OHS and risk management for animal shelter and pound personnel

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Introduction

In this day and age, Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) influences and affects all aspects of our life; going to the shops, driving the car, operating electrical appliances at home, playing with our children in the back yard and particularly our work environment. The work environment of an animal shelter or pound is a specialised environment and there are many opportunities for risk.

This paper is not designed to be a copy of the OHS Legislation, rather a practical outline for applying OHS to animal shelters and pounds. Every location is different and the appropriate Risk Management Plan should be adapted to your venue. This paper will refer to NSW Legislation as well as practical examples of systems and procedures that have been implemented at the Animal Welfare League NSW (AWL) shelters and throughout the Branch network across NSW.

Currently, every shelter or pound will have OHS in place to some degree, but perhaps this paper will help for further developing, reviewing or improving existing systems or encourage the implementation of additional safer procedures.

Risk management

Risk Management is a simple way to ensure the health and safety of people (and animals) in the workplace and to prevent an injury or incident.

In NSW, we are governed by the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2000 and the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation 2001. In addition, there are Acts for Workplace Injury Management and Workers Compensation. Under the Regulations, there are Codes of Practice, Australian Standards and Guides or Alerts which all provide information to compliance as well as practical information and guidelines to help your organisation meet the requirements of the Law. OHS Laws and Regulations may vary from state to state and it is important to refer to the Act and Regulations in your area.

The NSW OHS Act 2000 defines the duties of employers, management committees, managers, coordinators, supervisors, employees and others at the workplace.

It is important to remember, and to advise all staff and volunteers, that *everyone* has a duty of care for the health and safety of others in the workplace. Currently, there is no formal or specific OHS Regulation for volunteers in NSW, however, at AWL, they are considered the same as an employee for the purposes of health and safety.

The *workplace* is defined as including all sites and environments that the employee visits during their course of work. In the case of volunteers, organisations are not legally responsible for the safety and health of volunteers once they move off the premise to work in the community unless they are accompanying an employee. Where a private dwelling is a place of work the employer has a duty of care with respect to the work being carried out, including employees, volunteers and customers (Workcover NSW).

Risk is defined as hazard; chance of bad consequences, loss; exposure to mischance (Coulson et al, 1975)

A **hazard** is defined as anything (including work practices or procedures) that has the potential to harm the health or safety of a person (Occupational Health and Safety Regulation 2001).

The nature of work in animal shelters and pounds poses risks to staff, volunteers, contractors, members of the public and animals.

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) is designed to help protect the health, safety and welfare of people, however, it is important to also apply some basic principles to ensure the health, welfare and safety of the animals in our care, as that is the purpose we are here and this impacts positively on the health safety and welfare of people interacting with the animals. It is important to always remember that OHS is about common sense and 'thinking safety' to keep yourself and other people in a safe environment.

Different types of risks can be a factor for both people and animals – physical, emotional, psychological, chemical, biological, environmental.

Physical – risk of injury or illness due to a physical injury such as a bite, trip or fall, crushing incident, strains and sprains or physical exhaustion

Emotional – issues such as stress, grief, mental exhaustion

Psychological – issues such as feeling helpless, loss of motivation, disillusionment

Chemical – injury or illness as a result of exposure to or working with toxic or dangerous chemicals, including liquids, fumes and gases

Biological – diseases such as Tetanus, zoonotic diseases such as ringworm, Q fever, Lyme disease

Environmental – including weather (extreme heat or cold), bush fires, exposure to allergens in the air, such as pollens, animal hair

To be able to prepare for these risks and ensure the safest possible environment for everyone who interacts with a shelter or pound, it is essential to develop and implement a Risk Management Plan. A Risk Management Plan is a process to identify risks and hazards and then implement the appropriate solution: elimination, reduction or management of risks.

Elimination – remove a hazard or risk. For example: An exposed pipe that is a potential trip hazard across a path was redirected underground.

Reduction – minimise the hazard from a high level to a lower risk. For example: Limiting access to the dog kennels to only staff who are trained to handle dogs.

Management of risks – put into place procedures to manage a hazard. For example: Training staff to lift animals correctly into a bath tub or dog wash for bathing.

Implementation of a Risk Management Plan will develop a safer working environment and educate people to prepare for and respond to risks and hazards.

Risk management steps

There are several key steps in developing a Risk Management Plan. (There are many OHS Resources available and the numbers of steps vary) The key steps implemented at AWL are listed below. To demonstrate each step, we will use the example of taking a dog for a walk.

Step 1: Review current activities

This step involves a review of all shelter activities, both within the shelter and those conducted off site, such as transporting animals, catching and retrieving animals, attending vet clinics. A list should be compiled of all tasks carried out across the workplace by all staff and volunteers. This may differ for contractors, as they should have their own Risk Management Plan for their specific activities. Reviewing each task requires breaking down the task into steps. A Job Safety Analysis (JSA) form can be used for this process (Table 1).

