

THE COST OF CARING: A VISUAL EXPLORATION OF COMPASSION FATIGUE
IN ANIMAL SHELTER WORKERS

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Abstract

For the past five years I have been involved in the animal shelter community, but this past year I began exploring the concept of compassion fatigue and its connection to animal shelter workers at Animal Care Services in San Antonio, Texas. Animal shelters are often overlooked when discussing strenuous work environments. However, kennel attendants have one of the highest burnout rates in America and had one of the top three highest suicide rates of American workers as of 2015. I used research article, personal anecdotes, and photographs to explore how shelter work impacts the physical, emotional, and mental state of their workers as well as the animals they house. This profession is often deemed “dirty” and looked down on by society due to its labor-intensive nature, or demonized due to the involvement of euthanasia.

I chose to research this topic visually using photographs. My choice to involve the use of 35mm film, which dictates that I develop and process by my own hands, is in tribute to the work that those in this field contribute every day. A large portion of animals that come into shelters are from cruel and abusive conditions, and the shelter staff are the ones that must face this dark reality head on. Workers are confronted with a variety of situations including animals who are undernourished and severely emaciated to the point of being ‘walking skeletons’, embedded collars and lacerations, and even gunshot wounds. Through this research process I gained a better understanding of what these employees must shoulder every day, and through my images created a dialogue to further explore humanizing these unseen individuals.

Introduction

Animal shelters are facilities that often get overlooked by the public. Citizens are not aware of the complex relationship that develops between these stray animals and the animal care workers that care for them. As a result, many animal care workers face physical and emotional strain, compassion fatigue, and a negative public image. It can be difficult for the workers to not bring the daily challenges home with them. For fosters, this is a literal scenario. If there is no kennel space for the animals, the shelter will rely on fosters to provide a temporary home. This subject has a personal impact on my life as both my sister and my mother work for an animal shelter. Furthermore, my family has been rescuing and fostering dogs for almost seven years, with a current total of 37 fosters that have come through our household. The impression these animals have had on my family, both at the shelter as well as in our home, has inspired me to explore the everyday scenes and emotions that people with this lifestyle are exposed to.

My images create an open dialogue about how humans treat animals in shelters and how we, as a community, act towards the kennel attendants who care for them, whether it be with ignorance, hostility or appreciation. I interviewed, photographed, and collaborated with staff members at Animal Care Services in San Antonio, Texas to investigate the average day through the eyes of staff members in various departments. The images included in this body of work display the everyday scenes that shelter staff come across in their occupation, whether it be from Field, Clinic, Kennels, Euthanasia, Intake, and so on - pictures that will enlighten the general public of situations they may not commonly have exposure to.

Before this project, I had considered myself part of the community that relatively understood the work of owning and caring for an animal and had respect for those who did so as a profession. However, this project has led me to see the effort and perseverance of shelter staff in a whole new light, and to hold a new level of appreciation for the hours and labor they put in every single day. In the next few pages I will recount my experience shadowing staff members from different departments such as Field, Clinic, and Kennels. I will then recount my time observing the process of Euthanasia and end by discussing the concept of Compassion Fatigue and the impact it can have on shelter staff.

I would also like to state that Animal Care Services handles a large variety of animals - from bats, foxes, horses, cattle, pigs, rabbits, tortoises, and so on in addition to cats and dogs, but for the purposes of my project I am focusing on the dog population. I would also like to state that my photographs are in no way condemning any of the actions of Animal Care Services workers, especially in situations such as euthanasia, but I felt it was important to show all circumstances that shelter staff must face on a daily basis.

Field

The Animal Control Officers in the Field department are sorted into the sections of Cruelty, Bites, Dangerous, Permits, Field, Districts, Sweeps, Courts, Dispatch, Supervisors, and the Manager. Animal Control Officers go out into the community to respond to citizen calls that vary from trapped or roaming strays, neglect, cruelty, disturbances between neighbors involving their animals, and much more. In September 2019, Animal Care Services impounded a total of 2,999 animals, of which 1,686 animals were solely from the field department under the categories of strays, owner surrenders, quarantines, and confiscates. Many of the officers must face confrontation from a public audience that has been taught by society that they “can throw away their animals”. These officers are part of a shelter system that “performs incredibly difficult and draining tasks of cleaning up after a society that holds the life of animals in low esteem” (Arluke, 2006). My experience shadowing these officers are recalled below.

