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Closing the "PAWS" gap through pet-inclusive social work training and practice: Professional responses that incorporate human–animal relationships

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Despite a majority of households having at least one companion animal that they consider family members, human–animal relationships are largely ignored in social work training and practice.

METHODS: This article identifies a "People and Animals' Wellness and Safety (PAWS) gap" in social work practice, six reasons why social workers should be cognizant of clients' relationships with their animal companions, and a process of "3-Rs": recognition, response and referral. Nine opportunities whereby social workers can address human–animal relationships across pet-inclusive social work practice settings and populations are identified, along with action steps and emergent career opportunities.

FINDINGS: The PAWS gap can be closed by social work educators and practitioners by routinely and proactively assessing clients for their relationships with their animals. Such relationships may be strengths or stressors that impact clients' wellbeing, decision-making, and potential risk of violence.

IMPLICATIONS: The failure to consistently address human–animal relationships and support clients' animal-related concerns misses opportunities to identify clients' risk and resiliency factors, to enhance social and environmental justice, and to provide services to all vulnerable members of families and communities.

Keywords: Human–animal relationships, animal cruelty, training, career opportunities, policy and practice

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The "PAWS" gap

Despite 64% of households having companion animals that are often considered as family members (Forrest et al., 2023), and pets often serving as sources of strength, resilience and social support whose wellbeing impacts persons' ability to thrive, neither pre-professional training, continuing education, psychosocial assessments nor social work practice routinely address clients' relationships with their pets. Therapeutic-animal-assisted interventions, the link between animal abuse and human violence, and the psychological and emotional impacts of animal companionship on child development, healthy aging, mental health, and reducing loneliness and social

isolation are a *terra incognita* in social work. Field placement internships in animal shelters are rare (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019). Only a few genograms include household animals (Hodgson & Darling, 2011). Only 3% of United States (US) schools of social work address the potential import of clients' companion animals, and then only peripherally (National Link Coalition, 2023). We refer to this gap in social work knowledge and responsiveness as the PAWS (people and animals' wellness and safety) gap.

This PAWS gap is ironic. Social work's underpinnings of social justice and correcting power imbalances helped develop child protection, which emerged from the animal-protection movement in the 19th century. Today, even stronger links between animal cruelty and domestic violence are emerging. The lack of agency and autonomy afforded to children, women and animals reflects broader systemic inequalities; recognising this can help prevent situations of violence.

Responding to clients' emotional bonds with their companion animals and the risk factor of animal maltreatment—both of which can impact clients' quality of life, decision-making, and potential escalation into domestic, child, and elder abuse—does not challenge the epistemic underpinnings of the discipline but, rather, broadens it.

Resources are becoming more widely available to help social workers appreciate the significance of human–animal relationships and animal cruelty, the implications of ignoring these factors, and the need to include vulnerable animals in social justice concerns (see, e.g., Arkow, 2020; Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019; Hoy-Gerlach & Wehman, 2017; Risley-Curtiss, 2013; Strand & Faver, 2005; Yeung et al., 2020).

Individual, institutional, legislative, and peer factors have prevented the systemic introduction of human–animal relationships into social work. In this article we propose operationalising "the 3-R's"—recognition, response and referral—to positive and negative human–animal relationships and identifying ways to incorporate pet-inclusive awareness into career opportunities as means to close the PAWS gap to protect more people and animals.

Six reasons why social workers should be cognizant of human–animal relationships

1. Today's definition of "family" includes its non-human members

The percentage of pet owners who consider pets as family members has been estimated at 99%, with rates of dog and cat ownership highest in households with children; female household members have primary responsibility for pets' care (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2007, 2018). Veterinarians have been called "the other family doctor" (National Link Coalition, 2019). Social workers may miss significant touchstones in family dynamics if they neglect to inquire about the animals and any attachments and problems with them.

2. Pets enhance communities' social capital

Seeing human–animal relationships in a social context can reveal clients' connectivity to, or isolation from, the community. Putnam (2000) defined "social capital" as the community forces that build social cohesion, personal investment, reciprocity, civic engagement, and interpersonal trust. But Putnam notably failed to include the influence of pets in a community (Arkow, 2013). This gap was addressed in studies in Australia and the US, which reported that companion animals are positively associated with social capital, civic engagement and perceptions of neighborhood friendliness. Seeing neighbours walking dogs gave residents feelings of greater collective safety and sense of community. Pet owners were more likely to vote, to exchange favours with neighbours, to volunteer, and to participate in civic activities (Wood et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2017).

