

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Nonprofit Veterinarian Shortage: Who Will Care for the Pets Most in Need?

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Abstract

Introduction: The national shortage of veterinarians, and the technicians and assistants who support them, has affected private practices, emergency and specialty clinics, agricultural practices, public health departments, and veterinary college faculty. The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of the veterinary workforce shortage on veterinary care provided at two types of public practice: (1) veterinary care for cats and dogs housed temporarily in animal sheltering organizations (ASOs) and (2) veterinary clinics aimed at increasing access to care for animals in the community.

Methods: A novel survey was disseminated to 333 ASOs receiving a minimum of 2,500 animals annually and 118 access to care clinics (ATCCs) that partner with or receive grants from the national animal welfare nonprofit Petco Love. Surveys included questions about staffing and vacant positions for veterinarians and veterinary support staff, current hiring efforts for veterinarians, and delays in animal care.

Results: A total of 179 ASOs completed the survey (54% response rate). Most reported being short-staffed for veterinarians (130/179; 73%) and for veterinary support staff (132/179; 74%). Of the 143 ASOs answering a question about spay/neuter surgeries, 130 (91%) reported having a backlog with a combined total of 18,648 animals awaiting surgery. A total of 57 ATCCs responded to the survey (48% response rate). Of these, 41 (72%) reported being short-staffed for both veterinarians and veterinary support staff. As a result, clients were waiting longer than usual for care at 45 clinics (79%), with delays of 2 months or more at 28 clinics (51%).

Conclusion: This study highlights the critical impact of severe veterinary workforce shortages on nonprofit organizations responsible for medical care for the most vulnerable cats and dogs. These shortages pose substantial risks to animal welfare, the human–animal bond, and public health.

Keywords: *veterinary workforce; shelter veterinarian; veterinary nurse; veterinary technician; veterinary assistant; nonprofit veterinarian; access to veterinary care; spay/neuter; animal shelter; shelter medicine; public health; dogs; cats*

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material for
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In 2023, The American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges concluded that ‘significant shortages of veterinarians exist across all sectors of professional activity and at all levels of specialization ... a result of systemic, long-term trends in pet ownership and demand for veterinary services, along with limited capacity for training veterinary professionals’.¹ The American Veterinary Medical Association identified several industry segments most impacted by the shortage, including ‘food animal, equine, academia, shelters, emergency practices, specialties and public health’.²

Veterinary workforce studies predict the shortage will increase to 15,000 companion animal veterinarians and more than 100,000 veterinary nurses/technicians by 2030, resulting in 75 million pets going without veterinary care.^{3,4} Of these, 20 million would be pets of families that can currently access care, and 55 million would belong to families that have historically lacked access to care. Analysts predict that while competition for veterinary care workers would bolster lagging wages, these higher costs would also lead to fewer families being able to afford care at private practices and the need for

shelters and nonprofit clinics to increase their capacity to meet the widening gap.^{5,6}

Statewide studies suggest that shelters and nonprofit clinics have been especially hard hit by the veterinary workforce shortage. A 2023 survey of California shelters reported that 50% of veterinary positions and 54% of registered veterinary technician positions were vacant, leaving 344,000 animals without adequate veterinary care.⁷ This deficiency resulted in disease spread, prolonged length of stay, overcrowding, and increased euthanasia for the first time in decades. A survey of veterinary professionals in Colorado shelters in the same year highlighted understaffing issues leading to treatment delays and spay/neuter backlogs.⁸ Private practitioners in that study reported high levels of stress around performing economic euthanasia for clients that could not afford recommended care. They advocated for improved access to veterinary care for underserved pet owners. Another study estimated that the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown resulted in a collective backlog at more than 200 low-cost spay/neuter clinics of 2.7 million spay/neuter surgeries that were never performed.⁹ Aside from these reports, there is limited information regarding the national impact of the veterinary shortage on nonprofit clinics and shelters.

Petco Love, a national nonprofit organization, partners with over 4,000 organizations, including animal shelters and veterinary care providers, ‘to create a better world for animals and the people who love them’. In its 2022 fiscal year, Petco Love invested \$30 million in grants and products, a portion of which supports veterinary initiatives to deliver necessary care to pets in need, including preventive care, management of illness and injuries, and spay/neuter surgeries. Concerned about anecdotal discussions within the animal welfare community regarding a perceived need for additional support and resources in the veterinary space combined with information circulating from the above reports, Petco Love initiated this research. The aim of this study was to evaluate the influence of the veterinary workforce shortage on animal care within temporary sheltering organizations and community-focused veterinary services enhancing access to care.