I spent two days observing an Animal Control Officer in the field. On both days I was paired with young female officers who had been at Animal Care Services for a little over a year. On day one I was with Officer Killeen who oversees District 3 of San Antonio, and on day 2 I was partnered with Officer Wickstrom who oversees District 2 of San Antonio. Both days I witnessed a variety of calls and interactions, such as stray pick-ups, notice violations for animals that were chained and without proper shelter or water, and the obvious apprehensiveness of the general public around perceived authority figures. Animal Control Officers are often on the front lines in that they are generally the first one an animal has an interaction with before entering the shelter system, and this role can be a heavy burden to bear. If an officer approaches an animal too quickly, the animal may react aggressively and maintain that temperament once it is placed at the shelter. These officers are often “exposed to distressing situations in which animals are bred, raised, or slaughtered for sport and entertainment” as well as pure carelessness from their fellow humans (Fournier, 2019). Officers approach these situations with no filter; they are fully exposed to the animal cruelty, neglect, and abandonment.

On top of dealing with distressing animal conditions, Animal Control Officers are the individuals who have the most contact with the community outside the shelter. It is a

struggle for these officers to educate and help a community that does not want to be educated or changed. “At the most abstract level, the problem of homeless dogs and cats occurs because pets are treated as commodified objects rather than living beings. They are often produced, sold, and bought in ways that are fundamentally irresponsible” (Rudy, 2013). The City of San Antonio has made great strides to develop ordinances and laws that will make pet owners more accountable for their animals, such as mandatory microchips and sterilization, zero tolerance for animals that are outdoors in extreme weather, and the number of animals permitted on a property. Animal Control Officers are responsible for enforcing these laws, but the backlash of public outcry or defiance is a constant struggle that leads to mental stress. The act of “repeatedly seeing or hearing of animals being harmed, injured, or killed can [cause them] to begin to identify with the animal’s trauma” which can manifest in the form of secondary traumatic stress disorder, also known as compassion fatigue, which will be discussed in a later section (Fournier, 2019).

Officer Wickstrom has had several negative experiences with the public that could influence the development of secondary traumatic stress disorder. When she was responding to a call during night shift, a citizen pulled out a gun and told Wickstrom that she could not take the dog. It is important to mention that Animal Control Officers often respond to calls individually and their only backup is the San Antonio Police Department, which must be called by Dispatch and then make their way to the location. In these circumstances, Officers could be waiting several minutes or hours for help. Their occupation is not always safe. Officer Wickstrom also mentioned an instance when she was sitting in her truck and a woman approached the truck and began hitting and kicking the vehicle while calling Wickstrom a dog killer. Stressful situations such as this can increase an officer’s chance of developing secondary traumatic stress disorder and may make them question their choice of occupation.

Officers respond to a variety of calls, including reports of an animal that has bit or scratched a person and drawn blood. These animals must immediately be placed in Quarantine for rabies observation. Each animal receives a bite report describing the incident. My sister recalls the bite report of a Rottweiler that described an officer's response to a call in which the owner had opened the front door, pointed at a neighbor, and said, "Attack". The loyal Rottweiler obeyed his owner's command and was then placed in Quarantine for ten days. In situations such as these, it is not the animal who is at fault, but the irresponsible owner. However, the animal must face the consequences. If an owner refuses to reclaim their animal, then the dog faces the possibility of euthanasia. Further, if the dog is deemed dangerous or a certain level of aggressive then the owner must come into compliance if they wish to reclaim. This procedure entails acquiring Dangerous Dog Insurance, a neon orange leash and collar with the label 'Dangerous', a muzzle, and an enclosed potty area where the canine may never be left unsupervised. If the owner refuses to come into compliance, then the canine will be euthanized.

