

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory study was to gather information about what OTs know about Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT); to find out how many OTs currently incorporate AAT into their practices, and to learn how OTs developed their AAT practices. We designed a survey and a questionnaire for interviews and participated in a level I AAT fieldwork placement to better understand the scope of practice of AAT. A further aim of the study was to gauge interest in the development of AAT education for OTs. The survey results, telephone interviews, and direct observation resulted in valuable insight into the process and challenges involved in developing an AAT practice. Our survey results revealed a keen interest in the field of AAT from students that doesn't always result into practice. We also found a wide range of AAT types of practices with a variety of settings.

BACKGROUND

AAT is an emerging practice area in Occupational Therapy (Fine, 2015). There are many anecdotal reports of the benefits of animals in therapy but little evidence-based research that supports their use (O'Haire, Guerin, & Kirkham, 2015). Many existing research studies claim success but are actually engaged in Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) or Animal Assisted Education (AAE) and not AAT (Glenk, 2017). There is also no consistency in preparation for OTs to participate in AAT and for selection and certification of animals (Jill Felice, personal communication, 2017).

METHODS

- Mixed methods research with survey and interviews.
- Email invitation to distribute survey sent to 192 OT Programs in the U.S.
- In person recruiting at 2017 Philadelphia AOTA conference. (we handed out business cards with a QR code link to survey.
- Survey link posted on FGCU Facebook (snowball sampling).

Practitioner Interviews

- Interviewed AAT OT practitioners by phone.
- Calls recorded, transcribed and coded for themes.

