Temporary sheltering of companion animals exposed to COVID-19

By far, the greatest risk of COVID-19 exposure to staff, volunteers, and the public at animal shelters comes from person-to-person contact. Shelters should follow CDC guidance on preventing COVID-19 exposure in businesses to help you plan, prepare, and respond to COVID-19. In particular, staff and volunteers should not come to work if sick, and should take steps to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Interventions to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission are the same at an animal shelter or clinic as in other aspects of daily life; follow up to date information from the CDC on how to protect yourself. 

Protocols specific to protecting staff when in high risk situations, such as entering an infected person’s home or coming into proximity with a sick person, should be consistent with the most up to date guidance from state and federal public health authorities including CDC. For the most up to date guidance, visit your state’s Department of Health website and CDC’s COVID-19 website. These interim recommendations are for animal services and animal shelters that will intake companion animals that lived with persons with COVID-19. There is currently limited evidence that animals can be infected with the new coronavirus that causes COVID-19. As of March 19, 2020, two dogs in Hong Kong have been reported to test positive for the virus that causes COVID-19 by PCR testing. Each dog had close contact with a person with a confirmed COVID-19 infection in their home. Neither dog developed clinical signs of illness. Currently, there is no evidence that suggests companion animals can spread COVID-19 to people. For up to date information please see CDC COVID-19 and animals, AVMA COVID-19 FAQs for veterinarians and veterinary clinics and COVID-19 FAQs for pet owners.

Every effort should be made to allow companion animals to continue to co-habitate with their family when possible. However, if temporary sheltering becomes necessary, the following suggestions are provided to ensure coordination with the appropriate public health and animal health officials and to minimize infection risk to shelter staff and volunteers. While the risks of COVID-19 from contact with such animals are considered very low, it is nonetheless prudent for shelters to use the best available information on general infection prevention for contagious diseases, including coronaviruses.

1. In anticipation of an animal service agency being requested to assist with collection of one or more companion animals from the home of a person with known or suspected COVID-19, agencies should work closely with their public health department including the state public health veterinarian or designated health official to plan, including minimizing the risk to staff.
   a. Whenever possible, entry into the home where a person with COVID-19 lived should be avoided in order to prevent person-to-person transmission; additionally, companion animals should be collected by animal services staff with minimal contact with people living in the home. This includes remaining a minimum of 6 feet away from other people and limiting contact with the home environment.
   b. Washing hands with soap and water or using a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol before and after handling a companion animal should be done (See 5b for additional information).
   c. If collection of the animal means interacting with people from COVID-19 infected households or being exposed to home environments that might be contaminated with the virus, public health officials may recommend personal protective equipment (PPE) and provide training in the proper use of such equipment. Also see section 5a PPE.
   d. For details on potential precautions, refer to AVMA Considerations for mobile and house call veterinarians during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. As with any new shelter intake, gloves and gowns or coveralls should be worn while doing intake exams and treatments in order to reduce contagious disease risks.
   a. Gloves and gowns or coveralls are a good infection prevention control practice generally, and continue to be important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gowns or coveralls should be laundered before reuse if going to be reused (see section on PPE below).
   b. Hands should always be washed with soap and water including after gloves are removed and discarded.
   c. The animal intake area as well as materials in animal areas such as food and water bowls and bedding should be routinely cleaned and sanitized.
d. There is no need to bathe an animal because of COVID-19 concerns; at this time, there is no evidence that the virus that causes COVID-19 can spread to people from the skin or fur of pets.

e. Refer to the Compendium of Veterinary Standard Precautions for Zoonotic Disease Prevention in Veterinary Personnel by NASPHV for additional details on standard protocols for biosafety.

3. Animal housing plans for the shelter should be made for companion animals that were in contact with a person with known or suspected COVID-19 infection or a known high risk environment. Until more information is known, it is recommended that these animals be housed in an area separate from the rest of the shelter population, preferably in double-sided housing that is spot cleaned as needed when soiled. (See 6 for information on cleaning and disinfection).

