

ICARE



Interagency Collaborative Animal Research Education

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ICARE Dialogues: Optimizing Performance During a Pandemic Crisis: Animal Welfare

Presenters: Interagency Collaborative Animal Research Education (ICARE) Project faculty members: Bill Stokes, George Babcock, Carolyn McKinnie, Jane Na, and Susan Silk.

A record of this meeting will be posted on the OLAW website (<https://olaw.nih.gov/home.htm>) on the ICARE Project webpage (<https://olaw.nih.gov/education/icare-interagency>).

Silk: Bill Stokes will introduce his team and they're going to talk about optimizing animal welfare during the pandemic crisis.

Stokes: Thank you very much, Susan. Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you all for participating in this second part of the **ICARE Dialogue** session. We'll talk about how animal welfare has been impacted during the pandemic and ways to ensure that we are still continuing good animal care and good animal welfare despite the challenges of the pandemic. We had great participation earlier, and I encourage you to, again, please speak up by unmuting yourself, or add questions or comments to the chat as we move forward.

So today I've already introduced myself [I'm Bill Stokes, currently working as an independent veterinary consultant in animal research and welfare. I've got over 40 years of experience in biomedical research, including serving as an attending veterinarian at four research facilities, including two of the National Institutes of Health. At NIH, I also directed the National Toxicology Programs in our agency center. I was responsible for validating and gaining global acceptance of new refinement and replacement methods for testing. And most recently, I served as assistant director for animal welfare operations at the USDA.] as well as George Babcock [I'm George, Professor Emeritus of Surgery at University of Cincinnati. I've spent 32 years as a PI doing research. I'm currently a Chair, I've been that for 21 years. I'm the Vice Chair of the IBC.]. We have two others joining us. And I'll let them briefly introduce themselves. We have Jane Na from OLAW:

Na: I'm a veterinarian and recently became Director of the Division of Assurances, because Eileen Morgan's last day was yesterday. I look forward to working with all of you a little bit more. Thank you.

Silk: Aren't we lucky OLAW has such a deep bench. You guys are going to love working with Jane. She's great.

Na: She'll be back a little bit part-time.

Stokes: Welcome, Jane, we appreciate you stepping in. From the USDA we have Carolyn McKinnie joining us.

McKinnie: Thanks, good morning. I am a supervisor with USDA. I am in the Pacific Northwest, based in Washington State. My area goes all the way to the Dakotas, a pretty big area. It also includes Hawaii, but I don't get to go to Hawaii very often. Prior to my working here at USDA, I worked as a veterinarian at a facility in Hawaii, on a health and research project. I'm glad to be here and welcome everyone.

Stokes: Before we jump into the questions and topics that you all submitted, and I thank you for those, I just want to call your attention to a resource that Erin sent to you earlier, prepared by the ICARE faculty.

(<https://olaw.nih.gov/sites/default/files/20.08.04%20%20Resources%20and%20References%20Animal%20Welfare.pdf>) It has resources that could be helpful. And that includes things from OLAW. Jane, do you have anything else to add about those resources?

NA: There are updates sent out to the OLAW listserv, so be sure to sign up so you don't miss details or new FAQs that show up. The OLAW Division of Policy and Education are very busy and diligent about updating as frequently as possible.

Stokes: Thanks for those suggestions. Carolyn, do you have anything to add about the resources provided for USDA?

McKinnie: I don't have anything else to add except that the OLAW website is a great resource. We have a lot of joint presentations there for webinars. We also have our USDA website as well. Make sure you sign up for the stakeholder announcements for sure.

(https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/newsroom/stakeholder-info/CT_Stakeholder_Announcements)

Stokes: Thank you. Then there are also resources that have been provided by Tracy Thompson from the National Park Service. So if you're doing any field studies in your institution or if you're using wildlife or wild animals, that might be informative, particularly if you're using bats and doing any coronavirus research, their guidelines may be helpful. And then the last section is from the Veterans Administration Information provided by Kate Zigerer from the VA. So if you work at or support a VA facility, you might find that of interest.

Stokes: So today we want to have a conversation with you. We want to hear from you about how you're dealing with day-to-day challenges and adaptations in particular that you have made to successfully continue to provide good animal care. This is really a sharing session. And again, I thank all those who submitted topics and questions. And we'll do our best to work through those. But if we don't and you still would like a response, certainly send an email to Susan (ICARE.SERO@gmail.com) and she will get it to the rest of us to respond to and get back with you.

We're going to start out talking about an issue that is not directly about the animals, but it's about the staff. This was the area that we've received the most questions about in all three of our **ICARE Dialogues** on animal welfare. These are concerns about the need to balance the welfare of our human staff with the welfare of the animals they are charged to take care of. Clearly, we need to take good care of our staff in order for them to be able to take good care of the animals.

So, we've had some new challenges due to COVID-19. One issue that was raised was about maintaining adequate supervisory oversight. The lack of face-to face contact with staff has been significantly reduced. Keeping staff engaged and focused is more of a challenge because they're often working very isolated from the supervisor, as well as isolated from others. And so those issues create a lot of stresses on employees and supervisors. All of you have very valuable experience dealing with this now for six months or so. So I would invite you to either share with us some of the things that you've learned, some of the things you'd recommend that have worked well for you or didn't work well for you, and just enter maybe your favorite thing that you've found to be successful in the chat box, or speak up with what you have found. We'd like to hear from you.

