



**RAPID RESPONSE** BY  
LABORATORY ANIMAL RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LESSONS LEARNED

▶ MARCH 9-10, 2021

*A Virtual Workshop*

The National Academies of  
SCIENCE ENGINEERING  
MEDICINE

Rapid Response by Laboratory  
Animal Research Institutions  
During the COVID-19 Pandemic:  
Lessons Learned: Direct  
Staffing Impacts



# Biography CDR Terri Wilder, DMM, MPH, DACLAM

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- Tuskegee University College of Veterinary Medicine c/o 2006
- USDA 2006
- US Public Health Service Commissioned Corps 2008
- CDC Laboratory Animal Medicine Residency Program 2008/DACLAM 2011
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Comparative Medicine Branch 2012
- Milken Institute School of Public Health, George Washington University 2017

# Introduction

- Inherent workplace stress has been compounded by fear and anxiety; morale has been affected due to the current pandemic
- All institutions were keenly aware of the concerns and needs of their employees
- This session will discuss the fear and morale of laboratory animal care staff and mitigation efforts of leadership

# Fear and Morale - Government

- Facility is infectious disease research-focused
- ABSL 2 and ABSL3 vivariums
- Staff are provided extensive onboarding training and refresher training throughout the year
- Staff understand general viral principles (routes of transmission, prevention, etc.)

# Fear and Moral Cover nment

- Proficient in appropriate PPE donning and doffing processes and general biosafety principles
- Animal care staff represented and still represents the general population
  - At the start of the pandemic, the initial response was similar to the general population; some apprehension was present. Initially, fear was minimal
  - Understood the mission of the Agency and their essential roles

# Fear and Morale - Government

- Conflicting messages in media gradually increased the fear component
- Concerns about coming to work were expressed and addressed by leadership
- Over time, as the situation progressively got worse, the fear factor did increase
  - However, concerns arose from external sources (media, friends, family), but was not due to the work environment
- Staff understood their Essential Employee status and continued to work
- Morale overall - about average (on a scale of great to poor)

# Fear and Morale - Academia

- Emory Division of Animal Resources (DAR) 2020 COVID-19 Chronology
  - February: Questions arose at Emory of the possibility of pandemic-specific sick leave and if symptomatic persons would be prohibited from the workplace
  - March: False rumors arose: an employee was incapacitated with COVID-19, infected persons were working in research lab environments, mice were being euthanized due to food shortages (untrue). Attendance was closely tracked
  - March: DAR rebuffed a request from a physician to bring used N-95s back from the hospital to sterilize in Sterrad unit –this prospect caused considerable fear
  - April: A researcher improperly wore a mask, worked in a DAR facility and created great consternation



# Fear and Morale- Academia

- Coming to work in the face of a statewide stay-at-home order numerous questions were asked by staff:
  - How will stay-at-home orders be enforced? Would employees in transit be pulled-over? Would staff be frozen in place by a curfew?
- Emory campus police got a little “Barney Fife”, resulting in a public apology from the chief, whereas city and county police operated from a premise that commuters were engaged in essential activities
- Personnel at COVID-19 risk d/t age or condition (> 35 at Emory) were worried about leaving home and being exposed; they were kept safe at work

# Fear and Morale- Academia

- Researchers wearing masks in the facilities created fears among the animal care ranks that the masked persons were infected
- This occurred early on when the CDC and Dr. Anthony Fauci were recommending against wearing them because healthcare PPE was depleted; homemade cloth masks were gaining traction
- Animal Resources Program Leadership Fears:
  - School closures were projected to remove the 25% of workforce with young children from work –this did not happen.
  - The pandemic would explode and take many employees out of the workplace
  - How were commercial producers affected
  - Possibility of taking on a significant debt

# Fear and Morale- Academia

- As the pandemic progressed, large academic research universities began to reduce research and states issued stay-at-home orders
  - managing fear/anxiety/the unknown/morale was the primary concern facing programs (24% by survey ranking it first)
  - 13% of programs had at least one COVID-19 infected employee already; This increased to 28% with at least one infected employee by May 1.
- In an international academic institution, a potentially infected employee (due to possible spousal exposure) in mid-March was still permitted to work which was followed by two positive cases
  - In each case, the entire building was shutdown. Great fear ensued among staff in the face of trivial exposure
- Fear factor of research loss on the scientific side and managing it was a major challenge

# Staff Behavior and Outlook – Government and Academia

- SUPERSTARSTAFF
- Animal care workers in Government are designated as Essential Employees and are accustomed to working in challenging situations
- Large, academic programs reported without exception excellent attendance, high esprit de corps, little misuse of sick leave, and no one refusing to work.
  - This in an environment where most programs did not offer pay incentives.
- Programs reported (with the possible exception of single parents), employees are working out childcare and schooling at home within their families.

# Incentives and Morale Boosters

- Increased cleaning of workspaces (frequency)
- Schedule adjustments (split shifts, teleworking granted in limited cases)
- Food Items (candy, non-perishables, boxed lunches,
  - Catering in meals, box lunches, snacks periodically (Stanford, WashU, Emory)
- Dry Goods (handmade cloth masks donated, sanitizer, company logo t-shirts, backpacks and lip balm)
- Displayed motivational items (encouraging posters, employee appreciation notes)
- During the initial lockdown in DC, public transportation was limited. Staff were provided essential personnel letters due to transportation restraints (6 am to 4:30pm)

# Incentives and Morale Boosters

- Contractor gave each staff member an additional 80 hours of emergency leave (testing, quarantining, contact tracing) so that personal leave would not be used
- Emory used paid-not-worked (PNW) to send idled workers home when work for the day was completed early (due to reduced census and like factors), but to ensure the hours worked for a day and a week summed to 8 and 40, respectively.
- Emory paid a similar benefit where dependent care responsibilities required an employee to exit work before completion of a full workday

# Incentives and Morale Boosters

- For the autumn academic term, Emory offered employees with school age children 120 hours of paid leave (COVID ChildCare leave, CCC) to manage children schooling remotely from home
- PI started GoFundMe page for grocery gift cards for technicians.
- Virtual games - trivia, scavenger hunts,
- Outside events - space and weather permitting
- Zoom Town Halls

# Incentives and Morale Boosters

- Emory was prohibited to distribute grocery store gift cards to staff, but the Dean allowed for home delivery of locally-sourced, seasonal fruits and vegetables which was well-received.
- Free parking, fairly widespread (avoidance of public transportation)
- Florida, Yale: refunded one month of parking
- Virtual happy hours



# Training Challenges

- Staff continued hands on training for new hires, caretakers, cage wash, Pls, etc.
- Online trainings were provided
- Personnel less than 6 feet apart were required to don a face shield as additional PPE
  - Activity was recorded for contact tracing purposes (date, duration, and names of individuals)
- Group trainings were halted until further notice

# Thank you

- Dr. William R. Elkins (Associate Director, Laboratory Animal Resources and Director, Animal Program, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, CMB)
- Ms. Marni Walker (Chief, Laboratory Animal Sciences Section Animal Resources Program Administrator, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, CMB)
- Ms. Stephanie Weaver (Administrative Program Manager, Charles River Laboratories)
- Dr. Michael Huerkamp (Executive Director, Division of Animal Resources Emory University)
- Dr. Jill Ascher (Director, Division of Veterinary Resources, NIH)

# THANKYOU

Animal Care Staff, without whom  
none of this would be possible