



# Shelter

## research

3rd Edition: 2007

## Maximising the success of shelter volunteer programs

A book review by Anne Fawcett



There seems no shortage of willing volunteers to help out in animal shelters, but numbers alone don't add up to a successful shelter volunteer program. Some volunteers can't commit to sufficient hours, while others grow disappointed or disenchanted with the tasks they are given (I've seen shelters where volunteers are simply told to clean kennels for their entire shift – little wonder they don't stick around). There are those who endlessly question paid shelter staff, adding to their already heavy workload.

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Of course, some of these problems may be due to the character traits of individual volunteers. In her book *Volunteer Management for Animal Care Organisations*, Betsy McFarland argues that the shelter's approach to management of volunteers may have a lot to answer for.

A recent online study of almost 300 shelter volunteer managers conducted by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) found that the majority of shelters do not take full advantage of management strategies that would maximise the benefits of their volunteer programs. A staggering two out of five volunteers (40%) in US animal shelters stopped volunteering because of poor volunteer management practices.

So how do animal shelters make the most of volunteer programs? A strong volunteer program, argues McFarland, integrates volunteers into the operation, provides clear roles and creates meaningful work.

(continued on the back page)

# When caring hurts:

## Compassion Fatigue in Animal Shelter Staff by Vanessa Rohlf

*Compassion fatigue can affect both job satisfaction and general quality of life. The aim of this article is to help you recognise the signs of compassion fatigue and take steps to prevent and manage the condition.*

Think back to the main reason you entered the animal care industry. Was it for the money? Was it for the prestige or status associated with the job? Or was it for other reasons? If you are like the majority of animal care workers, you entered your occupation because of a love, respect and affinity with animals. You enjoy your work and feel a sense of satisfaction from helping animals. You find joy in reuniting an owner with their beloved pet or adopting out pets to loving and responsible homes. You feel a sense of satisfaction from comforting animals and easing their pain and suffering. Animal care work is your calling and these situations make your work worthwhile and extremely rewarding.



Vanessa Rohlf is a PhD candidate with the Anthrozoology Research Group, Monash University.

Her honours thesis explored compassion fatigue in Animal Care workers.



Unfortunately, if you're like many other animal care workers, there are times when things may seem overwhelming. No matter how hard you work, you find you can't save every animal, some animals are too sick or psychologically damaged to re-home and sometimes there are simply too many animals and not enough homes. This can leave you feeling angry or sad and may leave you questioning why you entered this profession in the first place.

What you may actually be feeling is compassion fatigue. A survey conducted in the United States by the Humane Society found that 56.4% of shelter and animal control officers were at extremely high risk of compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is more than just work-related stress; it is the result of prolonged exposure to stressful events and its symptoms are very similar to those associated with post-traumatic stress. This is not surprising, considering, as animal shelter personnel, you are exposed to many traumatic events, often on a daily basis. Looking after and caring for abandoned and abused animals can be emotionally taxing and having to euthanase the same animals you set out to save is, to say the least, extremely distressing.

Below you will find a description and some of the symptoms of compassion fatigue and most importantly what you, your co-workers and management can do to deal with compassion fatigue in your workplace.

### The signs of compassion fatigue trauma

Compassion fatigue is common to many helping professionals, affecting people in a number of different ways and impacting on both your personal and professional life. *Compassion fatigue includes symptoms such as recurrent and distressing feelings or images associated with a traumatic event(s), avoidance of reminders associated with a stressful or traumatic event(s), irritability and sleep difficulties.* Other signs include frequent bouts of crying, feelings of guilt or anxiety and physical ailments such as aches and pains. On a professional level, signs of compassion fatigue can be decreased in the quality or quantity of tasks performed, low motivation or loss of interest. Other signs may include a perfectionist attitude, obsession with details, and overwork. Relationships with co workers and management may also be disrupted.

### How to deal with compassion fatigue

The most important thing you can do to manage compassion fatigue is to look after yourself. Sometimes you can spend so much time looking after others that you forget to take care of the most important person of all - you! You may think that this is being quite selfish but by looking after yourself you can be much more effective in your work. Here are some suggestions to get you started.

#### **Breathing exercises**

Often when we are stressed our breathing becomes shallow. This can deprive our brains and muscles of oxygen. Give yourself some time out and concentrate on taking long deep breaths. This simple exercise calms us and helps us think more clearly. Once your breathing is under control you can introduce some stretches to increase blood flow and help relax the muscles. Pay attention to the muscles in your neck, shoulders and jaw as these areas are particularly susceptible to stress.