Participant: I'm happy to jump in. There's a difference between support staff, the people who care for the animals, and the people in the laboratories that work with animals. There are different challenges on both sides, but I think that from an animal healthcare perspective, that rotating schedules, health monitoring, supportive measures that are provided - whether it's additional resources for healthcare for family, parking that might not have been available for someone who prefers to drive, different resources that help them come to work and do their job are important.

Also managing social distancing where people maybe are at greater risk, giving some variability in their work schedule to do some of their role at home, whereas the day in and day out activities that have to be done on campus still need to be done, but maybe conquer and divide, disseminating that work amongst staff that could be there. I think some of the bigger challenges are from a research staff perspective. That is for those that are actually conducting the research. I think working from home, from a supervisory capacity, I think poses additional challenges. It's harder to keep PIs and research staff engaged during the pandemic. So I think that's a bigger challenge and takes more time and effort and staff time to keep those areas in check. From that perspective things seem to be going quite well.

Participant: Our biggest challenge has been training groups that are either new to the institution. I've been a little surprised at how few delays there have been. People have already signed contracts and they're still moving entire labs in the midst of all of this.

This summer we didn't have nearly as many summer people coming in. We didn't have the back and forth that we normally would see over the summer months. But as fall came, we've got a whole new crop of students and postdocs and some of them know what they're doing, and some of them just think they know what they're doing, and some of them know they don't know what they're doing. For all of these, normally we would be providing more hands-on, face-to-face, a little extra supervision in the beginning. And those things have not been possible to maintain at the level that we were making it happen before.

We recently had complications in a surgery that was new to the person it in the lab. It turns out the reason that there were complications was because she had made arrangements to work with another lab that was familiar with the procedure before everything got shut down and social distancing. So instead, she had already completed the basic training - you know how to make an incision and maintain a surgical plane of anesthesia and sew them back up afterwards - that was done. But the specific training in this specific procedure is something that was not specified by the IACUC. We don't tell them how to do that. She was watching a video. Great for her for finding a way, but it wasn't sufficient and her technique would have been improved greatly with hands-on. And we're struggling with that. Does anybody have any other ideas for how to handle that right now?

Babcock: We were worried about the same thing. First, we thought - no hands-on training. But then we had our infectious disease (ID) docs come in and review the situation. And they said - you can do one-on-one training. Obviously, you can't socially distance. They said as long as you had masks and full face shields that was acceptable, exactly the PPE that they used when they were face-to-face with a patient.

So we've done that for a few months. Obviously, one-on-one there's a limited number of people to the training and a lot more people that need training. So the ID docs came back and said that there had been no transfer - they did some testing on the trainees and the trainers. Now they said - you can go three-to-one trainees to trainers. Each of the three must be socially distant, so the trainer must go from person to person.

We set up a room with three tables in it. And that's the way we're doing it. It's a problem if they have to be trained in the lab because of equipment. So we still require one to one-on that, but not three-to-one. But it's been a month at three-to-one and it's worked out pretty well so far.

Stokes: Excellent. Thank you for sharing that, George. Has anybody else tackled the hands-on training in any different ways?

Participant: Our training corps set up some virtual Zoom trainings and we do have some online orientations, but we have a hands-on workshop. They set that up in Zoom and were willing to do some one-on-one in person as needed, as available, based on the staff, in a separate room.

Stokes: Okay. Good. It's more difficult, more challenging, but if you use appropriate precautions and PPE, it can be done safely in the one-on-one situation. Another participant said - yes, mask and full-face shields were okayed for them as well. So that looks like a fairly good standard to follow.

Participant: I did want to make a comment about one of the positives, I think, was how much PIs have learned they need and appreciate their postdocs. [Laughter] While they're at home doing their work remotely, the postdocs are in the labs doing the work.

Stokes: Right. And they have often been underappreciated in the past, so that's a good thing that's come out of this pandemic. Thanks for sharing that. Another thing is we've heard that some institutions have had greater attritions due to employees being overwhelmed with tasks at home, the

children not being able to go to school and spouses working at home. So they have lost employees. Are there things that you are aware of, or that you have used to help keep your employees engaged and motivated for the position? We heard earlier about being flexible with schedules, which I think is really helpful when people are juggling lots of responsibilities at home.

Participant: We try to be flexible. We have a flexible schedule. Especially for the veterinarian, when he comes, also for the students. They need to come every day. They still need to go through our surveillance and to answer the questionnaire. And for our department, we have been doing this monthly - the virtual lunch party, tried to engage all the staff to have some games, a bingo game or whatever, and a talent show to keep everybody energized and motivated.

Stokes: Wonderful. Thanks for that idea. And one that we had heard before - for institutions that were in downtown locations like Boston, New York City, because many of the workers might have used public transportation, but they don't want to put themselves at risk for that, we've heard of those institutions providing priority parking so that they can come to work in their own vehicles and be able to get free parking in a convenient location so they don't have to spend a lot of time getting from a remote parking lot to the building where they're working. So I think that's a good motivation. Just little things like that that can help make their lives easier. To participant: You offered the comment that you had free parking in some lots until September.

Participant: At our university, that's a big deal. It costs a couple hundred dollars a month or \$13 a day to park, so you had to hike a little bit, but for our folks that didn't normally drive in, it was very helpful.