1. Open kennel gate to remove dog
2. Clip leash on dog
3. Walk dog out of kennel
4. Walk dog around grounds
5. Return dog to kennel
6. Remove leash and close gate

Step 2: Identify the hazards

For each component of the task, the hazards need to be determined – what are the potential hazards that could occur from completing this task? Once all the hazards have been listed for each activity within the task, the level of risk will need to be determined. A Hazpak or risk scale can be used to determine the level of risk (Table 2). How serious would this hazard be? Is it likely to cause serious injury or illness? How often is this injury/illness likely to occur?

1. Open kennel gate to remove dog

Potential hazards

Level of Risk (refer to Hazpak scale)

Dog may jump up or attack	Moderate to high
Crushing injury to hand in gate	Low
Dog may escape	Moderate

Step 3: Establish the level of risk

The appropriate solution will need to be determined for each risk: eliminate, reduce or manage the risk.

a. Dog may jump or attack – this hazard has been rated high, however, it is not possible to eliminate the risk (there will always be a risk of dogs jumping up or attacking). The risk can be reduced to an extent, by identifying those dogs more likely to jump or attack and only allow trained staff/animal attendants to access these dogs. The risk could be managed by training people to safely enter the kennel and approach the dog

b. Crushing injury to hand in gate – this has been rated a low risk, but cannot be eliminated unless the gate is replaced by another mechanism. The hazard can be reduced by ensuring all gates are maintained for easy unlatching and accessibility. The hazard can be managed as for (a) by training people to safely access kennels.

c. Dog may escape – this hazard is rated moderate, but cannot be eliminated as the dog may be unpredictable. The hazard can be reduced and managed, as for (a) and (b) through training on safely entering the kennel.

Step 4: Develop procedures

Once the level of risk has been determined and the appropriate solution to manage the hazard identified, procedures can be prepared for each activity that will ensure the task is completed safely and efficiently.

a. All staff to enter kennel slowly, with lead in hand, ensuring the gate is not opened wider than the dog's head to prevent escape and protect from dog jumping on attendant. When the dog has stopped jumping (or when the dog is on the ground between jumps) attendant to reach for collar and clip lead on, without fully opening kennel gate. In the case where the dog is lunging or attacking towards the gate, the attendant must seek the assistance of a second attendant. (A further procedure may be needed to handle a dangerous or attacking dog. This procedure would also be affected by the direction the gate opens)

b. When entering the kennel, the latch is to be released prior to pushing or pulling gate open. As for (a) if the dog is jumping or pushing at the gate and entry is difficult, seek the assistance of a second attendant.

c. As for (a) gate is to be opened no wider than the dog's head and should the dog attempt to escape, pull/push the gate closed. For cases where the dog is known to escape or attempt, ensure you are in a secure/enclosed area (other gates or doors are closed) to limit the area for the dog to escape into.

Step 5: Educate and train

Staff and volunteers need to be educated, trained and informed about procedures that affect their tasks. Training and providing information can be communicated in a number of ways, including (but not limited to) formal training sessions, staff or group meetings, providing a copy of new procedures to all staff and volunteers, display procedures in the workplace or place them in an accessible location for all. At AWL, we have Standard Operating Procedures folders at each shelter, which contain procedures for all activities at the shelter and the folder is accessible for everyone.

It is important to keep a record of all training and to ensure staff and volunteers have read and understood the procedures. At AWL, all staff sign-off on each procedure, to confirm they have read and understood the tasks relevant to their job.

Other resources are also utilised to help educate and inform staff and volunteers; display signage can be used for awareness of certain procedures, a folder containing Material Safety Data Sheets is always accessible (sheets provided by manufacturers for any chemicals or materials that are potentially hazardous).

Where a task requires personal protective equipment (PPE), staff and volunteers are trained in the application and purpose of the PPE to ensure its proper use.

Step 6: Report and consult

The OHS Act and Regulation both state that the employer must consult with the employees of the employer to contribute to the making of decisions affecting their health, safety and welfare at work (OHS Regulation 2001). Therefore, it is important to involve staff (and volunteers where applicable) in the risk assessment process and the development of procedures. The people completing the tasks will be the best to determine whether the procedures will be practical to implement and that the task will be able to be completed safely and effectively.

Depending on the staff size of your organisation or location, it may be suitable to develop an OHS Committee. The Committee will be able to review incidents, review procedures and be actively involved in ongoing development of the Risk Management Plan.

Where applicable, the Risk Management Plan should involve local and state authorities and should be developed in consultation with them. AWL works with the Rural Fire Service, as one of our shelters is adjacent to a national park, so it is important that they are aware of our procedures during the threat of bush fire. For Councils, the Risk Management Plan may be specifically for your division or location, but may affect other divisions, locations or council groups.

Step 7: Evaluate

It is vital to continue to review the procedures put in place as well as monitor and investigate existing and new hazards. Reviewing the Risk Management Plan will help to improve and develop the safe systems of work, especially as the shelter develops or changes over time. It is beneficial to also obtain evaluation from an external group, such as an OHS auditing company, as they can advise if there are any areas of the Plan that need to be improved and developed to comply with law as well as advising of any new changes to legislation.