3. Inquiring about pets can build rapport and trust

Hodgson et al. (2017) found that asking patients about their pets enables better environmental/social history taking, facilitates

open communication, reveals clinically relevant information, and strengthens the therapeutic alliance. Because animals slip under the radar of human defence mechanisms, clients who are under stress may be more willing to talk about their animals before describing their own vulnerabilities (Melson & Fine, 2015). Discussing pets can segue into information about family support systems and the utilisation of resources and help establish a caring persona and a trusting relationship (Boat, 2010).

4. Children's positive and negative experiences with animals can have lifelong implications

Jalongo (2004) described bonds formed or broken with companion animals in childhood as reverberating and resonating across the lifespan. Children's committing or witnessing animal cruelty:

- may be sentinel warnings of a dysfunctional environment and other antisocial behaviors (Gullone, 2012);
- are a risk factor for perpetrating animal cruelty, bullying behaviours and violence against humans (Gullone & Robertson, 2008; Parkes & Signal, 2017; Vaughn et al., 2011; Walters, 2019);
- May lead to normalisation of violence against pets, decreased empathy and maladaptive coping mechanisms, particularly if there is co-occurring family violence (Ladny & Meyer, 2019; McDonald et al., 2018).

5. Knowledge of animal abuse can reveal other forms of family violence

Animal abuse and neglect can be sentinel indicators of concurrent, prior or future child maltreatment, domestic violence and elder abuse. Power relationship imbalances transcend species lines: when animals are abused, people are at risk, and when people are abused, animals are at risk (Arkow, 2019). Abusers often exploit women's and children's emotional attachments to their pets by threatening, hurting or killing the animals; this coercive control keeps victims from extricating themselves from domestic violence (Roguski, 2012; Taylor et al., 2020; Urban Resource Institute & National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2021).

Concurrent domestic violence and animal cruelty create extreme high-risk environments where interpersonal violence is more hands-on, lethality risks to first responders increase significantly, and victims are more likely to have had forced non-consensual sex and to fear for their lives (Campbell et al., 2017). Children exposed to domestic violence were reported to be three times more likely to commit animal cruelty than children not exposed to intimate partner violence (Currie, 2006).

6. Pet loss can be significant

The disappearance or death of a pet can bring a profound sense of loss with patterns of bereavement similar to the death of a human family member or friend. However, a disenfranchised grief over loss receives minimal support from society (Rémillard et al., 2017). The decision to euthanise a beloved animal companion can generate significant emotional trauma (Dunn et al., 2005; Laing & Maylea, 2018). Forced separations from pets during disasters, domestic violence or health crises can result in negative psychological impact and increased safety risks for people who choose to stay with and protect their pets (Montgomery et al., 2024; Oosthuizen et al., 2023). Social workers trained in grief and loss theory can help individuals make difficult decisions, navigate options, memorialise the animal, resolve feelings of guilt, and achieve closure.

Nine career opportunities that close the PAWS gap through recognition, response and referrals

1. Veterinary medicine

Social work's introduction into human–animal relationships began in 1978 with pet loss counseling at the Veterinary Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983) and at

New York City's Animal Medical Center in 1983 (Beck & Katcher, 1996).

The Veterinary Social Work collaboration between the Colleges of Social Work and Veterinary Medicine at the University of Tennessee—Knoxville, in 2002 created a new specialty practice. Over 400 veterinary social work graduates and current students can serve in veterinary clinics, teaching hospitals and animal shelters. They can address veterinary compassion fatigue and wellness issues, clients' grief management; animal-assisted interventions; and the link between animal cruelty and human violence. However, these 400 individuals represent a mere 0.05% of the total US social work profession.

Veterinary social workers can address inequitable access to veterinary care affected by affordability, transportation, clinic locations, and cultural and language barriers frequently associated with ethnicity, low income, young age, geographic area, and lower levels of education. These result in disparities in health outcomes for animals in underserved areas and populations (Blackwell & O'Reilly, 2023).

A new opportunity that can rely on social work support is in engaging veterinarians to recognise and respond to suspected domestic violence survivors (Larkin, 2018; Newland et al., 2019). Veterinary professionals can be potential touchpoints for domestic violence victims and play a key role in facilitating multi-agency collaboration, provided they have adequate training, support, and the confidence and capacity to respond (Paterson et al., 2024).

