

AlignCare™, a Solution to Improve Access to Veterinary Care
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The human-animal bond is truly special. A national population study by the Access to Veterinary Care Coalition (AVCC) in collaboration with the University of Tennessee, highlighted in the report, “Access to Veterinary Care: Barriers, Current Practices, and Public Policy” (available at <http://avcc.utk.edu/avcc-report.pdf>), found that 88% of pet owners consider their pet a member of the family. We call them “bonded families,” in that these families are based on the human-animal bond. Within many bonded families, it is said that unconditional love exists.

Unfortunately, millions of bonded families are among the working poor, retirees on a fixed income, or live with a disability, struggling to pay for veterinary care. For them, an ill or injured pet can be a crisis. Being unable to get veterinary care can result in prolonged illness and recovery, or worse, premature death, including by euthanasia. In some instances, the pet is relinquished, breaking up the family. The mental and emotional impacts can be significant; foremost for the family, but also for those dedicated to family and animal welfare. Denying these families companionship with a pet is not something we want to do, nor need to do.

A healthcare system to reach underserved families is needed.

AlignCare™: A One Health Healthcare System

We can improve access to veterinary care for families with limited means by better alignment of *existing* resources and activities. Family support agencies can be more effective by factoring in the influence of non-human family members on family wellbeing and provide options to assist when veterinary care is needed. Veterinary service providers can offer incremental care as an alternative to not being able to help the family or euthanizing a beloved pet with a treatable condition.

AlignCare™ aligns resources and facilitates interprofessional collaborations among family support agencies and veterinary service providers, while strategically utilizing community financial support. This One Health approach addresses the needs of people, their pets, being sensitive to their ecosystem, largely associated with low socioeconomics.

For AlignCare™ to be sustainable, three objectives must be addressed: 1) A co-pay from the family, calculated on a sliding scale, 2) Discounted services and products from providers and vendors, and 3) An AlignCare™ subsidy from community-based support (businesses, foundations, and private citizens).

Participating for-profit providers will see new clients, otherwise not available to them, generating new revenue. Some nonprofits are already helping families with limited means, however, with AlignCare™ they will now be paid for services they may not have previously been adequately compensated for.

AlignCare™ is a three-year, multi-site proof of concept research and development project that started in July 2018 after a generous grant from Maddie’s Fund. During the first year,

investigators are building the AlignCare™ model, including policies and procedures that will enable family support professionals to facilitate identification, enrollment, and on-going support of *bonded families*. In the second year, AlignCare™ will be implemented in 8-10 diverse communities across the United States. During the third year, program assessment and refinement will be conducted, enabling expansion to other communities throughout the United States.

Ultimately, by aligning family support, veterinary care, and charitable funds, we will be closer to achieving pet health equity and realizing the vision that all pets have access to veterinary care.

2019 Access to Veterinary Care Symposium

Attention to access to veterinary care is gaining momentum and a forum for interprofessional collaboration to address this issue is needed. The first [Access to Veterinary Care Symposium](#) is scheduled for Friday, June 28th to Saturday, June 29th, 2019. It will be held at the University of Tennessee Conference Center in Knoxville, TN.

This symposium brings together interested stakeholders to discuss the results of the [AVCC study](#). Study results will be presented, and attendees will have an opportunity to discuss them and provide their thoughts and interpretations. This will provide a context for presentations about AlignCare™, with specific attention to the four essential elements of the system, i.e., coverage, services, timeliness, and workforce. Breakout groups will work on: 1) How to engage and facilitate the family support activities of social service agencies and professionals, 2) Defining incremental care as a tiered therapeutic approach to case management by veterinary professionals, and 3) Mobilizing communities to support struggling families needing assistance with veterinary care.

It is expected that attendees will gain knowledge and understanding of lack of access to veterinary care and AlignCare™ as a viable solution. Many will be able to go back to their community and start to implement ideas learned at the symposium.

Consider attending the 2019 Access to Veterinary Care Symposium and join with others to apply our collective knowledge to address this national crisis.