Risk management – Key components

The identification and management of hazards only forms part of the Risk Management Plan. The Plan must include procedures to manage injuries, deal with emergencies and continue to inform and educate people. Additional components required for a Risk Management Plan include:

· Incident Investigation
· Injury Management
· Workers Compensation
· Evacuation and Emergency Procedures
· Registers
· Training

Incident investigation

This role is usually carried out by the OHS Representative, members of the OHS Committee or a nominated person. The purpose of investigating incidents is to determine the cause of the incident, the solution to eliminate, reduce or manage the incident and develop procedures to prevent this incident recurring.

Injury management

It is important to manage the progress of a person's injury, to help with their recovery to return to work. A Return to Work Program can be implemented as part of this program.

Worker compensation

Workers Compensation insurance is in place to cover employers and employees in the case of an incident or injury. This is usually managed in collaboration with your insurance company. Additional insurance will be required to cover volunteers and Public Liability.

Evacuation and emergency procedures

It is important to have emergency and evacuation procedures in place, in the case of an unforseen hazard or situation which cannot be avoided. For evacuations, it is important to provide maps for each building or location to identify exits and emergency equipment. Staff and volunteers (where applicable) must complete emergency and evacuation training to be aware of the procedures and chains of command. It is important to factor in movements of animals as well as people, although people must take first priority. Evacuation drills should be conducted regularly, to ensure everyone is familiar with the procedure, particularly where staff rosters change daily and different staff may be involved in command tasks.

Emergency services such as Rural Fire Service or the Police can also be a part of the development of evacuation and emergency plans, as it is important they are aware of your emergency and evacuation plans. In some cases, your organisation may determine they will 'lock down' rather than evacuate from the threat of a bush fire and local authorities must be aware of this. Again this will impact on evacuation procedures if animals need to be moved within the shelter to a safer location.

Registers

Registers must be maintained to keep a record of items such as incidents, hazardous materials and substances, training, relevant staff qualifications and accreditation.

Training

Training is an integral part of the Risk Management Plan as this ensures people are educated and informed of safe working procedures for both their job and the shelter or pound as a whole. This is also an opportunity to develop and refresh skills, introduce new procedures and techniques and reinforce the importance of health and safety in the workplace.

This will ensure the Plan will be adopted throughout the shelter and that any emergency plans and procedures are understood by relevant authorities in cases of emergency.

Conclusion

The development of a Risk Management Plan is vital in ensuring the workplace is as safe as possible, given the industry we are in. Every shelter or pound will have individual needs and procedures for health and safety, however, the same principles and laws apply to all. Occupational Health and Safety is about commonsense, being aware and being prepared to deal with a hazardous or potentially dangerous situation and being proactive rather than reactive. The key to a successful Risk Management Plan is to get everyone involved at all levels and encourage people to **always think safety.**

References

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www.workcovernsw.gov.au

Kate Neal

Kate Neal was born and bred on the Northern Beaches of Sydney, where outdoor activities, sport and animals always played a key role in her interests. Kate completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Human Movement, with a focus on Kinesiology, Sport and Event Management. Her career has lead to several positions in not-for-profit organisations, with the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) encouraging her love for Events. Kate has worked the last seven (7) Sydney Royal Easter Shows in various roles including sponsorship, operations, risk management and incident investigation. While at the RAS, Kate became the Chairperson of the Occupational Health and Safety Committee, a position held for over three (3) years. Kate has worked in the Event Hire industry for the past 3 years in the role of Project Manager with a key task of developing OHS programs. Having moved back to the not-for-profit sector, Kate has continued to balance event and project management with a passion for Risk Management, through establishing and developing the Risk Management Program for Animal Welfare League NSW. This has also lead to a strong interest in training, particularly in safety. When not working, Kate site manages and consults in Events and Risk Management and attempts to ski and play golf as often as possible.

ANIMAL WELFARE LEAGUE NSW

Head Office: 1605 Elizabeth Drive, Kemps Creek NSW 2178   **JSA SHEET NO**

JOB SAFETY ANALYSIS SHEET

Work Activity/Task:		Location:	
Date:		**Comments / Overview**	
Prepared By: Please print name			
Signature:			

Job Step Break down the job into steps	Potential Hazard What can harm you?	Controls What are you going to do to make the job as safe as possible	Person who will ensure this happens

Table 2: HAZPAK SCALE

Hazard Priority Table
(Workcover NSW)

	++ very likely could happen any time	+ likely could happen sometime	- unlikely could happen but very rarely	- - very unlikely Could happen, but probably never will
☹ Kill or cause permanent disability or ill health	1	1	2	3
!!! Long term illness or serious injury	1	2	3	4
!! Medical attention and several days off work	2	3	4	5
! First aid needed	3	4	5	6

For each hazard:

1. How severely could it hurt someone or how ill could it make someone?
- How likely is it to be that bad?