Aotearoa New Zealand is a pioneer in this global movement. The New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA) described veterinary medicine as a three-dimensional profession with a unique voice in issues that transcend animal life, human life and the environment. NZVA called for domestic violence protection-from-abuse orders to specifically include animals, and for changing the definition of domestic violence to include "coercive control" which would include emotional and psychological abuse to family members through threat or harm to animals (National Link Coalition, 2015). The Veterinary Council of New Zealand (2013) recommended that veterinarians confronting animal abuse should consider whether people within that home might also be at risk and prepare the practice to respond to domestic violence.

Scotland's Medics Against Violence collaborative of human and veterinary healthcare professionals created a Domestic Abuse Veterinary Initiative to train veterinarians to help pet owners escape domestic violence (Animal Welfare Foundation and The Links Group, 2016). Scotland had identified veterinarians, dentists and hairdressers as the three front-line professionals most likely to encounter domestic violence survivors (Paterson, 2015). The UK's Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons states, "Given the links between animal, child and domestic abuse, a veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse reporting suspected or actual animal abuse should consider whether a child or adult within that home might also be at risk" (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2016, s. 14.27). The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association's policy on veterinary responsibility to address animal abuse and neglect (2018) describes veterinarians and technicians as important in identifying human and animal victims of abuse, thereby breaking cycles of violence.

Recognition, response and referral

Veterinary professionals may be trusted confidantes and an underutilised intervention point for domestic violence survivors with animals, especially those who have been isolated from friends, family, and community (Paterson et al., 2024). Trained to work with people, social workers can help introduce protocols and

responses to intimate partner violence while the veterinarian focuses on her or his expertise in animal health. Social workers can disseminate domestic violence literature to clients and coordinate pet care programs with domestic violence refuges.

Social workers can help reduce barriers to access to care for companion animals in underserved communities, supporting the human-animal bond as a primary, secondary and tertiary public health intervention (Hoy-Gerlach & Townsend, 2023).

2. Child-protection agencies

The evolution of today's animal welfare movement parallels that of protecting children, who were once also classified as property (Arkow & Lockwood, 2013). Yet, despite the social reformer origins of child protective services established by Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in the 19th century (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019), today's child and animal welfare agencies rarely collaborate (Arkow, 2010; Zilney & Zilney, 2005).

The emotional impact of animals in children's lives cannot be overstated (Risley-Curtiss, 2013). Companion animals overwhelmingly reside in households with children (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2007). Melson (2001) reported that pets are more likely to be a part of children's lives than are siblings or fathers. An estimated 80% to 90% of children first confront the loss of a loved one when a pet dies, disappears, or is abandoned (Melson & Fine, 2015). Children's caring for animals offers gender-neutral opportunities for developing nurturing skills and feelings of self-efficacy among children who feel dependent and powerless (Melson, 2013).

Pets can be a sub-system within a complex family system and many children turn to their pets for reassurance and emotional support during times of stress (Risley-Curtiss, 2013). Including questions and observations about current and past animals in a child's environment, the meaning those animals have for each family member, their care, and whether any of them have been killed or hurt can enhance effective family-centered practice (Risley-Curtiss, 2013).

Children may feel safer talking about their pets' experiences before they disclose their own, thereby opening a friendly channel to gain important insights (Boat, 2010; Melson & Fine, 2015). Questions about their names, breeds, play activities, deaths or disappearances, health problems or injuries, and secrets the child shares with them may fill in details of the family dynamics, patterns of power and control, and a child's risk and resiliency factors. Introducing therapy animals into the interview process can further build rapport.

This may be particularly important in working with sexually abused children (Reichert, 1998), given evidence of a nexus between bestiality and child sexual abuse. Children may be groomed for sexual behavior through animal sexual abuse or animal pornography, often by a close family member who is in a position of trust over the child (Edwards, 2019; Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2018).

Recognition, response and referral

Systemic disproportionalities in reporting and enforcing child abuse and neglect at all levels of decision-making in child welfare systems may be rectified through culturally responsive, trauma-informed services and community-led strategies and interagency relationships. Regrettably, animal protection agencies have historically been excluded from these collaboratives. Social workers can facilitate cross-sector community engagement between the human and animal welfare sectors to better utilise community resources and safeguard vulnerable children and animals.

