
Animal Care and Service Workers

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Significant Points

- Animal lovers get satisfaction in this occupation, but the work can be unpleasant, physically and emotionally demanding, and sometimes dangerous.
- Most workers are trained on the job, but employers generally prefer to hire people who have experience with animals; some jobs require a bachelor's degree in biology, animal science, or a related field.
- Most positions will present good employment opportunities; however, keen competition is expected for jobs as zookeepers and marine mammal trainers.
- Earnings are relatively low.

Nature of the Work

Many people like animals. But, as pet owners can attest, taking care of them is hard work. Animal care and service workers—who include animal caretakers and animal trainers—train, feed, water, groom, bathe, and exercise animals and clean, disinfect, and repair their cages. They also play with the animals, provide companionship, and observe behavioral changes that could indicate illness or injury. Boarding kennels, pet stores, animal shelters, veterinary hospitals and clinics, stables, laboratories, aquariums and natural aquatic habitats, and zoological parks all house animals and employ animal care and service workers. Job titles and duties vary by employment setting.

Kennel attendants care for pets while their owners are working or traveling out of town. Beginning attendants perform basic tasks, such as cleaning cages and dog runs, filling food and water dishes, and exercising animals. Experienced attendants may provide basic animal healthcare, as well as bathe animals, trim nails, and attend to other grooming needs. Attendants who work in kennels also may sell pet food and supplies, assist in obedience training, help with breeding, or prepare animals for shipping.

Groomers are animal caretakers who specialize in grooming or maintaining a pet's appearance. Most groom dogs and a few groom cats. Some groomers work in kennels, veterinary clinics, animal shelters, or pet-supply stores. Others operate their own grooming business, typically at a salon, or increasingly, by making house calls. Such mobile services are growing rapidly as they offer convenience for pet owners, flexibility of schedules for groomers, and minimal trauma for pets resulting from their being in unfamiliar surroundings. Groomers clean and sanitize equipment to prevent the spread of disease, maintain grooming equipment, and maintain a clean and safe environment for the animals. Groomers also schedule appointments, discuss pets' grooming needs with clients, and collect information on the pet's disposition and its veterinarian. Groomers often are the first to notice a medical problem, such as an ear or skin infection that requires veterinary care.

Grooming the pet involves several steps: an initial brush-out is followed by a first clipping of hair or fur using electric clippers, combs, and grooming shears; the groomer then cuts the

nails, cleans the ears, bathes, and blow-dries the animal, and ends with a final clipping and styling.

Animal caretakers in animal shelters perform a variety of duties and work with a wide variety of animals. In addition to attending to the basic needs of the animals, caretakers at shelters also must keep records of the animals received and discharged and any tests or treatments done. Some vaccinate newly admitted animals under the direction of a veterinarian or veterinary technician, and euthanize (painlessly put to death) seriously ill, severely injured, or unwanted animals. Animal caretakers in animal shelters also interact with the public, answering telephone inquiries, screening applicants for animal adoption, or educating visitors on neutering and other animal health issues.

Grooms, or caretakers, care for horses in stables. They saddle and unsaddle horses, give them rubdowns, and walk them to cool them off after a ride. They also feed, groom, and exercise the horses; clean out stalls and replenish bedding; polish saddles; clean and organize the tack (harness, saddle, and bridle) room; and store supplies and feed. Experienced groomers may help train horses.

In zoos, animal care and service workers, called *keepers*, prepare the diets and clean the enclosures of animals, and sometimes assist in raising them when they are very young. They watch for any signs of illness or injury, monitor eating patterns or any changes in behavior, and record their observations. Keepers also may answer questions and ensure that the visiting public behaves responsibly toward the exhibited animals. Depending on the zoo, keepers may be assigned to work with a broad group of animals such as mammals, birds, or reptiles, or they may work with a limited collection of animals such as primates, large cats, or small mammals.

Animal trainers train animals for riding, security, performance, obedience, or assisting people with disabilities. Animal trainers do this by accustoming the animal to human voice



Most pet groomers work in kennels, veterinary clinics, or pet supply stores, but an increasing number operate their own salon or make house calls.

and contact and conditioning the animal to respond to commands. The three most commonly trained animals are dogs, horses, and marine mammals, including dolphins. Trainers use several techniques to help them train animals. One technique, known as a bridge, is a stimulus that a trainer uses to communicate the precise moment an animal does something correctly. When the animal responds correctly, the trainer gives positive reinforcement in a variety of ways: food, toys, play, rubdowns, or speaking the word “good.” Animal training takes place in small steps and often takes months and even years of repetition. During the conditioning process, trainers provide animals with mental stimulation, physical exercise, and husbandry care. A relatively new form of training teaches animals to cooperate with workers giving medical care. Animals learn “veterinary” behaviors, such as allowing and even cooperating with the collection of blood samples; physical, x-ray, ultrasonic, and dental exams; physical therapy; and the administration of medicines and replacement fluids.

