

Animal Caretakers



Occupational Brief Title Codes:

- D.O.T.: 410.674-010
- G.O.E.: 03.03.02
- S.O.C.: 39-2021
- O*NET™ 3.1: 39-2021.00
- N.A.I.C.S.: 812910, 541940, 813312, 712130, 115210
- H.O.C.: RCS

Occupational Subtitles:

- Animal Control Officers
- Pet Groomers
- Stable Attendants
- Veterinary Technicians

Work Classification Based Related

D.O.T. Occupations:

- Fur Farmers
- Kennel Supervisors
- Livestock Ranchers
- Machine Milkers

Interests Based Related

G.O.E. Occupations:

- Animal-Ride Attendants
- Aquarists
- Hoof and Shoe Inspectors
- Horseshoers

Skills Based Related

O*NET Occupations:

- Agricultural Technicians
- Animal Breeders
- Log Graders and Scalers

Noteworthy Quote:

"While most veterinary technicians [and other animal caretakers] work with animals, I work for them. As an Issues Specialist for HSUS, the nation's largest animal protection organization, I have many opportunities to educate all those concerned with the welfare of animals. I work with pet owners, veterinarians, landlords, physicians, the media, and others to promote responsible pet care. Speaking, writing, and people skills help me make the world a better place for animals. I only wish there were more hours in the day to hasten this process."

— Nancy Peterson, Registered

Veterinary Technician, The Humane Society of the United States

Animal caretakers ('an-i-mal 'care-tak-ers) feed, water, nurture, take care of animals in kennels, animal shelters, pet shops, veterinary hospitals, laboratories, zoos, and stables.

Work Performed

People caring for animals have different titles and responsibilities depending on where they work. They may also be required to go to school to get them ready for their jobs. However, animal caretakers, or *animal attendants*, everywhere have certain basic duties.

New workers clean cages, change straw or bedding, give water and food to the animals, and wash food dishes. As they become more experienced with the animals they take on more skilled tasks. They may groom, bathe, and exercise the animals. Sometimes they take charge of all the care of the animals.

An important part of this work is the nurturing of the animals. Working closely with the animals, caretakers often get to know their personalities, temperaments, and needs. They often handle, stroke, pet, and talk to the animals to coax positive responses.

Animal caretakers learn to observe animals for signs of illness. They watch the animals for lack of appetite, droopy posture, or weakness. They note unusual behavior. They check cages or pens for breaks, sharp edges, or other imperfections that might hurt the animals. Attendants take animals to treatment rooms or supervise their exercise in outdoor runs.

Animal shelter attendants may receive animals brought in by owners, Good Samaritans, or by the animal control officer. They determine the animals gender, and look for signs of sickness, infestations (fleas and ticks), or injuries. Attendants care for



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Photo by Amy Elliott

the animals and sometimes give simple first aid to sick or hurt animals. They put them in cages or pens. They maintain identification of the animals with tags and may keep other kinds of records.

Skilled animal shelter attendants, under the direction of a veterinarian, may give simple treatments to the animals. They also may perform euthanasia (i.e., put the animals to death). Some shelter attendants may serve as **animal control officers** who pick up stray animals and rescue trapped or injured animals. Attendants may field calls about abuse or cruelty toward animals.

These attendants may also help visitors at the shelter. They may reunite animals with their owners, they may assist in adoptions, and help match animals to new owners. They try to see that the animals will have a good home. They educate people about the importance of responsible animal care—especially to spay or neuter their animals.

Some kennels board dogs and cats for owners who are away. **Kennel workers** may bathe and groom the pets, and may clean their ears and teeth. They may keep records of feeding. Others may train dogs. Besides doing daily hands-on animal tasks, kennel attendants may paint kennels, cut grass and perform other maintenance tasks and business functions.

Pet shop attendants feed and water the animals, clean animal and bird cages, and wash food dishes. They may bathe dogs or cats, groom them with brushes and combs, and trim their nails or claws. They inspect each animal for sores, ear mites, fleas, worms, tartar on the teeth, or signs of illness that could hurt the animal or spread to other animals in the shop.

Some shops and kennels employ specially trained **pet groomers** to care for the animals. In addition to caring for the animals in the shop or kennel, pet groomers may also offer their services (for a fee) to pet owners on an individual basis.

Stable attendants feed and water the horses, brush and groom them, trim their manes and tails, and clean out barns and stalls. They harness, saddle, and unsaddle horses for riders. After the horses exercise, attendants rub them down, blanket them, and walk them to cool them down. Skilled riders and handlers may help train horses. Under the direction of a veterinarian or the horse's owner, attendants may apply medicine to small sores or injuries on horses. They may use insect spray or powders in the stables to control infestation. They keep the tackroom neat, and clean and polish saddles, bridles, and harnesses. They may unload and store supplies and feed.

