

Families in Crisis Due to the Lack of 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, found that 88% of pet owners consider their pet a member of the family. We call them “bonded families,” in recognition of the human-animal bond. Within many bonded families, it is said that unconditional love exists. The results of the study were released in the report, [Access to Veterinary Care: Barriers, Current Practices, and Public Policy](#). The study found that one out of four (27.9%) pet owning households have experienced a barrier to veterinary care, the overwhelming barrier is financial, and dogs and cats living in lower income households and with younger pet owners are more at risk for not receiving the recommended care. Also, families living in the Northeast and West are more likely to experience a barrier to accessing veterinary care.



Photo credit: James Evans, Illume Communications

An estimated 29 million dogs and cats live in families that participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps, and millions more are in financially struggling middle-class households. According the U.S. Census Bureau, one-half of U.S. households have a total annual income of less than \$54,000. Yet, the costs of veterinary care continue to increase. Recent studies show that more than three-fourths of Americans working full-time live paycheck to paycheck. Due to the economic circumstances of these families, they may have limited funds for veterinary care, especially when the need involves high-cost treatments. For these families, an ill or injured pet can be a crisis. Being unable to get veterinary care can result in prolonged illness and recovery, or worse,

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premature death, including by euthanasia. In some instances, the pet is relinquished to a shelter, breaking up the family.

Consequently, lack of access to veterinary care can have significant impacts on the mental and emotional wellbeing of not only the family, but also for those dedicated to family and animal welfare. In recognizing the importance of companion animals to so many, we should see this issue as a critical societal problem, not just a personal one.



Photo credit: Susan Krebsbach, DVM

It may be logical to say that families that cannot afford veterinary care should not have a pet. But, denying companionship with a pet based solely on affordability, especially given the benefits of such relationships, is difficult to defend. Also, pets are already with families that struggle financially, and are not likely to be taken from them, except in the most egregious situations.

Consider Bob, a veteran who risked his life for our country, who's dog, Max, suffered a treatable injury. Bob could not pay for the needed medical care. The heartbreak that Bob felt as Max was euthanized was overwhelming, especially since Bob's recovery from a stroke was in large part due to Max's never-failing companionship. Families like Bob (who fought to defend our freedoms) and Max deserve to be helped.

Contrast this to Brooke, a college student who had been in and out of homelessness for six years. When her cat, Kiki, who was incessant about adopting a reluctant Brooke, became ill, she was able to reach out to a veterinary clinic that provided services for pets of the homeless. Kiki's life was saved and the bond that Brooke and Kiki shared—something which had eluded both of them prior to their union—was

preserved. It was at this point that Brooke started taking better care of herself so that she could take care of Kiki. Brooke was able to find secure housing for the two of them.

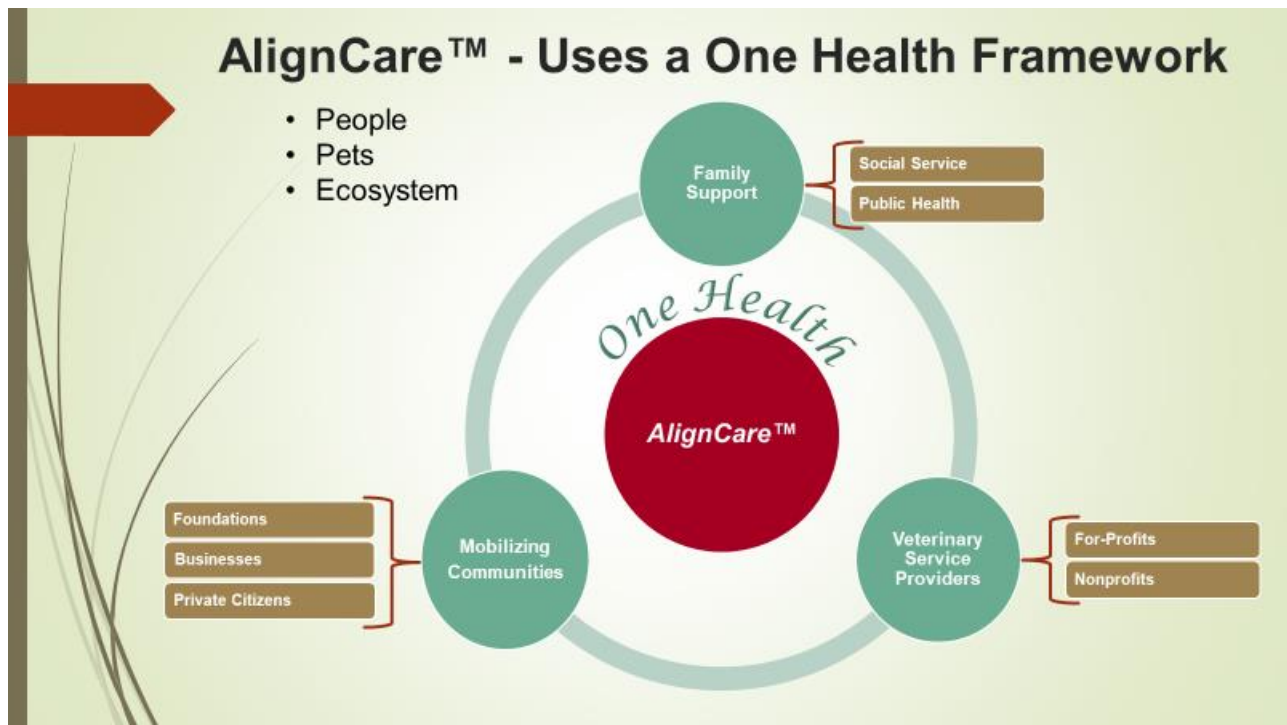
Fortunately, there are many organizations trying to help, either through direct medical care or by providing funding for such programs. Unfortunately, the majority of these programs only provide wellness and preventive care, like vaccinations and parasite control. Although critical to the overall health of the pet, more must be done to ensure veterinary services when a pet is sick or injured.