Training also can be a good tool for facilitating the relocation of animals from one habitat to another, easing, for example, the process of loading horses on trailers. Trainers often work in competitions or shows, such as circuses or marine parks, aquariums, animal shelters, dog kennels and salons, or horse farms. Trainers in shows work to display the talent and ability of an animal, such as a dolphin, through interactive programs to educate and entertain the public.

In addition to their hands-on work with the animals, trainers often oversee other aspects of animals’ care, such as preparing their diet and providing a safe and clean environment and habitat.

Work environment. People who love animals get satisfaction from working with and helping them. However, some of the work may be unpleasant, physically and emotionally demanding, and sometimes dangerous. Most animal caretakers and service workers have to clean animal cages and lift, hold, or restrain animals, risking exposure to bites or scratches. Their work often involves kneeling, crawling, repeated bending, and lifting heavy supplies like bales of hay or bags of feed. Animal caretakers must take precautions when treating animals with germicides or insecticides. They may work outdoors in all kinds of weather, and the work setting can be noisy. Caretakers of show and sports animals travel to competitions.

Animal caretaker and service workers who witness abused animals or who assist in euthanizing unwanted, aged, or hopelessly injured animals may experience emotional distress. Those working for private humane societies and municipal animal shelters often deal with the public, some of whom might react with hostility to the implication that they are neglecting or abusing their pets. Such workers must maintain a calm and professional demeanor while helping to enforce the laws regarding animal care.

Animal care and service workers often work irregular hours. Most animals are fed every day, so caretakers often work weekend and holiday shifts. Some zoo animals skip one meal a week to mimic their lives in the wild. In some animal hospi-

tals, research facilities, and animal shelters, an attendant is on duty 24 hours a day, which means night shifts.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

On-the-job training is the most common way animal caretakers and service workers learn their work; however, employers generally prefer to hire people who have experience with animals. Some preparatory programs are available for specific types of caretakers, such as groomers.

Education and training. Animal trainers often need a high school diploma or GED equivalent. Some animal training jobs may require a bachelor’s degree and additional skills. For example, marine mammal trainers usually need a bachelor’s degree in biology, marine biology, animal science, psychology, or a related field. An animal health technician degree also may qualify trainers for some jobs.

Most equine trainers learn their trade by working as a groom at a stable. Some study at an accredited private training school. Because large animals are involved, most horse-training jobs have minimum weight requirements for candidates.

Many dog trainers attend workshops and courses at community colleges and vocational schools. Topics include basic study of canines, learning theory of animals, teaching obedience cues, problem solving methods, and safety. Many also offer business training.

Many zoos require their caretakers to have a bachelor’s degree in biology, animal science, or a related field. Most require experience with animals, preferably as a volunteer or paid keeper in a zoo.

Most pet groomers learn their trade by completing an informal apprenticeship, usually lasting 6 to 10 weeks, under the guidance of an experienced groomer. Prospective groomers also may attend one of the 52 State-licensed grooming schools throughout the country, with programs varying in length from 2 to 18 weeks. Beginning groomers often start by taking on one duty, such as bathing and drying the pet. They eventually assume responsibility for the entire grooming process, from the initial brush-out to the final clipping.

Animal caretakers in animal shelters are not required to have any specialized training, but training programs and workshops are available through the Humane Society of the United States, the American Humane Association, and the National Animal Control Association. Workshop topics include cruelty investigations, appropriate methods of euthanasia for shelter animals, proper guidelines for capturing animals, techniques for preventing problems with wildlife, and dealing with the public.

Beginning animal caretakers in kennels learn on the job and usually start by cleaning cages and feeding and watering animals.

Certification and other qualifications. Certifications are available in many animal service occupations. For dog trainers, certification by a professional association or one of the hundreds of private vocational or State-approved trade schools can be advantageous. The National Dog Groomers Association of America offers certification for master status as a groomer. The American Boarding Kennels Association

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Animal care and service workers	39-2000	200,000	238,000	39,000	19
Animal trainers.....	39-2011	43,000	53,000	9,800	23
Nonfarm animal caretakers	39-2021	157,000	185,000	29,000	18

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

offers a three-stage, home-study program for individuals interested in pet care. Those who complete the third stage and pass oral and written examinations become Certified Kennel Operators (CKO).

All animal caretakers and service workers need patience, sensitivity, and problem solving ability. They also need tact and communication skills. This is particularly true for those in shelters, who often deal with individuals who abandon their pets. The ability to handle emotional people is vital for workers at shelters.

Animal trainers especially need problem-solving skills and experience in animal obedience. Successful marine mammal trainers should also have good public speaking skills as seminars and presentations are a large part of the job. Usually 4 to 5 trainers work with a group of animals at one time, therefore, each trainer should be able to work as part of a team. Marine mammal trainers must also be good swimmers; certification in SCUBA is a plus.

