

Veterinary Staffing Shortages and Potential Solutions During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted institutions in unprecedented ways. While the research community has risen to the challenge, the widespread effects of the SARS-CoV-2 virus has presented staffing difficulties for some institutions. According to the *Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (Guide)*, facilities must have a disaster plan. The disaster plan should identify essential personnel, provide training in advance of implementation, ensure personnel safety, and prevent animal pain and distress.⁸ The Public Health Service (PHS) Policy for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (Policy) requires medical care for animals to be available and provided as necessary by a qualified veterinarian,¹⁴ and the *Guide* specifies daily care for animals by qualified personnel, including weekend, holiday, and emergency care.⁹

How to Prepare Proactively for Staffing Shortages

The best responders will be individuals whose emergency tasks are similar to their daily tasks,⁵ who work well together as a team,^{2,15} and who are capable and authorized to make situational decisions.^{15,16} For example, the best animal caretakers in an emergency are those who perform husbandry tasks routinely. Responders may or may not be caretakers; in an emergency there may not be the luxury of having specialized staff available for certain tasks. To mitigate this possibility, make sure responders are cross-trained,^{3,11,15} and try to maximize the number of emergency responders and back-ups with specialized skills.¹⁵ Advance agreements with other institutions or contractors may also be of benefit.^{10,11} All responders identified in the institutional disaster plan should be categorized as essential personnel by the institution and receive basic first responder training to ensure access in as many situations as possible.^{3,15} Often only those with certain credentials and/or types of formal responder training are permitted access in hazardous situations. Requirements may vary depending on the situation and locality. One example is the Occupational Safety and Health Administration requirement for training if there is release of a hazardous agent.⁴ Although less applicable to pandemics, this training may prove crucial to entering damaged lab areas to access research animals during other emergencies such as natural disasters where gas, oil, or other hazardous agents may no longer be contained. In addition to responder training, emergency alternates and temporary hires should also have appropriate training in institutional procedures¹⁵ and

all applicable regulatory requirements. Therefore, institutions should have an onboarding procedure in place as part of their disaster plan to ensure training criteria are met for temporary emergency staff.

What if You Still Need Help?

Even with the most thoughtful disaster plan, extraordinary events can strain resources, and among the most critical resources for an animal care and use program are the dedicated and trained professionals involved in the care and well-being of laboratory animals. The current COVID-19 pandemic is affecting institutions globally, making it difficult to ensure staffing despite preemptive planning efforts. Below are some suggestions and resources to assist with personnel shortages.

Considerations for Hiring Temporary Staff

If temporary employees are recruited by an institution, it is important that they possess the appropriate training and/or experience with the species at the hiring institution. This is a requirement for attending veterinarians under the Animal Welfare Act Regulations for Animal Welfare Act-regulated species.¹ Institutions should also ensure that new temporary hires are trained, for example, in the humane practice of animal care and use as outlined in the PHS Policy and the *Guide*.^{13,6} Additionally, they should be covered under the institution's Occupational Health and Safety Program and/or an alternate method that meets all applicable regulatory requirements.^{12,7} Examples applicable to veterinarians include licenses if required by state Veterinary Medical Practice Acts, and any permits such as Drug Enforcement Agency permits.

Resources to Connect Institutions with Potential Hires

Two useful resources to assist institutions in providing much-needed veterinary relief are via advertising on the American College of Laboratory Animal Medicine (ACLAM) website and in the ACLAM Newsletter. Institutions may advertise jobs or offer veterinary services on the ACLAM website (aclam.org) or quarterly Newsletter free of charge. Ads are posted on this website for 90 days within a few days of submission. An approximately 150-word excerpt of the ad will also appear in the next ACLAM Newsletter referring those interested to the ACLAM website. The deadline for Newsletter submission is two weeks prior to the publica-



tion date. ACLAM Newsletter readers are predominantly board-certified veterinarians in laboratory animal medicine, so advertisements target a specific cohort of knowledgeable and interested professionals.

ACLAM requests that advertisement content be submitted within the body of a plain text email or as an MS Word attachment to nanettekleinman@gmail.com. Content may be formatted into the following sections:

- Job Title (short position title)
- Applications (how applicants are to apply)
- Position Description
- Requirements (qualifications, etc.)
- Employer Information (additional information about the employer [EEO etc.]

A new website section dedicated to advertising for temporary hires evolved through a collaboration between the American Association of Laboratory Animal Science (AALAS) and ACLAM. Institutions may occasionally require the temporary services of credentialed relief or consultant veterinarians to assist with temporary staff shortages, special projects, or to fill other needs. This is especially true with staff shortages resulting from the pandemic. ACLAM is creating a special section within the jobs area of the ACLAM website where institutions may post openings for these temporary services. AALAS is assisting in managing the site to ensure timely publication of announcements. Advertising requests follow the same procedures as for general advertisements. Openings are generally posted on the web within a day or two of receiving them, and will be accessible from the ACLAM home page. Be on the alert for when this specialized service becomes available.

Finding the Silver Lining

While the pandemic has proven to be an extremely trying time for institutions, it has also strengthened them. When institutions recruit temporary animal care staff for assistance in emergency situations, they also forge new relationships, and may benefit from an exchange of ideas and expertise. As members of the laboratory animal community, the authors

are grateful to ACLAM and AALAS for providing this new resource that will benefit institutions with temporary staffing shortages. We encourage the research community to investigate this new resource and to share it with colleagues. Using this tool and providing constructive suggestions will enable the research community to continually improve its emergency planning capabilities so that it can be fully prepared for future emergencies.

Institutions may find useful information on emergency management for research facilities from the NIH Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare by visiting <https://olaw.nih.gov/resources/disaster-planning.htm>, and <https://olaw.nih.gov/covid-19.htm>.

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