Methods

Survey administration and target audiences

Petco Love surveyed two types of organizations in its grantee and partner database: (1) animal shelters and home-based foster programs (collectively referred to as animal sheltering organizations, ASOs) and (2) veterinary clinics providing public access to veterinary care through low-cost or free services (collectively referred to as access to care clinics, ATCCs). Emails were sent to each organization’s top official (presidents, directors, and chief executive officers), explaining that Petco Love was conducting

the survey to assess current staffing levels for veterinarians and veterinary technicians/assistants. Organization leaders were asked to distribute the survey invitations to the personnel best equipped to complete them via an online GoogleForm link. Responses were accepted from August 1 to October 31, 2022. Nonrespondants received a single reminder email message 1 month after the first contact. Surveys were not anonymous. Information regarding responding organization type, location, animal care number, budget, and live release rate was obtained from Petco Love records and linked to survey responses for tabulation. Since there is no national directory of ASO and ATCC, it is not possible to determine to what extent this cohort of surveyed organizations is representative of ASO and ATCC overall.

Animal sheltering organizations

Petco Love works with ASO, including public governmental/municipal departments and private not-for-profit organizations (collectively referred to hereafter as ‘non-profits’), to increase positive outcomes for animals. These organizations are responsible for providing veterinary services for animals admitted into their care (‘intake’). Although many ASOs also operate public veterinary clinics to increase access to care for community pets, ASOs were only surveyed on veterinary care for animals in their custody. Because many smaller organizations do not have full-time veterinarians on staff, this study surveyed organizations with annual intake of greater than 2,500, as higher intake levels warrant full-time veterinary care. These high-intake organizations constituted only 8% of Petco Love’s total animal sheltering partners; however, they collectively represented 66% of the total animal intake at all partner ASO.

Access to veterinary care clinics

Petco Love funds nonprofit veterinary clinics to improve access to care for all pets, including those whose pet parents struggle financially and for free-roaming community cats cared for in trap-neuter-return programs. The scope of services provided ranges from limited outpatient wellness, to uncomplicated spay/neuter surgery, to full-service veterinary care.

Animal sheltering organization survey

A total of 333 ASOs met the inclusion criteria and were emailed a link to the ASO survey (Supplementary material, S1). The survey had a total of nine questions about the ASO’s name, state, the presence of a veterinary clinic for shelter animals and/or community animals, veterinary staffing, wait times for care, and number of animals waiting for spay/neuter surgery. Respondents could also enter an optional free-text comment; however, comments were not tabulated. Information regarding shelter type,

location, total animal intake, budget, and live release rate was obtained from Petco Love records.

Access to veterinary care clinic survey

A total of 118 ATCCs met the inclusion criteria and were emailed a link to the clinic survey (Supplementary material, S2). The survey had a total of eight questions about the organization's name, state, provision of veterinary care for community pets, veterinary staffing, and wait times for appointments. Respondents could also enter an optional free-text comment. Information regarding organization budget and location was obtained from Petco Love records.

Results

Animal sheltering organizations

A total of 179 of the 333 eligible ASOs responded to the survey (54% response rate). These ASOs collectively took-in 1,208,643 cats and dogs, representing approximately one-fifth of the national shelter intake of 6.5 million in 2023.^{10,11} The largest proportion of ASOs was located in the South (88/179; 49%), and they had animal control responsibilities (114/179; 64%), annual budgets of less than \$2.5 million (77/179; 43%), and intakes of less than 5,000 animals per year (95/179; 53%) (Table 1). Most ASOs had their own internal veterinary clinics for animals sheltered in their care (146/179; 82%). The remaining ASOs lacking their own in-house veterinarian had collaborating veterinarians of record who provided medical oversight and protocols for medical care to be carried out by trained shelter staff. More than half of ASOs (106/179; 59%) also operated public-facing veterinary clinics for community animals in addition to caring for animals temporarily belonging to their own organizations.

Approximately three-quarters of ASOs reported being short-staffed for veterinarians (130/179; 73%) and for veterinary support staff (132/179; 74%) (Table 2). Of the 130 organizations reporting a shortage of veterinarians, 109 (84%) were actively attempting to fill their vacant veterinarian positions. Ten additional ASOs that were not currently experiencing a veterinarian shortage were also recruiting for one to expand their veterinary capacity, resulting in approximately two-thirds of ASOs having vacant veterinarian positions (119/179; 66%).

