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Training and Capacity Building for Veterinary Disaster Response Teams

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ABSTRACT

Natural disasters and emergencies such as floods, earthquakes, pandemics, and disease outbreaks can have devastating effects not only on human populations but also on animals—both domestic and wild. Animals are often left vulnerable, which can have direct impacts on livelihoods, public health, and ecosystem stability. Veterinary professionals are key responders in such scenarios, yet in many parts of the world, their training in disaster preparedness and response remains inadequate or fragmented. This paper explores the critical role of training and capacity building for veterinary disaster response teams, reviewing global and regional models, key competencies, training methodologies, and challenges. Through a comparative analysis of structured initiatives like India's Veterinary Emergency Response Units (VERUs), the U.S.-based Credentialed Veterinary Responder Program, and global frameworks supported by FAO and WOAH, the paper proposes actionable strategies to institutionalize and scale up effective veterinary disaster preparedness training within the broader One Health framework.

Objectives

1. To identify the core competencies required for veterinary professionals during disaster situations.
2. To review and compare existing veterinary disaster response training programs and models.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of different training methodologies, including simulation, blended learning, and e-learning.
4. To assess the role of institutions, governments, and international bodies in sustaining veterinary disaster preparedness.
5. To propose scalable and context-specific strategies for strengthening training and capacity building of veterinary disaster response teams globally.

Literature Review

Veterinary disaster response training is a relatively underdeveloped area in many countries, despite growing awareness of the importance of including animal health in emergency preparedness frameworks. One of the most significant grassroots models is India's Veterinary Emergency Response Units (VERUs), established following the devastating 2008 Kosi floods in Bihar. Supported by World Animal Protection and developed in partnership with Bihar Veterinary College, VERUs trained veterinary students, faculty, and animal owners in emergency response through lectures, skill drills, tabletop exercises, and field simulations. By 2020, these programs had reached thousands of stakeholders across multiple Indian states, earning support from state governments and integration into disaster risk management policies (World Animal Protection, 2020).

In contrast, the United States offers more formalized training programs, such as the Credentialed Veterinary Responder Program developed by North Carolina State University. This two-week, competency-based training integrates online learning, in-person lectures, and field exercises, focusing on mass casualty triage, Incident Command System (ICS) protocols, animal handling, and ethical decision-making. However, even in the U.S., studies show that less than 30% of veterinarians have received formal disaster training, indicating that capacity gaps remain (Smith et al., 2009).

Globally, the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH, formerly OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) are taking steps to address these gaps through structured capacity-building frameworks. WOAH promotes veterinary education reform, particularly via the Performance of Veterinary Services (PVS) Pathway, and supports national training programs through e-learning, workshops, and policy advisory tools. FAO's Emergency Centre for Transboundary Animal Diseases (ECTAD) similarly focuses on field epidemiology training and cross-border emergency preparedness, particularly in regions vulnerable to zoonotic disease outbreaks (WOAH, 2021; FAO, 2022).

At a more localized level, Wildlife Conservation Trust (WCT) in India organized a veterinary disaster response workshop in Jaipur in 2022. The training addressed wildlife emergencies, focusing on species-specific rescue and rehabilitation (especially freshwater turtles and crocodiles), legal frameworks, and collaboration with forest and veterinary departments. This workshop exemplifies the need for context-sensitive training tailored to local ecological conditions (WCT, 2022).

Discussion

1. Training Structure and Core Competencies

Most successful programs adopt a **modular format** combining theory, field training, and soft skills such as communication and leadership. Core competencies include ICS protocols, zoonotic disease control, triage procedures, rescue handling, and use of personal protective equipment (PPE). However, there is often **inconsistency in curriculum design**, with some programs lacking in ethical decision-making, animal welfare standards, or simulation-based assessments.

2. Delivery Methods

Blended learning emerges as the most effective model—balancing accessibility (via e-learning) with hands-on training for practical skills. India's VERU model and WOAH's digital learning platforms both highlight how e-learning can scale training to remote or resource-constrained regions. However,

field simulations and mock drills remain irreplaceable, particularly for real-time coordination and cross-agency collaboration.

3. Institutional and Policy Support

The **success of VERUs** in India was largely due to strong collaboration between veterinary colleges, government departments, and international NGOs. Likewise, U.S. programs benefit from federal-level alignment with FEMA protocols. Without institutional support, training initiatives remain ad hoc and unsustainable. Integration into **national disaster frameworks** and veterinary education curricula is essential for long-term impact.

4. Gaps and Challenges

Key challenges include:

- Lack of standardized curriculum across regions
- Limited funding and logistical resources
- Inadequate inter-professional collaboration (e.g., with human health and emergency services)
- Poor awareness and prioritization of animal disaster response in public policy

Implementation Strategy

To scale veterinary disaster response training effectively, the following strategies are recommended:

1. **Institutionalize Training Units**: Establish VERU-like units in every veterinary college, integrated into academic programs with state and national disaster authority partnerships.
2. **Curricular Integration**: Make disaster preparedness a mandatory part of veterinary undergraduate and postgraduate curricula.
3. **Develop National Frameworks**: Standardize disaster response protocols and training guidelines with support from national veterinary councils and ministries.
4. **Foster One Health Collaboration**: Promote joint training with public health, wildlife, and environmental professionals.
5. **Invest in Simulation Infrastructure**: Build regional disaster simulation centers with support from global agencies.
6. **Promote Digital Platforms**: Utilize WOAH's and FAO's e-learning platforms to ensure training access in underserved areas.

CONCLUSION

Veterinarians are indispensable actors in disaster management, yet their training remains underdeveloped and inconsistently applied. Structured, well-funded, and context-sensitive training programs—supported by institutions and aligned with global frameworks—are urgently needed. Models like India's VERUs, the NCSU Credentialed Veterinary Responder Program, and global capacity-building efforts by WOAH and FAO provide valuable templates for implementation.

Integrating veterinary disaster response training into national policies and One Health strategies is not only essential for animal welfare but also for public health, food security, and sustainable development.

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