Kennels

Shelter staff consist of Animal Care Attendants, Specialists, Supervisors, and the Shelter Manager. The kennel attendants are individuals who receive daily building assignments, though these assignments generally remain consistent within the rotational schedule cycle. There are four kennels at Animal Care Services; Building 2 is the Quarantine building for animals that have bit someone and must be monitored for rabies, Building 3 and 4 contain stray and adoptable animals that come from field or are brought in by citizens, and Building 5 is the cat building. Building 2 also contains animals that are being investigated for cruelty, who remain in this building until the investigation is complete or until the owner relinquishes ownership. Attendants must be flexible and willing to work in any building as needed, should individuals call in or a building becomes short staffed. Specialist duties rotate daily between euthanasia, creating rabies certificates, caring for livestock, and reclaims or return-to-owners. The most labor-intensive and emotionally stressful task for Specialists is euthanasia, to be discussed in a later section.

Kennel attendants, aside from Animal Control Officers, have the most contact with the community since they come face to face with guests as they roam the rows of adoptable animals. Their days begin by scooping feces, spraying water and cleaning chemicals, scrubbing and squeegeeing, and putting down clean linen, all before the shelter opens to customers. Once customers enter the shelter, one member of kennel staff takes to the floor to respond to questions and clean cages as animals relieve themselves. The other kennel attendants may be on the floor as well or responding to other necessities such as obtaining and folding laundry, washing dishes, or cleaning the areas of the shelter that is not accessible to the public. The nature of animal care means these attendants are often in contact or proximity to the bodily fluids of animals, which is perceived by many as “dirty” work. This perception can play a big part in the worker’s development of issues such as compassion fatigue. Their comments of distress or exhaustion are often shrugged off or undervalued by those who see their job as simply taking care of animals or killing animals. “It is demoralizing and disheartening for humane workers who would do almost anything to stop that heartbreaking selection process. Humane workers who are brave enough to accept that dirty work deserve better” (Arluke, 2006).

Having been a volunteer for a little over 3 years, I have seen firsthand the attitude and judgement that some customers have when coming into the shelter. They are quick to criticize the conditions of the animals and even quicker to blame shelter staff for processes such as euthanasia. However, when animal care workers are confronted about euthanasia they often “bemoaned that euthanasia had to be done but felt that it was the right thing to do because of the large number of surrendered animals and the limited space and resources available” (Arluke, 2006). Staff members must deal with verbal beratement on top of an already physically and emotionally demanding occupation. My sister had an encounter with a customer who was interested in adopting a pregnant Shepherd. The customer inquired if he would pay an adoption fee for the unborn puppies as well as the mother. My sister informed the customer that the Shepherd would be spayed before she left the shelter. The customer did not understand her meaning, so she had to state directly that the unborn puppies would be aborted if the Shepherd was adopted. The customer and his friend gave my sister a shocked and disgusted look, immediately criticizing her even though she was not personally responsible for this policy.

Shelter guests feel that every animal should be saved and condone euthanasia, but they do not realize the drastic stray epidemic in San Antonio. Spaying and neutering are a solution to reducing the stray population. Although it is a sad reality, the city and the shelter cannot afford to have more stray puppies be born. The summer months are the shelter’s busiest time of year since it is also puppy season, or the season when puppies are being born. This past summer my sister had eight nursing mothers in her kennel. Each mother has approximately seven puppies in her litter, which adds up to about 56 puppies. One kennel has 55 cages. Imagine a few years from now, when these puppies are grown up, they would each be taking the place of an adult that is currently in the shelter. An entire building replaced by future strays; this is the vision that shelters like Animal Care Services are attempting to prevent.

