

# What Can Be Done to Better Support People Experiencing Homelessness with Pets?



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December 01, 2020

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Approximately 1 in 10 people experiencing homelessness have pets. Despite how common pet ownership is within the homeless population, this group is frequently overlooked or unaccommodated in efforts to end homelessness.

People experiencing homelessness have pets for many reasons (https://us1.campaign-  
(https://www.homelesshub.ca/blog/2019/03/28/10576957-people-have-pets) Most  
notably, research  
(https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10530789.2019.1650325?  
journalCode=ysdh20) has shown that pets provide an opportunity for unconditional love

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and companionship, a sense of responsibility, and a reason to live. Pets can also be a motivator toward behavioural change, such as reducing substance use.

Although they have many psychosocial benefits, having a pet can also pose barriers to accessing services and obtaining housing. One such barrier is that many emergency shelters do not allow pets. This forces people to have to choose between their animals and a roof over their head. Given the strength of the human–animal bond and the importance of this relationship, it is perhaps unsurprising then that many pet owners say they “would never go” to a shelter if they could not bring their animals

(<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.2466/pr0.1994.74.3.715?journalCode=prxa>).

Accessing other health and social services can also be difficult if pet owners need to find safe and reliable pet care

([https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08927936.2015.1082772?](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08927936.2015.1082772?journalCode=rfa20)

[journalCode=rfa20](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08927936.2015.1082772?journalCode=rfa20)) or temporary boarding. Similarly, the lack of pet–friendly options in the affordable housing market can be a prominent barrier to exiting homelessness. In low–vacancy housing markets, the few available options are made even fewer to pet owners due to policies that forbid pets (lawful or not).

Given that pets play an important role in their owners’ lives, it is essential that responses to homelessness take into account the human–animal bond and support this group to meet their basic needs, like housing and shelter, food, and healthcare, without separating pets and people. So, how can this be done?

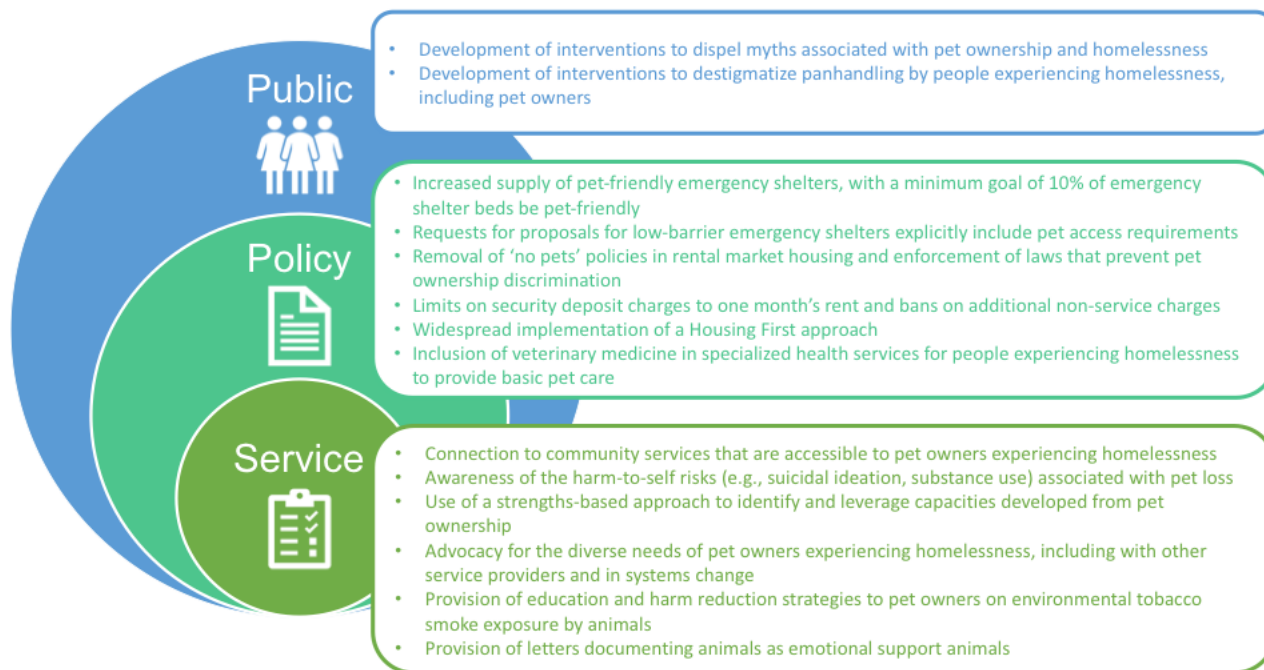
In collaboration with colleagues, Michelle Lem, Mike Witte, Christine Kim, and Harmony Rhoades, we propose a multilevel framework for how homelessness, housing, and healthcare systems can better support pet owners experiencing homelessness (<https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/10/10/1869/htm>). The framework offers tangible actions that communities and individuals can take to reduce the hardships faced by this group.