More than two-thirds of ASOs (124/179; 69%) reported delays in veterinary services for animals in their care. A total of 130 of the 143 ASOs (91%) replying to this topic reported a combined total of 18,648 animals waiting for spay/neuter surgery. More than half of ASOs with surgery bottlenecks (60%; 78/130) reported 50 or more animals waiting; there were 3 ASOs with 1,000 to >3,000 animals waiting for sterilization. Thirteen ASOs reported that there were no animals waiting for spay/neuter surgery.

Table 1. Characteristics of 179 ASOs that completed the survey

Categories	Number of ASOs	Percent
Geographic division*		
South	88	49
West	49	27
Midwest	29	16
Northeast	13	7
Annual budget		
<\$2,500,000	77	43
\$2,500,000–\$4,999,999	44	30
\$5,000,000–\$9,999,999	32	13
\$10,000,000–\$14,999,999	10	6
≥\$15,000,000	16	9
Animal welfare organization type		
Nonprofit or municipal agency that is responsible for animal control sheltering and performs adoptions	114	65
Nonprofit, SPCA, or humane society that operates a shelter and performs adoptions	59	31
Nonprofit organization that is primarily a foster-based rescue	6	3
Annual animal intake number		
2,500–4,999	95	53
5,000–7,499	39	22
7,500–9,999	18	10
10,000–14,999	12	7
≥15,000	15	8
Annual live release rate		
<60%	10	6
60–69%	14	8
70–79%	39	22
80–89%	77	43
≥90%	39	22
Clinical services available		
Internal clinic for animals in shelter care	146	82
Public clinic for community animals	106	59

ASO: animal sheltering organizations.

SPCA: Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

*<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/ahus/sources-definitions/geographic-region.htm>.

Access to veterinary care clinics

Of the 118 eligible ATCCs, 57 responded to the survey (48% response rate). Most ATCCs were located in the South and had budgets less than \$1 million. (Table 3). These stand-alone nonprofit clinics reported similar staffing challenges experienced by ASO.

Nearly three-quarters of ATCCs reported being short-staffed for both veterinarians (41/57; 72%) and veterinary support staff (41/57; 72%) (Table 4). Of the 41 organizations reporting a shortage of veterinarians, 34 (83%) were actively attempting to fill their vacant veterinarian positions. Two additional clinics that were not

Table 2. Details of veterinary personnel shortages and delayed veterinary services for shelter animals reported by 179 ASOs that completed the survey

Categories	Number of ASOs	Percent
ASOs with veterinary workforce shortages (179 responses)		
Veterinarian shortage	130	73
Veterinary support staff shortage	132	74
Actively seeking a veterinarian	119	66
ASOs with shelter animals waiting longer for internal veterinary services (179 responses)		
Waiting longer for veterinary care	124	69
Not waiting longer for veterinary care	55	31
Number of sheltered animals awaiting spay/neuter (143 responses)		
0	13	9
1–49	52	36
50–99	30	21
100–199	25	17
200–499	19	13
≥500 (up to 3,000+)	4	3
Actively recruiting for a veterinarian as a function of spay/neuter surgeries waiting (143 responses)		
0	9	69
1–49	33	63
50–99	24	80
100–199	21	84
200–499	15	78
≥500 (up to 3,000+)	3	75

ASO: animal sheltering organizations.

Table 3. Characteristics of 57 ATCCs that completed the survey

Categories	Number of ATCCs	Percent
Geographic division*		
South	24	43
West	18	32
Midwest	9	16
Northeast	5	9
Annual budget		
<\$1,000,000	30	53
\$1,000,000–\$2,499,999	17	30
\$2,500,000–\$4,999,999	7	12
≥\$5,000,000	3	5

ATCC: access to veterinary care clinics.

*<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/hs/sources-definitions/geographic-region.htm>.**Table 4.** Details of veterinary personnel shortages and prolonged wait times for veterinary care appointments reported by 57 ATCCs that completed the survey

Categories	Number of ATCCs	Percent
ATCCs with veterinary workforce shortages (57 responses)		
Veterinarian shortage	41	72
Veterinary support staff shortage	41	72
Actively seeking a veterinarian	36	63
ATCCs with patients waiting longer for veterinary services (57 responses)		
Waiting longer for veterinary appointments	45	79
Not waiting longer for veterinary appointments	12	21
Estimated wait time for an appointment (56 responses)*		
1 week	8	14
1 month	20	36
2–3 months	22	39
4–6 months	6	11
>6 months	0	0
Actively recruiting for a veterinarian as a function of wait time		
1 week	3	38
1 month	15	75
2–3 months	14	64
4–6 months	4	67
>6 months	-	-

ATCC: access to veterinary care clinics.