Stokes: Okay. Well, I hope that you can get an extension on that.

Participant: I don't think so.

Stokes: [Laughter] Okay. Let's see.

Participant: One thing we did was institute a weekly standing meeting for the IACUC staff. We're a small team of three. And we were already doing a little bit of teleworking, but we were staggering it to make sure that there were always two of us, and most of the time all three of us were still in the office. And so we had a lot of natural face-to-face time before all of this happened.

And we were definitely floundering a little bit without it until we formalized an alternate way of having those conversations that weren't just happening organically any longer. They did do free parking for people - close-in parking. Well, because they had to stop running all the shuttle buses. [Chuckling] So they just recently discontinued that. But I paid for parking anyway, so it didn't matter to me. [Chuckling]

A lot of the things that they've tried to do, though, haven't really been very successful. They're trying to do a lot of things, but a lot of it just feels a little bit forced. And so depending on how engaged or where morale was before all of this happened, has definitely had a big impact on how we've managed to move forward. Fortunately, my office has had great morale and we've got a great director who said if you need to be with the kids during the day and you need to do half of your work from 7:00 until

11:00 at night, that's fine, whatever you need to do to make this work. And one thing that we've certainly found is that there was a lot more flexibility than we thought.

If you had asked us last year if this or that would have worked, we would have said no, that's not acceptable. So I think we've all opened our eyes to possibilities that hopefully will help with some of our space discussions in coming years. As they say, we have to have this much space for everybody. And we're realizing no, we could probably have this much space and it would probably still work okay.

Stokes: I think that's wonderful that they've extended that flexibility. And we've heard over and over how important that is. I think it takes so much effort to bring employees on, to train them, and once you have good employees you really don't want to lose them. And so being flexible with their personal schedules and things is really a good way to help with retention.

We had a comment from a participant about how some are dealing with the lack of institutional buy-in. Some of the perks such as parking flexibility or scheduling are not always in our control, and it's difficult to get buy-in for those items at the level where those decisions are being made. What other non-policy ideas could we consider?

You know, the one comment I would make on that is that is to engage the Institutional Official responsible for the oversight of the IACUC and the whole program. If you're having challenges with your program, then I think it's important to take options to the IO to let them know how important those things are in helping you to be able to continue the functions that ensure a compliant animal care and use program.

We have heard some other thoughts in some of our other sessions about having frequent check-ins with folks, and not just about their job, but also making sure you're asking them how things are going for them outside of work. Trying to understand if there are other stressors in their life that you may be able to help with in terms of offering more flexible work hours or things like that.

We also had a question about addressing compassion fatigue and mental health issues. And certainly in this time of stress, there is a need to address that in employees. And there may be an increase in compassion fatigue, particularly as studies may be ended prematurely, animals euthanized unexpectedly, before expected. Any thoughts on addressing mental health issues or compassion fatigue?

Babcock: That's a pretty tough one, Bill, because it's a problem. And, you know, some of the resources aren't the greatest. Our institution provided counseling and actually a psychiatrist. But I don't know how well it's utilized because that's private information. But what I have noticed, which I think relates to it, is that a number of call-ins from our animal care staff, calling in sick has gone up greatly. Normally attendance is pretty good and we've had trouble covering several times. So I think it's there. One thing - we did not use universal sacrifice of any animals. We stopped allowing animals to come into the facility, but we didn't euthanize any. Investigators were allowed to continue with their studies. That may have helped a little.

I think loneliness ties into compassion fatigue, too, because they're working with less colleagues there. We're on rotating schedules. And one thing we've done which helped in some ways, but I don't know about compassion fatigue, is rotating them for less days a week and much longer shifts, which allows them to get overtime, so they make more money. But then again, often they're working by themselves late into the evening. So I think that may cause the problem in the other direction.

Participant: George, I agree with you that it is a problem. People miss the water cooler chat, as far as opportunities to engage, whether it's to vent, or to bounce an idea off of someone. Compassion fatigue, I know that the veterinary staff are available for animal care technicians or animal health technicians or any of the staff, but there's also human resources counseling that is available. There are some free sessions that are offered as well, mindfulness, providing resources for additional education and training to make them feel engaged.

I do find that having regular check-ins - not my job on the administrative side - is beneficial as well, that touch-base to see how things are going, how are you hanging in, what are our new challenges. And having the opportunity to talk as a group about it is really good, too. Or having some fun, at the end of the day a happy hour, or bring your sports team to a team meeting. There are some ways that you can build some fun into staff having an opportunity.

But there also are challenges of staff that don't have resources off-campus, they may not have the ability to Zoom into a meeting or have those fun office hours, so I agree, it's a challenge and it's really hard to be creative at this time.

Babcock: It's a particular challenge with the animal care staff. We don't have the ability to interact with them much because I'm not doing any research. So with my IACUC office [George is IACUC chair], which is a small group, only three, they don't actually report to me. They report directly to IO, but I meet with them on Zoom once a week and business is ten minutes and we talk and have a virtual happy hour. They're pretty happy. But that's three people out of 70 or so others in animal care.

McKinnie: Some of the things we've talked about in previous sessions is to reach out, even by text messaging, sending texts to the animal care staff. Doing a system - so that somebody that is doing pretty well can pair up with somebody that may be struggling a little bit. I recommend if you can, to give free lunches, you can maybe send bags or meals. People can rotate dropping things off for the animal care staff shows that you care.

