

The Rise of Street Veterinary Medicine and the Benefits it Provides for Unhoused Individuals  
and Their Companion Animals

By

Joslin Hall

Colorado State University

Honors Program

Fall 2024

When I began thinking about ideas for my thesis project I knew that there were certain goals I wanted to achieve and interests of mine I tried to bring together. Initially, I wanted my project to involve veterinary medicine in some way as this is one of my passions and the career I am actively pursuing. However, I also wanted to get involved in my community in some way and attempt to make a difference by utilizing the skills I already have. With this in mind, I decided to work with an organization in my community that met the requirements I was looking for called The Street Dog Coalition. By volunteering I would be working with members of the unhoused community who have pets, which inspired me to research the connection between the mental/physical health of unhoused owners and the physical health of their pets.

The organization I was able to work with is a nonprofit organization that provides veterinary care for the pets of unhoused people or those at risk of homelessness (Street Dog Coalition). Street Dog originated in Fort Collins, but they now have teams throughout the country. For my project, I wanted to gain hands-on experience by volunteering at one of the Street Dog clinics in Fort Collins, CO. My time at Street Dog has given me an inside look into the organization and street veterinary medicine. Throughout this paper I want to discuss my own experiences and personal takeaways from time volunteering, interviews I have conducted with members of the organization, and the effects of pet ownership on unhoused individual's mental/physical health.

To begin I wanted to discuss my time volunteering at The Street Dog Coalition. My desire to give back to my community was one of the main goals driving my thesis project and is what led me to Street Dog. I had the opportunity to volunteer at Street Dog's once-monthly clinic in Fort Collins which is catered to individuals who have been able to find housing or a more stable living environment but are still unable to cover certain expenses like veterinary costs. I did

not know what to expect going into volunteering with Street Dog because I had never worked in this form of veterinary medicine before. Initially, I thought the clinic would be a general wellness and vaccination clinic, but I was surprised to find there were all kinds of different cases. It was also interesting to see how many recurrent clients would come back every month to receive treatment for their pets. The monthly clinic is held outside of a feed supply store and all of the gear and treatments are brought to the location; however, I found they were able to make good use of the space to treat each patient.

After volunteering with The Street Dog Coalition for a few months I want to share some of my personal takeaways from my experience. I had an incredible time volunteering and am thankful I had the chance to work with a devoted organization. My experience with Street Dog has given me a newfound respect for those who work in community service and commit their lives to helping others. These are services that people need and the work volunteers do is incredible. I also gained a greater appreciation for the technicians and veterinarians I worked alongside, as well as an appreciation for the veterinary industry as a whole.

People who choose to go into the veterinary field are truly committed to providing the best care for their patients and clients. This is something I observed when working with my team and is a reason I am pursuing a career in veterinary medicine. Briefly, I just wanted to mention the passion and love that I felt when working in these clinics. Every person volunteering at the clinics is passionate about the work they are doing and the impact they are making on other people's lives. There is also so much love that these owners have for their pets, I could feel it each month. The kindness and care these individuals have for their pets despite everything they have gone through themselves is truly inspiring and is something I am thankful I was able to be a part of.

For my project, I had the opportunity to organize a handful of interviews with various staff members from The Street Dog Coalition. I conducted three short interviews with one of the veterinarians, the client liaison, and the technician supervisor for the once-monthly clinic. When deciding who to interview I knew I wanted to talk to members with differing roles and varying backgrounds to hear about each of their own unique experiences. Due to them having been with the organization for a longer period, I wanted to listen to what they had personally learned from working with Street Dog and the impact they had seen their organization have on the community. I also wanted to see what plans they had for the future of their organization and the potential growth of Street Dog. The mental and physical health of their clients is another subject I wanted to hear their opinions on.

After completing all three interviews, common themes and goals among interviewees were evident. When asked how working with Street Dog had benefited their lives there was a similar response of being thankful for having the opportunity to help others and make a difference. Each person recognized the importance of the work they do and how there is a definite need for these kinds of services throughout America. Following that I also asked my volunteers how they think Street Dog has benefitted the lives of others. The technician supervisor commented that the clients she has worked with were thankful that someone was there to listen and help them. This was a common answer as well and it was described that clients are relieved to know there is a reliable source of care for their pets without the typical financial stress that comes with veterinary care.

When I asked about plans for the future there were varying answers which aligned with the differing roles and responsibilities of each of my interviewees. One goal they did all share though was the commitment to continuing to provide the necessary care for their patients long

term. They know everyone's timelines can be different and they want to be able to offer vital veterinary care for their clients as long as needed. This is an aspiration I believe everyone working with The Street Dog Coalition shares. More specifically, the client liaison shared some business goals that they have for the future of the organization.