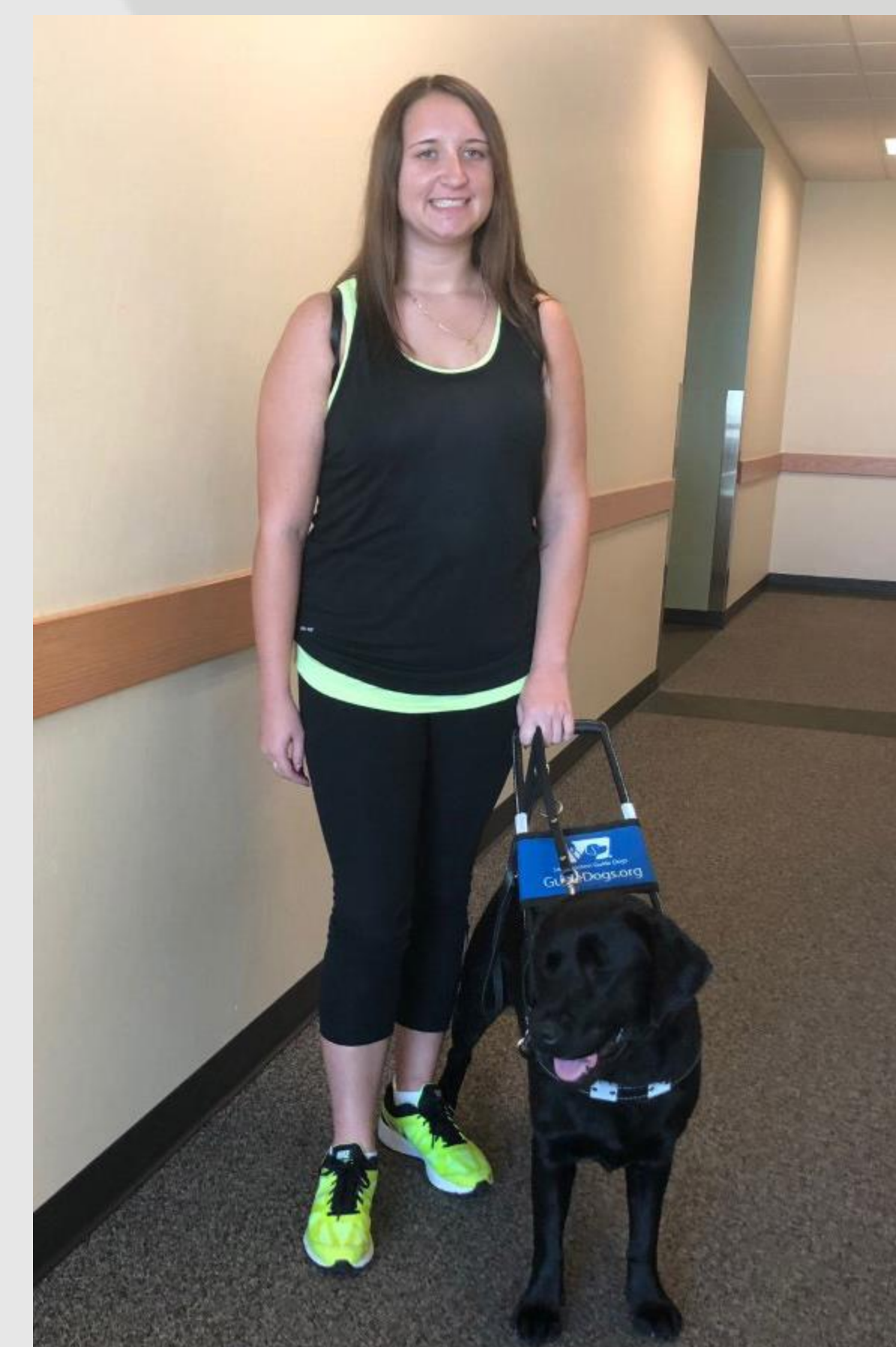
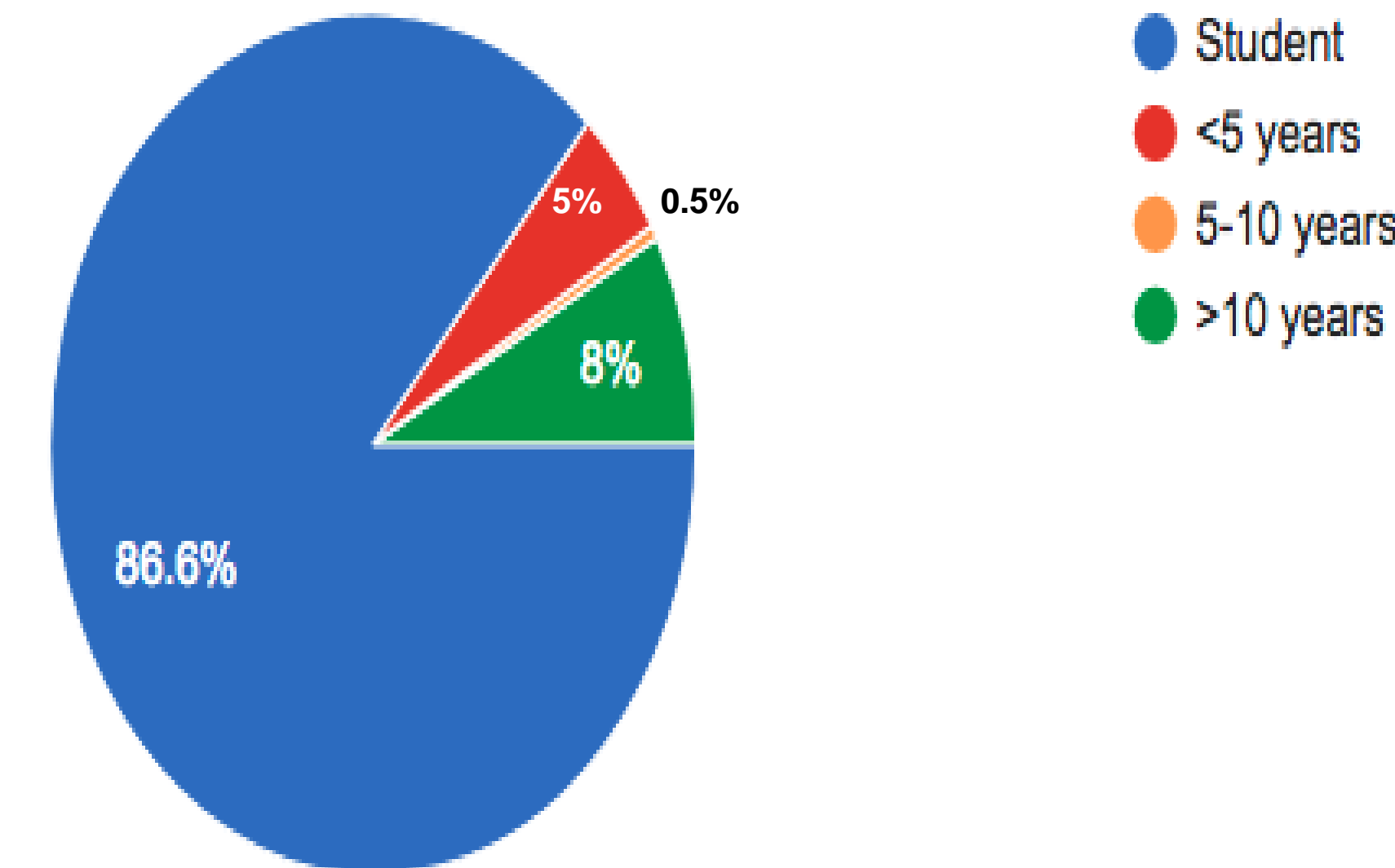