Just little notes, even the littlest things make a difference. And I also want to point out that on AALAS, they have good compassion fatigue resources. They have brochures and webinars to download. And if you don't have a compassion fatigue program in place. Making - for the staff - a little place where they can get respite, with a little room that has, you know, snacks, is peaceful, has relaxation music, I think would be very helpful, as well as making sure that if you do euthanize animals for whatever reason for the study - especially for those people - they have a chance to say good-bye - before euthanasia. So those are some things that we've talked about in the past.

Babcock: One thing I just thought about, what about your USDA VMOs? Are they undergoing - are they seeing a lot of animals euthanized? Are they starting to have problems?

McKinnie: One of the things that we've been doing from the beginning of the pandemic is we have weekly calls with our people. Every week we have a team call. We're trying to reach out a lot more frequently right now. We do have a compassion fatigue resource on what we call our communication station. It's sort of our library for animal care. And we have resources there. Also, employee services are active right now in sending out meditations, yoga, whatever, management, things that we've seen before, interesting things for your own self. So those are the ways that I've seen -- at USDA, we're handling things.

Stokes: Thanks for those suggestions. We've got a couple comments on the chat line. A participant said the IACUC office hand-wrote thank you cards, and it was well-received; different ways of letting people know they're appreciated is helpful. Another participant offered that they arranged for a large animal pickup of euthanized animals instead of having to have someone actually break down the animal for disposal. For large animals, I'm sure that was quite a bit of savings in effort. So it's really important to understand those little ways that you can help out. Thank you for that.

Another participant says, "We are thinking of never going back to the office, as we do so well at home. [Laughter] I give people projects putting two or more people together for projects so they interact as well." That's a good idea. Instead of a solo project, have a two or more person team assigned to the project so they have interactions. That's a great idea. Thank you.

Silk: You know, all the pets are going to be heartbroken if people do go back to the office. The veterinarians will have to come up with ways to console all the pets.

Participant: No one has brought this up yet, and I could speak for hours relatively negatively about distance learning with young children. [Laughter] I've brought this up at our director's meetings frequently. I have a 4th and 1st grader and it's awful. But I also bring it up because the animal caretakers have children. And it's difficult to support distance learning during the day and come in to do your work.

I know that our animal facility leadership has done a fantastic job of balancing that. Even during COVID they've done shift work and given people breaks so that they're not there all day. But I think that talking about having flexible hours and working until later in the night, but then the impact of the pandemic isn't just those nitty-gritty daily activities. When is family time, dinner time, if I'm at the computer until 7:00 because my attention is distracted during the day for these things?

I think that that contributes to the overall exhaustion and emotional distress, the constant distractions. And there's the worry of what's happening and isn't happening with children. The older students who have worked to accomplish things. Now they're in their senior year and there are no activities, right.

Stokes: Yes, they've been particularly hard-hit because of the outside activities being curtailed.

Silk: Earlier, I said something about pets. A participant tells us that her pet is sitting on her guest bed right now and all day long since she moved her office into the bedroom. We usually see Jane's dog behind her, but she's not there today.

Na: She's at doggie daycare today.

Silk: Another participant tells us she has an elderly New Zealand White rabbit sitting on her feet.

Stokes: A participant says she's working more hours, getting up at the same time, doing morning routine, and then heading to the office early when there's no traffic, then after dinner checking email and finding glitches there until bedtime sometimes. But luckily her son is in college, so she has nothing to do but work.

A couple others. A participant says one of her cats will be heartbroken and the other one won't notice [Laughter] when she goes back to work. And then another participant says one thing to consider regarding the possibility of continuing to work remotely, even after the pandemic no longer requires it, is the possibility that short-term work trends may not be indicative of long-term work trends.

I fail to recall where I read this, but there are articles about how businesses are considering the same possibility, abandoning brick and mortar locations in favor of going 100% remote. But Zoom fatigue and prolonged lack of proximity to one's team may detract from the quality of work. I think we all probably share that feeling. And I think if anything, we're likely to see more of a move toward a hybrid arrangement where there's sometimes the opportunity and desire to have people together in offices, but also the opportunity to telework, or work virtually.

Silk: I think all of us have to remember that we're working way harder than we have in the past. And some of our standards just have to be relaxed. You can't continue at this pace forever. So when you're afraid, and you're stressed, and then it's so much more work, you have to wait in line to get into the grocery store, and you have your children with increased demands. Or in my case, mine are not home, but I've gone to full-time worrying about them. [Chuckling] So I have to manage my own imagination. And I think we have to just relax our standards a little bit and not expect more of ourselves than we're able to do.

Participant: My dog started barking. It's good that I was muted. Thank you. I agree with what you say in full. Basically, everyone is focused, even when I'm working I'm reading up about the pandemic and how it's affected other businesses. There's the short-term appearance in other industries, this works, imagine if we don't need to pay for a brick and mortar location, everyone is in communication, things are getting done, how great is this?

It's good that this works and we have tools like Zoom and businesses can continue - not all businesses, but some can, of course. But, whether or not people could do this long-term is an entirely different measure. And, you know, I definitely agree with what Bill said. I think a hybridization of working strategies - that may be the healthiest way forward, but I'm sure we're going to have lots of different

articles and professionals telling us what's best and what the ramifications are of different routes. But it's something to consider in terms of what you do at your institution.

