

Florida School Launches Animal Forensics Program

ASPCA partners with the University of Florida to help investigate crimes against animals.

Posted: January 17, 2009, 5 a.m. EST

The University of Florida has partnered with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) to develop a Veterinary Forensic Sciences Program dedicated to the teaching, research, and application of forensic science in the investigation and prosecution against animals.

The university reported that this is the first such program within an educational institution.

“This is a newly emerging field,” said Bruce Goldberger, Ph.D., director of the William R. Maples Center for Forensic Medicine at the university. “We are translating our knowledge of forensic science to a new field devoted to solving crimes against animals.”

The program will also be directly involved in forensic work on animal cruelty cases investigated by the ASPCA, and will also assist other agencies with such investigations.

The ASPCA will provide an initial gift of \$150,000 to sponsor a clinical professorship at the rank of associate professor and work with the university to develop the educational plan and research mission and define the areas of applied casework for the program.

In addition to the undergraduate and graduate programs, continuing education programs will be available through workshops for veterinarians, law enforcement, animal control officers, and attorneys. Courses will include: forensic entomology, buried remains excavation, bloodstain analysis, bite mark analysis, and animal crime scene processing. Trainings will be done in classroom settings, online, and through the just-formed International Veterinary Forensic Sciences Association.

“Veterinarians are frequently asked to participate in cruelty investigations, yet we don’t receive special training on that in veterinary school,” said Julie Levy, DVM, Ph.D., director of Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Program at the University of Florida. “There is a substantial unmet need for that training to be provided to veterinarians.”

The university said that since there is no national tracking of animal cruelty cases, the new program will allow for better collection of such data. The ASPCA investigates more than 5,000 cruelty cases and arrests or issues summonses to more than 300 people each year. Scenarios include neglect, abandonment, animal hoarding, and dogfighting.

“The ability to offer a joint forensic science and veterinary medicine education at the Bachelor and Master level is unprecedented,” said Melinda Merck, DVM, senior director of Veterinary Forensics for the ASPCA. “We’re excited to have the opportunity to collaborate with the University of Florida and to create a program that can provide ‘one-stop shopping’ for veterinary forensic science needs for agencies and individuals.”