

Project Narrative

Co-Sheltering People and their Companion Animals: An Exploratory Study

The Animals & Society Institute (ASI) in collaboration with My Dog is My Home used a generous grant from Maddie's Fund® to explore and describe current approaches to “co-sheltering” of people experiencing homelessness with their companion animals.

The lack of animal-friendly policies and practices in many shelters means people experiencing homelessness are often asked to choose between their companion animals and a warm, safe place to stay. As recognition of the importance of the human-animal bond has grown, some homeless shelter providers are beginning to rethink their “no pets allowed” policies. Yet there is little documentation of co-sheltering strategies and even less information about the effectiveness of these efforts.

The aim of this project was to assess animal-friendly homeless shelters' current approaches to handling animals accompanied by people experiencing homelessness, documenting challenges, key issues, and lessons learned. Our goal is to use the project findings to inform development of animal-friendly policies and practices in homeless shelters nationwide, reducing the likelihood that animals will be relinquished simply because their caregivers are experiencing a period of homelessness. Further, the project intends to lay the groundwork for more intensive outcome-based research on the effects of such policies and practices on the well-being of pets and people alike.

This qualitative study of homeless service providers used a comparative case study approach to provide an in-depth understanding not only of the providers' policies and practices, but also the context in which those strategies have been implemented, the rationale for the strategies, barriers to and facilitators of implementation, lessons learned, and clients' perceptions of and experiences with them. The sample included four organizations that serve people who are homeless and their companion animals, one in Toronto, Ontario, Canada; two in Los Angeles, CA; and one in San Diego, CA. A total of 16 staff members, 23 clients with animals, and 14 clients without animals participated in the study. Qualitative data collection methods included individual interviews with the director and staff at each of the organizations and focus groups or individual interviews with clients living in the homeless shelter with and without companion animals.

Key findings include:

- Shelter policy that allowed accommodation of animals was a critical factor in people's decision to leave the street and seek shelter.
- Despite some shelter administrators' concerns that accommodating animals would result in animals flooding the shelter, only about 5-10% of the clients at each shelter had animals. In some cases, the shelters rarely accommodated more than one or two animals at a time.
- There is significant confusion about assistance animals among both staff and clients, including the legal definition, federal requirements regarding reasonable accommodation, and how an

animal is deemed a service or support animal. Three of the four organizations that participated in this study had a stated policy only to accept service or emotional support animals, although it was likely that a majority of the animals in their shelters were actually companions or pets. Education about what constitutes an assistance animal and frank conversations about the animals coming into the shelter would facilitate development of policies and practices that reflect the actual role of the animal in each client's life.

- Ensuring the welfare of animals in co-sheltering environments is important, though fraught with a host of practical, moral, and ethical issues with which both staff and clients reported struggling. Defining adequate care, ensuring it is provided, managing cases in which it is not, educating staff and clients around this issue, and helping to elucidate biases that arise from culture and socioeconomic status are no doubt challenging issues. One of the key themes noted by both staff and clients was the question of whether or not people who are homeless should have animals. These are difficult topics, but they must be more proactively addressed by all shelters that accept animals—in the interest of the well-being of clients, animals, and staff alike.
- Maintaining the minimal requirements of a low barrier shelter while at the same time ensuring the health and well-being of people and animals can pose significant challenges. Topics that should be considered by organizations offering co-sheltering include the role of partnerships with animal welfare organizations, effective strategies to help clients meet daily expectations around hygiene and safety, and the role of clients in the care of animals that are not their own.
- The benefits of having animals in the shelter were widely acknowledged, even by those few clients and staff that expressed concerns about the appropriateness of having animals in a shelter environment and the capacity of some residents to care for them. The animals provided emotional support and promoted motivation, responsibility, and a sense of community. They were described by staff and clients alike as being therapeutic not only for their people but for others in the shelter.

While these four organizations have made strides in developing strategies to accommodate people experiencing homelessness with their animals, there is much more to be done to ensure that policy and practice protocols are robust, implemented consistently, and refined as we learn more about what works—and what doesn't—in co-sheltering. Staff at all four organizations described an incremental approach to development of policy and practice guidelines. Protocols are developed as issues arise or new information becomes available. Of note, directors and staff alike are open to learning from other agencies and adapting the way they do business. This openness offers the opportunity to assist in crafting—and testing—new protocols that address emerging issues, particularly those noted here. By drawing on this study's findings and the work of other organizations and groups, including My Dog is My Home and the Co-Sheltering Collaborative, we are well-positioned to improve the provision of homeless services and enhance the well-being of both people and their animals.