Babcock: Regardless of how much work is or is not done, I miss people. And I may get to where I need to get out of here. That happens sometimes.

Stokes: Yes, I think everyone would second your feelings there, George. Let's see. A participant offered that there are ways to ameliorate the issues, but she expects some sort of blended solution. And she states that her campus may not want us to come back so they can give our space to faculty. [Laughter]

Participant: It's already been suggested that they'll probably reduce our space regardless, so we'll end up with some sort of coworking because they really want it. One of the things that I do know though, my partner works in tech and most of their work is actually done fully remotely, too. So I'm hoping that we'll be able to learn from some of those tech companies how they do maintain interpersonal interaction even when they're pretty remote, more large on-site social events or something like that as opposed to the daily socializing.

Stokes: I think that's a challenge that every organization is going to face going forward where there's the temptation to just keep people as virtual workers. It isn't the same. And I think some kind of additional arrangements will have to be done to compensate for that disconnectedness.

A participant said she does a lot more work and more efficiently from home. And at the office, she sits with her door closed so she doesn't have to wear a mask. And that's a good practice, I think, for those that are fortunate enough to have closed offices rather than cubicles.

A participant added that hybrid is needed especially because so many people have adopted puppies during COVID. Yes. There has been quite a demand. I understand that some places, some shelters don't have readily available puppies to adopt.

A participant said she just wanted to add to another participant's comment about being aware of substituting too much team interaction with virtual interaction, as they just aren't the same. She had an experience at her institution where there was a planned half-day department retreat that got shifted to virtual. While some people enjoyed it, for others it was just another Zoom meeting, which contributes to Zoom fatigue.

A participant says extroverts are suffering. And there's agreement with that. And then a participant added that remote working will limit the unofficial networking, brainstorming creative impact, and that's for sure.

Participant: A lot of us work administratively in the IACUC. Our animal care facility and the people limited their amount of people in for the social distancing. So some people were like three days in, two days doing paperwork. And some of the schedules, with the limited PPE, we limited a lot of what we did. So some of the workload was lessened, so we didn't need as many people in the building. I'm not

sure how long that's going to continue. We started seeing that we're picking up and most people are back to five days a week. Have others done something similar, or has it changed since this all started?

Babcock: We've divided into what they determined essential and nonessential. The employees who are classified as essential can come in pretty much full time. The nonessential are supposed to stay home. And my IACUC and IACUC office are considered nonessential, so we're supposed to stay home.

Silk: I wish they would come up with a better term for that.

Stokes: We know that IACUC personnel are essential, they just don't have to be on-site essential. Okay.

Participant: It's like the critical or vital organ removal. [Laughter]

Stokes: We had a question about what details should be included in contingency plans with regard to staff shortages. In contingency disaster plans, we deal with all kinds of physical damage from hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, things like that. But in pandemics it's really the personnel shortages that impact us. And so I wondered if folks have updated their contingency plans with regard to how they would address personnel shortages that are occurring or may occur in the future from this?

Participant: Part of our return to work plan, if things shifted the other direction, is a plan as to how we would accomplish our activities. Being a compliance unit, the protocol reviews would take a backseat, meaning the review and approval process would be slower and we would focus more on the compliance activities, whether it's an investigation or completing the semiannual program review, including the inspection. So a shift to more of the required activities is a priority and then moving towards the things that just keep business going.

Stokes: So really triaging your activities so that the most critical are at the top when you can't do everything.

Participant: Right.

Participant: In response to the comment about post-approval monitoring, our QA team and our controlled substance (CS) team members have done some Zoom meetings. It's not the same and they don't do them for all visits. You can't say show me a picture of your logs on Zoom. But they've done enough to help the PIs manage through the COVID changes, or COVID-induced changes, and also for the CS team to have enough of a touch-base with their licensees to avoid some problems. So it's been great. And the response from the PIs has been wonderful. It might be a faster response and better scheduling than when it was in person.

Silk: A participant inquires: How many institutions have a pandemic policy where details such as IACUC meetings, inspections, etc. are outlined. Did you want to elaborate on that?

Participant: That's me. We have a pandemic policy. And when this all first started, and we found out that we were going to be sent home, basically, it was right around the day before the IACUC meeting.

But we have had a pandemic policy for quite some time. At the IACUC meeting right before everything shut down, we brought our policy to the meeting, made changes at the meeting based on what we knew to be true at the time, had the members vote on it, and basically said we're sending everything DMR until further notice. Unless something was specifically called for FCR, because we have a current policy that says certain things are FCR. We said everything is going DMR unless a member specifically calls for FCR. And we had a waiver from OLAW for our site inspections. So I was just curious if other people had a policy in place or something similar to where if you do have a pandemic of some sort that you already have wheels in motion of what's going to happen.

Silk: You were not talking about a disaster plan. You were talking about a pandemic policy, weren't you?

Participant: Yes.

Another participant: We have created a much more flexible policy that's not specific to pandemics, but as opposed to a disaster that required disaster plan, we actually created a policy that was written in such a way that whatever the emergency circumstance is, we would be allowed to make decisions that would address appropriately anything that we needed to do to make sure the program stayed up and running. It's not specific to pandemic, it doesn't say specific things like everything will go DMR, but it's written so that we can say under these circumstances, this is what we feel we need to do in order to keep things running and protocols reviewed, and our facilities up and running.