Euthanasia

Animal Care Services was originally designed as a catch-and-kill facility. Ten years ago, the main priority for the shelter was euthanasia. The most seasoned Specialist at Animal Care Services has been at the shelter for over twelve years. She can attest to the days when a single Specialist would euthanize 300 dogs in one day. Animal Control Officers would pick up stray animals, bring them to the shelter, and the animals would immediately be euthanized. There was no process for finding owners or making these animals available for adoption. The shelter had one goal: reduce the number of strays. The physical toll of euthanizing an extensive number of animals was debilitating, the emotional burden overwhelming. After a period of time, the individual may place internal barriers against their actions, which is mentally unhealthy and leads to a lack of compassion. Over the years Animal Care Services has transitioned to a shelter with more emphasis on live release, which consists of Adoptions, Foster, and Rescue.

The remains of the deceased animals are placed in an incinerator. Once the bodies become ashes and bones, they are disposed of in a waste bin. About 30 bodies can be placed in the incinerator for a single load. There have been instances when the incinerator broke down or had mechanical malfunctions and the deceased remains were unable to be disposed of. When this happens, the piles of bodies in the cooler can become appalling. Bodies are also stored in the cooler for owners who wish to reclaim their pet's remains. Some bodies are kept for the purposes of cruelty investigations. In these circumstances, a veterinarian will perform a necropsy (an explorative surgery to determine the cause of death and the extent of cruelty and/or negligence) to determine the cause of death and provide evidence to support charges of animal abuse in investigations. Once the evidence is compiled the remains are released for incineration. As bodies wait to be incinerated the excess waste slowly trickles down to the bottom of the container. When Specialists and Kennel Attendants load the bodies into the incinerator and reach the bottom of a container, they are confronted with a pool of blood and other bodily fluids.

Having witnessed three of my personal dogs be euthanized due to old age and health issues such as cancer, I understood how emotional the process could be. Nevertheless, I was surprised at how quickly I dissociated to the act as I was surveying it

for this project. I approached euthanasia strictly as an observer, with a scientific - almost cold - mentality. I realized that the severing of emotion is what these staff members must do every day in order to protect themselves emotionally and mentally. “Rather than expressing their emotions about preventing euthanasia or grieving when it occurs, these workers block their emotions... To make it easier on themselves, they [do] not form deep and complex relationships with shelter animals” (Arluke, 2006). This is easier said than done, and there have been many instances in which a shelter employee becomes attached to an animal who is later pulled for euthanasia, and the emotional coping of such an occasion can be overwhelming.

Clinic

The clinic staff at Animal Care Services consists of three full-time veterinarians, three part-time veterinarians, and veterinary technicians, also known as vet techs. The veterinary technicians are responsible for performing tasks such as assisting a veterinarian in spay and neuter surgeries, helping animals recover and awake from surgery, preparing vaccines and medications, applying medications to animals in the kennels, changing bandages, providing vaccines to animals brought in by Animal Control Officers and kennel staff, cleaning clinic cages, and numerous other activities. Monday through Thursday's veterinary technicians also assist with Foster Hours. During this two-hour time period, fosters bring in animals for medication, follow-up procedures or medication, or any new medical conditions that have developed.

A single veterinarian can perform up to 70 spay and neuter surgeries in a single day. This requires precision, efficiency, and time management skills. The veterinarian must complete these surgeries by a specified time period so animals may recover and be returned to their kennel before the close of business. This does not include any special surgeries or procedures a veterinarian may conduct during the day, such as the amputation of a leg, an exploratory surgery to determine the internal injuries of an animal, or the inoculation of an eye.

The clinic environment is fast paced, with few breaks, and an endless stream of both human and animal bodies. Veterinary technicians often work 10-hour shifts with only a thirty-minute lunch break. If a veterinarian decides to stay late to conduct a special surgery, the veterinary technicians must also stay to clean-up after the procedure. Clinic staff is surrounded by the painful and fearful cries of the animals as they awake from surgery and the anesthesia begins to wear off. No follow-up pain medications are given to the animals.

