

Curing ailing animal shelters

By Cindy Swirko
Sun staff writer

Published: Monday, July 14,
2008 at 6:01 a.m.

A new \$1.7 million University of Florida program to improve the lives of animals in shelters couldn't have started at a more symbolic time - with dozens of sick animals turning up recently at Alachua County Animal Services and other area shelters.



AARON DAYE/The Gainesville Sun
Veterinary student Hugh McClelland
prepares to neuter Dex, a chow mix, at UF's
College of Veterinary Medicine on Wednesday.

The UF College of Veterinary Medicine received a three-year grant from the nonprofit **Maddie's Fund®** - a nonprofit pet rescue foundation - to create a shelter medicine program that began July 1.

It will train veterinary students, offer continuing education for veterinarians and technicians, provide consulting services to shelters and undertake research into the diseases and problems commonly faced by animal shelters.

A goal is to improve shelter medical treatment and conditions so shelters have healthy animals for people to adopt.

"Our funder has very high expectations," said UF veterinary professor Julie Levy. "Infectious diseases are a real big problem with all shelters, but especially here in the South with the tropical environment. It's a huge challenge. You see injuries, neglect, starvation, poor conditions, mange."

Shelters can range from government facilities such as Alachua County Animal Services to small home-based rescue organizations.

The work environment and the ailments of the animals in shelters can be quite different from the typical veterinary practice, Levy said. Infectious diseases are more common and, because a large number of animals are housed together, they tend to spread quickly.

Also, shelter vets and technicians treat lots of animals that are in bad shape - dog collars embedded in skin, broken bones and hide ripped off from accidents or abuse, dogs involved in fighting, severe flea and tick infestations.

Alachua County Animal Services Director David Flagler said working in a shelter is akin to working in a military field hospital.

"Shelters are like the MASH units," Flagler said. "Having your own private practice or being a shelter vet requires two different schools of thought. Generally in private practice you have a responsible pet owner who brings their animal in to get the necessary treatment, and those expenses are covered by the owner. In the animal shelter business, what happens and when it happens is unpredictable. It's not more difficult, but it is very challenging to be a shelter veterinarian."

Animal Services veterinarian Randy Caligiuri said more animals coming into the shelter have upper respiratory infections, kennel cough, distemper and parvovirus. All are extremely contagious, and in many cases fatal.

Alachua County Humane Society Executive Director Kirk Eppenstein said the organization is experiencing the same thing.

Meanwhile, one of three UF staffers in the shelter medicine program, Cynda Crawford, was at the Marion County animal shelter last week trying to deal with a disease outbreak.

Crawford specializes in infectious diseases and her work with the Marion shelter will likely reduce the number of dogs that shelter officials initially believed they would need to euthanize.

All UF veterinary students will get some training in shelter medicine through lectures in their required courses. Electives will also be offered.

A limited number of residencies will be open to veterinarians who want to specialize in shelter medicine.

The program came at the right time for student Lauren Unger, who already has a taste of shelter medicine from working in a Fort Pierce shelter while in high school.

Unger had just enrolled in the veterinary program when the shelter medicine program was announced and she was chosen as a research fellow in the program.

Shelter medicine merges well, Unger said, with her interests in promoting spaying and neutering and in animal rescue.

"I don't want to have my own clinic. I want to work in a shelter or in an emergency setting," Unger said. "For me, I think it will be more rewarding."

Continuing education classes for veterinarians and technicians will be available. Offerings will include forensics to help build cruelty cases.

Another component will be research into areas such as sterilization vaccines and infectious diseases.

It will include getting information out to the public through Web sites, seminars and other means.

Finally, the program will offer consulting services in shelter assessment and disease control. A better-operated shelter - from kennel cleaning to evaluating animal behavior - means a healthier animal. Well-run shelters will also be less costly to operate - which, in the case of government shelters, is a plus for taxpayers.

"One of the goals is to develop shelter systems that keep animals both physically and mentally healthy during their shelter stay. We also have angles that are trying to avoid animals from coming to the shelter in the first place - spay/neuter programs, feral cat programs," Levy said. "One of the major goals is to help shelters make the best use of their very limited resources. I don't know of a single shelter that is adequately funded to do everything they would like to do. So everyday shelters have to make very difficult decisions about priorities and a lot of times they don't have the information to know what the best use is."

Cindy Swirko can be reached at 374-5024 or at swirkoc@gvillesun.com