Shelter Medicine Program Aims for Healthier, Adoptable Companion Animals

Homelessness kills more animals than cancer or any other disease, and kills them in the prime of life,” says Kate Hurley, director of the Shelter Medicine Program at the school’s Center for Companion Animal Health (CCAH).

“Shelter Medicine at UC Davis is the first program in the world to tackle this major killer of animals, to really take it on from a veterinary perspective,” says Dr. Hurley. The program aims to

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... improve the understanding, prevention and management of infectious diseases and behavioral care in shelter populations to improve well-being and adoptability. The Shelter Medicine Program was established in 2000 with initial support from Maddie’s Fund, a nonprofit animal welfare organization, and the CCAH.

“Other veterinary schools have incorporated aspects of shelter medicine into their programs in recent years,” says Dr. Hurley, “but the UC Davis program remains unique in its comprehensive scope and commitment to national outreach.”

The goals of the program are twofold: to improve the quality of life of animals in shelters through advances in preventive medicine and management of disease, and to advance shelter medicine as a veterinary specialty through research, education and service in animal shelters.

“Our mission,” says Dr. Hurley, “is to develop and distribute the information veterinarians and shelter professionals need to provide the best care possible for homeless animals.”

The Shelter Medicine Program takes a three-pronged approach:

■ Fundamental research to investigate infectious diseases and behavioral problems in shelters to determine how to either prevent or manage them.
■ Education—such as residencies, externships, academic and continuing education courses, presentations and online scientific resources—to meet an urgent need in the sheltering and veterinary professions for accurate information about shelter animal health.
■ Consultation and diagnostic services specifically geared toward shelter populations—services that are not readily available elsewhere—are offered by the Shelter Medicine Program at the lowest possible cost to shelters.

“We aim to provide shelters with evidence-based guidance on managing common shelter infections such as upper respiratory infection and diarrhea,” says Dr. Hurley. “We also assist shelters in dealing with disease outbreaks and cruelty cases, along with providing education and outreach programs. Consultations and protocol development are offered for topics such as facility design, husbandry issues such as cleaning and housing, and vaccination.”

“Really simple information can have a profound effect on a shelter’s ability to take good care of its animals” says Dr. Hurley. “Shelter staff members don’t need a lot of high-tech equipment—using an effective cleaning agent or making a small change in vaccination strategy can impact thousands of animals.”

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“Our goal is to create a model program of medical care for shelter animals—one that can provide hands-on training for veterinary students and a place for residents to become experienced shelter veterinarians. On-site service—by veterinarians who can provide information about policies, protocols and successful strategies—benefits the animals, shelter organizations (public and private), students and residents—not only locally, but nationally.”

Left: Dr. Kate Hurley and Dr. Cindi Delany examine a dog at the Sacramento County Animal Shelter.

Right: Michael Bannasch, RVT, and Dr. Hurley examine a sick shelter kitten. They will take laboratory samples of the kitten’s nasal secretions to test for calicivirus, which can be a serious problem in the shelter environment.