Advancement. With experience and additional training, caretakers in animal shelters may become adoption coordinators, animal control officers, emergency rescue drivers, assistant shelter managers, or shelter directors. Pet groomers who work in large retail establishments or kennels may, with experience, move into supervisory or managerial positions. Experienced groomers often choose to open their own salons. Advancement for kennel caretakers takes the form of promotion to kennel supervisor, assistant manager, and manager; those with enough capital and experience may open up their own kennels. Zookeepers may advance to senior keeper, assistant head keeper, head keeper, and assistant curator, but very few openings occur, especially for the higher-level positions.

Employment

Animal caretakers and service workers held 200,000 jobs in 2006. Over 3 out of 4 worked as nonfarm animal caretakers; the remainder worked as animal trainers. Nonfarm animal caretakers often worked in boarding kennels, animal shelters, stables, grooming shops, pet stores, animal hospitals, and veterinary offices. A significant number of caretakers worked for animal humane societies, racing stables, dog and horse race-track operators, zoos, theme parks, circuses, and other amusement and recreations services.

Employment of animal trainers is concentrated in animal services that specialize in training and in commercial sports, where they train racehorses and dogs. About 57 percent of animal trainers were self-employed.

Job Outlook

Because many workers leave this occupation each year, there will be good job opportunities for most positions. Faster-than-average employment growth also will add to job openings, in addition to replacement needs.

Employment change. Employment of animal care and service workers is expected to grow 19 percent over the 2006-16 decade, faster than the average for all occupations. The companion pet population, which drives employment of animal caretakers in kennels, grooming shops, animal shelters, and veterinary clinics and hospitals, is expected to increase. Pet owners—including a large number of baby boomers, whose disposable income is expected to increase as they age—are expected to increasingly purchase grooming services, daily and overnight boarding services, training services, and veterinary services, resulting in more jobs for animal care and service workers. As more pet owners consider their pets part of the family, demand for luxury animal services and the willingness to spend greater amounts of money on pets should continue to grow. Demand for marine mammal trainers, on the other hand, should grow slowly.

Demand for animal care and service workers in animal shelters is expected to grow as communities increasingly recognize the connection between animal abuse and abuse toward humans, and continue to commit private funds to animal shelters, many of which are working hand-in-hand with social service agencies and law enforcement teams.

Job prospects. Due to employment growth and the need to replace workers who leave the occupation, job opportunities for most positions should be good. The need to replace workers leaving the field will create the overwhelming majority of job openings. Many animal caretaker jobs require little or no training and have flexible work schedules, making them suitable for people seeking a first job or for temporary or part-time work. The outlook for caretakers in zoos and aquariums, however, is not favorable due to slow job growth and keen competition for the few positions.

Prospective mammal trainers will face keen competition as the number of applicants greatly exceeds the number of available positions. Prospective horse trainers should anticipate an equally challenging labor market as the number of entry-level positions is limited. Dog trainers, however, should experience conditions that are more favorable. Opportunities for dog trainers should be best in large metropolitan areas.

Job opportunities for animal care and service workers may vary from year to year because the strength of the economy

affects demand for these workers. Pet owners tend to spend more on animal services when the economy is strong.

Earnings

Earnings are relatively low. Median hourly earnings of non-farm animal caretakers were \$8.72 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$7.50 and \$10.95. The bottom 10 percent earned less than \$6.56, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$14.64. Median hourly earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of nonfarm animal caretakers in May 2006 were:

Spectator sports.....	\$9.38
Other personal services.....	8.78
Social advocacy organizations.....	8.31
Other professional, scientific, and technical services.....	8.23
Veterinary services.....	8.23
Other miscellaneous store retailers.....	8.22

Median hourly earnings of animal trainers were \$12.65 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$9.11 and \$17.39. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$7.66, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$22.42.

Related Occupations

Others who work extensively with animals include farmers, ranchers, and agricultural managers; agricultural workers; veterinarians; veterinary technologists and technicians; veterinary assistants; and biological scientists.

Sources of Additional Information

For career information and information on training, certification, and earnings of the related occupation of animal control officers, contact:

- ▶ National Animal Control Association, P.O. Box 1480851, Kansas City, MO 64148-0851.

Internet: <http://www.nacanet.org>

For information on becoming an advanced pet care technician at a kennel, contact:

- ▶ American Boarding Kennels Association, 1702 East Pikes Peak Ave., Colorado Springs, CO 80909.

Internet: <http://www.abka.com/abka>

For general information on pet grooming careers, including certification information, contact:

- ▶ National Dog Groomers Association of America, P.O. Box 101, Clark, PA 16113.

Internet: <http://www.nationaldoggroomers.com>