



Policy Paper Review on Shelter Medicine

Standing Committee on Animal Welfare Policy Paper





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Abstract

Millions of stray and surrendered animals worldwide face welfare challenges, including overcrowded shelters, insufficient funding, high euthanasia rates in some shelters, and a lack of skilled professionals to provide appropriate care. These systemic issues result in compromised health, poor living conditions, and limited opportunities for a better quality of life for shelter animals. Despite the growing global awareness of animal welfare, shelter medicine continues to be underutilized [1, 2

The International Veterinary Students' Association, Standing Committee on Animal Welfare (IVSA SCAW), calls for urgent action to uplift shelter animal welfare by addressing systemic challenges and promoting sustainable and evidence-based solutions. IVSA SCAW advocates for empowering shelters with better management practices, fostering collaboration with animal welfare organizations, and implementing innovative approaches to enhance living conditions and healthcare for shelter animals.

Shelter medicine can transform shelter animals' welfare globally by focusing on resource-efficient care, population management, and behavior assessment. This policy paper outlines IVSA





SCAW's commitment to advancing shelter animal welfare through practical training, public awareness initiatives, and encouraging global partnerships among international organizations, governments, and academic and research institutions. By prioritizing shelter animal welfare, we can ensure a compassionate future where every animal has the opportunity for health, welfare, safety, and dignity.

Introduction

The International Veterinary Students' Association (IVSA) is a leading global non-profit and non-governmental organization dedicated to uniting veterinary students across more than 84 member organizations worldwide. As the world's largest veterinary student network, IVSA strives to enhance the well-being of animals and humans by harnessing the passion and expertise of future veterinarians. Through international collaboration, education, and knowledge exchange, IVSA empowers students to address global challenges, advance animal welfare, and make a meaningful impact in veterinary medicine.

The Standing Committee on Animal Welfare (SCAW) is a cornerstone for advancing global animal welfare by actively mobilizing veterinary students and professionals to champion meaningful change. [SCAW](#) is dedicated to raising awareness, providing education, and fostering advocacy on critical animal welfare issues, ensuring that veterinary students are equipped to lead the charge in improving the lives of animals worldwide. It aims to establish high animal welfare standards universally and promotes an understanding of the connections between animal well-being, human health, and environmental sustainability.

Shelter medicine is an emerging and dynamic speciality within veterinary medicine dedicated to improving the health and welfare of animals in shelters. It developed from early animal welfare initiatives by groups like the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) in response to the particular difficulties faced by animals in shelters. After initially concentrating on basic medical care, the field has grown to encompass behavioral rehabilitation, population health management, and initiatives to prevent cruelty and control overpopulation. Animal shelter veterinarians treat individual animals and entire populations while navigating challenging conditions with few resources, high intake rates, and moral





conundrums. Despite improvements, shelters still face overcrowding, limited funding, and an increased number of stray and abandoned animals worldwide [1, 2].

This paper presented by IVSA SCAW explores the historical development of shelter medicine, its current scope, and its critical role in addressing the multifaceted issues of animal welfare. Additionally, it examines the challenges shelters face and highlights the innovative practices and policies being implemented to improve the lives of shelter animals and the communities they serve.

Background

Shelter medicine is a specialized field of veterinary medicine focusing on the health and well-being of animals in shelters [3]. It is dated to the 19th century, when the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) in England and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in the United States, respectively founded in 1824 and 1866, were established to prevent animal cruelty and provide care for stray animals [4].

In the mid-20th century, the need for a specialized field for shelter medicine became apparent, with most veterinarians focusing on spaying and neutering to control the pet population [5]. It was not until 1999 that the first course on shelter medicine was offered at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, marking the formal introduction of shelter medicine as an academic discipline [6]. Later, in 2000, the University of California, Davis (UC Davis) launched the world's first shelter medicine residency program [7].

The Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) was founded in 2001 to promote standards and guidelines for shelter care, such as the Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, published in 2010 [8]. Shelter medicine became formally recognized by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) as a specialty in veterinary medicine in 2014 [9, 10].

Shelter medicine's evolution now encompasses a wide range of efforts to improve animal welfare, including providing medical care for at-risk, owned animals through outreach clinics, implementing trap-neuter-release programs for community animals, and supporting grassroots rescue organizations and animal sanctuaries [3]. Veterinarians in this field require





specialized skills, such as veterinary forensics, disaster response, and behavioral management expertise, along with strong communication abilities to collaborate effectively with diverse stakeholders like shelter medicine staff workers, community, government organizations, academic institutions, and media [3, 11, 12]. The field also emphasizes spay/neuter programs to address dog and cat overpopulation. However, ethical and financial debates persist around methods like high-volume spay/neuter and trap-neuter-return programs [13].

Despite the advancements in shelter medicine improving animal welfare and health, many animal shelters face significant challenges, including overpopulation, limited funding, insufficient space, poor disease control, poor nutrition, and a lack of well-trained staff [14]. These challenges are worsened by the increase in stray and abandoned animals, leading to high euthanasia rates [15]. For example, in Saipan, due to the high ratio of dogs to humans, almost 1:2, some shelter homes have resorted to euthanasia to curb the overpopulation of stray animals [16]. This also has a resultant effect on veterinarians, leading to burnout among veterinarians and workers [16, 17].

Some shelters have begun to adopt the no-kill policy that ensures no healthy or treatable animal is euthanized [16, 18]. This has helped improve the status of shelter animals; in the United States, about 57% of shelters have adopted the no-kill policy as of 2022, intending to achieve 100% in 2025 [19]. States like Los Angeles became the largest US city to achieve non-kill status, reaching 90.4% as of 2021 [20]. Countries like Germany, Sweden, and the UK have implemented stringent pet ownership regulations and robust sterilization programs to achieve de facto no-kill, while shelter euthanasia is illegal in Taiwan [21].

Behavioral issues are also a challenge faced by animal shelters, as some animals tend to exhibit signs like aggressiveness, fearfulness, and anxiety due to past trauma or difficulty in adapting to the shelter environment [11]. A Czech Republic study revealed that 72% of dogs exhibited behavioral issues after the first week of adoption. Aggression (24%), fear (21%), destructiveness (17%), excessive vocalization (15%), and separation anxiety (13%) were the most common problems. Interestingly, problem behaviors were more common in dogs with a recorded history of abuse than in dogs who had not experienced abuse [22]. Behaviors linked to fear, anxiety, and arousal were significantly correlated with results in formal behavioral assessments in a study conducted in Brisbane, Australia, that tracked dogs during their first five days in a shelter. This implies that early observation can assist in identifying dogs who may be at risk for behavioral issues, thus enabling prompt interventions [23].





Unlike clinical veterinary practice, shelter medicine requires veterinarians to prioritize population health over individual care, often within environments that lack stringent regulatory standards. Utilizing standardized guidelines is crucial to guaranteeing the well-being and health of animals in shelter environments [24].

Methodology

This policy paper is based on a comprehensive review of literature on shelter medicine, academic research, and reports from veterinary associations. The best shelter management and veterinary training practices were analyzed to identify issues shelter medicine faced and opportunities for improvement.

Counterarguments and Rebuttals

1. **Argument:** Shelter medicine is a narrow field with limited impact on overall animal welfare.
 - **Rebuttal:** Shelter medicine is a cornerstone for uplifting animal welfare by addressing systemic issues such as stray population control, disease outbreaks, and behavioral rehabilitation. About 4000 to 4915 animal shelters in the United States alone house over 6 million companion animals [25]. Shelter medicine is crucial in improving public health and furthering the One Health goal by preventing zoonotic diseases, that is, diseases that can spread between animals and people [26]. It plays an important role in managing and halting the development of these diseases by enforcing strict health regulations and encouraging cooperation between veterinary specialists, public health officials, and shelter organizations. Shelter medicine guarantees shelter animals receive the treatment they need, lessens their suffering, and enhances their quality of life by providing vets with specialized training. This integrated strategy, which emphasizes the interdependence of the One Health concept, protects both public health and animal welfare. [3, 11].
2. **Argument:** Shelter medicine's variability across regions makes it difficult to standardize welfare practices.
 - **Rebuttal:** Shelter medicine is built on universal principles of welfare, which include the five freedoms: freedom from hunger and thirst, freedom from discomfort,





