

The "AAALAC International i-brief" (short for "Issue Brief"), is designed to help clarify specific elements of the accreditation process and is published as a service to accredited institutions. Feel free to distribute this i-brief to others at your organization.

# Understanding Suggestions for Improvement (SFIs) in AAALAC Accreditation

## What Are SFIs?

**Suggestions for Improvement (SFIs)** are non-mandatory recommendations provided by **AAALAC International** following an accreditation site visit. These suggestions are part of the organization's peer review process and reflect the collective expertise and observations of the **Council on Accreditation**. The purpose of SFIs is to identify areas where an institution's animal care and use program could be enhanced, even if those areas already meet the required minimum standards.

Each SFI typically follows a structured format: first, it outlines the issue; next, it explains why the issue is significant; and finally, it offers a recommendation to address it. For example, an SFI might note that cleaning equipment in an animal room was stored improperly and appeared soiled. The Council would then explain why this could reduce sanitation effectiveness and suggest improving storage and equipment maintenance practices to enhance hygiene and reduce contamination risk.

SFIs are rooted in good practice and are not punitive. Instead, they are intended to promote high-quality, performance-based animal care that may go beyond regulatory minimums.

## How SFIs Differ from Mandatory Items

While SFIs are suggestions, AAALAC's site visit reports may also include **mandatory items for correction**, which represent serious non-conformance with core standards such as the *Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals*, the *Ag Guide*, The European Convention ETS 123, or relevant AAALAC Position and Guidance Statements, Reference Resources, or regional requirements. Unlike SFIs, these mandatory items must be resolved before full accreditation can be granted. They often involve deficiencies that may pose a risk to animal welfare, personnel safety, or compliance with law and policy.

For example, a missing emergency escape mechanism in a rack washer, or a failure to follow aseptic technique during survival surgery would be categorized as mandatory corrections due to their potential to cause harm and their conflict with fundamental standards.

## The Purpose and Value of SFIs

SFIs serve as a resource for institutions striving for **continuous improvement**. AAALAC Council members visit and assess hundreds of programs each year, giving them unique insight into evolving best practices and new interpretations of standards. Through SFIs, they share this collective knowledge, offering institutions ideas that may help strengthen their programs. This is particularly important in a field like animal welfare, where best practices and expectations evolve over time, often outpacing published guidance.

In some cases, SFIs may highlight areas where an institution falls slightly short of recommendations in the *Guide*, the *Ag Guide*, the European Convention ETS 123, or AAALAC's own Position and Guidance Statements. They may also draw attention to small administrative or regulatory compliance issues that do not amount to serious deficiencies but are still worth addressing to enhance overall program quality.



continued next page...

## Understanding Suggestions for Improvement (SFIs) in AAALAC Accreditation

### How to Respond to SFIs

Institutions are not obligated to act on or formally respond to SFIs. However, they are encouraged to do so—either to acknowledge the recommendation, describe planned improvements, or respectfully disagree. Any such response must be submitted in writing as part of a **Post Site Visit Communication (PSVC)**, typically within ten business days after the site visit exit briefing.

It is important to note that if an institution indicates in a PSVC that it plans to implement a suggested improvement, that statement becomes a written commitment to AAALAC. Council members will then follow up on that commitment during future reviews, unless the institution later notifies them of a change in direction.

The decision to implement SFIs usually falls under the responsibility of the Institutional Official in collaboration with the **Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee or equivalent Oversight Body (IACUC/OB)** and the Attending or Designated Veterinarian. These groups are best positioned to evaluate the recommendation in the context of the institution's goals, resources, and program priorities.

### Do SFIs Ever Become Mandatory Later?

Receiving an SFI does not mean that the issue will automatically become a mandatory item for correction in a future site visit. However, if similar SFIs continue to accumulate in a particular area—such as multiple issues related to animal husbandry—this could eventually signal a programmatic problem. In such cases, the Council may determine that the pattern of deficiencies warrants reclassification as a mandatory area for correction.

For example, a single observation about temperature and relative humidity levels in a feed storage room might not be serious enough to require correction. But if future site visits reveal additional related issues (for example, inconsistent temperature and humidity controls in other parts of the animal facility), the Council may conclude that the overall program management of temperature and relative humidity requires corrective action.

An SFI may also become a mandatory finding for correction if the regulation or standard that AAALAC is using to support that SFI is revised. For example, if site visitors identify social animals being housed singly and recommend through an SFI that social species be housed socially, Council may determine that this practice was not consistent with the AAALAC International Position Statement on Social Housing. Social housing is considered the default method of housing unless otherwise justified, as such, resulting in this finding being elevated to a mandatory finding for correction.

### Institutional Benefits of SFIs

One of the major benefits of participating in the AAALAC accreditation process is access to the insight and experience of an external, expert evaluation team. SFIs offer practical suggestions that may support internal discussions around resource allocation, facility upgrades, or procedural improvements. They can also be supportive for changes in operational procedures or equipment by referencing guidance from a respected third-party authority.

Beyond their immediate value, SFIs reflect AAALAC's broader goal of supporting institutions in achieving the highest possible standards of animal care and use. Accreditation is a voluntary commitment to excellence. Implementing SFIs is one way institutions can demonstrate that their program not only complies with regulatory requirements but also aspires to exceed them.

### Conclusion

SFIs are a valuable part of AAALAC International's accreditation process. They offer insight, promote best practices, and help institutions stay aligned with evolving expectations in laboratory animal care. While not mandatory, these suggestions are offered in the spirit of continuous improvement and can serve as a useful tool for enhancing both the quality and credibility of a program.

Institutions are encouraged to review and consider SFIs carefully, leveraging them as an opportunity to strengthen their programs and demonstrate a commitment to excellence in animal care and use.