased length of stay due to difficulty of cases at 59%, followed by pressure to expand existing services or create new programs at 39%, and then increased length of stay due to decreased flow-through at 34%. Various comments indicated detrimental sequelae to prolonged length of stay including overcrowding and disease.

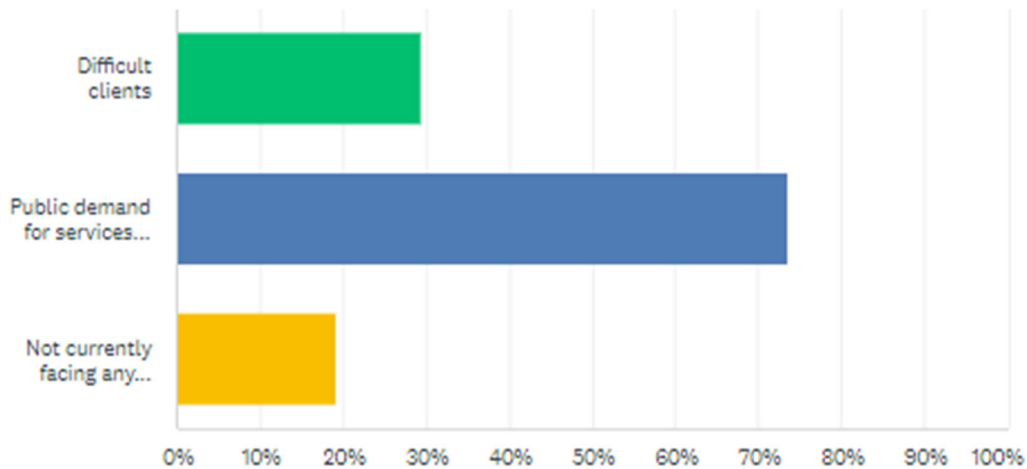
Figure 3. Challenges related to capacity for care, length of stay, operations, and resources.



Community and Client Relationships Challenges

When asked about community and client relationship challenges, 74% of respondents indicated that public demand for services is greater than what the shelter can currently provide. 29% of respondents indicated that difficult clients were a challenge. 19% were not currently facing any challenges related to community or client relationships.

Figure 4. Challenges related to community and client relationships.



Other Challenges

In a free response question, other challenges being faced by respondents included:

- Relationships with private practice veterinarians
- Public scrutiny of animal outcomes
- Pandemic's effect on personal life is making it "more difficult to be at work and handle the regular challenges"
- Infrastructure and facilities, including lack of isolation space
- Lack of veterinary oversight in shelter operations
- Increased individualized animal care, in contrast to the past where shelter medicine's focus was more on population health
- Increased client communication and interpersonal interactions with the increased focus on keeping pets with their families or in foster care
- Increased demand for veterinary services across the profession but without an adequate supply of veterinarians to meet the need

Solutions and Successes

In a free response question, responses to the question "What are examples of challenges that your shelter has addressed successfully? What made those efforts successful?" responses included:

- Reallocating staff to better address the needs of behavior cases (enrichment, training)
- Implementing basic preventive protocols for vaccination and deworming
- Managed admission/managed intake and appointment-based intake services

- Advanced medical care for individual patients, given that overall decreases in the number of animals occurred during the pandemic
- Shelter leadership's commitment to support change and a collaborative effort amongst shelter departments to improve animal flow-through and increase efficiency
- Expanded foster programming
- Collaboration and partnerships with other non-profit organizations to increase volunteers, fosters, and transfer outcomes

Veterinary Retention

One of the most striking findings in the survey was related to shelter vet retention. 53% of respondents indicated they are considering or have considered leaving their current job and 27% indicated they are considering or have considered leaving shelter medicine in the next 1 to 3 years.

When asked what would need to change in order for them to remain or, in the case of those not considering leaving, what keeps them in their current position and the profession, responses indicated that the following strategies might increase retention:

- Increased professional development
- Increased involvement with case decisions and shelter operational decisions
- Improved relationships with management/leadership
- Improved work/life balance
- Increased staffing

Salary and benefits were indicated as important, but not the most important factor in retention.

Member Discussion

In breakout groups, attendees of the member discussion tackled individual topics that were prioritized and selected by each group. Topics for discussion were derived from the challenge areas already identified by organizers combined with themes that emerged from respondents' comments in the survey. Facilitators of the various breakout groups had a goal of focusing the discussions on actionable solutions.

