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The Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ (AZA) Animal Welfare Committee helps raise Accreditation Standards for nonhuman animal well being. An Animal Welfare Process Standard requires AZA-accredited zoos to “develop a clear process for identifying, communicating, and addressing animal welfare concerns within the institution in a timely manner.” Smithsonian’s National Zoo has an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), which has more limited communication processes than a newly developed process called “Animals First.” Guiding principles of Animals First are that all animal care sciences staff members are responsible for understanding “their” animals’ requirements, enhancing animal welfare, and providing optimal care. Animal welfare is proactively addressed through staff education/research, regular assessments of animal well being, appropriate chains of command, and the IACUC. Welfare is addressed reactively as necessary through similar mechanisms. Proactive and reactive means for discussing welfare require Courtesy, Professionalism & Respect (CPR) and open/honest communication about issues and their resolution. Animals First achieves excellence in animal welfare via defined channels of communication through which perceived animal welfare issues are reported, documented, reviewed, addressed as necessary, and then discussed with concerned parties. Animals First ideally supports animal care personnel addressing welfare issues with any zoo staff in a safe environment and helps them clearly articulate action steps that need to be taken (or articulate that no action will be taken following thorough analysis among senior managers) to address the issue. If good communication is missing, animal welfare may suffer. Moving from good care to great animal welfare means we must confront difficult facts together in an honest way, then take disciplined actions that put animals first!

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