Pet-inclusive practice can lead to more accurate assessments of child safety and wellbeing (Arkow, 2020):

a. In child welfare checks and case management, look for animal health and welfare issues that can affect the child: abused, neglected, starving, aggressive or dangerous animals; animals needing veterinary care; excess numbers of animals; and fleas and other parasites. Include these findings in evaluating the child's living environment, lifestyle and risk factors.
b. Consider a frequent turnover of animals as a potential indicator of a family's inability to make lasting emotional attachments.
c. Treat emotional attachments to pets as a protective factor which may help build resiliency, and the death or disappearance of animals as emotionally significant.
d. Identify whether the child has been traumatised by witnessing or causing the abuse or death of animals.
e. Consider animal maltreatment as a factor supporting a finding of child abuse or neglect.

Social workers should report suspected animal maltreatment to the appropriate agency, such as the local SPCA Centre (or the Ministry for Primary Industries for livestock animals). Establishing channels of communication with these agencies in advance can simplify reporting when animal abuse is suspected. The reporter need not prove that animal abuse occurred but merely introduces the case into those agencies' systems to follow through as warranted. Confidentiality restrictions may be waived in reporting to law enforcement agencies or when the health or safety of the client and others are threatened.

3. Children's advocacy centres and courthouse facility dogs

Pet-inclusive social work can involve facility animals in children's advocacy centres, family justice centers and courtrooms who provide emotional support to sexual abuse survivors as they undergo forensic examinations, re-live their experiences, and confront their abusers (LaBahn, 2015). Guidelines protect the interests of the animal, the victim, the defendant, and the criminal justice system to prevent violating confidentiality or adversely eliciting sympathy from a jury (Courthouse Dogs Foundation, 2015). However, these dogs are not currently believed to be working in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers in victim services can be trained to be therapy animal handlers during children's interviews and testimony. They can also facilitate interactions between dogs and distraught family members and stressed facility staff and can connect these individuals with community resources.

4. Animal care centres

Animal sheltering centres have historically been isolated from human services agencies, creating a "silo" effect that hinders cross-disciplinary collaborations (Becker & French, 2004). Centre personnel face severe emotional stressors: witnessing animal suffering and euthanasia; making life-and-death decisions; abusive clients; negative public perceptions; and attachments to animals under their care (Schneider & Roberts, 2016). Few facilities have yet to engage veterinary social workers to respond to these stressors. This increases the risk of harm to people and animals.

Some animal centres are breaking out of the silos. Their service philosophy is evolving to recognise that animal homelessness, abuse and neglect are merely symptoms of greater societal problems. To be truly effective, underlying community and family dysfunction and violence must be addressed (PetLynx, 2011).

Some animal shelters collaborate with juvenile and adult detention centres in animal-assisted therapy interventions; individuals who have offended, or who are at risk, train dogs with behaviour problems who are at risk of being euthanised. These programmes teach teamwork, non-violent conflict resolution and collaboration skills to save animals' lives and modify the behaviours of abusive and traumatised individuals (Arkow, 2019).

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers can facilitate bridging segregated human and animal services delivery systems through the profession's commitment to community-level action, intervention and change. Social workers can link animal centres with community coalitions and social services agencies to coordinate inter-disciplinary relationships, particularly cross-reporting animal, child and elder abuse, to better protect vulnerable populations (Long & Kulkarni, 2013).

Hoy-Gerlach et al. (2019) described promising opportunities for social work field placements in animal centres: reducing staff and volunteers' compassion fatigue; placing pets as emotional support animals; strengthening responses to child, elder and animal abuse investigations; creating cross-sector educational programming; and increasing awareness of the link between violence to animals and humans. When SPCA animal welfare inspectors observe environmental conditions detrimental to the wellbeing of humans, social workers can make referrals to social services agencies.

Other social work opportunities in animal centres include:

a. collaborating with domestic violence refuges and mobile meals programmes;
b. directing animal-assisted visits in long-term care facilities;
c. designing pet loss grief support groups;
d. developing safety nets for individuals experiencing medical, economic or housing crises that make it temporarily difficult to keep their animal;
e. defusing contentious confrontations with shelter customers and resolving their complaints and needs for services;
f. connecting pet owners with low-cost veterinary services, animal behavioural counselors, pet food banks, and social services agencies.

