

Veterinarians balance social distance, supply shortages with caring for pets during coronavirus shutdown

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Veterinary hospitals and practices are dealing with their own set of issues due to the coronavirus pandemic. Veterinarians have limited all

but emergency services and have set up curbside service, so pet owners can just drive up and hand over their pet.

They are breaking up their staff into teams, trying to conserve or reuse supplies of personal protective equipment and medications, and trying to find ways to euthanize animals so that owners may be close by, while trying to maintain social distancing.

"Everything takes longer because we're doing curbside," said Dr. Kim McClure Brinton, who has been a veterinarian for 28 years and owns Country Companions Veterinary Services. "I come in every day and hit the ground running."

Brinton is answering phones and cleaning animal cages, doing a little bit of everything these days, while trying to run her practice in Bethany, because she, like many vets, has broken her staff into teams to limit potential illness.

"It's hard," said Dr. Monica Dijanic, who owns Beaver Brook Animal Hospital in Wethersfield with her husband, Dr. Howard Asher. "Even though we love animals, we are 'people' people so it's been kind of hard to do this.

"I'm on the wellness committee for the (Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association) and well-being and wellness are big topics with veterinarians and animal health care professionals, so we're doing as much as we can to keep morale up."

Limited services

Veterinarians are trying to balance what is essential or emergency service and what isn't, following guidelines set by the American Veterinary Medical Association and the state association.

"The recommendation is to do essential services," Dijanic said. "Certain vaccinations are considered essential. Rabies. Leptospirosis. Those can be transmitted to people. If it's something we think can be postponed, we are recommending they postpone it. If it's something where the pet's in pain, we can do that. Like dental extractions. It's on a case-by-case basis."

At Beaver Brook, people call from their car and then bring their pets into a vestibule one at a time. For a dog, they will remove the collar and leash and put on a sanitized leash provided by the practice and a vet tech will come in and get the animal. Cats are generally transported in carriers, which are left in the room, and the carriers are wiped down with disinfectant by a technician.

Bolton Veterinary Hospital, a 24-hour emergency care hospital, is also doing curbside service, but their employees come out to the car to get the pet when the client calls and the vet and the client talk on the phone after the animal has been examined. Bolton's staff has been split into three teams, which each work 12-15 hours a day for three days, then the team gets six days off.

"We're trying to protect the owners from us in case we are infected, but also the team that's on," said Dr. Ed Grace, who has been at Bolton since 1994.

Brinton has two teams of 14 staff members at her County Companions practice, which treats both small animals and all farm animals except horses.

"God forbid one team goes down," said Brinton, who is the vice president of the CVMA. "We could split the other team one more time.

"That's part of the beauty of my practice is that everybody's cross-

trained. Everybody can almost do everybody else's job."

On farm calls, one of the vets will take a technician and both wear masks and PPE.

"We're taking a tech so it's us and the technician and not necessarily an owner," Brinton said.

Euthanasia

Euthanasia is also problematic because sometimes an owner wants to be with their pet. Some vets have tried to accommodate that, to a degree.

"We have a memory garden outside so if it's nice, we can be in the garden," Brinton said. "We've done some cat euthanasias in people's cars. I have one doctor who prefers to put in an IV catheter and use an extension set, so she's standing six feet away from the people. We're doing it outside."

Dr. David Mordasky, who owns Stafford Veterinary Center, is allowing owners to come into the office to be with their pet if it has to be euthanized but all other clients must use curbside service.

"We in no way can wrap our head around, telling them, "OK, look, you can't be with your animal when we put it to sleep," " said Mordasky, who has been in practice for 40 years. "We take every precaution possible. We put them in masks and gloves and say, "Yes, you're going to be part of this." Do you take that risk? Yes. You have to take that chance on some level of not spreading it ... you don't want to rip these people's hearts out."

Dr. Satyender Valipe, who works at the Connecticut Veterinary Center in West Hartford, has allowed people to come in to be with their pet if it

has to be put down but in the past few weeks, he said, not many have.

"We tell them to wear a mask," Valipe said. "Maintain a distance from the doctor. Sometimes they get emotional and they start to hug ... it's very difficult, sometimes, somebody is emotional and they're saying goodbye to their pet and you can't say, "Hey stay away!" It's difficult. We try to tell them before so they understand."

Supplies

The supply of drugs and PPE as well as disinfectant and paper products has been limited, as it has been in the medical field. The CVMA has shared safety protocols for its members as well as guidance on the use of anesthetics.

Dr. Andrea Looney, an anesthesiology specialist who works part-time at the Central Hospital for Veterinary Medicine in North Haven, wrote the guidelines.

"We use a lot of the same drugs for dogs and cats for surgery and intensive care as humans would use for the same things, for pain," Looney said. "Since the opioid crisis hit in 2017 and '18, we've been rationing different narcotics.

"We're experienced in dealing with shortages, but this just hit suddenly. The suddenness of it, in terms of the paucity of anesthetics and sedatives required for sedating both people and animals, whether it's for ventilating people and calming them down so they breathe better or whether it's for anesthetizing a dog or a cat for a necessary surgery ... we're trying to do only necessary surgeries now, like for fractures, or bleeding internal organs or life-threatening illnesses but we are running out of the same drugs."

Like the others, Mordasky is limiting surgeries only to emergencies, as his supplies are finite.

"(The suppliers) have told us, the supply of anesthetics you have, that's it. Don't plan on getting any more," he said. "There are none to be had. All the disinfectants, what you have is what you got. That's it. The human profession is going to have access to it first."

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