Fostering

The Live Release Department of Animal Care Services is categorized into the sections of Intake, Education, Adoptions, Rescue/Foster, and Community Cat Program. The Rescue/Foster section is tasked with finding placement for animals through the shelter's rescue partners or available fosters. Animal Care Services currently has 280 rescue partners, of which only about 15 actively pull animals from the shelter. There are also 900 approved fosters that have completed a foster application, but significantly fewer actively foster animals. The term 'foster' entails a group or individual that will provide temporary care and shelter for the animal until more permanent placement can be found either through Adoption or Rescue. By placing animals in foster care, fosters alleviate space in the kennels for incoming animals and help reduce the number of animals being euthanized.

Being a foster allows us to become more personable with the dogs in our care. A home environment allows the puppies to develop their personalities and become comfortable in a home setting for future potential adopters. We teach our fosters basic obedience skills such as how to sit and reward them with treats. The puppies receive some potty training and are crate trained for the convenience of future adopters. These traits make puppies more appealing to those interested in adopting. My family tends to foster puppies that are too young for adoption or those that require more intensive care. We have had fosters that were unsocialized and afraid of people, underweight due to lack of nourishment, or being treated for medical conditions such as ringworm, an altered spine, or a broken leg that would later require amputation. Our most memorable fosters that required intensive medical care are Echo and Gracie. Echo was a three-month-old Labrador Retriever puppy that had a permanent downward curve in his spine from living in an enclosed area. When he walked, his chin would drag on the ground and his steps were small. To help him rehabilitate, we would hold his chin up as he walked and performed hydrotherapy daily. After a few weeks of rehabilitation, Echo improved significantly. His coat was shiny, his spine was straight, and he could run around like a normal puppy. Echo was later adopted by a family and renamed Benjamin.

Gracie was only six weeks old when we brought her home to foster. She came to Animal Care Services with her mother and siblings as strays. Gracie was the runt of the litter. For unknown reasons, the mother bit Gracie and broke her hind leg in two places. Due to her young age, Gracie could not be given a splint for a few more weeks. We fostered Gracie during this time, endured the process of applying splints and attempting to reset her leg, but the damage was too severe. Gracie's leg could not be fully healed, and the weight of her broken leg would cause future hip problems. We continued fostering Gracie as her leg was amputated and she adjusted to being a three-legged dog. To make matters worse, Gracie also became sick with parvo. She recovered after a week of treatment, but this diminished her already few chances of adoption. Eventually, Gracie did find her forever home on a property in the suburbs. We fostered Gracie for seven months, our longest foster record so far.

Of our 37 fosters, Guapo was the only foster that we failed to find adoption placement for. Guapo was a three-month-old American Staffordshire puppy. He was extremely shy and apprehensive of people; he would attempt to hide behind the furniture and cry out if we touched him. It took about three weeks for Guapo to become comfortable around us to the point that he would not run away if we came near him. Despite his fear of people, Guapo was very dog friendly and found comfort with our personal dogs. This interaction greatly helped Guapo to become more outgoing and social. A potential adopter came to our home to meet Guapo, and Guapo immediately regressed to his shy and fearful tendencies. A family later became interested in adopting Guapo. We warned them to go slowly with Guapo due to his shyness, but they did not heed our advice. When they brought Guapo to their home, he hid in his cage and would not come out, and when the family's child attempted to reach in the cage to play with him, Guapo snapped at the child in fear. Guapo was returned to us the next day. Eventually Guapo found placement at Animal Defense League as an office dog. Staff members would visit Guapo to help expose him to strangers and social situations.

There has only been one instance when we found one of our fosters in the shelter months after he was adopted. Beaux had been adopted by a single mother and her two daughters, who were very excited about adopting a puppy. My mother arrived at work

