

# Ensuring access to veterinary care

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**P**ets have become an integral part of our families. Take, for example, that it is possible to establish a trust for the care of an animal in all 50 states after the owner dies. Or that there is more visibility in restraining orders and divorce proceedings involving family pets.

An estimated 29 million dogs and cats live in families that participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps. This is an important fact, indeed, as needing public assistance is an index of a family's capability to purchase veterinary care. That said, there also are middle-class families that live paycheck to paycheck, with limited funds for veterinary care, especially when the need involves high-cost treatments.

In recognizing the importance of companion animals to so many, we should see a lack of access to veterinary care as a critical societal problem, not just a personal one. The paradox we face is that while it may be logical someone should not have a pet if they cannot provide veterinary care, it is difficult to defend denying companionship with pets. Consequently, pets will continue to live with families with limited means. These families deserve companionship with pets and to enjoy all the benefits that come from these relationships.

In December 2018, the Access to Veterinary Care Coalition (AVCC) released its report, "Access to Veterinary Care: Barriers, Current Practices, and Public Policy." It is intended to serve as a guide to veterinarians, animal welfare organizations, legislators, community leaders, and other stakeholders as they seek to improve access to veterinary care.

Through a grant from Maddie's Fund, AVCC commissioned a national population study to better understand the barriers to veterinary care experienced by pet owners across the socioeconomic spectrum. The study also sought to understand the knowledge, attitudes, and practices veterinarians have regarding access to veterinary care. The report is a compilation of results from national population research of veterinarians and pet owners,



including those experiencing housing insecurity. It also includes scholarly discussions about pets as family, evolving animal welfare laws, public health implications, an economic comparison of for-profit and nonprofit veterinary practices, and a discussion covering a broad range of issues and attitudes that are relevant to access to veterinary care.

## A few key results

Households participating in the study reported owning an average of 2.2 pets, with approximately one out of four households owning only one pet. Households with lower incomes were more likely to own more than one pet compared to those with higher income levels. The majority (80.2 percent) of respondents indicated they strongly agreed with the statement, "My pet is considered a member of my family." In the past two years, one out of four (27.9 percent) households experienced barriers to veterinary care. The most frequent barrier reported for all groups of pet owners was financial for all types of care (80 percent for preventive, 73.8 percent for sick, and 55.7 percent for emergency care). Dogs and cats living in lower-income households and with younger pet owners are most at risk for not receiving recommended veterinary care.

Among housing-insecure pet owners, the study found they are two times more likely to be unable to obtain preventive care and three times more likely to be unable to get sick and emergency care than other pet owners. Older housing-insecure pet owners, on average, had more pets and faced more barriers than younger pet owners. Additionally, only 27.8 percent of dogs and 11.5 percent of cats were acquired through

adoption or purchase. Rather, most pets were acquired through nonpurposeful means, such as a gift, stray, family, or friend. Nonpurposeful acquisition of pets is likely to compound the issues this population faces when seeking veterinary care. More efforts to educate pet owners about the costs of pet ownership, including veterinary care, will help those considering adopting or purchasing a pet.

One of the study's most encouraging findings is that veterinarians not only recognize

the severity of the problem, but also feel a commitment to explore ways to address it. Almost all veterinarians (94.9 percent) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "All pets deserve some level of veterinary care." Moreover, 84.8 percent are comfortable with alternatives to the "standard of care" when their client cannot afford that level of care. The report advances the concept of "incremental care" as a way to ensure some level of veterinary care is available when financial resources are limited. Nearly nine out of 10 veterinarians (87.9 percent) indicated they agreed or strongly agreed owned pets are a member of the family.

Similarly, 86.7 percent agreed not being able to obtain needed veterinary care impacts the owner's mental and emotional health. These sentiments are very much in line with attitudes expressed by pet owners. Many veterinarians commented the rising costs of veterinary education and medical supplies are preventing them from

offering care at reduced costs to vulnerable populations.

## Main takeaway

Lack of access to veterinary care is a complex societal problem with many causes. The AVCC's report furthers our understanding of these complex and interrelated issues, and can guide stakeholders in the development of solutions to reach underserved families with pets.

Barriers to veterinary care can be mitigated, especially through determined effort and better alignment of existing resources to achieve this outcome. Providing access to veterinary care is implicitly part of the veterinary profession's "social ethic" mandate and responsibility to support the human-animal bond.

"This is a critical report for the future of the veterinary profession and the animals we made an oath to help," said Laurie Peek, DVM, executive leadership team, Maddie's Fund. "This will truly revolutionize the status and well-being of companion animals." ●

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