freedom from pain, injury, or disease, freedom to express normal behavior, and freedom from fear and distress. Regional collaborations and knowledge-sharing networks enable tailored implementation while maintaining global standards. This adaptability ensures shelter medicine remains effective in uplifting welfare, regardless of cultural or economic differences. Ultimately, this promotes a sustainable model for animal care that transcends geographic boundaries and inspires innovation in welfare practices [14].

3. **Argument:** Shelter medicine has limited appeal among veterinary students, diminishing its potential impact.
- **Rebuttal:** Shelter medicine's focus on uplifting animal welfare and addressing societal challenges makes it a highly impactful field. Increasing student exposure through practical training, outreach programs, and real-world success stories highlights its transformative potential. The skills acquired in shelter medicine (such as population management and resource optimization) are versatile and appealing to many veterinary careers. Additionally, involving students in real-world shelter environments and practical applications increases their engagement and interest in shelter medicine by demonstrating its tangible impact on animal welfare [14].





IVSA's Stance on Shelter Medicine

IVSA recognizes shelter medicine as a critical discipline for addressing pressing welfare issues such as overcrowding, disease management, and behavioral rehabilitation. It provides practical solutions to improve the lives of shelter animals while addressing broader challenges like stray population control and zoonotic disease prevention. Shelter medicine is not just a specialized field but an essential component of global welfare efforts that can transform shelter systems into centers of care and rehabilitation. By prioritizing shelter medicine, we can ensure sustainable improvements in animal welfare, encourage community involvement, and create a future where every animal in a shelter receives the care and dignity they deserve.

Objectives

The IVSA aims to:

1. Advocate for including shelter medicine as an elective course in veterinary curricula globally to equip veterinary students with essential skills necessary for the welfare of shelter animals.
2. Raise awareness of shelter medicine's importance in improving global animal welfare.
3. Facilitate neutering campaigns and support shelters through future projects in collaboration with sponsors and welfare organizations.
4. Secure resources and partnerships to address shelter overcrowding and improve animal welfare, ensuring long-term impact through evidence-based practices.
5. Support the development of student chapters focused on shelter medicine, fostering a network of future veterinarians dedicated to animal welfare.
6. Encourage veterinary schools to incorporate practical shelter medicine training, including spay/neuter clinics and behavior assessment workshops.





Recommendations

IVSA recommends stakeholders, including veterinary schools, veterinary students, shelter medicine programs, veterinary associations, government health agencies, animal welfare organisations, media outlets, and health technology companies to:

Veterinary Schools:

- **Incorporate** shelter medicine into the curriculum.
- **Provide** hands-on training to veterinary students on shelter medicine.
- **Encourage research in shelter medicine** by funding studies on disease prevention, public health, and animal behavior.
- **Encourage establishing internship or residency programs** in shelter medicine for students interested in specializing in the field.

Veterinary students:

- **Gain hands-on experience** by volunteering or interning at animal shelters to understand real-world shelter medicine practices.
- **Advocate for shelter medicine education** by encouraging veterinary schools to offer specialised courses and training programs.
- **Participate in spay/neuter and vaccination programs** to help control pet overpopulation and prevent disease outbreaks.
- **Engage in research on shelter medicine** by studying disease management, animal welfare, and public health impacts.
- **Educate the public on responsible pet ownership** through outreach programs, workshops, and social media campaigns.
- **Advocate for policy improvements** in shelter animal care by working with veterinary associations and government agencies.

