Occupational Stress Among Employees in Animal Shelters

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Purpose

To go beyond the issue of euthanasia and determine whether there are other significant stressors for shelter workers.
**Method**

- Employees in seven shelters in Ontario, Canada and the Northeastern United States
- Recruited through email, word of mouth, at dog training seminars
- Qualitative semi-structured interviews
- Constant comparative method (text analysis)

**Demographics**

- 22 Caucasian females employed in animal shelters.
- Majority worked full-time
- 7 animal shelters in Ontario, Canada and Northeastern United States.
- Age: 22-58, mean = 38
- Annual Income: 8,000 – 100,000. Mean, including part-time=36,000. Mean excluding part-time = 40,000.
Categories of Stressors

- Unique or largely unique to shelter settings (e.g. euthanasia)
- Generic stressors (e.g. top-down management style)
- Generic stressors manifested in ways particular to shelter settings (noise levels due to barking dogs)

Shelter Specific (cited by more than half of participants)

- Euthanasia ($n=21$)
- Public’s perception of shelters ($n=21$)
- Human clients ($n=18$)
- Relationship with animals ($n=17$)
- Witnessing suffering ($n=11$)
**Generic Stressors**

- Poor organizational management (n=17)
  - Policies and their implementation
  - Poor communication
  - Conflicting values and goals
  - Top-down management

**Mixed Stressors**

- Conflict with co-workers (n=20)
- Work-home interface (n=18)
- Physical environment (n=13)
- Scheduling and vacation time (n=11)
- Workload (n=11)
Conclusions

- Euthanasia is an umbrella for multiple factors
- Sources of stress go beyond euthanasia
- Stress in shelters is complex
- Factors affect employees differently, depending on their job
- No signs of compassion fatigue?
- Signs of “moral stress,” “costs of caring,” stigmatization of “dirty work.”

Recommendations

- Professional development in organizational management and front-line strategies
- Increase public awareness
- Professional development in animal behavior and temperament testing
- Self-care/ strengthen ability to set boundaries
Thanks to all the shelter workers who took good care of me.