



How canine distemper almost ravaged a shelter – and why it didn't

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Dr. Jill Kirk, Veterinarian (left) and Karen Slomba, Director (right) at the Animal Welfare League

Dr. Jill Kirk was making her rounds at the Animal Welfare League of Charlotte County, Florida, last October when she noticed a dog named Ruth who didn't seem to be doing right. "She was sitting still, looking at me, twitching. Just this sudden, myoclonic twitch. And my stomach dropped and I thought, 'Oh my God. This is just like that video they showed us in school of a dog with distemper.'"

Ruth was one of a group of dogs who had been transported from North Carolina to the AWL a week or so before in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence. Dr. Kirk went to the shelter's

executive director, Karen Slomba and shared her fear that distemper may have been an invisible stowaway with the dogs.

Slomba's first response was that wasn't possible. "There's never, ever been distemper here," she recalls saying. "I told her yes, we can test, but inside I was thinking, 'No way.' I've been in animal sheltering for a really long time, and she was new at the shelter. I thought she was stretching it. But you know what? She was right. And I can't think of too many veterinarians who could have recognized it that quickly."

Slomba, too, was new in her position; she'd only been there two and a half months. After what she called "my initial heart attack," she and Dr. Kirk moved rapidly to respond to the outbreak. And this is where the story gets interesting.

In many shelters, distemper in any dog leads to euthanasia of every dog in the shelter, in the name of protecting dogs in the community from the disease. But Dr. Kirk received the Maddie's Professional Certificate in Shelter Medicine from UF and is currently enrolled in the MS in Shelter Medicine program, and she knew there was another way.

She didn't have to convince Slomba, who was as determined as she was to make the effort to save as many dogs as possible. "We made a commitment to give these dogs a second chance at life when we rescued them from North Carolina in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence," she said. "We are going to honor our commitment by doing everything we can to help them recover from this illness."

The two of them reached out to Dr. Jill Kirk's mother, Dr. Sarah Kirk, a veterinarian and Adjunct Lecturer in the UF Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program, as well as to Program Director Dr. Cynda Crawford. Dr. Jill Kirk told them, "Help me. I remember learning about this, but I never thought I would ever deal with it."

The response was swift. Dr. Crawford and Dr. Sarah Kirk told them that while canine distemper is a treatable disease from which most dogs can recover if provided proper supportive care and time. They explained to the AWL team how to provide that care, as well as how to protect their entire canine population in the shelter while doing so.

First, AWL tested dogs who were sick or exposed to Ruth. "We ended up having 25 dogs over the span of six months who tested positive for distemper, and we were able to save a little more than two-thirds of them," said Dr. Kirk.

"We put the infected dogs into isolation. We treated symptomatically. That's really all you can do with distemper. We were giving fluids, anti-nausea medication, and appetite stimulants." And they



repeated the testing of each infected dog over time to determine when they cleared the distemper virus and were no longer contagious. Once they were no longer an infectious risk to other dogs, they were moved from isolation to the adoption floor.

“There was one dog who I definitely thought we were going to lose,” Dr. Kirk said. “She wasn’t eating and she was going downhill.” She turned to Slomba, wondering if they should let the dog, named Little Girl, go. But Dr. Crawford was adamant that the dog had a chance.

“She really fought for her,” Dr. Kirk said. “She told us, ‘Don’t do it. She’s not suffering, and you just need to get her over this hump.’ So we did, and she ended up being adopted after around three weeks by a family who fell in love with her and took her home!”

Even before the happy endings started pouring in, Slomba felt confident in the approach UF guided them in. “I knew that we were doing it the right way,” she said. “But because I have a lot of longtime employees who have already been hit with a thousand changes since I’ve gotten here, the hardest part was rallying the troops. They struggled with understanding the importance of personal protective equipment – PPE, like gloves and masks and gowns and booties – because they’d never had to deal with them before.

Treating canine distemper may be straightforward, and the price tag relatively modest, but the cost of diagnostic testing and the length of times dogs may need to be in isolation can still be financially challenging for many shelters. “These dogs were transported from a bad situation in North Carolina after Hurricane Florence by an ASPCA program,” said Slomba. “It cost us just a little over \$35,000 to take care of these 25 animals, not including our staffing. And the ASPCA backed us up financially 100 percent since we were committed to saving them.”

What about shelters that don’t have that financial advantage? Slomba had one word for them: transparency. Both Slomba and Dr. Kirk were proactive in letting the media and local veterinarians know what was going on. From day one, they issued press releases and letters to veterinarians in the community.

Dr. Kirk reported the same experience from her outreach to local veterinarians. “We got nothing but support, and people thanking us for telling them. I was expecting backlash, worrying ‘Oh my God, what are people going to think about us? What’s going to happen to our reputation?’ But the response was literally nothing but positive. We even had a veterinarian stop by and say, ‘If there’s anything I can do, if there’s any way I can help, let me know.’”

Probably the biggest payoff on their transparency policy was for the dogs. AWL was able to find homes for every single dog who survived the outbreak.

The distemper outbreak experience only strengthened her belief in working with trained shelter veterinarians. “I’ll tell you that under no circumstance would I be in a shelter with a veterinarian who was not specifically trained in shelter medicine,” she said. “Of course I have a tiny budget.

But I would go to great lengths, I would go without a vet for several months, to make sure I found a shelter vet with the kind of training Dr. Kirk had.”

Dr. Kirk summed up the difference her shelter medicine education made in the outbreak this way: “I was trained to do daily rounds of the entire shelter population, which is how I saw those initial signs of possible distemper in the first place. If I hadn’t been trained to do rounds, those signs would have been missed. Without my training, I don’t think a necropsy would have been done on the first dog who died to confirm distemper. I don’t think any testing would have been done. I think a lot more dogs would have gotten infected and sick, and a lot more dogs would have died.”

Most of all, she said, “I was not taught at UF that distemper means euthanasia. I was taught that it would be difficult, but infected dogs could be saved. And so they should be.”