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# Training Law Enforcement Officials on Responding to Equine Calls

**Abstract**

The occurrence of equine abuse/neglect cases is an ongoing issue. However, officials responding to equine cases are rarely experienced in handling horses. Therefore, workshops teaching basic horse husbandry were offered to better equip and prepare officials to respond to equine cases. Trainings consisted of both classroom and hands-on sessions. Responses to a survey conducted 4 to 6 months postworkshop indicated that the training had been very beneficial during subsequent equine investigations (80%) and that officials were more prepared to assess horses (85%). Thus, Extension faculty presented basic, factual information that was relevant to the needs of officials responding to equine cases.

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## Introduction

Law enforcement officials asked to respond to equine neglect and abuse cases frequently are minimally trained in basic horse knowledge and handling (Porr, Brown, & Splan, 2011; Yoder, Hamilton, Ray, Stewart, & Walls, 2011). Some states have reported requests for training by animal control officers and equine rescue facilities due to increased cases of neglect and abuse (Yoder et al., 2011). In a survey of emergency responders, including law enforcement officials, 60% reported having responded to equine-related emergencies but less than 25% reported having received any training in equine handling techniques (Porr et al., 2011). Law enforcement officials often need to make decisions and handle horses in challenging situations but are reluctant to do so because of

their limited horse knowledge and skills. In response to requests from the Nebraska Humane Society, University of Nebraska Equine Extension professionals developed a single-day training for law enforcement officials to enable them to respond to equine cases in a more confident, equipped manner.

## Materials and Methods

In fall 2011, University of Nebraska Equine Extension faculty and the Nebraska Humane Society organized the Nebraska Unwanted Horse Coalition (NUHC) in an effort to assist as needed with unwanted horses in Nebraska. A 1-day program was developed to educate law enforcement officials on basic horse husbandry and handling needed when responding to equine abuse/neglect calls. The 3-year annually held program was conducted at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) Animal Science Complex (2012, 2014) and Haythorn Ranch in Arthur, Nebraska (2013). These locations were chosen for their adequate classroom facilities in close proximity to horses and particular geographic regions of Nebraska. Speakers were selected NUHC experts and consisted of UNL Extension equine professionals, veterinarians, Farm Bureau personnel, and Nebraska Humane Society and Nebraska Horse Council representatives. The program was promoted primarily to various law enforcement groups, such as animal control divisions, county attorney offices, and the Nebraska Sheriffs' Association. Horses used for the hands-on sessions consisted of UNL teaching and Haythorn ranch horses chosen to meet the needs of the various sessions (UNL Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee #918).

The workshops involved a combination of classroom instruction and hands-on opportunities. A goal was to enable officials to be more confident with basic horse handling, horse behavior, and knowledge about horses. The importance of training basic horse husbandry skills to individuals was documented by Stull (2014), and the program described here was formatted to address the identified priority areas. Topics included body condition scoring, aging by teeth, general health observations, quality of feed, investigative techniques, horse behavior, basics of horse identification, and available resources. Information was initially presented in a classroom/lecture format, using presentations, handouts, and videos. Additionally, the trainings incorporated the opportunity for hands-on horse handling and application of concepts introduced during lectures. Groups of three to five individuals were rotated among stations to allow everyone the opportunity for hands-on experiences. Participants were coached through a variety of horse handling skills, such as safely approaching and haltering, leading, tying to an appropriate location with a quick-release knot, assessing horse health (temperature, pulse, respiration, capillary refill time, etc.), aging by teeth, and trailer loading/unloading.

Participants were asked to complete a paper-based pre- and postprogram survey to determine the amount of knowledge gained from the program and the effectiveness of the program on improving abilities they need when responding to equine-related calls (Martinson, Bartholomay, Anderson, Skelly, & Greene, 2012). The survey was designed using a 5-point Likert-type scale, with response options ranging from 5 (*very much*) to 1 (*very little*). Additionally, a similar online follow-up survey was emailed to all attendees 4 to 6 months following the training to determine longer term program effectiveness. Questions related to how the training had benefited participants in responding to equine-related calls during the previous 4 to 6 months.

 

# Results and Discussion

During the 3 years of the annual program, 64 individuals attended the trainings conducted at the UNL Animal Science Complex (2012, *n* = 22; 2014, *n* = 20) and Haythorn Ranch in western Nebraska (2013, *n* = 22). Of the 49 attendees responding to the postworkshop survey, most (37/49; 4.68±0.84, scale 1–5) indicated that their ability to investigate equine calls following the training was very high to highly improved and that they felt they would be more prepared when responding to equine cases (39/49; 4.87±0.88).