Stokes: That sounds like a very flexible approach that can be adapted as needed.

Participant: That's exactly why we did it that way, to allow for the unknown.

Participant: When we reviewed the IO report after March from our spring inspections and program review, one of the community members asked that our animal facility leadership present to the IACUC how our current disaster plan covered the pandemic and our response and modifications to that, and do a check-in and description of this is what we learned, this is how we might modify it in the future. I thought that was great that this individual suggested that and it was very well-received and desired by the rest of the committee.

Stokes: I think this is the prime time to do that, while we're in the midst and we've already learned a lot of things, because when the pandemic is finally over, we will probably all want to rapidly move on to other things. [Chuckling] So we are learning a lot and I think that's great that you've done that. And I would encourage others to also consider taking a look at that now and seeing what should be updated to take advantage of what we have observed to work well during the pandemic.

We have a comment from a participant asking if we can get Jane's input on what OLAW expects to see in a pandemic plan?

Na: Certainly. So, according to the *Guide*, the disaster plan should define the actions necessary to prevent animal pain, distress, and deaths and should describe how the facility will preserve animals

that are necessary for critical research activities or are irreplaceable. And then it's a little bit generally vague because the IACUC does have latitude and flexibilities, as you guys were pointing out.

But really, there are a lot of IACUC activities that are allowable that are not usually practiced at your institution. I've had several institutions ask me like we added DMR, can we just start doing it? And you can certainly do that. And if it's a permanent change, it will end up in the Assurance and be reported on the annual report. So IACUC functions and responsibilities and how those are going to happen - how animal care things - I'm not going to go into specifics because it's going to differ per institution, how animal care would progress.

If you go to the OLAW resources, there are examples of disaster plans that are out there. So, for example, one university's pandemic plan actually goes into staged phases of lower impact, what happens at this point where we have most of our staff and we're able to provide care kind of as normal, and then go into mid-range where a certain number of staff are out, how do we move forward in that route. And then they go to a more critical level of inadequate staffing. So one might wonder, should we put in how are we going to deal if we have no animal care. In previous sessions, some institutions have solicited and routinely have backups. So I don't know if any of your institutions have that currently?

Participant: It sounds like we could take our hurricane plan and substitute. I'm in a location that has a lot of hurricanes. We could substitute pandemic for hurricanes and it would almost be the same thing.

Na: Certainly. A lot of the other emergencies would be applicable and the flexibilities are actually always available and could be applied to any natural disaster, or hurricane, as you said. OLAW has put out a lot of guidance that we are directing to be pandemic-specific, but it's generalizable to other emergencies.

Silk: I know that one of the positions that OLAW has is that euthanasia of the animals should be considered a last resort. Are you able to speak on that a little bit?

Na: Absolutely it should be a last resort. The veterinarian should be involved in the decision when it comes to that part, as well as the institution's leadership. And planning in advance to make sure that you have written and documented an understanding of what you consider critical or what animals kind of are more priority. And it's actually a good time to maybe start promoting cryopreservation as far as being able to have animals genetically available for later, but perhaps some of the colonies wouldn't be so large to begin with.

We do have FAQs that specifically talk about careful planning and alternatives. So instead of euthanizing, is it possible to transfer the animals to a different facility? If you can just postpone the procedures and still keep them on hand, if that's an option. And we did get a lot of questions about can the animal be transferred to a holding protocol. Certainly, if we can keep the animals around, that is what we want to do. We want to be able to adequately provide for them, and euthanasia is a last resort.

Silk: Typically, Jane, when they're on a holding protocol, what does that mean?

Na: Institutions may have a protocol that is not associated with any specific study. Does anybody want to describe their holding protocol?

Participant: We basically use ours in case someone inadvertently lets their protocol expire, despite our numerous reminders, it happens occasionally. And we transfer the animals there and then when they renew the protocol, we transfer them back. That's what we use it for.

Silk: My experience is that typically a holding protocol specifies that no experimental manipulations are to be done to the animal. However, if the animal requires clinical care as a result of experimental manipulations, that is provided. So all the basic needs - husbandry needs, including clinical needs of the animal are met.

Babcock: Ours is the same, except we allow breeding, also.

Participant: We do all of the same, animals coming in for new PIs that haven't yet had IACUC approval. But to what you just said, Susan, maybe we could have a brief discussion about that. So if you have, for example, animals on a protocol and unfortunately there's a lapse in approval but those animals have been on a special chow or light cycle, or get injections to maintain an induced disease or something, to prevent or to care for the welfare of those animals, could we include those stipulations in the holding protocol to permit ongoing continuity of those activities?

Participant: I'm the PI for our holding protocol and a veterinarian. Ours includes that. If a specialized diet is necessary to maintain animal welfare, we'll do that. It's just that all of the manipulations like that would be done by the animal care staff, not the investigator.

Participant: Do you charge a fee for that?

Participant: I do not know. I'm not sure if we do.

Participant: We do.

Participant: I think we charge a fee to move them to the holding protocol because then we have to print new page cards and somebody has to put them on and then we have to change them back, but I can't swear to that. It's in our policy.

Participant: At our institution, we charge daily fees for holding protocols to try to discourage them from not having them on the actual protocol.

Babcock: In a disaster it would be a little different, but routinely we want to discourage them from doing it, like the participant just said. It's a pain to print out the cards and do the transfer.