Veterinary Associations:

- **Enhance shelter medicine education and training** by providing continuing education, promoting shelter medicine in veterinary schools, and providing online learning resources on shelter medicine.
- **Establish and enforce shelter medicine standards** by developing evidence-based minimum standards of care for shelters regarding housing, disease





prevention, and humane euthanasia and ensuring compliance with the best practices.

- **Supporting research on shelter medicine** by funding and developing a centralised database on shelter medicine.
- **Advocate for policy and legislative changes** to strengthen animal welfare laws and improve shelter funding resources.
- **Promote public awareness and community engagement** by educating the public on shelter medicine, expanding TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return) programs, and encouraging adoption over euthanasia.

Governmental health agencies:

- **Strengthen shelter regulations and policies by** developing national and international shelter standards, enforcing shelter policies, mandating veterinary oversight, and enhancing animal welfare and public health legislation.
- **Increase government funding and support for shelter medicine** by allocating more resources to shelter medicine programs, supporting research on shelter medicine and zoonotic disease prevention, and subsidising low-cost veterinary care for shelters and low-income communities.
- **Implement global shelter medicine strategies** by supporting the One Health approach in shelter medicine, developing shelter medicine guidelines for refugee and disaster relief areas, and adopting international shelter standards.

Animal welfare organizations:

- **Enhance veterinary care in shelters** by ensuring disease prevention, regular health checks, and access to veterinary services.
- **Develop and enforce shelter medicine guidelines** to maintain high animal care, housing, and biosecurity standards.
- **Support spay/neuter and population control programs** to reduce overpopulation and minimize euthanasia rates.
- **Increase public education and awareness** by promoting responsible pet ownership, vaccinations, and adoption.
- **Strengthen collaborations with veterinary professionals and government agencies** to improve shelter policies and disease surveillance.



**Media outlets:**

- **Raise awareness and** educate the public, publish articles about zoonotic diseases, animal welfare, shelter medicine, and responsible pet ownership.
- **Encourage adoption and spay/neuter programs** to manage overpopulation and lower euthanasia, emphasise spay/neuter programs, and promote pet adoption over purchasing.
- **Collaborate and advocate**, share success stories, and advocate for more robust animal welfare laws by partnering with veterinary and animal welfare organisations.
- **Leverage digital platforms** to disseminate information, interact with communities, and encourage volunteerism; use social media and online resources.
- **Feature investigative reports** on animal cruelty, neglect, and the need for better shelter medicine practices.

Health technology companies:

- **Create new diagnostic and monitoring tools** to identify and treat animal illnesses in shelters, create wearable medical technology, sophisticated diagnostics, and surveillance systems.
- **Improve digital and telemedicine solutions**, like establishing telemedicine platforms and digital health records to facilitate better tracking, remote consultations, and easily accessible veterinarian care.
- **Encourage research and AI-powered insights** to make better decisions for the health of animals by using data analytics and AI to improve shelter medicine.
- **Collaborate and finance technology adoption** to provide grants for implementing innovative health technologies and collaborate with shelters and veterinarians to create affordable alternatives.

Conclusion

Shelter medicine is a critical field that directly uplifts animal welfare by addressing overcrowding, disease control, and behavioral rehabilitation. It plays a transformative role in ensuring shelter animals receive the care they need while creating broader impacts on public





health and community well-being. IVSA highlights the importance of adopting shelter medicine as a holistic approach to advancing welfare standards globally. To strengthen this field's impact, training veterinary students in high-volume spay/neuter surgeries is essential, establishing partnerships with welfare organizations, conducting public education campaigns, implementing evidence-based practices, facilitating global exchange programs, and integrating health monitoring technologies. These steps foster a more effective and collaborative approach to improving animal welfare and public health. The call to action is clear: shelter medicine is not just an isolated specialty but a critical component in advancing global welfare efforts, with long-lasting benefits for animals and communities.





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