Veterinary hospitals and biomedical laboratories vary in size. Some have only one attendant. Others have more. These workers have many duties. Besides feeding the animals and cleaning the cages, they clean animal treatment and surgery rooms, and wash and sterilize surgical instruments. They may hold the animals or assist while the veterinarian or other animal scientist examines and treats them. With additional training and experience, caretakers may advance to more technical positions in laboratory animal care, such as research assistant or mid-level technician. In some veterinary hospitals, attendants also greet pet owners, answer the phone, make appointments, take payments, and keep records.

Veterinary technicians do more advanced work. Most

have completed formal studies in an accredited college and work in animal hospitals, animal laboratories, and other places that serve or use animals. They prepare animals for surgery, give anesthetic, administer medicines, collect samples and run laboratory tests, take x-rays, and perform other skilled duties. Veterinary technicians may also be asked to supervise other caretakers.

Zoos and aquariums also have animal caretakers. Many have a four-year college degree in biology or zoology. Some are in charge of rare and expensive animals who must have special care. Under the supervision of a veterinarian or zoologist, caretakers provide for each animal's very special diet and other daily needs. Often, at the direction of animal behaviorists and trainers, they may train some animals to respond to signals in order to make it easier to carry out the daily care and treatment of the animals.

Working Conditions

Animals, like people, are all different. Dealing with their temperaments, habits, and response keeps the caretakers on the alert. The work environment may be noisy, filled with strong animal odors, and may be hazardous on occasion. Animals may bite, scratch, or kick. Caretakers take precautions to avoid exposure to diseases they might catch from the animals.

Some of this work is demanding and unpleasant. The work can be hard, often dirty, and repetitious. Every day of the year animals need food, water, and clean quarters. Animal caretakers may move bags of food that weigh fifty pounds or more. They may have to stoop and bend when cleaning cages and yards. They may have to handle unusual or exotic pets, like snakes and spiders, and help collect urine, feces, and other samples for examination.

A sad but necessary part of this work is that many animals die. They may die of old age or other natural causes, illness, or from serious abuse, neglect, or injury. Humane societies and animal control agencies must also euthanize the many animals when they cannot find homes. Caring for sick, injured, or abused animals and having to euthanize an animal can be emotionally draining.

People who work for humane societies or shelters also often deal with the public. Enforcing laws regarding animal care can be stressful, especially when dealing with owners who react with hostility.

Hours and Earnings

As a rule, animal care businesses have a forty-hour week. However, many animal-related jobs require more than a forty-hour week. Workers cannot just leave if an animal still needs care. Since animals need care seven days a week, sometimes animal caretakers must work weekends and holidays. Small places may have part-time helpers for routine tasks on weekends. Other animal care centers set up shifts so that employees take turns working weekends.

The earnings of animal caretakers vary with their skill, experience, and education. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2000, most nonfarm animal caretakers earned between \$5.78 and \$12.70 an hour. The median

earning for those in local government was \$11.80 an hour. The median in commercial sports, such as horse or dog racing, was \$8.09 an hour. In animal services (except veterinary), retail stores, and membership organizations the medians ranged from \$7.78 to \$7.18 an hour.

Animal control workers earned from \$6.91 to \$17.55 an hour. Animal care assistants in laboratory and science fields earned from \$5.90 to \$12.05 an hour. Veterinary technicians had the highest earnings, due to their advanced training, generally falling between \$12.59 and \$16.63 an hour.

Many animal care attendants get paid vacations. Other benefits such as health and life insurance, pensions, and sick leave vary with the business. Part-time workers seldom get fringe benefits.

Education and Training

There are no formal education requirements for caretakers to work in animal shelters, kennels, pet shops, and stables. Most get their training on the job. Employers generally prefer to hire people with some experience with animals. Some training programs are available for specific types of animal caretakers, but formal training is usually not necessary for entry-level positions. A knowledge of business methods may also be helpful.

Employers of laboratory animal caretakers often require a high school diploma or equivalent. A few colleges and vocational schools offer programs in laboratory animal science, but such training is not strictly necessary. The American Association for Laboratory Animal Science offers educational courses for different levels of responsibility.

Formal programs of study prepare more advanced workers such as veterinary technicians. Two-year and four-year programs in veterinary technology, which may be found at many colleges and universities, prepare students for many jobs in animal care. In some states, completion of a two or four year college degree from an accredited program is required for certification, licensing, or registration as a veterinary technician.

Animal caretakers in animal shelters are not required to have any specialized training, but training programs and workshops are available through The Humane Society of the United States and the National Animal Control Association. Workshop topics include cruelty investigations, appropriate methods of euthanasia for shelter animals, and techniques for preventing problems with wildlife.

Large zoos may require their caretakers to have a bachelor's degree in zoology, biology, animal science, or a related field. They must also have experience as a volunteer or a paid keeper in a smaller zoo.