#### **Self-talk**

Remind yourself that you are good at what you do and try to think of the times when you felt rewarded by your work. When we are feeling stressed or depressed we become negative towards ourselves and the environment. There may also be a tendency to obsess over stressful and traumatic events. Psychologists call this 'rumination' and it has been linked to depression in some people. Monitor your thoughts. Are you holding yourself to unrealistic standards? Are the goals you set for yourself attainable? Are you putting unnecessary pressure on yourself by thinking "I must..." or "I have to..."? Try to reappraise negative events in a positive light. If you are worried about something current, are there steps you can take to improve the situation?

### **Exercise and Interests outside of work**

Create balance in your life. Make time to take that course you have been thinking about. Join the gym or a team sport. By developing other interests outside of work and deriving satisfaction from external sources you are increasing your support network. You may even find a hidden talent.

### **Utilise support networks**

Utilise the support of understanding friends and family members. Your own pet can also be a great source of support. It may also be of benefit to talk with co-workers. They may be exposed to similar stressors and may be able to offer support and advice on how they have dealt with similar feelings or situations.

care workers state that dealing with clients or pet owners can often be a source of stress. For that reason, training in communication skills and conflict management may be helpful.

### **Communication**

Take extra time to listen to the issues of staff members. One of the key aspects to how staff may react to a stressful event at work is how well management had responded to the particular event.

### **Proactive programs**

Empower staff by participating in research and public education programs. Many animal shelters do this already but actively involving

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Sometimes just telling someone about your problems can release pent up emotions and help you clarify and reappraise the situation.

### **Counselling**

Speak with a trained professional about how you are feeling. This will be confidential and they may be able to offer you other coping techniques.

### **How management can help**

Benefits of managing compassion fatigue and stress at work include decline in staff turnover rates, decrease in work related accidents, increase in quality and quantity of work produced by staff. Compassion fatigue is contagious so the sooner it is dealt with the less likely other workers will be affected.

### **Training**

Equipping staff with the skills necessary to perform their duties at work will assist in their confidence and ability to perform these tasks. Research suggests that if staff feel that they dealt with an incident in a competent manner they are less likely to experience traumatic feelings towards that incident. Training may include animal handling skills and administration of euthanasia. Many animal

staff and informing them of the progress can be another measure put into place by management.

Compassion fatigue is a real issue amongst animal care workers and it does not go away by ignoring it. Look after yourselves because you deserve it.

### **Resources**

- If you are experiencing difficulties please speak with your GP or health care professional
- You can also call Lifeline on 13 11 14
- If you would like to speak with a psychologist the Australian Psychological Society can help you find a psychologist in your area who specialises in these matters. Call 1800 333 497 or visit [www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)

#### *References*

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# Toy Box

## Enrichment ideas

### **Dogs:**

Stock Soaked Rope Toys - mix up chicken/beef stock and soak rope toys in them - dogs love to chew on these!

Fragrant Treat Bottles – make some holes in the side of a milk bottle and add anything dogs might like to smell - horse manure is great- also use grasses, bark and leaves from the gardens.

### **Cats:**

Inexpensive cat toys can be made from bottle tops with string through the middle. Five or six bottle tops on each piece of string with shredded paper on the bottom will entertain them for hours!

Logs of wood with lots of bark are also enjoyed by cats. This promotes natural nail trimming and scent marking.

**NB: These are suggestions and should always be used under supervision.**

# From the Editor



Kate with her dogs Archie and Charlie

Dear readers,  
I am delighted to introduce you to the third issue of Shelter Research newsletter.

This issue focuses on two very important aspects of running an animal shelter: Identifying and managing compassion fatigue in shelter workers and maximising the success of shelter volunteer programs.

The aim of this edition is to provide you with enough information to enable you to manage these issues effectively in your own shelter.

Thanks again for your continued support of this publication and we welcome your suggestions for future issues.

Kind Regards

**Kate Mornement**

Please send your ideas to:  
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# Hints & tips

## Volunteer Management Tips

(adapted from Volunteer Management for Animal Care Organisations)

