

Report on the Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare Site Visits to the Veterans Affairs Medical Centers with Focus on Canine Care and Use in Research

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INTRODUCTION

As part of OLAW's program evaluation of Assured Institutions, between January and July 2018, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare (OLAW) conducted visits onsite of four of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Centers (VAMC). Specifically, OLAW conducted site visits to Hunter Holmes McGuire VAMC (Richmond), VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, Clement J. Zablocki VAMC (Milwaukee), and Louis Stokes Cleveland VAMC. The visits were prompted by allegations of animal welfare concerns, recordkeeping and reporting inconsistencies at Hunter Holmes McGuire VAMC.

At each site visit OLAW assessed institutional compliance with the standards of the Public Health Service (PHS) Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals¹ (Policy) and the *Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (Guide)*, 8th Edition². While the site visits focused on dogs used in the VA Medical Centers' research, an overall animal care and use program review was conducted. The centers were provided with an exit briefing on the site visitors' findings at the conclusion of each visit. This report summarizes the results of the site visits.

BACKGROUND

OLAW oversees PHS-funded animal activities by the authority of the Health Research Extension Act of 1985³ (Section 495 of the PHS Act) and the PHS Policy. As a condition of receipt of PHS support for research involving laboratory animals, institutions must provide a written Animal Welfare Assurance⁴ (Assurance) to OLAW describing their program of animal care and use. Through the Assurance mechanism, the institution commits to the operation of their animal care and use program in compliance with the PHS Policy, the *Guide*, and the Animal Welfare Act and Regulations⁵ (9 CFR, Subchapter A).

All VAMCs conducting research with animals must have an Assurance approved by OLAW and are subject to OLAW oversight per the Memorandum of Understanding⁶ between the VA and OLAW. VA animal care and use programs must also follow VA policy on the use of animals found in Handbook 1200.07⁷ which incorporates compliance with the Animal Welfare Act and Regulations and PHS Policy. Currently, all VA animal care and use programs are accredited by AAALAC International⁸.

OLAW site visits consisted of meetings with program leadership, review of the institution's Animal Welfare Assurance and pertinent facility and Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) records, and a physical walk-through of the animal housing and procedure areas. The VAMCs were evaluated for IACUC processes and recordkeeping, post-approval monitoring, program of veterinary care, daily animal health and husbandry monitoring, social housing and environmental enrichment policies and practices, program for reporting animal welfare concerns, personnel training, occupational health and safety oversight, animal procurement, and disaster plan. During some visits, the visitors observed the conduct of approved surgeries using dogs.

FINDINGS

Following extensive discussions with key personnel, facility inspections, and comprehensive reviews of relevant records, OLAW determined that Hunter Holmes McGuire VAMC responded appropriately to the allegations of animal welfare concerns, recordkeeping and reporting inconsistencies. In compliance with the PHS Policy, the institution investigated, self-reported to OLAW, and ensured that appropriate corrective measures were taken after deficiencies were identified. During the site visit OLAW found that the facility not only executed and implemented, but has consistently maintained, the appropriate corrective measures in response to the animal welfare concerns.

The use of dogs at the remaining three visited VAMCs was evaluated based on adherence to the current, locally-approved IACUC protocols, the PHS Policy, and the *Guide*. In each case, the use of dogs was found to be compliant and no animal welfare concerns were found.

SURGERY

Where feasible, the site visitors observed the conduct of research procedures on dogs including surgery. The activities were found to be consistent with the approved protocols and accepted veterinary medical practice. These include adequate anesthesia and analgesia, thermal support, fluid support, appropriate monitoring, and aseptic technique.

SOCIAL HOUSING

Dogs at all facilities visited were socially housed in pairs or groups, unless contraindicated by protocol or management requirements and approved by the IACUCs. Dogs not socially housed were provided visual, auditory, and olfactory enrichment with conspecifics and regular human interactions. Individually housed dogs were found to be well socialized to other dogs and humans. All dogs were provided with regular opportunities for access to larger indoor or outdoor enclosures for exercise. Canine psychological well-being was enhanced by frequent positive human interactions with research and animal care personnel.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall the visited facilities were found in compliance with the PHS Policy and the *Guide*. Animals were in good health, properly managed, receiving appropriate husbandry, and maintained under an effective program of veterinary care. In general, social species were socially housed and had environmental enrichment. The IACUCs were properly constituted, knowledgeable, engaged with their programs, and provided records documenting their comprehensive oversight to the site visit teams. Husbandry, veterinary, and scientific staff members were noted to be dedicated to both the animals and the research. Occupational health programs were effective and ensured personnel safety. Facilities and support areas were clean, organized, and well-maintained. Senior management provided strong leadership and support to the programs. Recommendations regarding specific site visit findings were discussed with program leadership at the individual VAMCs. Any required corrective measures were either made at the time of the visit or subsequently developed and are being monitored and reviewed by OLAW.

OLAW determined that the visited VAMCs are effectively supporting the humane programs of animal care and use at their institutions and conducting research with dogs and other vertebrate species in compliance with the PHS Policy, and all applicable rules and regulations.

References

1. Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare, National Institutes of Health. Public Health Service Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals. (US Department of Health and Human Services, Bethesda, Maryland, USA, 2015, <https://olaw.nih.gov/policies-laws/phs-policy.htm>).
2. Institute for Laboratory Animal Research. Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals 8th ed. p. 51 (National Academies Press, Washington, DC, 2011, <https://olaw.nih.gov/sites/default/files/Guide-for-the-Care-and-Use-of-Laboratory-Animals.pdf>).
3. Health Research Extension Act of 1985, Section 495 of the PHS Act. (<https://olaw.nih.gov/policies-laws/hrea-1985.htm>).
4. Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare, National Institutes of Health. Obtaining an Assurance. (Accessed 12/12/18 at <https://olaw.nih.gov/guidance/obtaining-an-assurance.htm>).
5. Animal Welfare Act and Regulations, Code of Federal Regulations, Title 9, Subchapter A. (<https://www.nal.usda.gov/awic/animal-welfare-act>).
6. Memorandum of Understanding between the National Institutes of Health Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare and the Veterans Health Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Research Oversight and Office of Research and Development Concerning Laboratory Animal Welfare. (Signed 1/16/18, <https://olaw.nih.gov/DVA.html>).
7. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration. Handbook 1200.07, Use of Animals in Research, Washington, DC 20420, November 23, 2011, (https://www.va.gov/vhapublications/ViewPublication.asp?pub_ID=2464).
8. AAALAC International. About AAALAC. (Accessed 12/12/18 at <https://www.aaalac.org/about/index.cfm>).