Staffing

Several groups identified the wage difference between shelter/non-profit and private practice as a barrier to recruiting and retaining staff. Shelters that successfully advocated for wage increases saw successes in addressing staffing challenges, even if wages were not equal to private practice. Providing those in leadership that oversee hiring and budgeting with calculated figures on the financial losses related to staff turnover was suggested as a strategy for advocating for wage increases.

Additional strategies for addressing staffing challenges for both veterinarians and support staff included the provision of flexible scheduling, an attractive benefits package, mentorship for new graduates or those new to shelter medicine, tuition reimbursement or debt forgiveness,

provision of staff training opportunities, regular performance reviews (e.g. 30-60-90 day reviews for new hires), and a focus on improving workplace culture.

Several organizations utilized an employee engagement survey to identify areas for improvement and to track progress over time. Workplace culture was identified by many groups as important for staff retention, and organizations that intentionally set aside time for activities to promote a positive workplace culture have seen sustained improvements in their work environments. The decreased animal inventories early in the pandemic allowed the time for the creation and implementation of these programs, and several organizations have been successful at prioritizing this programming, even as workloads have increased.

The benefits of considering candidates outside of the animal welfare industry were discussed by one group, and several shelters have experienced improved employee retention when staff were hired for culture rather than previously-acquired skills. Training can be performed on-the-job in these situations, though adequate time must be allocated for this training and realistic expectations set by the employer.

Leadership and Management

Identified both in the survey and in multiple breakout groups was the importance of veterinarians being included as part of the executive leadership team in shelters. [Previous research](#) has also demonstrated this as a factor in shelter veterinarian retention. Not only was the need for deliberate inclusion identified by several groups, but so was the need for dedicated time to perform these management or leadership duties. Professional development opportunities for veterinarians including opportunities to improve leadership skills and to receive formal business training were identified as a need by several groups.

Capacity for Care and Shelter Operations

A common theme across the survey and the discussions in several groups was the issue of capacity challenges. These capacity issues are thought to be due to a combination of factors interacting that ultimately have resulted in animals staying in the shelter for longer, on average. Factors influencing this situation include intake increases from 2020 levels to near 2019 levels combined with adoption numbers that, while higher than 2020, have not matched the increase in intake. With decreases in adoptions nationally, the number of animals transported has also decreased, and this represents a significant proportion of live outcomes for many shelters (dependent on region). Combined with increased animal inventories, staffing shortages due to decreased retention, staff turnover that results in a larger proportion of less experienced staff, and COVID-related shortages due to quarantines and illness compound the problem, as there are fewer, less trained staff to take care of more animals.

The COVID pandemic led to many changes in shelters, and, in contrast to the staffing and capacity challenges, some of these changes were beneficial to staff and to the animals. Many groups discussed that increases in foster care capacity and managed intake/managed admissions [programs implemented during the initial stages of the pandemic have remained](#) and

this has been positive. Other shelters were forced to return to pre-pandemic operations, despite the observable benefits of these programs.

Resources and References

Retention of Veterinarians and the Veterinary Shortage

Workplace Relations and Opportunities for Career Development Impact the Retention of Shelter Veterinarians in Shelter Medicine.

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fvets.2021.732105/full>

Are we in a veterinary workforce crisis? Matt Salois, PHD - AVMA Chief Economist. Sept 2021

<https://www.avma.org/javma-news/2021-09-15/are-we-veterinary-workforce-crisis>

Shortages and Excess. Mark Cushing, JD. Feb 2021

<https://todaysveterinarybusiness.com/shortages-and-excesses/>

Best Friends Animal Society - Shelter Staffing Survey

<https://network.bestfriends.org/research-data/research/staffing-shortage-survey-data>

Best Friends Animal Society - Veterinary Shortage and the Impact on Shelters Survey

<https://network.bestfriends.org/research-data/research/vet-shortage-and-compensation-survey-data>

Data and Trends During the Pandemic (and Beyond)

Characterizing Pet Acquisition and Retention During COVID-19 Pandemic

Front. Vet. Sci., 18 November 2021. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2021.781403>

PetPoint Industry Data: https://www.petpoint.com/industry_data

PetPoint Steve Zeidman Blog: <https://www.petpoint.com/zblog>

National Animal Care and Control Association Statements on shelter operations during COVID-19: <https://www.nacenet.org/naca-statements-on-covid-19/>

Workplace Culture and Work Environment Resources

Compassion in Balance - Compassion fatigue education and resilience training programs for individuals and organizations working with animals

<https://www.compassioninbalance.com/>