Mimimizing the Consequences of Canine Distemper Virus (CDV) and Canine Parvovirus (CPV) Outbreaks in the Shelter Setting

Exploring the benefits of diagnostic testing to better manage canine populations

Outbreaks of CDV/CPV can lead to devastating consequences including unnecessary quarantine or euthanasia, increased costs and animal care days, reduced or delayed adoptions, and decreased staff morale.

Part of the answer to addressing these may be a shelter’s decision to utilize diagnostic testing to help make treatment decisions and manage their canine population.

“I think the use of diagnostic testing varies widely with some shelters not using any or using them improperly, to those that are using quite a few to help make decisions,” says Dr. Jeanette O’Quin, Clinical Assistant Professor at the Department of Veterinary Preventive Medicine at Ohio State University. “However, overall, I think diagnostic tests are underutilized.”

How can antibody titer testing help with disease outbreaks?

First, antibody titer testing can be an objective tool for assessing CDV/CPV risk. Testing can also aid the shelter staff in deciding appropriate and timely healthcare needs for dogs. And, antibody titer testing can help identify dogs that require special handling during an outbreak.

Diagnostic testing may be underutilized because of a lack of trained staff to conduct testing and interpret test results; as well as the perceived cost and time involved to conduct testing.

“Numerous issues are to be considered with diagnostic testing,” according to Dr. Annette Litster, BVSc, PhD, MMedsC, FANZCVSc and Senior Veterinary Specialist at Zoetis. “Firstly, paying for it and then interpreting the results. After interpreting the results, what is your plan? If you have an animal management plan, testing can be a really powerful tool.”

Not only can antibody titer testing help shelters make better decisions about population management during outbreaks, it offers other benefits too including positioning the shelter as a leader in animal health and serving as an example for animal care in their local community. Shelters should serve as the first gateway in educating people who adopt animals about the need for maintaining quality care for their new pet. Adopting a healthy dog or cat that has been tested also provides an easy transition to a local veterinarian for life-long care of the animal.

“The veterinary community expects basic diagnostic testing to be done on adopted animals,” says Dr. Barbara Hanek, director of shelter medicine at PAWS Chicago. “As the adopter’s veterinarian reviews the results of diagnostic testing, it can serve to open dialogue regarding potential diseases and prevention.”

“We can talk about the amount of money saved by not testing, but ultimately, our end goal is lives saved,” says Dr. O’Quin. “So, if testing helps rapidly move dogs through the system to the adoption floor and reduce euthanizing healthy dogs that have simply been exposed but are of low risk of developing disease, we can ultimately save both costs and lives.”