A comprehensive healthcare system that reaches underserved families is needed.

AlignCare™: Supporting Families Through Access to Veterinary Care

We can improve access to veterinary care for families with limited means by better alignment of *existing* resources and activities. Family support agencies and professionals 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 reach more underserved patients by offering incremental veterinary care, a tiered diagnostic and dynamic therapeutic approach to care when resources are limited, as an alternative to not being able to help or euthanizing a beloved pet with a treatable condition.

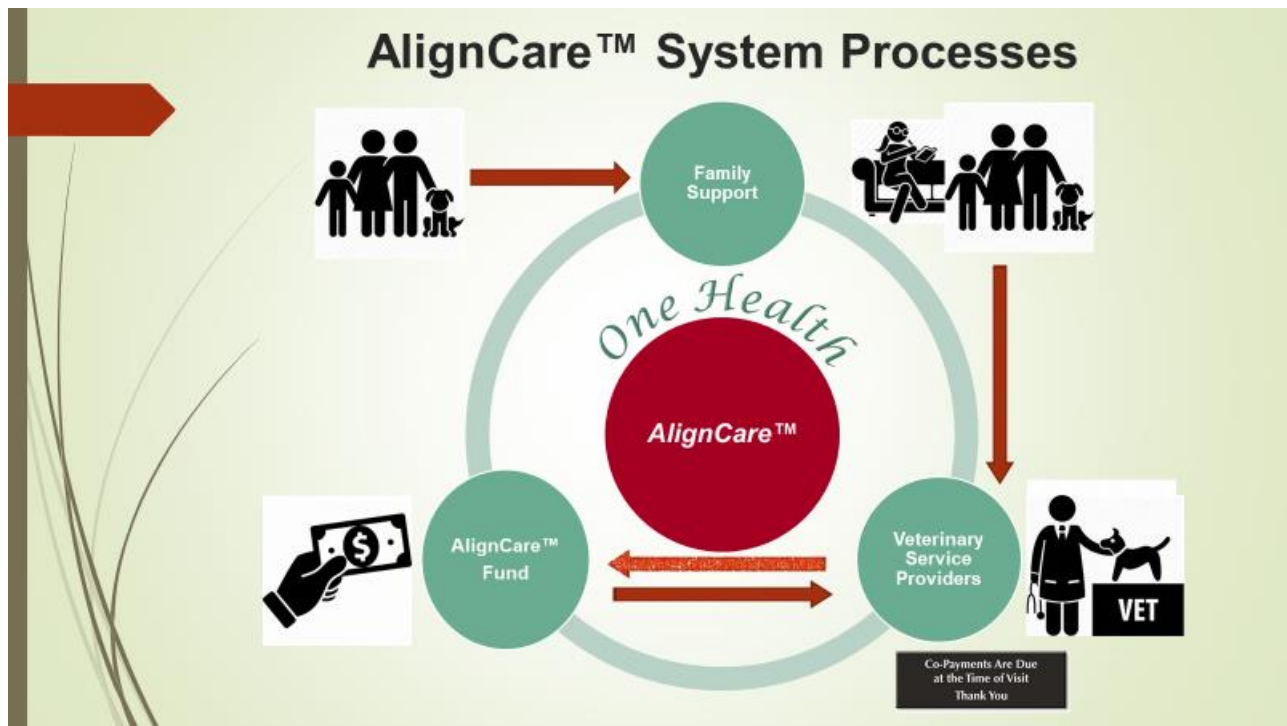
AlignCare™ is a three-year, multi-site research and development proof of concept project of the [Program for Pet Health Equity](#) that started in July 2018 after a generous grant from [Maddie's Fund](#). AlignCare™ improves access to veterinary care for families underserved by the current system. Key features of AlignCare™ include: 1) critical family support by social service agencies and professionals, 2) *incremental veterinary care* by veterinary service providers to control costs, and 3) mobilizing community-based resources.



By December of 2019, AlignCare™ will be implemented in Knoxville, TN, Asheville, NC, and Phoenix, AZ. In addition to these initial three communities, at this time we are projecting to implement AlignCare™ also in:

- Buffalo, NY
- Cincinnati, OH
- Denver, CO
- Findley, OH
- Jacksonville, FL
- Houston, TX
- Pomona, CA
- Miami, FL
- Middlesboro, KY
- Raleigh-Durham, NC

Implementation will be governed by a number of factors, most importantly committed community participants and available funding. In the third year, program assessment and refinement will be performed, enabling expansion to other communities throughout the United States.



AlignCare™ system processes:

1. An eligible family will be enrolled through their social service agency.
2. The family is referred to an enrolled veterinary service provider. A co-pay is required at the time services are provided.
3. The AlignCare™ Fund pays the veterinary service provider the balance of charges based on a prescribed rate.

By aligning family support, veterinary care, and charitable support, we can achieve pet health equity and realize our vision that all pets have access to veterinary care.



Photo credit: James Evans, Illume Communications