General Guidelines for the Care of Malnourished Horses

Effect of Malnourishment:

1. Fat and carbohydrate stores are used for energy
2. When energy stores are used up the body begins to break down its own protein
3. This causes weakening of the heart, skeletal muscles, and gastrointestinal tract

Initial Guidelines for working with an underweight horse, feeding guidelines developed by Dr. Stull, University of California-Davis Veterinary Medicine Extension:

1. Put the horse in a safe, secure location
2. Provide the horse with water
3. DO NOT feed the horse grain
4. Have the horse examined by a veterinarian as soon as possible
5. Acquire good quality hay – preferably alfalfa
6. Feed 1 pound of alfalfa hay (approximately 1/6 a flake) every 4 hours
7. Continue feeding 1 pound of hay every four hours for the first three days with free choice water
8. Implement what the private veterinarian recommends
9. Days 4 through 10 gradually increase the amount of hay being fed to just over 4 pounds of hay every 8 hours
10. Day 10 until the horse is recovered feed as much hay as the horse will eat, decrease feeding to 2 times per day; provide a salt block

Notes: if horses are significantly dehydrated – evidenced by an extended skin tent over the point of the shoulder lasting more than 3 seconds, rehydrate slowly with two to three gallons of water each time they are offered hay instead of giving them free-choice water right away; after a full day of receiving water this way allow free-choice water. If they do not show signs of dehydration they may be allowed water free-choice from the start.

Good quality, alfalfa mix hay can be used; alfalfa cubes can also be purchased at farm supply stores; in the case of severely malnourished horses it may be helpful to soak the cubes in water to soften them prior to offering them to the horses.

Providing salt is delayed until Day 10 to allow the horse to properly hydrate and begin to take in nutrients such as minerals through the hay in small quantities. If salt is provided too soon it can potentially cause metabolic problems.

A horse would be considered to be significantly underweight, and thus should be fed as described above, if it has a body condition score of 2.5 or less. Horses in body condition score of 3.0 and above may be offered free-choice quality hay, still avoiding grain since we don't know if their digestive system is acclimated to grain.

Some rescue facilities will, after a horse has been on hay for at least 10 days, begin adding senior horse feed to the diet. It is important that if the decision is made to feed a grain product that it be a senior feed. Senior feeds are usually pelleted, higher protein, lower carbohydrate type feeds and less likely to cause digestive upset. Feeds high in corn or sweeteners (high energy) should be avoided in all horses being re-fed. If you wish to add grain to the diet consult a private veterinarian about whether grain should be added to the re-feeding diet or not, starting amounts, and how to adjust the amount over time.

De-worming:
De-worming should be avoided in severely malnourished horses until they improve in body condition and strength. The focus initially should be on providing quality nutrition in small portions multiple times a day. Once the horses show weight gain and improvement in strength, a mild de-worming product like either fenbendazole (Panacur) or pyrantel (Strongid) should be used. It can be followed up two weeks later with a product containing ivermectin.

Veterinary Care:
As mentioned above horses should be evaluated by a private veterinarian soon after their removal from a neglect situation. The veterinarian should perform a complete physical exam that includes evaluating the condition of the horse's teeth. Recommendations given by the attending veterinarian should be followed and supersede the general guidelines provided in this document.

Farrier care:
Often malnourished horses have issues with their hooves. If there is an injury or some other type of immediate problem with the hooves a professional farrier should attend to the problem as soon as possible and treat the problem enough to alleviate discomfort or health issues. Horses that are in thin to emaciated condition may not be able to stand on three legs very well so the urgency of providing farrier care must be weighed against the risk of causing injury to the animal or people by working on its hooves. If it does not threaten the horse's health or well-being, farrier care may be delayed until the animal can safely maintain its weight on three legs for brief periods of time.

Case Documentation:
It is important to maintain information on how the horses are being fed, de-wormed, and provided veterinary and farrier care. Also important is to accurately track the costs incurred in caring for the animal. A record folder should be maintained that documents all illnesses/injuries/problems, treatments – de-worming/medications/etc., how the horse is being fed, and costs. The best option is to have one folder for each horse; if that isn't feasible then one master folder for all the horses being re-fed on a property would suffice. This documentation provides a history for the horse which can help when needing to review and possibly adjust its care. It also provides information that may be helpful during court hearings.