Stokes: It's expensive to continue the care. I think this has been addressed, but there was a question about how might institutional responses and contingency plans be modified to avoid or reduce unplanned euthanasia of animals. This is in the context of reports we heard that animals at some

institutions that had to be euthanized because of institutional policies. Has anyone had any experience with their contingency plans and getting buy-in at higher levels on strategies that might avoid that?

Participant: At our institution, they had a special committee of higher-ups, researchers who reviewed petitions by researchers to be allowed, after the facility was being shut down and COVID-19 had ramped up and we were moving into quarantine, to allow specific researchers to complete research efforts that had already been begun so that animal life would not be wasted. And on a case-by-case basis they reviewed and approved, but people were not allowed to start new projects. However, the animals were maintained, they just weren't able to be utilized.

Stokes: Sounds like an excellent approach. Thank you.

Babcock: We did the same thing. There were restrictions put on how many people each lab could send and it was one. Finally, they ramped up and said two.

Participant: We had similar experiences. Another thing that we encouraged people to do - we have a lot of projects where there are multiple time points. So you've got some animals that are expected to go out for longer time points, and some animals that are going to be euthanized earlier. We encouraged people, where possible, to go ahead and utilize the animals for the earlier time points when maybe they had planned on having some of those go out further, and they could then restart the longer-term projects a little bit down the road. And that was helped by NIH sending out guidance early on saying they were going to be accommodating for extension requests. And the funding agencies weren't going to be trying to hold anybody to the very tight timelines and productivity standards that they might otherwise expect.

Stokes: That sounds like an excellent strategy. Jane, would you like to comment on that?

Na: That was early-on guidance put out by NIH Grants. They did recently change it. I don't have it memorized by heart. Somebody referenced the guidance put out by NIH initially on how funds for something were a lot more lax. But then it had been updated, so Neera are you able to speak on that?

Gopee: The new update states recipients may re-budget funds to accommodate unanticipated cost without prior approval. However, it can only be done if the re-budgeting does not constitute a change in scope and is not restricted by terms and conditions of the award. So you have to look at the terms and conditions of the award. And if it does impact, I would recommend you reach out to your program official and see whether it's allowed or not. But if it does constitute a change in scope, you need prior approval, also if there's any re-budgeting issues. And that's our COVID FAQ 5, so we did update that about a month or two ago. [<https://olaw.nih.gov/covid-19.htm>]

Na: Thank you, Neera. And I also was notified back when we were talking about staff shortages, the Division of Policy and Education submitted an article to LAS that does specifically speak to veterinary staffing shortages, so be on the lookout for that in the future. If you have further comments?

Gopee: That article has been submitted and hopefully will be published in the next couple weeks.

Silk: Then OLAW will put it up on your website, right? You'll have a link to that. [<https://olaw.nih.gov/>]

Gopee: Yes.

Stokes: Going back to shutting down programs, a participant said they only had two days notice before research was halted and access removed for all research staff. Later, PIs had to apply for access, but only a very few were allowed in at first. So that was a very sudden policy that many institutions implemented. And, of course, many of those were in response to state and city shutdowns that just occurred on very short notice.

Participant: We didn't have the opportunity - we had no opportunity to negotiate. It was just an edict issued. It changed. First, they said you have three days, then two days, then tomorrow. We couldn't plan.

Stokes: Wow, that must have been challenging.

Participant: Because we were located downtown in a very large city, we had a sufficient timeframe to know what was coming down the way, and to be able to put our heads together and think what will we do under these circumstances, how are we going to manage it. It obviously wasn't the most time that one would want under certain circumstances, but I think we had a lot more time than people located in other parts of the country to come up with a viable strategy to not have to do mass euthanasia and control the shutdown.

Stokes: I think it's already been answered, but I just want to see if Jane and Carolyn might have additional comments. The question was, could PHS and OLAW provide future guidance that might assist institutions in avoiding mass euthanasia of animals? Do you have any other thoughts or thinking on that Jane?

Na: I don't have any further thoughts. This was just being well-prepared, encouraging cryopreservation, considering relocation. I had all my talking points discussed earlier, thank you.

Stokes: Just wanted to make sure. Thank you. Carolyn, did you have anything to add?

McKinnie: Jane covered everything very well. I agree with everything that she said, most importantly, just to emphasize that the euthanasia is a last resort, just like Jane said. It must involve the AV. If it does happen, it has to meet the definition of euthanasia in the Animal Welfare Act. To reiterate what Jane said, it's a good idea to have MOUs with other facilities in order to share potential space, staff and resources as needed.

We've had a couple of our facilities share resources. I know that happened on the East Coast. And ensure there are backup supply chains and have advanced agreements for necessary supplies you might need. As far as thinking ahead of the game, even having alternate sources lined up with agreements. And lastly, everything else that Jane said, I agree with, of course. But have enough trained

essential personnel identified in the disaster plan and have alternates and there you would have a lot of cross-training involved as well.

Stokes: Thanks, Carolyn. You did bring up planning ahead because of disruptions in supply chains and I think it's really important that if you see this coming - and that there may be a need for increased euthanasia - that there be adequate stockpiles of euthanasia agents at your facility. You know, it may be difficult to get gas cylinders of carbon dioxide or veterinary supplies. And we've certainly seen delays in getting supplies due to transportation being disrupted, warehouses being disrupted, and manufacturers being disrupted.

