



Trust... Trust is the Key

By: Kelly Thyssen

Those in the animal welfare community are often left behind and are decades behind the resources that are rightfully made for other first responders. While they may not be legally recognized as first responders by the government, Animal Welfare Professionals are first responders. They experience similar critical incidents as other first responders and often many traumas that other categories of first responders do not. I know many Animal Welfare Professionals have had to walk through a shelter and have to decide which animals need to be put down. This is a common event and a trauma that police officers, fire fighters, and paramedics often never have to experience. These Animal Welfare Professionals have had to rescue, care for, and hold animals who are often completely healthy, and then end the life of these same animals. These are faces and fur that are not forgotten. These are experiences that will live with them for the rest of their lives and are then compounded and amplified by acute and critical incidents that they are called upon to respond to, such as distemper outbreaks, cruelty investigations, overcrowded shelters, and local disaster response. These are the forgotten first responders, the ones who face situations that others don't understand. It's okay to not be okay but how do we raise the bar for mental health resources and tools for the field so often overlooked? We make this shift by going back to the basics.

Social Scientist Abraham Maslow proposed that human beings have a hierarchy of needs. The base of this starts with physiological needs (water, food, shelter), building up to safety needs (physical security), love and belonging (family and friendship), esteem (respect, confidence, and recognized achievement), peaking at self-actualization (creativity, moral development etc.). What this tells us is that in order to focus on ourselves, we often have to pay attention to our base needs. Stated another way, before we can improve mental health, we often have to take care of physical needs.

So, what does that mean for those of us who are trying to support our peers and ourselves as we experience critical incidents? Often, we want to jump in and fix the problem as quickly as possible. We want to talk to our peers who have experienced a critical incident and make it all better. All we have to do is counsel them...right? Both social science research and practical experience tell us the answer, unfortunately, often is no.

For practical experience, let's examine the events of January 6th at the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The purpose of this article is not to delve into any political concerns whatsoever; however, much can be learned from this incident. Police Officers who were present experienced various physical, mental, and emotional traumas. Peers who responded quickly found it difficult to connect directly with those officers who were impacted by the incidents. The responding peers quickly relied on the research conducted by Maslow. Instead of trying to force officers to speak with them about their traumas they started at the base and worked their way up. By making coffee, vacuuming floors, and simply being present, they met base needs. Fulfilling these needs made it possible for traumatized officers to open up to these peers and seek the support they needed.

How do we apply this to the animal welfare field? Pretty simply actually. Our peer team with Humane HELP responded to a request from an animal shelter in the greater Houston area. The shelter was experiencing, and was still neck deep in, a widespread distemper virus outbreak. Nearly 100 dogs were impacted, and the small number of staff were tasked with not only the regular duties of an animal shelter but the increased cleaning, disease isolation protocols, and medical care of the affected dogs. The staff were quickly overwhelmed and stressed with handling this situation while also being understaffed. Staff fought through this for several weeks, which included processing the loss of loved animals in their care and making life and death decisions multiple times daily. The staff were exhausted, depleted, and everyone from leadership down to the line-level staff was feeling the strain.

The Humane HELP peer team first met with the Directors over the phone and learned that basic needs of the shelter were not being met...essential cleaning services were failing due to employees being overwhelmed. So, our game plan revolved around Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the RITS components of Group Crisis Intervention. On day one of deployment, after meeting with the management team, we set up a short informational brunch period. We provided snacks and water and introduced ourselves to the staff. With our brief introduction, we laid out our plans for the next 3 days. The overwhelmed and definitely frustrated staff quickly informed us that they were "very busy" and "thank you for coming, but when will we have time to sit and talk about 'feelings'?" We responded with actions, not words. Our peers spent the entire first day at the shelter cleaning dishes and washing, sorting, and folding laundry. Animal welfare professionals, by trade, tend to be leery of new people who claim to want to help. As public servants and first responders, they have been burned time and time again by well-meaning citizens. So, for our team, TRUST was the key component of making this a successful deployment. We built our trust through piles of dirty towels and an endless sink full of dishes.

On day two we paired up with individual staff members to clean kennels, give out medicine, assist in euthanasias, and more. During that time, we 'snuck in' talks about feelings, compassion fatigue, and leaned into the SAFER-R model of individual crisis intervention. We continued to stock the break room with drinks, snacks, and full-on meals.

By meeting these basic needs, Humane HELP was able to help staff address the mental traumas caused by the distemper outbreak as well as the compounding struggles faced in their profession. Trained peers working alongside them created space for staff to decompress and process the mental stressors that were compounding. The added manpower allowed staff to take more breaks and connect deeper with peers when needed.

These experiences with line-level staff helped the peers to better understand what information executive staff needed to help navigate through this crisis. On the third and last day of the deployment, Humane HELP met with the Executive Directors as well as the supervisors and helped them better understand the challenges the staff were facing. This included providing actionable suggestions to improve sanitation and support their staff.

How do we use this moving forward? We have to understand that when a crisis happens, which it will, we must meet the base needs of those responding to the crisis and establish trust. It's important to understand that all of those we work with are humans and we need to make sure we satisfy the physiological and safety needs of the staff we work with. If the first responder is scared that they will not eat or be safe, it's unreasonable for us to expect more of them when it comes to crisis intervention and their mental wellbeing.

Once we take the time to satisfy their basic needs, we can help to build relationships with them. Relationships are the foundation for all of our successes in life. Building these relationships in peer

support deployments create bridges for us to help our colleagues. These relationships build trust, and once we have trust we can focus on improving mental health and the animal profession as a whole.

The formula is simple...but it's not easy. Remembering that we are working with humans who are tired, broken down, and battling a daily struggle alongside the critical incidents is key. We must take a novel approach to peer support that not only accounts for meeting base needs but cultivates a deeper trust in the peer and the peer support process.

Quote from the shelter director:

"Working with Tabitha, Kelly, and the Humane HELP team during our distemper outbreak was truly a lifeline. At a time when our shelter was overwhelmed and the situation felt daunting, they didn't just offer remote support, they came to us. Their boots-on-the-ground help brought much-needed stability, clarity, and expert guidance when we needed it most.

Tabitha and Kelly helped us assess and tighten our disease control protocols, supported our staff with compassion and confidence, and empowered us to take immediate, effective action. Their presence was more than professional, it was personal. They understood exactly what we were going through and brought the kind of calm leadership that can only come from deep experience. Beyond the outbreak, they've continued to be incredible partners, always just a phone call away, ready to brainstorm, advise, or just offer encouragement. Their impact on our team and animals was, and continues to be, immense. We are so grateful for their expertise, their hearts, and their unwavering dedication to helping shelters like ours through our hardest days." -Nicole H.

About the author:

Kelly Thyssen has nearly 20 years of experience in the animal welfare profession including animal control, veterinary assistant, shelter manager, and state public health. She is the founder of Humane Educators of Texas, which specializes in continuing education for law enforcement and animal welfare professionals. She is a trained Peer through the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation and Co-founder of the nonprofit Humane H.E.L.P. which provides peer support services and resources for animal welfare professionals.

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