

Establishing volunteer programs for wildlife rehabilitation centres

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Drawing from my experiences as a veterinary assistant and a volunteer at several different rescue and charitable organizations, I will stress the importance of establishing a strong network by building a volunteer program and will integrate ideas and strategies from veterinary medicine into aspects of training and coordinating volunteers.

Why is a volunteer program needed?

Increase patient care: Volunteers are often a vital component of many rescue and rehabilitation centres. Whether helping with administrative work, transporting food and animals, feeding and husbandry, or other mundane chores, volunteers help free up the centre manager, staff and other experienced volunteer's time, so care of wildlife patients can be maximized.

Disaster preparedness: Natural disasters and human impacts will continually displace wildlife, and with global climate change, there is an increasing concern for more extreme weather that will likely cause centres to be overrun with wildlife intakes during these periods. Having a good, solid group of experienced volunteers who are trained and know the system of the centre is part of disaster and emergency planning and would be extremely useful to call upon when needed.

Inspiring environmental stewards: Allowing people to volunteer and engage in hands-on work of animal care and centre maintenance often results in higher environmental awareness and an increase in environmentally friendly practice in the individual's own lifestyle. It is frequently through frontline experience that people fully understand the problems facing wildlife and their caretakers and appreciate that they too can play an active role to help. A well thought out volunteer program can reach out and inspire people, especially the younger generations, to become wildlife stewards.

Build your centre's reputation in the community: By showing that your centre has good credibility and is committed to supporting and developing volunteers, the centre may receive publicity which can help secure more funding.

Developing and implementing a volunteer program

Set up a volunteer program development committee: Involve staff, stakeholders and other long-term experienced volunteers to brainstorm ideas into the design and implementation process. Estimate a development timeline and resources that may be needed. Recognise the centre's strengths and weaknesses and consider logistics and practical issues. For example, will volunteers be provided accommodation, food, or lockers? If the location of the centre is far away from the city, will pick-ups or transport reimbursement be provided?

Identify volunteer roles and write up detailed task descriptions. Specific volunteer roles include an IT expert that can help build your patient database or update the website, someone in public relations who would be happy to plan for fundraising events and manage social media sites for the centre, or a skilled carpenter who can build nest boxes and enclosure furniture for wildlife in rehab. Are you also looking for professional volunteers such as veterinarians, nurses, and

licensed rehabilitators who are fully vaccinated, skilled at restraining patients, and are at ease at administering fluids and medicating patients?

Identifying a volunteer manager: Do you have someone in mind who is experienced, enthusiastic at teaching and have good leadership qualities? The manager will be tasked to produce recruitment materials, process volunteer application forms, contacting and interviewing applicants, conducting volunteer orientation, and may also take up part of volunteer training.

Design a framework for your volunteer program: Plan and produce a volunteer manual which includes the centre's vision, mission, and objectives of the volunteer program. Provide background information about the centre and its organisational structure, and include volunteer policies, health and safety procedures, support and training arrangements, husbandry manuals and centre maintenance protocols.

Constant evaluation of the program: Collect feedback from trainers and volunteers and identify areas that may need improvements. Questions to ask participants may include: What did they enjoy the most and what areas of the program can be improved?

Standardize protocols and forms

Protocols and standardised forms are essential when you have more than one person caring for animals or maintaining the centre, to improve quality of care and efficiency, prevent and minimise errors and to ensure consistency. New volunteers will be able to familiarise with the tasks quicker, and staff or volunteers can always review protocols if they have forgotten a particular step. It is important to notify all centre members whenever modifications are made to any of the documents. Even if you work more or less on your own, it is good practice to follow set guidelines. Producing these documents may be time-consuming, but it is time well spent and invested into the long-term improvement of the centre.

Writing protocols: Brainstorm what procedures are performed at the centre. Begin writing protocols of daily procedures that you are most familiar with and different approaches that can be summarised. Does the procedure involve more than one person, require certain skills, involve machinery, or may be a risk to health and safety? Include all details and ensure that warnings of risks or hazards, and clear goals of the protocol should be set at the beginning of the document. Write the steps in detail and provide rationales at each step to maximise learning and promote memory retention. Research carefully the associated best practice, so all details are logical, valid and scientifically sound. Examples may include a protocol in the set-up and maintenance of the ICU humidicrib (temperature and humidity controlled unit), patient positioning and comfort within the unit, or a protocol in the recognition and assessment of pain in animals.