5. Women's refuges

Family violence abusers employ "emotional blackmail" (Arkow, 2014) to exploit victims' vulnerability through their emotional attachment to pets. Threats or harm to pets and livestock are barriers causing many individuals to delay seeking safety in fear for their animals; 97% of callers to the US national crisis line said their animals' welfare is a consideration, and 50% would not leave if they could not secure safety for their pets (Urban Resource Institute & National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2021).

Animal cruelty is one of the four greatest risk factors for someone becoming a physical abuser (Walton-Moss et al., 2005). Co-occurring animal abuse magnifies the risk of lethality to law enforcement officers responding to family violence incidents and dramatically increases the number of incidents a victim endures before gaining the courage to seek help (Campbell et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2018).

Until recently, women's refuges would not accept animal members of abused families. Roguski (2012) first demonstrated this phenomenon in Aotearoa New Zealand, describing pets as "pawns" in perpetrators' threats to attain and maintain control of the family. The National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges subsequently recommended that abuse towards women, children and animals should be addressed simultaneously and that pets be a central consideration in safety planning (Jury et al., 2018).

Global response has been dramatic. More than 300 women's refuges in the US, Canada, Australia, the UK, Spain, and the Netherlands now co-shelter pets (Sheltering Animals & Families Together, 2024). In the US, 41 of 50 states now allow courts to include animals in domestic violence protection-from-abuse orders; 19 states define animal abuses intended to intimidate a family member as an act of domestic violence; and eight states allow courts to award custody of pets in divorce settlements to the party identified as being in the animals' best interests.

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers can help plan innovative pet-inclusive processes in women's refuges and collaborate with SPCA centres to more effectively help women, children and animals achieve safety (Strand & Faver, 2005):

a. Gathering information about the status of animals and their (mis)treatment during crisis line calls, refuge intakes and risk assessments.
b. Identifying and making referrals to pet-friendly transitional housing, affordable veterinary care, pet boarding, and foster care.
c. Helping clients establish ownership by getting animals' licenses, vaccination records, microchips, pedigree papers, and receipts from pet stores and veterinary clinics in her name. This may mitigate contentious custody disputes in divorce settlements.
d. Including information about acts of animal cruelty in mental health assessments, rehabilitation of abusers, and the Specialized Domestic Violence Assessment of Risk to Children.
e. Including provisions for pets in safety plans.
f. Obtaining information from SPCA about prior investigations at the household.
g. Inviting animal-assisted therapy teams into refuges where appropriate.
h. Counseling children who have witnessed or committed animal maltreatment, death or disappearance of pets.
i. Coordinating veterinary care for animals in women's refuges.

6. Clinical social work practice

Issues such as restrictive housing policies and affordable veterinary care can impact clients' decision-making and quality of life. Social workers should routinely be sensitive and supportive with clients who have pet-related problems, assist in locating pet care support services, and advocate for clients' pet-related interests.

Recognition, response and referral

Silverman (2018) identified four categories of animals that can expedite building rapport, enhance clients' motivation to attend sessions, and introduce human–animal awareness into all levels of professional social work, once clients are ready to accept pet-related intervention:

a. Service animals trained to do specific tasks for a client with a physical or sensory disability.
b. Therapy animals introduced in treatment plans with intentional, goal-directed activities to complement traditional interventions.
c. Emotional support animals, a newer and vaguer category, that provides emotional benefits to a person diagnosed with a mental health disorder that impairs or limits functioning in one or more life domains.
d. Comfort dogs calming survivors and first responders in disaster scenarios.

7. Public policy advocacy

The established role of social workers as social justice advocates provides opportunities to advance legislation that recognises both the beneficial aspects of pet ownership and the adverse effects of animal abuse on human wellbeing and safety. Animals are legally classified as property (Arkow & Lockwood, 2013), making them an underserved population long trivialised by legislators because human concerns are widely viewed as more important. Recognition that animal abuse is linked to human violence and that protecting animals also protects people is generating a new respect for animal welfare legislation.

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers can advocate for public policy innovations:

a. Allowing courts to include pets in protection-from-abuse orders.

b. Allowing courts to award custody of pets in divorce settlements based upon the animals' best interests, similar to child custody provisions.
c. Redefining coercive-control animal abuse as also an act of domestic or dating violence.
d. Allowing courts to appoint pro bono advocates to represent animals in criminal cruelty cases.
e. Mandating or permitting child welfare, adult protection and SPCA agencies and veterinarians to cross-report suspected animal, elder and child abuse with immunity from civil and criminal liability and professional disciplinary sanctions.
f. Increasing penalties for bestiality based upon its links with child sexual abuse and child pornography.
g. Increasing criminal penalties for acts of animal cruelty committed in the presence of a minor.

