

Animal Care is Human Care:

WHAT A PANDEMIC MADE CLEAR



By Annette Uda

As confirmed COVID-19 cases in the U.S. approached 2 million and well over 100,000 deaths, the official number of animals in the U.S. with the virus stood at seven, including a tiger and a lion. Further, per the CDC, “there is currently no evidence that animals play a substantial role in spreading COVID-19.”¹ Yet, pet care businesses were shuttered, employees laid off and bank accounts left in tatters. When it came to the pandemic and pet care, was the concern all bark and no bite?

No, not at all.

What This Means for You

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daycare facilities. Inarguably, the human aspect of pet care has attained a greater level of importance in terms of infection control protocols (that has also translated to better human customer service) and industry experts see this as a permanent change.

Lori Davis, CEO and founder of Paramount Success Group, a consulting business for pet boarding and daycare facilities, notes that, “what the general public may not realize is that long before the COVID-19 crisis, premium pet care providers have long practiced advanced cleaning protocols to reduce the

spread of viruses, bacteria, and germs.” But with the advent of COVID-19, she says, “we have seen a higher level of focus on cleaning high-touch areas where humans come and go.”

Charlotte Biggs, Business Growth and Development Guru with The Dog Gurus, echoes this greater attention to human-detail sentiment, also commending the enhancement of “already well-established, industry-wide sanitation and disinfecting policies and procedures.”

Both Davis and Biggs foresee the curbside drop-off and pick-up procedures, put into place by facilities in the wake of

the pandemic as infection control measures and to meet local guidelines, as an enhanced level of customer service that will continue. "A way of doing pet care business," says Davis, "that will remain after people have moved on from the fear of COVID-19."

While orders and guidelines varied widely by location, in many states pet care was deemed an essential business. Many of you offered free or deeply discounted pet care for frontline workers which, ultimately, included you and your staff as you took in the pets of nurses, doctors and paramedics working endless shifts away from home and their pets.

In the past months, pet care providers adapted—or should be adapting—to a new normal in protecting the health of staff and clients as they continue protecting the health of, and providing the best care for, their furry clients. Part of that new normal is an increased focus on sanitation protocols, along with continuing infection control education, to protect the health of both animals and humans.

Reliable Sources for Information

Because the information about COVID-19 has been something of a rollercoaster ride, knowing where to go for the most accurate, latest and relevant information is key. Unfortunately, the World Health Organization (WHO) has fumbled the ball on responsibly disseminating information. For example, in June, they relayed that transmission by asymptomatic carriers was "very rare", and then the very next day expressed regret for saying that, clarifying that much is still unknown and that it could be closer to 40 percent (a number more in line with CDC studies). But the good news is, there are other resources.

CDC

The CDC has made COVID-19 information front and center and easily accessible on its website. Bookmark www.cdc.gov/coronavirus and navigate to specifics from there.



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RELIABLE SOURCES

- **CDC:** Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
- **LOCAL GOVERNMENT**
- **ASHRAE:** American Society of Heating, Refrigerating & Air-Conditioning Engineers

pet boarding
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Local Government

Another potentially helpful resource is information from your local government. For example, Hays County, Texas is one of the fastest growing counties in the U.S., but for some time managed to keep its COVID-19 cases relatively low compared to neighboring counties. Two possible reasons for its relative success were consistent public safety reminders, distributed almost daily, from the county's resident epidemiologist, and a local state representative who proactively distributed infection control information (and literally distributed masks) throughout the county. Take advantage of local resources.

ASHRAE (American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers)

While that may sound completely far-removed from your business, these are the people who develop guidelines to help keep indoor environments healthy. ASHRAE recognized early on that COVID-19 could be spread through the air and that "ventilation and filtration provided by heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning systems can reduce the airborne concentration of SARS-CoV-2 and thus the risk of transmission through

the air." While some of their information might be more technical than you need, it's important for building owners and operations managers to stay aware of disease transmission routes. ASHRAE has consolidated its pandemic information at: ashrae.org/covid19.

When this rollercoaster ride started, the focus was on surfaces, but, at this point, the premise that the virus can be spread through the air is now generally recognized. COVID-19 education courses including Pet Sitters International's course for professional pet sitters and dog walkers have made the fact that "airborne droplets carrying the virus can remain in the air and on surfaces even after the ill person has left the area" part of the standard education.

Masks help, and that's why wearing them has become standard protocol for many pet care providers interacting with their human clients. However, they are designed to limit larger droplets from landing on other people and on surfaces, where they can be mitigated with surface cleaning, but those limitations are why air transmission must also be addressed.

What the Future Holds

It's good that industry experts like Biggs and Davis see changes made in the wake of COVID-19 as most

likely permanent changes because this pandemic will not be the last. Indeed, the pace appears to be picking up along with increasing urbanization of wildlife areas (leading to more human-animal interaction and zoonotic risk), denser populations and global connections (e.g., worldwide passenger plane travel).

As this particular pandemic plays out, the human connections to pet care have taken on increased recognition and an increased urgency to safely maintain those connections. Infection control for animals and humans in pet care environments is imperative. It's something most pet care providers have known; with text updates being sent, investments made in remote access cameras installed for pet parents, and social media updates of happy, playing dogs posted. But now, with more human life and death implications, animal care is human care. ■

Reference

1. https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalhealth/sa_one_health/sars-cov-2-animals-us

Annette Uda is the founder of PetAirapy. Annette has a passion for animal health and educating animal care providers on reliable, non-toxic ways to create clean, healthy environments for animals—and the humans that care for them. To learn more about PetAirapy, visit petairapy.com.