- Make the most of your volunteers. Determine in advance which projects could benefit the most from volunteers input and what roles volunteers will play within the organisation. Consider how volunteers can free up staff time for other projects.
- Write detailed job-descriptions for volunteers (and staff!) before recruiting. Be clear that the volunteer's and the organisation's expectations match.
- Budget for your volunteer program. Include costing for insurance, equipment, office supplies, identification and uniforms, expense reimbursements and a volunteer manager. The more you invest in managing volunteers the more you will get out of them.
- Get staff on side. Promote good staff-volunteer relationships by consulting staff, incorporating "working with volunteers" into staff job descriptions, training staff to supervise and work with volunteers and rewarding those who do so well. Ensure staff receive at least the same level of training as volunteers, and that their needs are being met first.
- Provide a comprehensive orientation. The more information you provide at the orientation, the more confident volunteers will feel and the less they will need to prevail upon staff. Cover sensitive topics like euthanasia of shelter animals.
- Create a volunteer manual. This should cover everything from general animal handling information to the shelter's confidentiality policy, policies on work attire, bullying and alcohol/drugs to what to do if bitten or scratched and frequently-asked-questions.
- Request that all volunteers sign an agreement detailing working hours. This should also include a waiver of liability and the job description.
- Invite volunteers to training events and workshops that are open to other staff. "Resume building" activities are excellent incentives, but also help to increase the skills bank that the organisation can draw upon. Cross-training volunteers also provides more flexibility in rostering.
- Acknowledge the work of volunteers. Say thank you, explain how a particular job they did benefits the shelter, and consider getting publicity for their good work in the local paper. Not only is this a motivator for volunteers, it's also positive coverage for the organisation.
- Set high expectations. Volunteers are more likely to leave a position because they are underutilised, not overworked. Give meaningful and challenging tasks. Reward dedicated volunteers with greater responsibility.



## Maximising the success of shelter volunteer programs. (Front page article continued)

In Chapter one, she outlines an organisational "self-evaluation" that shelters can use to assess their existing volunteer programs. This includes an investigation of staff retention rates as well as tidying up of standard operating protocols. After all, she points out, unless basic operations are in order, volunteers may harm an organisation by spreading the word that a shelter is poorly run. She also covers budgeting for volunteer programs – no matter how small-scale – to insure shelters yield a significant return for their investments.

Chapter two provides extensive advice about developing good staff-volunteer relationships, which is critical to the success of a volunteer program. No matter how well a shelter recruits volunteers, turnover will remain high if staff regard them as "in the way". McFarland explains why staff require support and training if a volunteer program is to succeed. She also addresses common staff concerns about shelter volunteers.

In order to provide volunteers with work that is meaningful and beneficial to the shelter it is important to provide detailed job descriptions as might be prepared for paid positions. In chapter three, McFarland explains how to develop volunteer job descriptions and provides examples for different volunteer roles from a number of animal shelters.

Chapters four and five cover volunteer recruitment and screening, with examples of application forms and formal volunteer agreements used by shelters.

Ideally, volunteer training should enable volunteers to perform their jobs well and confidently, without having to interrupt staff to ask basic questions. Chapter six describes how to develop a training program and gives a detailed guide to developing

a volunteer manual. Chapter ten, which is closely related, discusses supervision of volunteers as well as dealing with problems when they arise.

Chapter seven covers the always-tricky subject of rostering, and describes systems that shelters can employ to determine not just how many hours volunteers contribute, but what was accomplished during those hours. It is important to know how the volunteer program is helping the shelter meet its goals, and whether it needs to be altered to do so.

Chapter eight covers working with young volunteers, including minors undertaking work-experience. While it is often not practical to expose work-experience students to animals in a shelter environment, McFarland outlines a number of ways they can undertake meaningful projects with the shelter.

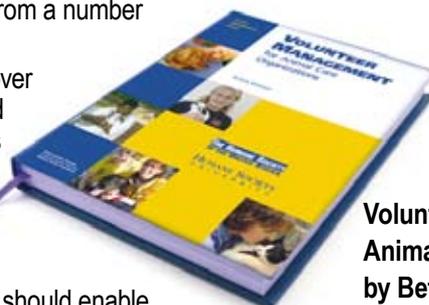
We all know that shelter staff and volunteers face a number of occupational risks and hazards, including animal bites and scratches. Chapter nine covers volunteer occupational health and safety, and the steps shelters need to take to cover themselves against liability.

Finally, chapter eleven provides excellent advice on retaining and motivating volunteers.

While some pointers contain information specific to North America (a small section on volunteer-tracking software and repeated mention of rabies quarantine, fortunately not an issue in Australian shelters), the majority of information is applicable in shelters worldwide. The author demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the workings of shelters and doesn't fail to address the tough issues like politics that tend to rear their head in the shelter environment.

McFarland's book is easy-to-read, providing practical tips and real examples throughout. Unlike a lot of management books which boil down to little more than inspirational quotes, the management advice McFarland provides is not only helpful, but backed by solid research on volunteers.

This guide is a must for any Australian shelter wishing to improve or establish a volunteer program.



**Volunteer Management for Animal Care Organisations, by Betsy McFarland, is published by the Humane Society of the United States. 120pp. RRP \$US15.95 or visit**

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