One of those is the creation of more clinics and more opportunities for care. The client liaison works more on the administrative side of the organization, and they want to continue to keep the already established clinics running, but also to fill the demand for these services throughout Colorado. Some of the things that would make this possible are more funding from donors and donations and more volunteers. They say, “—we have a very dedicated small group, but we don't have backups for those folks. So that's something that I've been trying to work on.” Creating a bigger team would allow for more clinics to be created, but it would also give volunteers the chance to rotate out and could provide a break for the technicians and doctors who have been working at the clinics consistently.

Another goal for Street Dog is to increase community involvement and implement collaborations with different businesses in Northern Colorado. Working with businesses in the community would allow for more services to be offered at the clinics for clients. This idea aligns with the one health approach which is a concept promoting the health of humans, animals, and the environment (Calistri et al.) When talking about offering a clinic with multiple services the client liaison said, “We were given a grant to increase the number of Covid-19 vaccinations given out. So, we want to tie that in and do an outreach clinic offering vet care and vaccinations. Then we'll probably do bike repairs and haircuts and some of that kind of stuff.” With more funding, the client liaison wants to make these outreach clinics a recurring event with services the organization knows their clients would benefit from.

The final topic that was discussed throughout my interviews was the mental health of the unhoused owners my interviewees had worked with. I wanted to hear their perspective on the connection between pet ownership and mental health within the unhoused community. The veterinarian answered by saying many of their clients have mental health challenges, but they have observed the clinic to be an outlet for those individuals and a place where they can relieve some stress. Providing proper care for one's pet can be incredibly taxing especially when you are unable to finance it, so knowing there is a free resource to help can reduce that stress. It also discussed how some of the pets have been with their owners through the darkest times of their lives, and clients stated a reason why they pushed through is their pets and the love they have for them.

The technician supervisor touched on this by saying, "Some people are living on the street, and they have nothing, but they give everything that they do have to their animal." Throughout my interviews and my own experience volunteering at the clinics, I observed that it is common for unhoused owners to put their pet's needs before their own. This is something that I believe translates to pet owners who are not in the unhoused community as well. We all have a devotion to our pets and want to be able to fulfill all their needs. Looking at mental health again, the technician supervisor also mentioned the importance of keeping owners with their animals. "They need to be kept together. They need to have support, and I think getting through it together is better than them getting through it alone," they answered. Keeping pets and owners together is a core value at The Street Dog Coalition because the organization acknowledges the human-animal bond and its mental health benefits (Street Dog Coalition).

Following this subject brings me to the next section of my project which is the research of the connection between the health of a pet and the mental and physical health of unhoused

owners. I wanted to further understand this connection and learn more about the advantages and disadvantages of owning a pet and being unhoused. By reading various studies and articles I was able to learn more about this relationship and how the human-animal bond plays a role. To start I found a study that investigated people's own experiences of having pets and their mental health. The results of the study found that while there are many benefits associated with pet ownership there are also various struggles and stressors owners face as well.

Some of the ways pet ownership positively impacts mental health is by directly improving the moods of owners and bringing humor to their lives (Hawkins et al.) Participants from the study indicated that their pets were always happy to see them and often made their bad days better (Brooks et al.) Another benefit is that having a pet facilitates a sense of responsibility due to having to care for something other than yourself. This increases motivation and helps owners who struggle with their mental health (Hawkins et al.) Looking at the positive impacts pets have on their owner's mental health we can then apply that to the unhoused community.

One of the articles I found talked to two individuals who had experienced being homeless while owning a pet. The participants discussed how their pets helped with their decreased mental health due to the stress of their living situation. The first-hand recounts also highlighted how having a pet while being unhoused reduced their feelings of loneliness and isolation (Cleary et al.) However, in the article, the owners went on to talk about the added stress they endured while being unhoused pet owners. Something all individuals in the unhoused community can relate to is the struggle to find accommodations, but this becomes more difficult when pets are involved (Haley, Kinney, and Tsai.) Being unable to find housing because of an animal and being unable to afford the care of your animal is detrimental to one's mental health and is a frequent struggle throughout this community (Scanlon et al.).

While the stress of having a pet while being unhoused can take a toll on an owner's mental health, it can also impact their physical health. Many unhoused owners report their animals receiving health care more recently than them and comment how providing for their animals is their top priority (Ramirez et al.) This is a prime example of the commitment the owners in this community have for their pets. However, pet ownership can prevent unhoused people from receiving the medical care they need. Due to this, the idea of one-health clinics is gaining popularity and is something many individuals in the unhoused community have expressed interest in (Ramirez et al.) A one-health clinic would provide both veterinary care and medical care to be able to treat animal and human patients.

As I mentioned, pet ownership can restrict unhoused individuals from utilizing various services and accommodations. This is why a “pet-friendly” approach is gaining popularity when it comes to offering services for the unhoused community. A main reason why it is important to provide one-health options and include pets in accommodations is so owners do not have to decide to separate from their pets (McCosker et al.) This can be an incredibly difficult experience for owners and can set unhoused individuals back. By providing opportunities for both the pet and their owner to receive medical care and housing options we are making sure people remain with their support system, benefiting both their mental and physical health (Overgaauw et al.)