* Take ideas from veterinary treatment charts, health-check sheets, ASA Physical Status Classification System, 'SOAP' notes (Subjective, Objective, Assessment, Plan), anaesthetic monitoring sheets, or pain and body condition scoring systems that are commonly used in veterinary medicine.

Leadership skills

With volunteers around the centre, staff and other experienced volunteers will need to step up into leadership roles. Below are some tips to improve leadership skills:

Foster fairness and become a role model by doing the best you can be. If you have certain rules and protocols in place, be consistent and follow them! When you are going through protocols and demonstrating the steps of a job, be sure to explain the rationale behind each step and the chosen method. Whenever you make errors, own up to it and let the volunteers know you learnt a lesson today from a mistake you made, and that they may have to be wary of making the same error. If someone points out a mistake done by you, admit to it and thank the person for noticing it, and view criticisms as an opportunity to grow, but never view it as a personal attack. If a mistake is always made by others, first review with the committee or volunteers to check if the protocol is set out clearly or whether there are issues within the logistics of conducting the method. Make modifications and improvements where necessary.

Get to know the volunteers: Take the time to get to know all the staff and volunteers and offer help and guidance whenever possible. Recognise and celebrate the accomplishments of others and provide positive feedback whenever possible.

Keep learning: Don't stop learning and participate in as many conferences, workshops, and continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities from the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation, zoo, and veterinary industry. Engage in discussions and be open to people's ideas. Research deeply and become a subject expert. Don't be afraid to ask questions from others or experts in the field. Visit expos and other centres to gather information about new products and ideas. Become a volunteer yourself at another centre and learn what it is like to be a new volunteer at an unfamiliar place.

Lighten the mood: Being a leader does not mean you have to be serious at all times. Be cheerful, make some jokes and light the room with contagious smiles! Even amidst high caseloads, people work better when they are in good moods and in harmony with each other! Volunteers are using their free time to help the centre, so keep them coming back with a safe, supportive, and happy environment.

Learn about compassion fatigue and be vigilant of its occurrence in the rescue centre. Compassion fatigue is the emotional cost of caring for others and can induce chronic stress or more serious issues. For some, they may have developed coping mechanisms to deal with the sadness and anger of seeing animals suffering, day in and day out. However, for others, especially inexperienced volunteers, it may be triggered by a single event, or by chronic exposure to the stressors of working with sick, injured animals. Keep in mind that what you are used to seeing may be extremely traumatic to newcomers.

- When stress or compassion fatigue is suspected in staff or volunteers, provide support and reassure them that these emotions are normal and should be recognised and not be denied. It is often most useful to talk to others witnessing the same experiences and support each other. Managers and trainers can speak to them about their past experiences and provide tips on how they can cope with such upsetting situations, such as to encourage the brain to recall more success stories and positive interactions. Remind them of the cold reality that it is impossible to save all that come in through

the door, but as heartbreaking as it is, it is important to realize that the work we are doing offers many second chances. Offer them to take a break, and ensure they understand that self-awareness and self-care is essential, so we can keep going and focus more on saving those that need our care. Most importantly, acknowledge their hard work and applaud them for their time and effort in helping the centre and animals.

Conflict resolution skills: Conflict can arise whenever there are disagreements between people, for example when there are opposing opinions about how an animal should be cared for, when there is communication breakdown, frustration caused by an individual's personal habits, or discriminatory behaviours. Sometimes conflicts can become very serious and damage relationship if left to continue without closure. On the other hand, when conflicts are handled constructively and with care, it may produce desirable results such as stronger team bonds.

Meticulous record keeping

Record keeping is necessary for monitoring the progress of the animals in our care. No matter how many or how few admissions there are at your centre, detailed documentation is absolutely vital. Reviewing records over a period of time may provide evidence to what protocols are successful and to assess which ones require modification. Wildlife medicine still relies heavily on extrapolation, so excellent monitoring and documentation have the potential in helping rehabilitators, veterinarians and researchers to identify trends and disease processes, provide a large pool of results to build a database, and generate questions to spark scientific research. Therefore, it is also useful to engage and network with the scientific and veterinary community whenever possible to build dialogue.

Make it a rule to sign with initials when recording on treatment charts or checking off task boards.

Recording of medications administered: Apart from recording the dose given, ensure to include the units used, route of administration, frequency, name and concentration of the medicine, and if available, the dose rate used.

Always back up verbal orders with written communications, for example if you had asked the volunteer to add another feeding to an orphan in 30 minutes time, remember to add the task to the treatment chart.

