Conduct of Animal Research May Well Necessitate Focus on 'Forever Homes'

By Theresa Defino

Throughout her career, Lara Helwig, director of animal care at Brown University, has helped adopt out a number of research animals beyond the typical cats and dogs. These include "mice, rats, hamsters, rabbits, ferrets, pigs of all sizes, and even anoles," a type of lizard. "In this case, the anoles went home with the graduate student at the end of a non-invasive study," said Helwig, who has been with Brown for seven years.

Helwig, previously associate director of the Division of Teaching and Research Resources at the veterinary school at Tufts University for nine years, also said Brown has retired approximately 20 nonhuman primates (NHPs), rhesus macaques. She recently described her experiences as part of a webinar sponsored by the NIH Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare (OLAW).

Universities, institutions and other research centers that don't already have a formal policy for how to handle animals after their research life is over may look to Brown's example to guide their efforts. While such policies are not required by federal granting agencies, state laws and other developments are driving awareness of the issue, if not the outright imperative to implement strategies for what Helwig referred to as the other "Rs" in animal research.

The three Rs in animal research, as they are known, stand for replacement, reduction and refinement. To this group Helwig adds "the fourth R," which itself is three: rehoming, retirement and release.

As she explained, rehoming is also known as adoption, retirement refers "almost exclusively" to NHPs, and release is "typically associated with field studies or other studies involving wild animals."

Interest, Laws Are Growing

In terms of OLAW and NIH, Helwig pointed out a relevant FAQ which states that the Public Health Service (PHS) Policy, the *Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals,* and the Animal Welfare Act "are silent on the issue of private adoption of research animals for pets after a study has been completed and the animals are no longer required. The [9 C.F.R. (2019)] recordkeeping regulations and official policies offer institutions the option of developing and implementing an adoption policy. OLAW is supportive of the concept of adoption but reminds institutions that NIH grant funds may not be used to support the cost of the program. The PHS will not assume legal or financial responsibility for any adoption program or any results of adoption. The institution should ensure that its policy meets pertinent state and local regulations for transfer of animal ownership and is encouraged to coordinate with local animal shelters."

Nearly half the states have either adopted or are considering legislation that requires mandatory adoption of certain research animals, typically dogs and cats. "It is important to note that these laws and bills do vary significantly in terms of what types of facilities they apply to, which species are impacted, and who is ultimately responsible for determining whether an animal is suitable for adoption," Helwig said.

In addition, the American Veterinary Medical Association in April "approved a policy supporting best practices in the adoption of research cats and dogs," AVMA announced.

"The AVMA supports the adoption of healthy, post-study, research and teaching animals into long-term, private homes as companion animals through the use of adoption programs developed and managed by research institutions," the association said. "The AVMA encourages research institution adoption programs because they can provide the individualized attention needed by each animal moving from a laboratory home into a private home."

The policy also lists "factors to consider when developing an adoption program at a research institution and when determining the potential of individual animals for adoption." (For more details, see http://bit.ly/2JJ8RmJ.)

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