*One clinic was limited to monthly spay/neuter clinics for cats.

currently experiencing a veterinarian shortage were also recruiting for one to expand their veterinary capacity, resulting in nearly two-thirds of ATCC having vacant veterinarian positions (36/57; 63%).

The majority of ATCCs (45/57; 79%) reported delays of 1–6 months for appointments.

Discussion

This study documented that nonprofit veterinary workforce shortages initially described in California and Colorado are occurring nationwide. Despite the critical nature of the current workforce shortage in nonprofit animal welfare organizations, this important topic is currently underserved by published literature, perhaps because the situation is rapidly evolving. While historical data were not available for comparison with our data, the similarities and high personnel vacancy rates in both ASO and ATCC provide compelling evidence for a crisis in these essential services for the most vulnerable animals: those in shelters, free-roaming community cats, and pets belonging to families that are struggling to access

veterinary care. This nonprofit veterinary vacancy rate depletes already limited options to provide low-cost services to pet parents at a time when the economic climate, overcrowded shelters, and increasing cost of veterinary care create a greater need for more accessible services.

Impacts on veterinary care

Approximately three-quarters of ASO reported vacant positions for both veterinarians and veterinary support staff. Without proper veterinary staffing, shelters cannot effectively manage their pet population and the care needed to efficiently move these pets to their best outcomes and save lives. Whether these pets need important vaccinations and parasite control, treatments for illness and injuries, or spay/neuter surgeries, every delay contributes to crowding, spread of disease, animal and staff stress, and unnecessary euthanasia.¹²

With surgical sterilization before adoption as a standard practice, survey data confirmed that the veterinary staffing shortage resulted in a backlog of shelter animals awaiting surgery. Nine out of 10 shelters collectively reported spay/neuter delays involving nearly 20,000 animals. Options for managing surgery backlogs, such as keeping pets longer in shelters or foster homes, implementing post-adoption surgery contracts, or using ‘foster-to-adopt’ placements, have drawbacks, including increased workloads, bottlenecked animal flow, risk of poor compliance with sterilization, and the birth of accidental litters.

Similarly, more than two-thirds of ATCCs had open veterinarian and veterinary support staff positions at the time of the survey. These nonprofit veterinary clinics may include everything from limited wellness and spay/neuter surgery services to comprehensive full-service and urgent care for emergencies. ATCCs reported that pets were waiting longer to receive needed care in 8 out of 10 clinics. More than half of clinics had wait times of 2 months or more. Apart from the evident challenges in providing timely treatment for sick animals, delayed access to spay/neuter procedures elevates the risk of unintended breeding.

Importance of access to veterinary care safety nets

ATCC/ASO provide spay/neuter and essential preventive healthcare for pets that would otherwise lack access and pose risks to animal welfare and public health. High-quality high-volume spay-neuter (HQHVSN) clinics and ASO altering pets before adoption were important factors contributing to the decline of shelter euthanasia from 22 to 25 million animals in the 1970s to approximately 1 million by 2022.^{13,14} Current reductions and delays in spay/neuter procedures jeopardize the life-saving trends of the last 50 years.

Access to subsidized veterinary care for pets in underserved communities can reduce relinquishment of pets to animal shelters. These ‘safety net’ programs provide

services ranging from basic preventive care to treatment of common illnesses, injuries, and emergencies and may be the only option for veterinary care for some families.¹⁵ For example, in a national study of patients admitted for spay/neuter at 22 low-cost clinics, the spay/neuter appointment was the first visit to a veterinarian for 49% of dogs and 77% of cats.¹⁶ Nearly all cats and one-third of dogs over 4 months of age had not been vaccinated against rabies, and 22% of female cats and dogs had already produced litters by the time they were brought in for spay/neuter. Nearly half of families using the clinics had household incomes of less than \$30,000.

Access to veterinary services for the most vulnerable populations and animal welfare is closely coupled. Without reasonably prompt access to veterinary care, sheltered and owned animals can experience greater risk of morbidity, mortality, and unnecessary euthanasia for preventable or treatable conditions. There is also a strong correlation between lack of access to veterinary care and human healthcare within the same communities.^{17,18} This not only raises the specter of increased vulnerability to human health due to zoonotic diseases and other risk factors¹⁹ but also presents a One Health opportunity to develop health services addressing ‘the whole family’ of pets and people together.