Photo courtesy of Kayla Copass

RESULTS

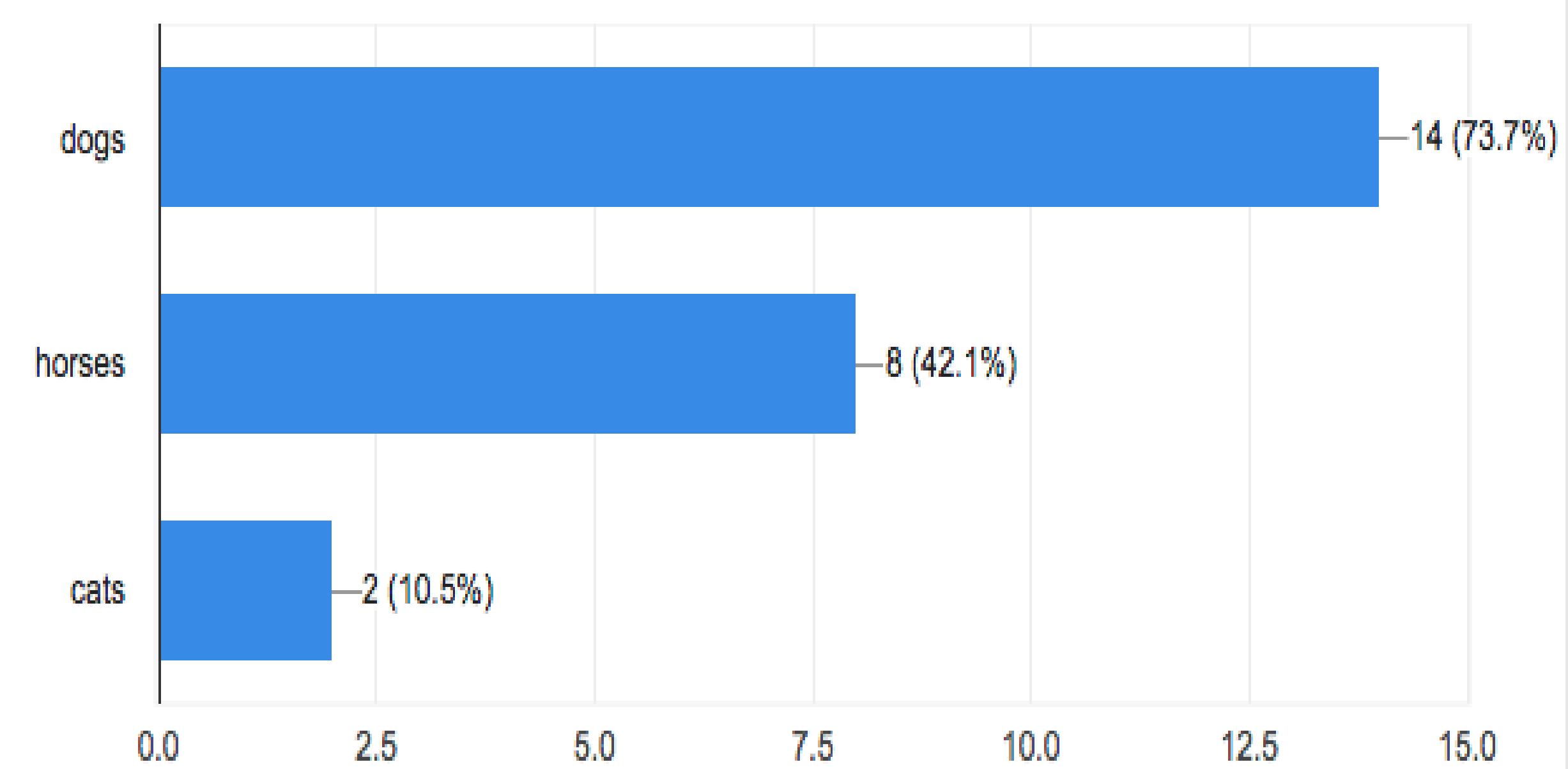
How long have you been practicing occupational therapy?