Looking at this information, something that is consistently mentioned is the role of the human-animal bond. Throughout all my research this is a topic that reoccurs and recently society has begun to recognize it as a significant connection. The power of this bond must be analyzed when discussing the relationship between an unhoused individual and their pet. I found an article that talks about this and is something I agree with based on my own experiences with the unhoused community, “The analysis confirms that the nature of the bond between homeless dog

owners and their animal is dynamic and complex” (Scanlon et al.) This bond is incredibly complex, but for some, it is necessary for their survival.

There are deep emotional attachments between an owner and their pet, and when we look at some of the things people have endured with their pets, the connection makes sense. The idea of separating from a pet can be unbearable, which is why unhoused owners will often prolong homelessness to ensure they remain with their pets (Montgomery, Liang, and Lloyd.) Despite all of the stress, restrictions, and negative impacts of owning a pet while being unhoused, owners decided to commit themselves to their animals anyway. But from what I have learned throughout this experience these relationships are invaluable, and what people gain from their bond is more important than any of the downsides. Hawkins et al. reported that “participants commented upon how pets increased their sense of purpose and meaning in life and gave them a ‘reason to live’.” (Hawkins et al.) The bond between humans and animals is incredibly powerful and justifies the sacrifices each person would make for their pet.

To conclude I am incredibly thankful for the time I was able to spend volunteering and the knowledge I have gained about the unhoused community. This project has given me a new perspective on the work I can do in the future within the veterinary industry and my personal life. I want to continue to volunteer with The Street Dog Coalition and try to generate more exposure for the organization throughout my community. I am extremely passionate about the work I did at Street Dog because I think it is something everyone can relate to today, with the prevalence of pets in our day-to-day lives. Each person who has pets loves them deeply and I believe everyone should be allowed to provide for their animals. The connections I observed between unhoused people and their pets impacted me in a way I know will stick with me for a long time and has inspired me to further pursue this experience in my future career.

## Works Cited

- Brooks, H.L., Rushton, K., Lovell, K. et al. (2018). The power of support from companion animals for people living with mental health problems: a systematic review and narrative synthesis of the evidence. *BMC Psychiatry* 18, 31.  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-018-1613-2>
- Calistri, P., Iannetti, S., L. Danzetta, M., Narcisi, V., Cito, F., Di Sabatino, D., Bruno, R., Sauro, F., Atzeni, M., Carvelli, A. and Giovannini, A. (2013), The Components of ‘One World – One Health’ Approach. *Transbound Emerg Dis*, 60: 4-13.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/tbed.12145>
- Cleary, M., West, S., Visentin, D., Phipps, M., Westman, M., Vesk, K., & Kornhaber, R. (2020). The Unbreakable Bond: The Mental Health Benefits and Challenges of Pet Ownership for People Experiencing Homelessness. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 42(8), 741–746. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01612840.2020.1843096>
- Hawkins, R. D., Hawkins, E. L., & Tip, L. (2021). “I Can’t Give Up When I Have Them to Care for”: People’s Experiences of Pets and Their Mental Health. *Anthrozoös*, 34(4), 543–562.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08927936.2021.1914434?src=recsys#abstract>
- McCosker, L. K., Maujean, A., Hill, N., & Downes, M. J. (2023). Services and interventions for people who are homeless with companion animals (pets): a systematic review. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2023.2205188>
- Montgomery, J., Liang, Z., & Lloyd, J. (2024). A Scoping Review of Forced Separation Between People and Their Companion Animals. *Anthrozoös*, 37(2), 245–267.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2023.2287315>

- Overgaauw, P. A. M., Vinke, C. M., van Hagen, M. A. E., & Lipman, L. J. A. (2020). A One Health Perspective on the Human–Companion Animal Relationship with Emphasis on Zoonotic Aspects. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(11), 3789. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17113789>
- Ramirez, V., Frisbie, L., Robinson, J., & Rabinowitz, P. M. (2022). The Impact of Pet Ownership on Healthcare-Seeking Behavior in Individuals Experiencing Homelessness. *Anthrozoös*, 35(5), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08927936.2022.2042082#abstract>
- Scanlon, L., Hobson-West, P., Cobb, K., McBride, A., & Stavisky, J. (2021). Homeless People and Their Dogs: Exploring the Nature and Impact of the Human–Companion Animal Bond. *Anthrozoös*, 34(1), 77–92. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08927936.2021.1878683?src=recsys>
- Tsai, J., Haley, G., & Kinney, R. L. (2024). Why some homeless individuals are unsheltered: A narrative review of self-reported reasons. *Social Science & Medicine*, 117179. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953624006324>
- (n.d.) The Street Dog Coalition <https://www.thestreetdogcoalition.org/>