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## What can be done at the service level?

*Service connections:* Many pet owners experiencing homelessness encounter challenges accessing services where they can bring their pets. Service providers of all professions – human health, homeless service, housing, and animal health and welfare organizations – can help pet owners by being aware of the community services that accept pets and offer pet-related supports (e.g., pet food, veterinary services). It is also important for service providers to know what are the offerings, location and hours of operation, wait times for access, and eligibility criteria of these services. Informing pet owners of these services and making referrals if necessary can help them to navigate these complex service systems.

*Awareness of risks from pet loss:* Like anyone, losing a pet, whether due to death, surrender, runaway, or removal, can be a very difficult experience for people experiencing homelessness. During periods of grieving from the loss of a pet, people may be at-risk of suicidal ideation and increased substance use. Service providers can support people experiencing homelessness by considering these risks and asking about suicidal ideation, providing education on harm reduction, and making referrals to counselling and crisis management services.

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*Recognition of pets in a strengths-based approach:* Pets can be sources of responsibility, structure and routine, resourcefulness, pride, and motivation for people experiencing homelessness. Service providers can support pet owners experiencing homelessness by

recognizing the capabilities and skills that they have developed through pet ownership. Such strengths should also be leveraged when helping people pursue their hopes and goals.

*Advocacy for pet owners experiencing homelessness:* Service providers have an indispensable voice in systems change advocacy on homelessness and the affordable housing crisis. In this work, they can also be advocates for pet owners by calling for increased access to pet-friendly housing and shelter, and advocating with other service providers for the accommodation of pets in service delivery.

*Education and harm reduction strategies on environmental tobacco smoke exposure:* Tobacco use is prevalent among people experiencing homelessness (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-smoking-cessation/article/smoking-amongst-adults-experiencing-homelessness-a-systematic-review-of-prevalence-rates-interventions-and-the-barriers-and-facilitators-to-quit-and-staying-quit/5DF8012E78FCB4D86931F961AFF12F37>). However, pets can be a motivator to quit smoking. Veterinarians and human health service providers can support pet owners experiencing homelessness by providing education on the impacts of tobacco on animals' health and using motivational enhancement strategies to promote harm reduction.

*Provision of letters documenting emotional support animals:* Mental health service providers can also support people experiencing homelessness by providing letters documenting their animals as emotional support animals if they have therapeutic benefits to their owners. This can help pet owners experiencing homelessness to access housing and shelter in some communities, as laws enable people to keep emotional support animals as a "reasonable accommodation" to any 'no pets' restrictions.

### What can be done at the policy level?

*Removal of 'no pets' policies and pet-related fees in housing and emergency shelters:* 'No pets' policies in housing and shelters are a prominent barrier for pet owners experiencing homelessness that put them at risk of poorer health outcomes. As such, a minimum of 10% of emergency shelter beds need to be made pet-friendly (this number corresponds with the estimates of pet ownership among the homeless population). Similarly, in the rental housing market, there is an urgent need to remove 'no pets' restrictions and enforce laws related to this. Limiting financial deposits to one month's rent (i.e., no pet-related

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archive/shelter-beds-61238be40bca87d8977f631e81d150a7bb5b)

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fees) would also be beneficial for helping pet owners to exit homelessness. Such policy changes do not absolve people of the responsibility for their pets, as they would still be accountable for any property damages caused by their pets, but would reduce the potential for financial exploitation of prospective tenants who have pets.

