LOGAN: Hello! Today we are talking with Dr. Fitzpatrick about heartworm treatment programs for shelter dogs. Dr. Fitzpatrick was a veterinarian at the Humane Society of North Central Florida and is currently the veterinarian at Alachua County Animal Services. Thank you so much for joining us!

FITZPATRICK: Thank you guys for having me!

LOGAN: So we have a few questions for you today, the first one is could you briefly describe the heartworm treatment protocol for dogs in your shelter?

FITZPATRICK: Sure. So when any dog comes in that’s over 6 months of age, we run a heartworm test on that animal using a witness test. From there, if it is positive, we check under the scope to see if they have microfilaria. If they’re microfilaria positive, that’s great. That’s our confirmation. If not, we will do an IDEXX SNAP to do the confirmation testing essentially that way to ensure that they are in fact positive. From there, we follow the American Heartworm Society’s protocols and so we do 5 days of Panacur, and 30 days of Doxycycline at 10 mgs per kg, twice per day. The animals will be on that for 30 days. We do 30 days of rest, and then, in the best situation, at that point they would get their first injection and another 30 days of rest followed by their second and third injection. We do three injection protocol for every animal that comes through. After each injection, they do get Prednisone on a 4-week taper. And the only caveat to that is we don’t start treatment on any of our animals until they have a foster or potential adopter. Because we’re putting them on Prednisone and because it’s just a stressful situation, going through treatment, having to crate rest and restrict activity, we do want them to be in a normal home and not the shelter environment during that time for their own health and safety.

LOGAN: That makes total sense. When is the heartworm antigen test repeated to determine the success of the treatment?

FITZPATRICK: So generally, we don’t get to retest. We recommend between 10 and 12 months after treatment to seek care with your primary care veterinarian and get tested at that time. We do have an agreement with all of our doctors that have adopted heartworm positive dogs that if it comes back positive at that time that we’ll do the follow-up injection for them for that treatment. So far, I’ve only been here for a year. So, at this point we’re just getting to the first set that’s been treated. With that three injection protocol, we don’t have a lot of dogs that are testing positive after that year of having not been here. Sorry.

LOGAN: That makes sense. Are the dogs in your shelter that test negative on a monthly heartworm preventative?

FITZPATRICK: They are. So at the time of testing, we start everybody on, we do oral Ivermectin, just for cost around here. So we have a dilution of Ivermectin that’s given orally. All of our animals get that and a topical flea and tick prevention, monthly.

LOGAN: Perfect. And I know you touched on this a little bit, but where are the dogs housed for the various stages of heartworm treatment?

FITZPATRICK: So during that initial stage, when they’re on the Doxine/Panacur, generally they’re in the shelter, unless we have somebody. We have some dogs that the day after we test them, they find a foster and immediately go to a home. In order to start treatment, they have to be in a foster home or we call it “foster to adopt”, so in that situation, for at least 2 weeks, for them to say “yes this dog is a good fit, yes we want to proceed with treatment”. And they do have to commit to that 6-8 weeks of injections and crate rest before they’re fully adopted out. Because after 4 weeks after their third injection, we finalize the adoption.

LOGAN: Nice, okay, thank you. Is there anything you’ve identified in the heartworm treatment program at ACAS that you would like to do differently?

FITZPATRICK: I wish that we could treat community animals. Right now, we don’t have the bandwidth for that, and so we are hopeful that in the next several years, we’re looking at building potentially a new shelter, and also creating a clinic space within that where we would be able to treat at a low cost those animals for heartworm disease that are RTOs, so our “return to owners”, that are heartworm positive.

LOGAN: That makes a lot of sense. Thank you so much for your time today and for helping us understand the treatment of heartworm in shelter dogs a little bit better.

FITZPATRICK: Thank you so much for having me. Have a great day.