201 responses



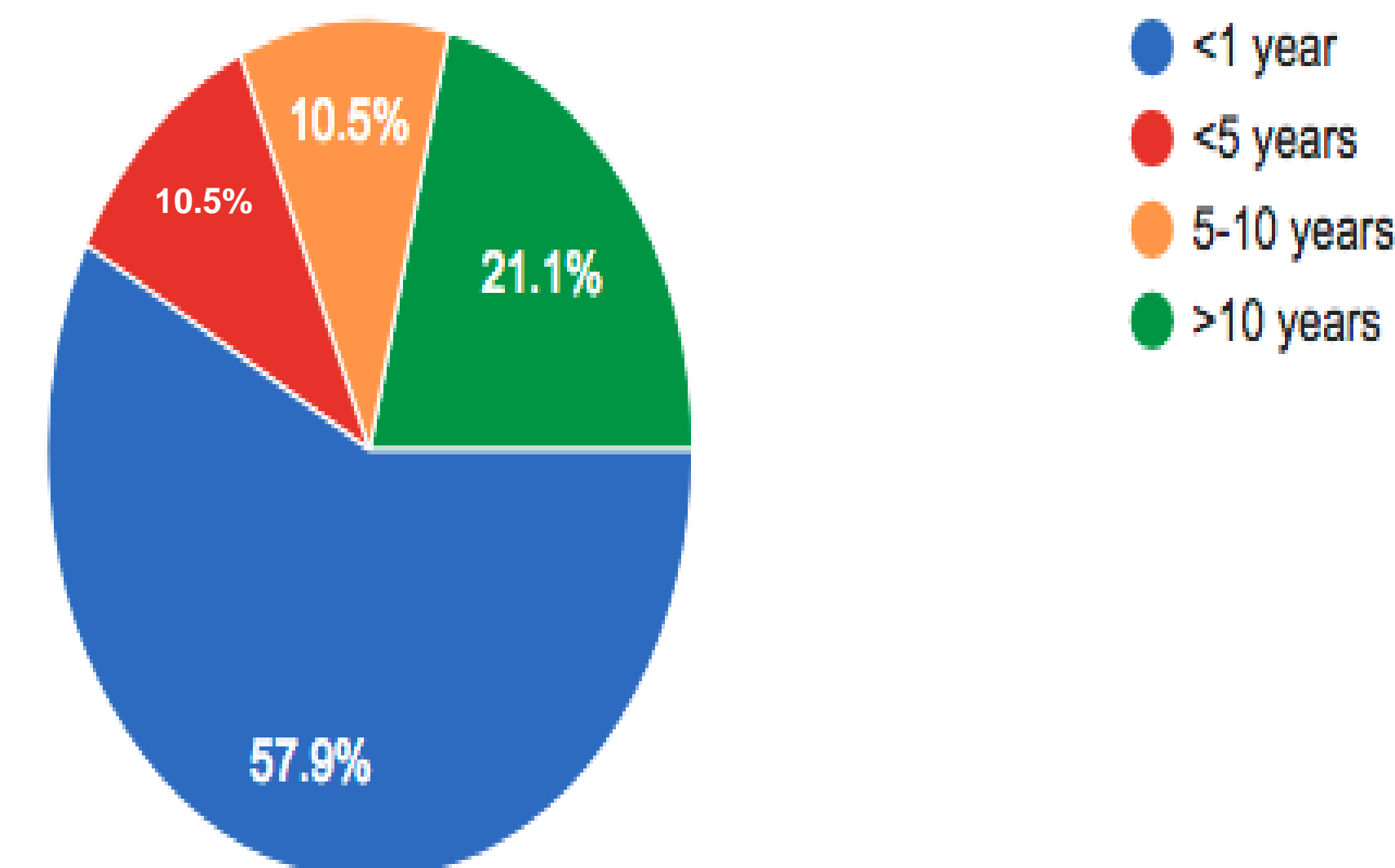
What kind of animals do you work with?