And so these supply chain issues can be significant. And they can also extend to other critical supplies like feed and bedding, veterinary supplies, anesthetics, and analgesics. It is important to have an adequate supply on hand and also have, perhaps, some alternate sources that you might be able to tap by reaching out to other institutions that you might be able to share with during critical times.

Silk: One of the confounding aspects of that is, when this began, we all thought we were going to be isolated for two weeks. And here we are going into our seventh month. It's a difficult calculation, isn't it? Because presumably populations of animals are going to be reduced. We don't know how long the isolation would be for. And supplies expire. So there's certainly a lot of unknown factors to consider.

Babcock: Our staff had a lot of PPE stocked up and they were scrambling at the end. They couldn't get new supplies in and had to use it.

Stokes: Hopefully that won't happen again. [Chuckling] We had a question about asking if USDA could talk about how institutions can be expected to comply with USDA unannounced inspections, especially the review of protocols, minutes, review reports, etc. while maintaining institutional COVID restrictions. Carolyn, go over how USDA would deal with those kind of restrictions?

McKinnie: Sure, Bill. If we show up for an inspection and the facility staff is not available to accompany us, for example, or an employee has actually been tested positive for COVID - and this did happen early on when one of our VMOs showed up. So, if there is a possibility that we would have exposure risk, then the facility can tell us that - because of these COVID times, the circumstances aren't good right now and they can ask the inspector to come back at another time.

So that's one option and the VMO probably will ask you what are some good times and days in the future to do an inspection. So, also it should be important to note that while we're doing the inspection, we will follow all biosecurity procedures that the facility has. And that the state might have, the local government and whatnot. We are supposed to follow all those guidelines and we will.

You might have heard that a focused video records inspection virtually is being used in some cases. We have something called the COVID dashboard at USDA. Maybe many of you have those yourselves. We can go into each state and see which counties are identified by government as being either green, purple, or gray. Green is go. Gray is - don't know what's going to happen and purple is a high incidence

of COVID.

So if your inspector and your county happens to be in a gray or purple county, then we may be conducting a virtual inspection just on your records. So that would be a focused inspection. And if that happens, we do not give you a lot of time. We would probably give you 24 hours notice so you could set up a records channel with your IT. And if that was a problem and you couldn't do that, then we would come back at some other time. So, those are ways that we are dealing with it right now. We just did start doing those virtual focus inspections fairly recently in the last month or so, I would guess.

Participant: We have a brand new to us VMO after our previous VMO of 14 or 15 years retired last year. And we had stayed in touch with her. We let her know - we were supposed to have an AAALAC inspection, and one of the inspectors in March actually emailed us to cancel because his institution that morning had sent out a notice saying that there was no nonessential travel and if they traveled, they were in quarantine for 14 days.

He was supposed to be on his way to the airport to come do our inspection. They rescheduled. We ended up having them come in early August. And we were in touch with the VMO letting her know we've got AAALAC coming, this would be a really bad time to do this. So she waited until the end - I think it was sometime in September and notified us the evening before and asked us, if at all possible, to have records available starting at 8:00 the next morning.

It was a challenging way to provide some of the records. Some of them were in hard copy, particularly things that were on the animal, the lab animal side instead of the IACUC side. All of our IACUC stuff was available online, but their facility and lab stuff is in hard copy. But we managed and she looked through a significant number of records and was very good about talking with us and asking questions, just like we would have if we were in person. And we survived, but it's definitely a different experience.

McKinnie: I can understand how very challenging that would be, especially if your records aren't electronic, or they're hard copy. I guess what I can say is that if somebody else has issues and they cannot meet that requirement, then we can also probably give an extension of time or it can be elevated to the supervisor to see if we can come to a better agreement. Did you say that she did come during the AAALAC inspection?

Participant: No, she waited until after that, but we were staying in contact. We hadn't met her yet. Ideally, she would have come earlier in the year. It had been a year and a half and the last inspection was a focused inspection on the facilities side. But because she was new to our institution, she didn't understand how we divide the records. The previous inspector would have waited until the next one and done the facilities because she knew they were in hard copy and the intake records are in a central file but the disposition records are kept with each animal record. It was an undertaking.

McKinnie: Congratulations on surviving. This is a challenge time for everyone. Hopefully you can meet your VMO face-to-face soon and can show her the ropes. Thank you for sharing that.

Stokes: Thank you. Unfortunately, we've come to the end of our time. There were a lot of other questions, but if you have a question, please reach out to either Carolyn at USDA or Jane at OLAW, or send your query to Susan and she'll get it to the right person and get a response to you.

Silk: I'll be glad to do that.

Stokes: Thank you, Susan. I want to thank everyone for your contributions and sharing your experiences. We learned a lot from each other so we can all do a better job going forward. And in the end, animal welfare benefits from us thinking about these challenges and learning from each other about the best way to prepare for and address them. So, I will turn it back to Susan to wrap things up.

Silk: I want to thank the faculty for doing a wonderful job, and I want to thank the participants for doing a wonderful job. We're so glad that we can meet with you this way and see you.

Participant: Thanks, everyone.

Silk: You're welcome.

Participant: This was great. Thank you so much.

Silk: You're quite welcome. It means a lot to us, too. It's very good to see you and know you're doing okay. Bye-bye.