The highest degree of knowledge gained from both lecture sessions (Table 1) and hands-on sessions (Table 2) was on the topic of equine health and aging (91.2% increase from lecture session, 71.3% from hands-on session). Nearly all respondents (95%) commented favorably on the value of being able to apply the lecture information to live horses and felt very strongly that doing so was one of the most worthwhile aspects of the training. The training in health and aging allowed participants to obtain greater confidence in their health assessment abilities as they were provided the opportunity to examine several horses of various ages and temperaments. Horses used in the trainings were excellent teaching subjects for inexperienced handlers. However, future trainings might be enhanced by using horses that are more similar in temperament to those that may be encountered in the field.

**Table 1.**

Knowledge Gained by Law Enforcement Officials from Lecture Sessions (*n* = 49)

| | **Average initial knowledge level** | | | **Average final knowledge level** | | | **Knowledge gained[a]** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Lecture topic** | **Mean** | | **Standard deviation** | **Mean** | | **Standard deviation** | **%** |
| Health and aging | 2.04 | ± | 1.08 | 3.90 | ± | 0.71 | 91.2 |
| Resources | 2.12 | ± | 0.89 | 3.85 | ± | 0.66 | 81.6 |
| Hay quality | 2.27 | ± | 1.21 | 3.93 | ± | 0.73 | 73.1 |
| Behavior and body language | 2.58 | ± | 1.20 | 4.0 | ± | 0.60 | 55.0 |
| Basic horse information | 2.8 | ± | 1.20 | 4.11 | ± | 0.72 | 46.8 |
| Investigative techniques | 3.0 | ± | 0.93 | 4.17 | ± | 0.68 | 38.0 |

*Note.* Scores for response options were 1 = very little, 2 = little, 3 = some, 4

= much, 5 = very much.
[a]((Average final knowledge level – average initial knowledge level) / average initial knowledge level) * 100 = % knowledge gained.

**Table 2.**

Knowledge Gained by Law Enforcement Officials from Hands-On Sessions (*n* = 49)

| | **Average initial knowledge level** | | | **Average final knowledge level** | | | **Knowledge gained[a]** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Hands-on topic** | **Mean** | | **Standard deviation** | **Mean** | | **Standard deviation** | **%** |
| Aging and health | 2.23 | ± | 0.93 | 3.82 | ± | 0.77 | 71.3 |
| Hay evaluation | 2.43 | ± | 1.14 | 3.89 | ± | 0.76 | 60.1 |
| Trailer loading | 2.58 | ± | 1.24 | 4.0 | ± | 0.60 | 54.8 |
| Basic horse information | 2.67 | ± | 1.09 | 3.39 | ± | 0.62 | 47.2 |

*Note.* Scores for response options were 1 = very little, 2 = little, 3 = some, 4 = much, 5 = very much.
[a]((Average final knowledge level – average initial knowledge level) / average initial knowledge level) * 100 = % knowledge gained.

Responses to the survey conducted 4 to 6 months following a workshop indicated similar benefits for individuals who had responded to equine calls. Of the 20 responders, 80% (16/20) indicated that the workshop information had been very beneficial during subsequent equine investigations, and 85% (17/20) indicated that they were more prepared to assess the horses.

Likewise, 100% indicated that the information presented during lecture and hands-on sessions on aging by teeth, assessing a horse's health, investigative techniques, and resources available to them had been very to moderately beneficial (Table 3). Furthermore, 81% to 94% indicated that the material presented on the other lecture and hands-on topics had been moderately to very useful. This result is very similar to what was reported in the postworkshop surveys, indicating that attendees' perceptions of what was useful and meaningful information at the conclusion of the workshop were confirmed when they responded to cases in the field.

**Table 3.**

Apparent Usefulness of Equine Law Enforcement

Training 4–6 Months Following Workshop (*n* = 20)

| Topic | Very to moderately beneficial % |
|---|---|
| Aging | 100.0 |
| Health assessment | 100.0 |
| Investigative techniques | 100.0 |
| Resources | 100.0 |
| Accessing hay quality | 93.7 |
| Horse body language | 93.7 |
| Basic horse information | 88.2 |
| Trailer loading | 88.6 |
| Horse handling | 81.0 |

The data indicate that university Extension faculty presented basic, factual, unbiased information that was specific and relevant to the needs of officials responding to equine cases. This training empowered officials with needed skills and knowledge when investigating equine calls.

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