*Widespread implementation of Housing First:* Housing First is a highly effective intervention for stably housing people experiencing homelessness who have complex support needs. The intervention's low-barrier and person-centred principles make it highly compatible with the needs of pet owners. Because Housing First programs can collaboratively work with pet owners to find them appropriate housing and advocate with landlords where needed, widespread implementation of the intervention will be beneficial to overcoming housing barriers faced by pet owners exiting homelessness.

*Inclusion of veterinary medicine in specialized health services for people experiencing homelessness:* Veterinary care is often financially inaccessible for many pet owners experiencing homelessness. There are examples of innovative veterinary programs that serve the homeless population in many parts of the world. However, the supply and availability of these programs are limited. Because of this, there is a need for greater inclusion of veterinary medicine in specialized healthcare for people experiencing homelessness (e.g., street outreach, inner-city health programs). Considerations for how this could be done include having veterinary medicine be a part-time funded position in these services or integrating veterinary medicine into income support programs as a limited available benefit.

## What can be done at the public level?

*Educational and anti-stigma interventions:* Disapproval of pet ownership by people experiencing homelessness among members of the public is not uncommon. Beliefs behind this way of thinking

([https://www.rienner.com/title/My\\_Dog\\_Always\\_Eats\\_First\\_Homeless\\_People\\_and\\_Their\\_Animals](https://www.rienner.com/title/My_Dog_Always_Eats_First_Homeless_People_and_Their_Animals)) often include: "They should not have a pet if they can't take care of themselves," "They can't take care of the pet," and "If you can't afford a pet, you shouldn't have one."

However, these views are generally unsupported by evidence

([https://www.rienner.com/title/My\\_Dog\\_Always\\_Eats\\_First\\_Homeless\\_People\\_and\\_Their\\_Animals](https://www.rienner.com/title/My_Dog_Always_Eats_First_Homeless_People_and_Their_Animals)) because of this, interventions are needed to enhance public knowledge and reduce stigma related to pet ownership and homelessness. Key educational messages should address the primary criticisms of pet ownership by people experiencing homelessness, while also highlighting the benefits of the human-animal bond to foster a shared connection between pet owners

and homelessness. Key educational messages should address the primary criticisms of pet ownership by people experiencing homelessness, while also highlighting the benefits of the human-animal bond to foster a shared connection between pet owners

that transcends housing status. Similarly, because panhandling can result in confrontations with members of the public, anti-stigma interventions are also needed to increase acceptance of panhandling by pet owners experiencing homelessness.

## Where can I learn more about pet ownership and homelessness?

- National Alliance to End Homelessness' Keeping People and Pets Together (<https://endhomelessness.org/pets/>) (report)
- Leslie Irvine's My Dog Always Eats First: Homeless People and Their Animals ([https://www.rienner.com/title/My\\_Dog\\_Always\\_Eats\\_First\\_Homeless\\_People\\_and\\_Their\\_Animals](https://www.rienner.com/title/My_Dog_Always_Eats_First_Homeless_People_and_Their_Animals)) (book)
- Invisible People's stories about people experiencing homelessness who have pets (<https://invisiblepeople.tv/category/by-topic/pets/>) (videos and blogs)
- Community Veterinary Outreach's Animal Care Guidelines for Emergency Co-sheltering (<https://vetoutreach.org/animal-care-guidelines-for-emergency-co-sheltering/>) (report)
- Nick Kerman and colleagues' literature review on pet ownership and homelessness (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10530789.2019.1650325>) (academic article)
- Michelle Cleary and colleagues' literature review on pet ownership and homelessness (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10488-019-00967-6>) (academic article)

homelessness (<https://www.homelesshub.ca/researchmatters/search?tag=351>)

pets (<https://www.homelesshub.ca/researchmatters/search?tag=823>)

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