Research program IZS VE 13/16

Rehoming shelter dogs: selection and training protocols for AAI

Project coordinator: Luca Farina

Dogs are one of 5 species enabled for involvement in therapeutic and educational animal assisted interventions by the Agreement between the Government, the Regions and Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano regarding the document "National Guidelines for Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI)" adopted on March 25th 2015. However, AAI involvement of dogs that have an anamnesis of recent abandonment and/or abuse (including dogs kept in kennels and shelters), is subordinated to a process of re-education and socialization, coordinated by a veterinary behaviourist with the support of adequately trained staff. To date, there are neither indications nor protocols for the selection of eligible individuals for the re-education programme. There is also a lack of operational working methods and concrete targets, according to which the recovery of social and intra/inter-specific relational abilities could be completed, leading to a reliable and successful involvement of these dogs in AAI.

This project has four main objectives:

1. the definition and validation of the process for selecting, among those dogs kept in kennels and shelters, of the individuals with social and behavioural characteristics which are indicative of a possible future involvement in AAI;
2. the identification of the re-education objectives that are functional for the correct recovery of relational abilities of selected dogs;
3. the definition of reference criteria for implementing appropriate training of selected dogs towards specific relational spheres of AAI;
4. the definition of reference criteria for ethical analysis of all aspects related to the selection process of dogs to be included in the re-education programmes, the possibility for them to be adopted by dog handlers and be involved in AAI projects, the resulting economic advantage for the management of kennels and shelters by the National Healthcare Service or associations and the suggestion of a model for dog shelters' integration in the modern society.