and recognized him in the back of her kennel. He had come into the shelter as a stray found on the streets. Animal Care Services attempted to contact the owner through emails and phone calls but received no response. This situation is one of a foster's worst nightmares; to think that our foster, whom we've given all this love, care, and attention, will end up in a bad situation and we will never know the outcome. We develop strong bonds with our fosters as we see them open up and develop their own quirks and personalities. The experience of fostering is highly enriching as we see the progress a puppy makes from Day One to Adoption Day. This makes it difficult to let them go, but ultimately, we know our fosters are finding their forever homes. Moreover, there are always more potential fosters waiting at the shelter.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue, also referred to as empathy burnout or secondary-traumatic stress disorder, is defined as the physical and mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal experienced by those who care for sick or traumatized people over an extended period. It is also described as apathy or indifference toward the suffering of others as the result of overexposure to tragic news stories and images and the subsequent appeals for assistance. There are “two main ingredients for compassion fatigue—empathy and compassion... [which are also the] key ingredients in a strong caregiving relationship (Figley & Roop, 2006). Unfortunately, consistent empathy and compassion for traumatized others can mean taking on the trauma oneself” (Mustful, 2019). Given this definition, it is not uncommon to think of nursing or social work as fields that would frequently experience this phenomenon. However, unlike human patients, animals do not have a voice to ask for help; instead, they rely on the intervention of humans. This intervention falls on individuals such as the staff at Animal Care Services in San Antonio, Texas. Animal shelter employees “demonstrate a strong sense of empathy” through their belief that the animals in their care deserve attention, safekeeping, and a responsible home that will provide affection (Austin, 2016).

The Animal Care Services shelter is the only intake facility for the city of San Antonio and contains roughly 350 animals or more every day. For this context, an animal shelter is a place where stray, lost, confiscated, abandoned, or surrendered animals are kept while they are being rehabilitated, investigated for cruelty, or quarantined, with the potential of being fostered, adopted or euthanized. Animal Care Services has a live release rate of approximately 90% which classifies them as a no-kill shelter. However, as a city-run facility that is required to have space for incoming animals, Animal Care Services still performs euthanasia in situations involving health issues, lack of capacity, or the well-being of the animal (City of San Antonio, 2019). This presents a unique circumstance in which the animal shelter employees inhabit the roles of both caretaker and executioner; although they ensure the safety and well-being of the animals during their stay, shelter staff may also oversee these animals’ untimely death (Austin, 2016). This phenomenon is also known as the *caring-killing paradox*; “the contrast between the

motivation to care for an animal and the duty to end its life is viewed as an additional strain for shelter workers” (Mustful, 2019). While euthanasia plays a role in the development of compassion fatigue, many workers develop this disorder from simply working in a career that includes caring and fighting for animals suffering at the hands of humans - a fight that often displays cases of extreme animal cruelty and abuse, which causes shelter workers to question the decency of humanity.

Common symptoms of compassion fatigue are hopelessness, anxiety, chronic physical and emotional exhaustion, depression, low self-esteem, loss of sleep and nightmares. These symptoms can go unnoticed by friends and families of animal care staff members since their jobs are often overlooked, and this lack of a support system contributes to the worker’s decline in physical and emotional health.