Community demographics and pricing impact accessibility to veterinary care.^{20,21} Of the 3,108 counties in the contiguous US, 344 have no veterinary clinic at all, impacting an estimated 1.4 million pets.²² The cost of veterinary services in the private sector has outpaced the consumer price index since 1996,²³ and the current trend of veterinary costs exceeding inflation by 3–4% per year is expected to continue over the next 8–10 years.²⁴ As a result, as the cost per visit has increased, the overall number of visits has decreased, along with the sale of important medications, such as heartworm, flea, and tick preventives.^{25,26} Nearly 30% of pet owners do not see a veterinarian at least once a year, with the cost of care cited as the most frequent reason.^{17,23,27} Price sensitivity is not limited to low-income pet owners. ‘Financially fragile’ families are defined as unable to access \$2,000 within 30 days. Approximately one-third of pet owners at a wide range of income levels already fall into this category, especially for unplanned emergencies.²⁸

Factors impacting nonprofit veterinary staffing

Competition for veterinarians and recovery from previous wage stagnation have driven up compensation offers in private practices. ASO/ATCC have less flexibility to develop competitive recruitment and retention packages by raising fees. While one published survey reported increased salaries, benefits, and resources for veterinarians employed in shelter medicine over the period 2011–2018,²⁹ more recent statistics show that salaries in this sector lag behind. In

2022, new veterinary graduates entering companion animal private practice accepted their first positions at an average salary of \$120,317, 28% higher than those entering nonprofit positions at \$93,922.³⁰ The average salary for all veterinarians working in companion animal private practice was \$140,348, 42% higher than salaries for nonprofit veterinarians averaging \$98,833. Unlike their counterparts in private practices, nonprofit organizations encounter limited flexibility in passing on escalating costs to clients through elevated service fees.

Mental health and burnout issues prevalent in the wider veterinary profession also affect veterinarians working within nonprofit practices. Burnout among veterinarians has consistently risen annually since the initiation of the Professional Quality of Life: Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue (ProQOL) survey in 2015.²⁶ Primary factors contributing to this burnout are long work hours and on-call responsibilities post-shift.^{26,31,32} In small animal practice, burnout leads to turnover of both veterinarians and support staff at rates higher than other medical professions.^{25,33} Despite veterinarians' aspirations to reduce their work hours, shelters often face limitations in alleviating workloads or number of animals in care without jeopardizing positive outcomes or population-level animal well-being.

Similar challenges and staffing turnover impact veterinary nurses, technicians, and assistants in both nonprofit organizations and private practices but are amplified by historically low compensation. Salaries for veterinary technicians averaged only \$21–25 per hour in 2022, a rate that forced one-third to take on second jobs or to leave veterinary medicine for better paying professions to make ends meet.³⁴ Veterinary support staff and shelter personnel report even higher rates of burnout, compassion fatigue, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation, and suicidal attempts than veterinarians.³⁵ This is particularly pronounced among those involved in euthanasia decision-making or directly engaged in the euthanasia procedure itself.^{36–39}

Opportunities for recruitment and retention of veterinary personnel

Despite plans for 10 or more new veterinary colleges, the persistent shortage of veterinarians and technicians is expected to endure for at least another decade. This scarcity could disproportionately affect recruitment by ACO/ATCC. Nonprofit organizations must explore all viable means to reduce turnover and retain their existing veterinary professionals, emphasizing the benefits of nonprofit practice and fostering an inclusive atmosphere. For example, a study comparing veterinarians who left shelter practice with those who stayed revealed that both groups valued Shelter Medicine duties.⁴⁰ However, departing veterinarians rated their roles lower in terms of relationships with

administrators, team involvement, mentorship opportunities, and input into medical decisions. Meanwhile, those who remained were more engaged in management, policy development, and treatment planning.

Veterinarians employed in governmental or nonprofit roles have access to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, offering capped monthly loan payments based on income and debt write-off after 120 payments. Since 8 out of 10 senior veterinary students graduated in 2022 with student loan debt averaging \$179,505 each,²⁶ loan forgiveness can amount to an important economic enhancement and recruitment tool for ASO/ATCC, especially when organizations are unable to match cash compensation packages offered by private practices.

