On-site veterinary medical evaluation and care of working dogs and horses at the 2012 Republican National Convention

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Objective—To describe on-site veterinary medical care for working dogs and horses deployed for the 2012 Republican National Convention (RNC) in Tampa, Fla, August 24 to 30, 2012.

Design—Retrospective case series.

Sample—130 dogs and 45 horses.

Procedures—Data collected included breed, age, history, task assignment, reason for evaluation, and physical examination findings. A patient encounter report was recorded each time an animal was seen by veterinary staff for a physical evaluation.

Results—46 of the 130 (35%) dogs and all 45 (100%) horses underwent at least 1 on-site veterinary evaluation, for a total of 478 patient encounters. The most common reason for an on-site veterinary evaluation was a wellness check (446 patient encounters). On the basis of veterinary recommendations, 1 dog and 4 horses were removed from continued service for the duration of the event. In addition, 1 dog and 1 horse were removed from active service for 12 to 24 hours but allowed to return to service for the duration of the event following a veterinary reevaluation.

Conclusions and Clinical Relevance—Results suggested that working dogs and horses deployed for large planned events face different health concerns, compared with concerns previously reported for animals deployed following disasters. Pre-event planning and training of handlers and riders may have helped reduce the number of health concerns, particularly health concerns related to high heat. (J Am Vet Med Assoc 2015;247:539–541)

Abbreviations

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>NSSE</td>
<td>National special security event</td>
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<td>NVRT</td>
<td>National Veterinary Response Team</td>
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<td>RNC</td>
<td>Republican National Convention</td>
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Since 2000, events of national importance (ie, NSSEs) have been accorded special attention by the US Secret Service for enhanced security.1 Factors that are considered when classifying an event as an NSSE include anticipated attendance by US officials, presence of foreign dignitaries, and size of the event.1 As event security is enhanced, support for security personnel, including their working animals, must also increase. Veterinary medical support for working animals at NSSEs is typically provided through cooperative efforts involving several partners, including the Department of Defense, local veterinarians, nongovernmental organizations, and the NVRT. The NVRT is a component of the National Disaster Medical System under the US Department of Health and Human Services and is charged with providing veterinary medical support to animals, including working animals, during a planned event or federally declared national disaster, if requested, to augment local capabilities. The NVRT may be deployed during an NSSE on the basis of an official request from the Secret Service or the host jurisdiction.

The working animals most commonly deployed during NSSEs consist of dogs and horses. Dogs may be used as sentinels, for guard duty, or for real-time detection of explosives.2,3 Horses are used to help spot potential threats as sentinels, for guard duty, or for real-time detection of explosives.2,3 Although on-site human medical support is commonly in place during NSSEs, on-site veterinary medical support for working dogs and horses is less consistent. Also, although literature exists regarding veterinary medical support for working animals responding to natural disasters and terror events,4–7 there is little published information regarding veterinary medical support for working animals at planned events, such as NSSEs.

The purpose of the study reported here was to describe on-site veterinary medical care for working dogs and horses deployed for the 2012 RNC in Tampa, Fla, August 24 to 30, 2012. The intent was that the information would be used to augment planning and preparedness for future NSSEs.

Materials and Methods

The 2012 RNC was held in Tampa, Fla, from August 24 to 30. Working dogs and horses were deployed during...
the convention to augment law enforcement activities, including contraband detection, explosives detection, subject apprehension, and crowd control. For both dogs and horses, work shifts consisted of 12 hours on duty followed by 12 hours off duty. On-site veterinary medical support was provided through joint efforts of the NVRT and Department of Defense. Canine veterinary support was provided by 3 veterinary medical officers and 4 animal health technicians, with on-site care available 24 hours a day. Equine veterinary support was provided by a single veterinary medical officer and 2 animal health technicians working 12 hours each day.

Two months prior to the event, a training seminar was conducted by NVRT personnel for working dog handlers and mounted patrol officers assigned to work at the RNC. All training participants were law enforcement officers. The focus of the training seminar was to provide information regarding veterinary services available on-site and to provide instruction to handlers and riders on basic physical assessment parameters. Additionally, pocket cards with temperature, pulse, and respiration guides were issued to all handlers and mounted patrol officers. The seminar also included hands-on training for routine postshift physical assessments (eg, evaluation of mucous membrane color, capillary refill time, skin tending, and overall appearance) that could be performed by the handlers and officers. During the event, an overview of veterinary services available on-site and information on points of contact was provided by NVRT personnel during federal and local law enforcement briefings.

Although ambient temperatures in the Tampa Bay region during late August can exceed 38°C (100°F), nearby tropical storm activity resulted in daily high temperatures ranging from 25° to 32°C (76° to 89°F) during the 2012 RNC.8 Although dogs typically did not wear extensive protective equipment while working, several of the horses were outfitted with riot gear during their work shifts. This riot gear was constructed of a combination of high-impact-resistant polycarbonate, high-impact-absorbing foam, polyurethane, and leather.