19 responses



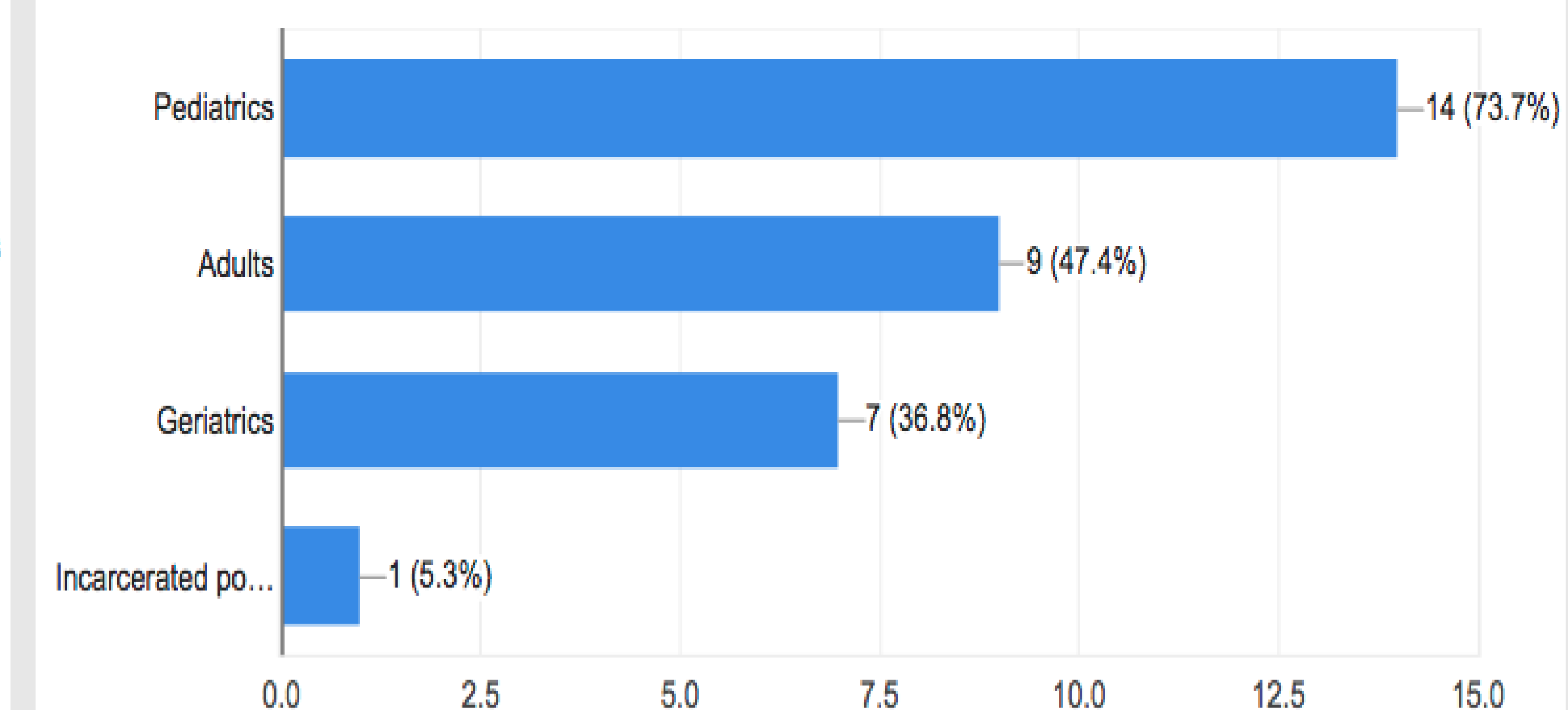
How long have you been practicing AAT?

19 responses



What client population do you work with?

19 responses



QUALITATIVE THEMES

- High variability in practice settings & types of animals
- The limited availability of local resources for interested OTs:
 - Required out of state travel to training sites
 - Expensive & time consuming
- Absence of standardization for certification & training requirements.
- OTs interested in AAT must be very motivated and dedicated to complete the process.
- Concerns regarding insurance and reimbursement



Photo courtesy of Catster



Photo courtesy of Pet Partners



Photo courtesy of Island Dolphin Care

CONCLUSIONS

- Keen interest among students.
- Limited opportunities to develop AAT practice due to cost, availability of education, training & internships in the field.
- No standardization in preparation for OT AAT practitioners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop OT-centric post professional AAT curriculum.
- Collaborate with existing AAT sites to develop standards for education and certification.
- Increase awareness to attract OTs to AAT and focus on AAT research endeavors to promote evidence-based practice guidelines.



Photo courtesy of Special Equestrians