University of Tennessee launches the first Center for Veterinary Social Work

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A celebratory kickoff on June 2, 2023, launched the new Center for Veterinary Social Work. The Center is the latest achievement in the 37-year collaboration between the University of Tennessee College of Social Work and College of Veterinary Medicine.

Veterinary social work is an area of social work practice that tends to the human needs at the intersection of veterinary medicine and social work practice. Using a One Health human-animal interactions model, 4 broad categories of practice define veterinary social work: animal-assisted interventions, animal-related grief and bereavement, the link between human and animal violence, and intentional well-being.

Veterinary social work is an inherently interdisciplinary approach to the human-animal relationship, with veterinary professionals addressing the needs of animals and social workers attending to the humans. The vision of the Center for Veterinary Social Work is “attending to the welfare of all species through excellence in global interprofessional practice.” The Center’s goals are as follows:

- Lead and deliver innovative interprofessional education and training.
- Employ access to care strategies that provide direct services to enhance welfare and well-being for humans and animals.
- Facilitate connections and collaborative opportunities among human and animal science and welfare professionals and teams.
- Create and disseminate adaptive, participatory, and transdisciplinary research and scholarship.

The Center for Veterinary Social Work’s interprofessional Advisory Council consists of 3 social workers and 3 veterinary professionals, in addition to an advisor from the College of Social Work and from the College of Veterinary Medicine. The inaugural council comprises the following members:

Elizabeth Strand, PhD, LCSW
Pamela Linden, PhD, LMSW
Bethanie Poe, PhD, LMSW
India Lane, DVM, MS, EdD, DACVIM
Mary Passmore, LVMT, VTS, MSSW
Zenithson Ng, DVM, MS, DABVP
Council Advisors:
J. Douglas Coatsworth, PhD
Marcy Souza, DVM, MPH, MPPA, DABVP

The Council utilizes a collaborative decision-making process that reflects the competencies established by the Interprofessional Education Collaborative, guaranteeing that everyone has a voice on every topic and establishing degrees of agreement on interprofessional ideas.

Dr. Lori Messinger, Dean of the University of Tennessee College of Social Work, says this innovative Center is dedicated to research, education, and service for all professionals with an interest in the field. “Under Dr. Elizabeth Strand’s leadership, the Center will provide people in our community and across our university a recognized framework to support further academic and professional opportunities in veterinary social work.”

Dr. Jim Thompson, Dean of the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine, notes that Dr. Elizabeth Strand, the founder of veterinary social work and the Center for Veterinary Social Work Director, is fiercely protective of those in the veterinary profession: “Dr. Strand realizes at the end of every leash, or the head of every herd, is a person. Veterinarians are highly trained to address animal issues, but human beings are a whole other factor. The work of this Center will enhance the understanding of the complex relationships between humans and animals.”

According to Dr. Strand, the Center for Veterinary Social Work is the “match.com” for human and animal science researchers and practitioners, working to bring professionals and organizations from different fields together to address problems that impact all species.

For more information about the Center for Veterinary Social Work, please visit https://vetsocialwork.utk.edu or email vetsocialwork@utk.edu.