8. Older populations
Human–animal bonds may be particularly robust with older clients and present unique challenges. For elders who are socially isolated or widowed, pets may be a unique source of companionship and emotional support and a last link to a deceased spouse; the death of a beloved pet may trigger profound grief, emotional trauma and depression (Boat & Knight, 2000). Caring for a pet may alleviate loneliness and improve mental health in older adults who live alone (Sanderson et al., 2024), be a preventive factor against suicide (Young et al., 2020) and be a strong motivator to get out of bed, have a daily routine, or go for a walk (Arkow, 2015).

Older, isolated individuals are over-represented among animal hoarders, who often exhibit mental health issues and self-neglect and live amid the hazards of neglected, diseased and dead animals. Animal hoarding cases are perplexing and problematic; a collaborative, multi-agency response is invariably required to address the wellbeing of the hoarder, human and animal dependants, property, and community (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009).

Animal neglect is common among older persons who lack financial resources, transportation, or physical or mental capacity to care for pets adequately (Peak et al., 2012). Self-neglect occurs among vulnerable adults who spend their limited financial resources on their animals' food and medications (Boat & Knight, 2000).

As in domestic violence, animals may become pawns in elder abuse when family members neglect or abuse the elder's pet as a form of control or retaliation, out of frustration over their caretaking responsibilities, or to extort financial assets from the victim (Humane Society of the US, 2005).

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers can help to develop, implement and manage programmes that keep pets with older adults with physical, cognitive or medical challenges (McLennan et al., 2022) by locating support services for their animals and making appropriate referrals including temporary foster care and other pet services for owners needing hospitalisation, assisted living, long-term healthcare or other social services. Social work input on multidisciplinary teams can help to resolve the challenging psychosocial aspects of animal hoarding.

Home health aides and other caregivers may be reluctant to enter seniors' dwellings if they fear aggressive animals or deteriorated environmental conditions linked with animal hoarding or neglect (Boat & Knight, 2000). Social workers can help facilitate these otherwise denied services by making referrals to appropriate agencies.

9. Pets and homeless populations
Individuals who are homeless or sleeping rough frequently have attachments to their animal companions stronger than those of the general population and keep pets,

primarily dogs, for emotional support, safety, a sense of responsibility, to combat loneliness, and to attract donations (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; Irvine et al., 2012; Williams & Hogg, 2016). Most homeless shelters do not allow pets, deterring individuals from seeking essential shelter (O'Reilly-Jones, 2019).

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers can respond to the needs of homeless pet owners by coordinating veterinary and foster care and advocating for pet-friendly co-shelters similar to domestic violence shelters (Phillips, 2019). My Dog Is My Home, founded by social worker Christine Kim, advocates for co-sheltering pets with their people in homeless shelters. The Street Dog Coalition operates in 30 US states with social work, veterinary and medical school students hosting clinics and providing resources to help the pets of people who are homeless.

Conclusion

Progress has been made in bridging the PAWS gap and career opportunities in pet-inclusive social work are emerging, but additional steps must be taken. Incorporating companion animals into new definitions of "family" and "community" can improve delivery of services, identify clients' risk and resiliency factors, enhance social and environmental justice, and continue social work's legacy of facilitating collaborative community change. Social workers' capacity and willingness to recognise, respond and refer issues affecting clients' companion animals will be critical to this progress.

Inquiring about the presence (or absence), stability (or turbulence), attachments, dangerousness, history, and status of animals within clients' lives can provide more comprehensive family assessments, validate intra-familial relationships, gain earlier recognition of abusive behaviours, and address clients' animal care concerns with practical, appropriate and affordable solutions (Arkow, 2020).

An understanding of human–animal relationships is a valuable asset in social work practice. This can begin by including pets in family genograms and adding pet-inclusive coursework and field placement opportunities in schools of social work and continuing education. By addressing human–animal relationships and being aware of community resources that can resolve clients' animal-related concerns, social workers can be more effective in advancing social justice and preventing abuse of all vulnerable members of families and communities.

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