

Access to Veterinary care for low-income pet owners

Key Messages

Keeping Pets with People

- For many years, animal shelters in WA state have focused on pet overpopulation. In the past few years, shelters have been very successful in lowering euthanasia rates and increasing adoption – so much so that many shelters need to transport animals in from other states to meet the demand for adoptable pets. Focus is now shifting to areas of unmet need – specifically the lack of affordable veterinary care for low-income pet owners.
- People in WA state love their pets – they consider them family members. When a pet becomes ill or is injured, the cost of medical care can be extremely high. Many families struggle with the high cost of living in our area, and are not able to afford sudden veterinary costs, which can be significant.
- Currently, there are limited options for families who cannot afford veterinary care – try to rehome it themselves, euthanize their pet (called economic euthanasia), or surrender them to a shelter so that they can get the care that they need. Often, people will delay urgent veterinary treatment, causing further complications. Providing access to veterinary care will relieve pain and suffering.
- Shelters are a safe haven for unwanted and neglected animals, but there is no help available for pets that are wanted and loved, but whose family is unable to afford the treatment they need. A family should not have to choose between paying their rent, and saving the life of their beloved pet.
- Providing a way to keep pets with their families keeps animals out of shelters, and promotes emotional and physical well-being.

Needs Assessment

Last fall, we conducted a state-wide survey for clients of animal shelters and low-cost spay/neuter programs. Nearly 1,200 responses were received, and revealed several key facts:

- Over 60% indicated that they did not regularly take their pet to a veterinarian.
- 65% of the clients who had an urgent veterinary concern stated that they would leave the condition untreated, because they could not afford the cost of medical care.
- 46% indicated that they would need to borrow money to cover the cost of treatment, adding to an already high rate of debt in underserved populations.
- We believe that there is a role for all types of veterinary practices in the community. The field of veterinary medicine is rapidly changing, with the addition of specialty services and 24-hour hospitals. Based on our research, we know that clients who will access low-cost clinics do not

currently utilize the services of private practice vets, because they cannot afford to. Animal shelters can fill the role of needs-based work – we're the safety net for the underserved or for those who can't participate in the regular private practice world of animal care.

- Considering the overall number of full-service veterinary clinics in WA state, the addition of a handful of clinics that provide urgent care to low-income families is not likely to have a significant impact.

Restraint of Trade

- Non-profit animal shelters are businesses that employ veterinarians and veterinary professionals. Shelter medicine has become a specialty, with an increasing number of vet students choosing to enter this subset of veterinary medicine. In fact, the WSU Veterinary School partners with both Seattle Humane and the Idaho Humane Society to provide internships and training to every vet student. Shelter medicine is becoming a fast-growing segment of the veterinary profession.
- Rather than competing with established veterinarians, non-profit organizations and low-cost services are reaching a new audience of pet owners and families, and introducing them to veterinary care for the first time, expanding the overall universe of veterinary customers and pet owners receiving services.
- The Federal Trade Commission, charged with preventing unfair methods of competition, has ruled in similar cases involving medical professionals, and has made it clear that attempts to interfere with the practice of medical professionals in an effort to eliminate competition (real or perceived) violates federal law.
- State laws and regulations should not be used to prevent competition. Human doctors who work in free clinics are celebrated, not scorned. Veterinarians who are using their skill and expertise to perform a public service that benefits society should be valued in the same way.
- Washington is one of just a handful of states that continues to restrict the practice of veterinarians working in animal welfare. Most states have embraced veterinary clinics operated by non-profits as a valuable community resource. In fact, many private practice veterinarians utilize them as a referral source when their own clients are unable to afford the cost of treatment.