Any important note or warning about the patient should be written clearly and in bold on the treatment chart. Highlight the note so people can view it easily. The same should be done by putting a clear note on the patient's cage card. For instance, a bird with suspected psittacosis should have a warning note written on both the treatment chart and cage card: "SUSPECT ZONOSIS: PSITTACOSIS. WEAR PPE (Personal Protective Equipment)".

Photos and Videos: Encourage staff and volunteers to take photos or videos of the patients whenever they are unsure of something, as sometimes images speak louder than words. For instance, it may be difficult to describe bird droppings found on the cage floor and accurately record it on the treatment chart, but taking a photo adds qualitative information that allows a more in-depth monitoring of the patient's progress, in this case the progress of the faeces of a patient while on treatment and good nutrition.

Photos may be used to track the patient's wounds and to monitor its healing and response to treatment, or even to identify the animal by its distinct markings, ear marks and other visual patterns. Videos are useful for documenting dynamic processes, such as the animal's breathing quality and effort, neurological behaviour, a patient's lameness, gait, or the angle of a bird's wing droop.

- These should be saved into the patient's folder on the computer at the end of the day, and a note made on the chart to communicate with others that such a record is made.
- A collection of abnormal and normal images can be used to produce educational material to be shown at volunteer training sessions. For example, a video of a bright, alert and responsive bird perched properly in its enclosure, in comparison to a video of a fluffed-up bird on the cage floor, with its tail bobbing and eyes half-closed, indicating respiratory distress.

Volunteer recruitment and induction

Volunteer recruitment: Recruit volunteers via social media platforms, such as posting on Instagram and Facebook. Schedule info sessions or behind the scenes tour day at the centre or set up a stall at school and university open days to maximize exposure.

Volunteer induction: All handouts should be given at orientation as an induction pack, or via email beforehand to save paper. The induction process and orientation day should be a fun process to help make new volunteers feel welcome. Consider a nice, friendly gathering over lunch and include ice-breaking activities and have all the staff and existing volunteers introduce themselves. New volunteers should be scheduled for observational sessions. On the first day, do not ask them to perform tasks as the purpose of these sessions should be to ensure the volunteers are comfortable with the sort of tasks they may need to perform.

Volunteer training

In-house training is needed because working with or close to animals inherently carries risks, and they may be lacking many of the skills needed. Even if they are professional volunteers who may already have the requisite training, you do not know their full background so protocols and training on site are necessary to keep everyone aware of the centre's system. Training is also crucial for the motivation, development, and even retention of volunteers. There are many training methods available but the best technique is to have several methods that are tailored to different learning styles and the type of volunteers your centre will have. At the very least, a new volunteer should be paired to shadow someone who is experienced, skilled, patient, and enjoys teaching.

Learning goals and handouts: Volunteers should be given time to read the induction pack thoroughly. A checklist of learning goals should be provided where the newcomer can tick off protocols covered and learned at the training sessions.

Job shadowing and one-on-one mentoring: These are some of the most effective methods for acquiring practical skills. During this training period the mentor will go through the manuals, provide challenges, solutions and strategies, supervise constantly, then eventually the volunteer

will progress to no supervision at all once the mentor feels the volunteer is competent enough to be left on his or her own.

Buddy system: For long term professional volunteers, volunteers may support and mentor each other.

Role playing: An underused training tool, acting out a scenario can be extremely effective for many learners to build confidence and competence. Role playing ideas may include taking a stuffed toy animal out of an enclosure while acting and talking through how to approach, capture and restrain a stressed and angry animal.

Feedback: Providing feedback on a regular basis should be an important component of training. The learning environment should be safe and comfortable so that the volunteer does not see feedback as a confrontational process. The individual should be provided with suggestions to improve his or her skill set and performance.

Learning styles questionnaires: Just as there are different personalities, there are individual differences to how people learn, which can be a problem for trainers, where just using one teaching style may not be effective for the individual learner. There are many different types of questionnaires available online that can help measure and identify preferred learning styles of an individual, for example the Honey and Mumford (1986) Learning Style Questionnaire. The result from the questionnaire can be used to the trainer and volunteer's advantage when teaching and learning new skills, by choosing an activity to match the preferred style, to make the learning process more effective and enjoyable.

Rotation of job tasks may be helpful for new volunteers to become familiar with the whole system and the different job roles at the centre. In addition, volunteers may appreciate the occasional rotation away from mundane chores to something more exciting, which may be an important factor in the retention of volunteers.

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