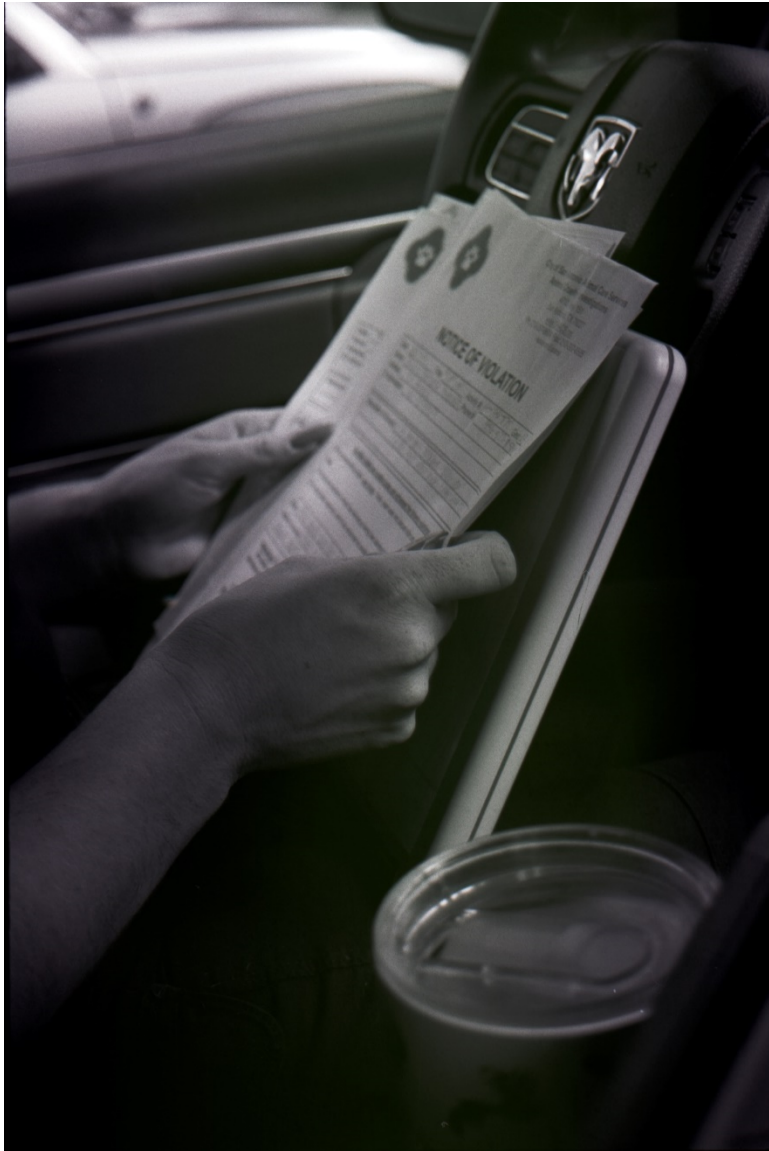
Conclusion

Coming into this project I did not expect it to affect me as much as it did. I thought that my experience as a volunteer already gave me slight insight into what these individuals must go through daily. However, I was shocked at how each excursion caused me to be exhausted physically, mentally, and emotionally. After sitting in a truck for eight hours with an Animal Control Officer, getting in and out periodically when they determined it was safe, I was surprised at just how much my body *hurt*. I had done little to no extraneous activities, and yet my body felt sore and ached all over, which could be attributed to my muscles constantly tensing and my nerves being on edge. Ironically, the day I observed euthanasia, was the day I felt the least emotionally and physically exhausted. I contribute this to the fact that I forcefully shut myself off emotionally in order to strictly photograph, which was remarkably easy – making it even more disturbing.

Although Animal Care Services recognizes compassion fatigue as a concern and has put in place management courses that shelter staff may attend, it does not offer a concrete solution. Honestly speaking, I do not think there is one. If there are animals that need to be rescued, these individuals will continue to put themselves in physically and emotionally demanding scenarios to help. Capturing compassion fatigue as it has manifested in clinic, field, kennels, foster care, and acts like euthanasia impacts the daily lives of these individuals, and I hope that this discussion leads to more dialogue on the mental health of shelter workers. These personnel are more than staff members, they are caregivers. They are individuals with families and loved ones, and like the animals they care for, they deserve more than to be overlooked.