4. Animals that were in contact with COVID-19 should be separated from the general animal population during the animal’s stay in the shelter due to the unknown risks associated with this rapidly evolving emerging infectious disease. While there is no evidence at this time that any animals, including companion animals, in the United States, might be a source of infection for humans, it is prudent to keep companion animals that came from households where a person was infected with COVID-19 separated from the general shelter population out of an abundance of caution to protect both human and animal health. When possible, dedicate separate staff for each group of animals or enhance hygiene precautions for staff that need to transfer between groups.

   a. Every effort should be made to promptly reunite sheltered companion animals with their owners.

   b. Animals that need to be adopted or sent to a foster home should be held for 14 days out of an abundance of caution.

5. Animal handling should address human health, animal health, and animal welfare needs.

   a. Personal protective equipment (PPE)

      i. Current shortages in commercially available PPE are causing a crisis due to the overwhelming need in the human healthcare field. See updates from CDC, FDA (mask, gown, and glove), and AVMA.

      ii. For these animals, shelters should use routine basic PPE to prevent transmission of contagious pathogens, per usual shelter protocols.

      iii. The use of protective clothing, such as gowns or coveralls that can be laundered, and dedicated footwear is an alternative that may be preferable to preserve disposable PPE. The use of gloves is recommended.

   b. Clean hands often. Washing hands with soap and water before and after handling a companion animal should be done.

      i. Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

      ii. If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry.

      iii. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

      iv. Hand washing should also be done right after removing gloves.

   c. Dogs should be walked outside for elimination and exercise but direct contact with other companion animals should be avoided as a best practice to protect animal health.

      i. Feces should be collected using gloved hands or a bag and disposed of immediately. See hand washing information above.

      ii. Ideally, these dogs should be walked in an area that can be readily sanitized in a dedicated area separate from the general animal population.

6. Routine cleaning and disinfection is important in animal areas. Cleaning of visibly dirty surfaces followed by disinfection is a best practice measure for prevention of COVID-19 and other viral respiratory illnesses. Coronaviruses are readily inactivated by disinfectants typically used in animal shelters, including accelerated hydrogen peroxide at concentrations used for other more common shelter pathogens (e.g. 1:64 (2 oz/gallon) for 5 minutes for coronaviruses, 1:32 (4 oz/gallon) for 10 min. for parvoviruses). Normal cleaning and disinfection protocols for both animal housing and common areas used in shelters are sufficient. Increased sanitation of surfaces
frequently touched by people (e.g. light switches and door knobs) is recommended to reduce exposure to/from humans.

- Refer to EPA and CDC disinfection protocols written for households for some guidance on coronavirus disinfection, while still being aware of potentially more stringent requirements for sanitation of non-enveloped virus animal pathogens in shelters.
- Disinfectants licensed by the EPA must be used in accordance with their label directions. Many disinfectants have the potential to cause significant harm if direct contact with human or animal skin occurs. It is inappropriate (and potentially illegal if not labeled accordingly) to apply liquid disinfectants directly onto animals.

7. If a companion animal that has had close contact with a person suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 develops an unexplained illness during their shelter stay, animal shelter staff should work with appropriate public health or animal health authorities to determine whether testing for COVID-19 (see #8) and further precautions are warranted. Existing biosecurity and infection prevention control protocols should be adhered to in this event.

8. Neither the CDC, USDA, nor AVMA recommends that companion animals be routinely tested for COVID-19 at this time. Companion animals presenting with illness or injury should receive veterinary care. Where appropriate, testing for infectious diseases that commonly cause companion animal illness should be conducted. If staff observe a new, concerning illness that cannot be otherwise explained, and the companion animal has had close contact with a person with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 infection, the supervising veterinarian should contact the state public health veterinarian or designated health official to discuss whether or not there is a need to test that animal for COVID-19. Some jurisdictions do not have state public health veterinarians, or geographic, resource, or time limitations may prevent public health veterinarians from managing a situation involving shelter animals.