During the convention, a patient encounter report was recorded each time an animal was seen by veterinary staff for a physical evaluation. For the present report, these patient encounter reports were obtained and reviewed. Data collected for individual dogs and horses receiving veterinary care included breed, age, history, task assignment, reason for evaluation, and physical examination findings. Distance traveled to the event was collected for some, but not all, animals.

**Results**

A total of 130 dogs (100 federal and 30 local) and 45 horses were deployed during the 2012 RNC. Forty-six of the 130 (35%) dogs and all 45 (100%) horses underwent at least 1 on-site veterinary evaluation, for a total of 478 patient encounters (46 canine patient encounters and 432 equine patient encounters). The 46 dogs that were examined had a mean age of 4.9 years (range, 2 to 10 years). The 45 horses had a mean age of 11.6 years (range, 5 to 22 years).

For both dogs and horses, the most common reason for an on-site evaluation was a wellness check (37 canine patient encounters and 409 equine patient encounters). Other reasons for evaluation of dogs included heat exhaustion or diarrhea (n = 2), pyoderma or dermatitis (2), allergic reaction (1), medication refill (1), body condition evaluation (1), sternal callus (1), and lameness (1). Other reasons for evaluation of horses included anti-inflammatory administration for a preexisting chronic condition (n = 10), acute lameness (4), dermatitis (4), sore back (2), heat exhaustion or diarrhea (2), and acute trauma (1). During the event, removal from continued service for the duration of the event was recommended for 1 of the 130 (0.8%) dogs and 4 of the 45 (8.8%) horses. The dog was removed from continued service because of a severe allergic reaction; the horses were removed from service because of a sore back (n = 2) or lameness (2). Additionally, 1 dog and 1 horse were removed from service for 12 to 24 hours. The dog was temporarily removed from service because of gastroenteritis; the horse was temporarily removed from service because of heat stress. Both animals were approved to return to work within 24 hours.

**Discussion**

For many working dogs and horses, a duty assignment during an NSSE can mean an increase in daily workload while in unfamiliar surroundings and climate. Even though the actual work may not change, the duration of the shift may increase, compared with animals’ normal working hours, potentially resulting in health risks for these animals. In the present study, the workload subjectively did not appear to have a substantial impact on the type or amount of on-site veterinary care needed. Rather, the climate (high heat) appeared to pose the greatest health risk. Importantly, only 2 dogs and 2 horses received on-site veterinary care because of heat exhaustion. However, much of the pre-event training provided to officers by the NVRT focused on early recognition of heat stress and methods of mitigation that could be performed by the handlers and riders, and this may have prevented heat-related injuries that might otherwise have occurred. During pre-event training, officers were instructed on accepted reference ranges for temperature, pulse rate, and respiratory rate for dogs and horses as well as how to assess each parameter and evaluate for heat exhaustion.9 We suspect that the low number of weather-related veterinary medical problems was a result of efforts by veterinary medical personnel to cultivate relationships with the handlers and riders prior to the event and to raise awareness among the officers of the dangers of heat exhaustion.

Our findings suggested that working animals deployed for planned events face different health threats, compared with health concerns for animals deployed following disasters. Acute injuries predominate in dogs deployed following disasters,5,7 whereas wellness checks requested by handlers and riders were the most common reason for evaluation of animals in the present study. Existing chronic issues, such as eye infections and chronic musculoskeletal injuries, were common causes of treatment of horses during this event. Few animals were removed from service for veterinary medical reasons, with only 1 of the 130 (0.8%) dogs and 4 of the 45 (8.8%) horses removed from service for the duration of the event. Data for previous NSSEs or comparable response efforts are not available for comparison. However, in the absence of on-site veterinary care, the number of animals removed...
Many variables affect responder health and safety during planned events such as NSSEs. A major unpredictable variable is the behavior of members of the public who attend or attempt to participate in the event (eg, protesters who may present a security situation). Considerable discussion and planning for the 2012 RNC focused on potential responder exposure to contaminants introduced with criminal intent; fortunately, no such exposures were experienced at the event. The introduction of contaminants with criminal intent or by security personnel (eg, pepper spray) would be expected to drastically affect the type of on-site veterinary medical care provided to working animals.

To the authors’ knowledge, the present study is the first to describe on-site veterinary care for working dogs and horses during an NSSE. Our findings indicated the value of proactive, on-site veterinary support for working animals at NSSEs; however, more information is needed to enhance the ability to provide optimal veterinary services to animals working to maintain public safety at such large events.

References

2. Ferton KG, Myers LJ. The scientific foundation and efficacy of the use of canines as chemical detectors for explosives. TALANTA 2001;54:487–500.