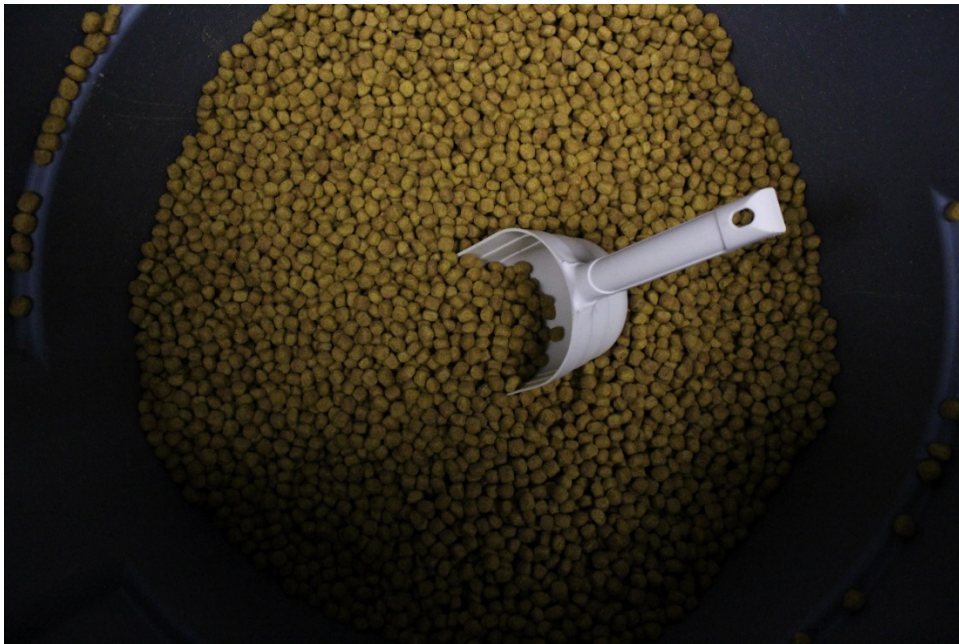




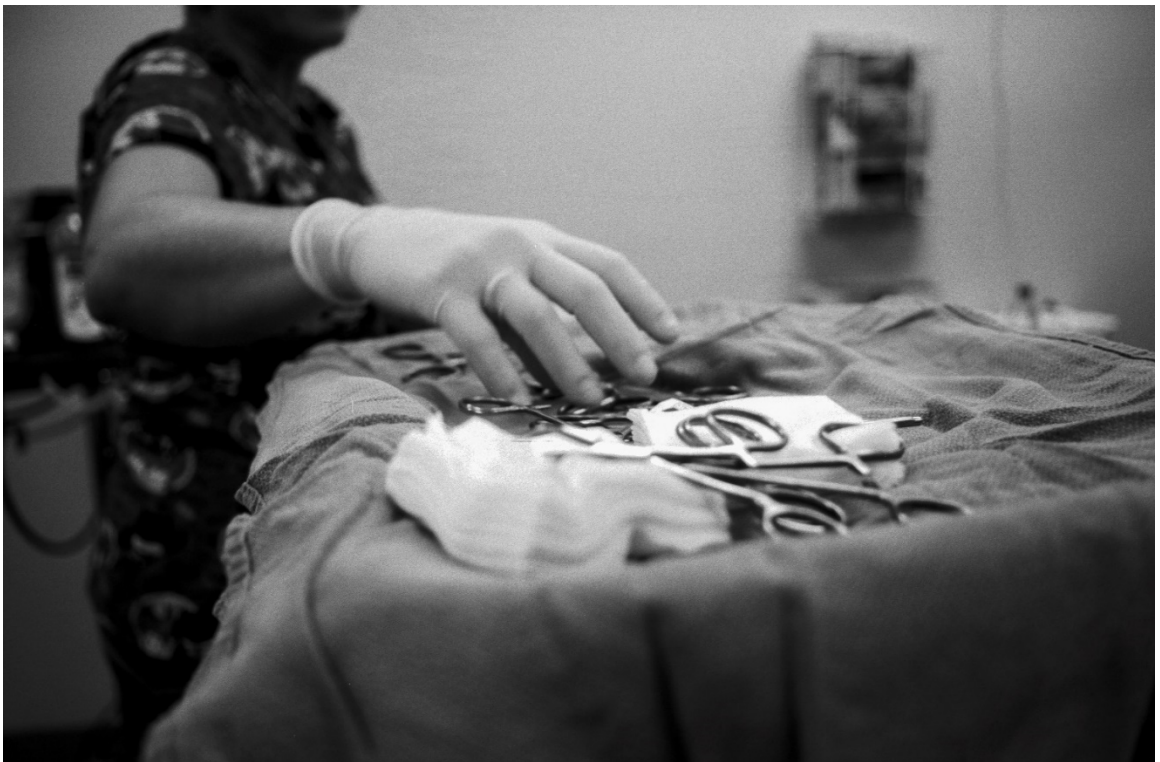
































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