Most pet groomers learn their trade by completing an informal apprenticeship, usually lasting six to ten weeks, under the guidance of an experienced groomer. Prospective groomers may also attend one of the fifty state-licensed grooming schools throughout the country, with programs varying in length from four to eighteen weeks. The National Dog Groomers Association of America (NDGAA) certifies groomers who pass a written and practical skills examination.

Certification and Professional Societies

Individuals with a concern for animals may join animal welfare associations. Many societies sponsor workshops, bestow awards, offer certification, and work to promote the quality of standards for animal care and treatment.

In many states, animal caretakers who euthanize animals must be certified. Most states also have regulations that require veterinary technicians to be certified, licensed, or registered. Regulated by the state board, candidates are tested for competency through examinations, or required to pass the Veterinary Technician National Examination. The National Association of Veterinary Technicians of America and the Society of Veterinary Behavior Technicians work to advance the professional growth of veterinary technicians.

The American Boarding Kennels Association (ABKA) offers a three-stage, home-study program for individuals interested in pet care. The American Association for Laboratory Animal Science (AALAS) offers certification for three levels of technician competence. Those who wish to become certified must satisfy education and experience requirements before taking an examination administered by AALAS.

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) sponsors workshops, symposia, and seminars across the country for individuals who work with animals. HSUS also offers workshops, certificates, and higher education programs through the Humane Society University.

The National Animal Control Association (NACA) operates a training academy. The academy is designed for animal control officers at the federal, state, and local levels, responsible for animal control and all of its many facets and offers a two-level certification program.

Personal Qualifications

The ability to enjoy, appreciate, and understand animal behavior is important. Kindness, patience, alertness, and thoroughness are valuable qualities in dealing with pets, livestock, or zoo animals. Animals are living beings; self-control and calmness when the unexpected happens are important traits for the job. It is important to realize, however, that not all jobs that entail working with animals would be considered humane or kind. Working in a laboratory where animals are used in scientific experiments, or having to put an animal "to sleep" can be unpleasant and emotionally draining.

The ability to get along well with people is equally important. Animal caretakers often deal with strong human emotions in the course of their work. Sensitivity and a pleasant nature help attendants deal with customers and employers. Attendants should be able to work without direct supervision.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

Animal care and service workers held about 130,500 jobs in 2000. Another 30,000 worked as veterinary technicians. Most animal caretakers worked in boarding kennels, animal

shelters, stables, grooming shops, animal hospitals, veterinary offices, and local, state, and federal regulatory agencies. Many also worked for humane societies, government animal control agencies, racing stables, dog and horse racetrack operators, zoos, theme parks, circuses, and other amusement and recreation services. Most towns and cities have an animal care and control agency. Other places include companies that breed and supply animals for the laboratories of veterinary, medical, and pharmacy schools. Wildlife management centers and aquariums also offer employment opportunities.

Employment Outlook

Employment of animal caretakers is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations through the year 2010. The number of dogs and cats is increasing every year and is expected to continue growing. People need veterinary services, boarding and grooming care, and other services for their animals. They are demanding higher standards of care and better treatment for their animals.

In the United States the number of animal hospitals, pet shops, boarding kennels, and riding stables is growing. Demand for animal caretakers in animal shelters is expected to remain steady. The outlook for caretakers in zoos, however, is not favorable; job seekers will face keen competition because of expected slow growth in zoo capacity, a low turnover rate, and the fact that the occupation attracts many candidates.

Entry Methods

Many people start in this work as volunteers. Some pet shops, animal hospitals, humane societies, boarding kennels, and stables hire part-time workers who do routine cleaning chores or feed the animals. Doing this work may help students decide whether they want a career in animal care.

Individuals interested in a career as a veterinary technician should enroll in an accredited veterinary technology program. Graduates of formal programs of study can get help in finding a job from their school placement office. Workers with no experience should call on local pet shops, animal care agencies, or state employment offices to find out about jobs.

Advancement

High school graduates with experience in pet shops may become pet shop managers or owners. Workers at humane agencies may, with further education and experience, become directors of the agencies. With experience and additional training, caretakers in animal shelters may become an adoption coordinator, animal control officer, emergency rescue driver, assistant shelter manager, or shelter director. Veterinary technicians may go on to further their education and become veterinarians.

For Further Research

American Association for Laboratory Animal Science, 9190 Crestwyn Hills Drive, Memphis, TN 38125-8535. Web Site: www.aalas.org

American Boarding Kennels Association, 1702 East Pikes Peak Avenue, Colorado Springs, CO 80909. Web Site: www.abka.com

The Humane Society of the United States, 2100 L Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037. Web Site: www.hsus.org

National Animal Control Association, P.O. Box 480851, Kansas City, MO 64148-0851. Web Site: www.nacenet.org

Acknowledgments

CGP appreciates the cooperation of the following who reviewed the information in this brief.

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