Enhanced support for training in Shelter Medicine, HGHVSN, and spectrum of care is essential to equip veterinarians for confident practice in ASO/ATCC settings.^{41,42} Sustainable funding sources are needed to enhance academic Shelter Medicine programs⁴³ and provide internships and residencies and continuing education opportunities. These are crucial for recruiting new graduates, developing specialists, and supporting mid-career practitioners transitioning to nonprofit practice. Partnerships between veterinary schools and ASO/ATCC offer practical experiences for students and serve as recruitment opportunities when showcasing positive work cultures and commitment to team well-being.

Active recruitment of veterinary professionals to this sector should prioritize competitive compensation, novel student debt repayment options, and increasing awareness of the scope and rewarding nature of practicing in these fields. Since burnout driving veterinarians and support staff away from this sector in particular or from veterinary medicine altogether is most strongly related to workplace culture, poor relationships with management, lack of input on medical protocols and operations, and poor work-life balance, organizations have the opportunity to increase retention of veterinary staff through positive work environments where they can thrive in sustainable careers.

Summary of recommendations to address current veterinary workforce shortages in nonprofit organizations

1. Encourage nonprofit animal welfare organizations to be more inclusive of veterinarians in leadership, policy development, and treatment planning.
2. Enhance a positive work culture with initiatives to promote work-life balance, such as 4-day workweeks, family-friendly hours, no on-call duty, and choice to work with or without public clients.
3. Develop competitive compensation packages on par with private veterinary practice.

4. Emphasize access to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program in recruitment materials for veterinarians.
5. Increase awareness within the veterinary profession of the scope and rewarding nature of ASO/ATCC practices.
6. Encourage partnerships between veterinary schools and ASO/ATCC to increase awareness of career options in this sector among veterinary students.
7. Create sustainable funding sources to enhance academic Shelter Medicine programs to support education of veterinary students and technicians in this discipline.
8. Increase integration of more entry level and advanced Shelter Medicine topics into professional continuing education offerings.
9. Increase awareness of opportunities for board certification in the specialty of Shelter Medicine Practice in the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners and programmatic support for residency and practitioner certification pathways.
10. Support research into nonprofit workforce trends and their impact on meeting needs for access to veterinary care within shelters and their communities.

Limitations

The data reported in this paper concern a rapidly evolving situation, for which only a scant amount of previous research has been reported. Whereas the veterinary workforce shortage and factors impacting recruitment, retention, and career satisfaction are the topic of frequent reports in private veterinary practice, there is little information and even less peer-reviewed literature on workforce issues and impacts in the nonprofit sector. Even the sector itself defies definition as there are no comprehensive directories of organizations or descriptions of their patients and clients. As such, it is difficult to create a representative survey sample. With these limitations in mind, we surveyed the database of Petco Love, a national funder of organizations providing care for animals in shelters or low-cost clinics. This unique audience may not represent the greater sheltering and access to care community. However, Petco Love has broad reach in the animal welfare field, and survey respondents reflected a national cross-section of organization types, size, funding levels, and region, thereby reducing the chance of bias. The survey titles 'Petco Love Veterinarian Shortage Survey' may have biased respondents toward reporting perceived shortages. The response rate of approximately 50% could influence results if a subset of eligible participants was more motivated to participate due to a particular experience or point of view, such as having a veterinary personnel shortage in their own organization. The surveys

were not anonymous to enable matching responses with the historical organizational information from the Petco Love database, and they were branded as Petco Love products. Therefore, some respondents may have felt pressure to provide answers they believed would please their funder. This study aimed to create a snapshot of veterinary workforce adequacy at the time of the survey. Only one question in each survey sought respondent perceptions about whether delays were more severe than in the past. Therefore, nothing in this report should be taken to mean that the situation is worse than before, only that many organizations cannot fill their veterinary team positions or their veterinary service needs at this time. Furthermore, while this report sought to identify whether a workforce shortage exists (yes/no answer options) and the number of animals impacted, it did not pursue the reasons for the shortages or to investigate solutions. These are topics that warrant further investigation in more detail.

Conclusion

In our survey, approximately three-quarters of participating shelters and low-cost clinics had vacant veterinarian positions, leading to delays in preventive healthcare, spay/neuter, and treatment of sick and injured pets. Current trends of increasing shelter intake and euthanasia rates and more pet owners left out of veterinary care due to economic conditions have increased the urgency for creative solutions for this shortfall.

Author credit statement

SK conceptualized the project and designed and implemented the survey. SK, MLM, and JKL curated the data. SK prepared the original manuscript draft, and MLM and JKL reviewed and edited the final version.

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Statement of ethics

This study was exempted from human subject research review by the University of Florida Institutional Review Board (#17745).

Conflict of interest and funding

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