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Keeping People and Pets Together: Community Animal Services for Vulnerable Guardians in Victoria, BC

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Key messages

- Pet guardianship provides critical mental health, social, and emotional benefits for people experiencing poverty and homelessness: reducing suicidal ideation, supporting recovery from addiction, and fostering a sense of purpose and identity.
- Victoria's existing animal welfare services are fragmented, under-resourced, and largely inaccessible to those most in need, with service users relying primarily on word of mouth rather than digital channels to learn about supports.
- Structural barriers—particularly veterinary costs, lack of pet-friendly housing and sheltering, and information gaps—drive unnecessary animal surrenders and compound the hardship faced by vulnerable guardians.
- Cross-sector collaboration between animal welfare organizations, social service providers, and local government is essential; formal partnerships remain rare despite widespread interest from service providers.
- Practical, low-barrier tools such as the Victoria Pet Survival Guide, combined with expanded low-cost veterinary services, mobile outreach, and pet-friendly policies, can keep people and their animals together while reducing pressure on sheltering systems.

Introduction

Victoria, British Columbia, has one of Canada's highest per-capita rates of homelessness, with the 2025 Greater Victoria Point-in-Time Count recording 1,749 individuals meeting homelessness criteria, a figure acknowledged to underrepresent the full extent of housing precarity in the region. Rising living costs, persistently low vacancy rates, and a severe shortage of pet-friendly housing intensify the challenges facing the growing number of unhoused and low-income individuals who share their lives with companion animals. Yet animal welfare services in Victoria remain fragmented, difficult to navigate, and largely invisible to those who need them most. This policy brief draws on my 2026 Master of Arts Community Development project, conducted in partnership with the BC Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BC SPCA), to examine how local services can better support vulnerable pet guardians, reduce stigma, and keep people and their animals together.

The BC SPCA, the largest animal welfare organization in North America, serves as the primary anchor institution for animal welfare services in British Columbia. In 2025, its Victoria centre assisted 1,000 animals through direct care and community programs, provided 5,000 pet meals through the centre food bank and eight community partners, supported 40 low-income pet guardians with spay and neuter services, responded to 1,700 animal cruelty complaints, and housed 50 animals through emergency boarding. Guided by its 2025–2030 strategic plan, the BC SPCA is transitioning from an institution-centred sheltering model toward one in which the community is the best at caring for animals. This shift creates both an urgent need and a genuine opportunity to strengthen community infrastructure supporting vulnerable pet guardians.

The Human-Animal Bond: More Than a Pet

A robust and growing body of interdisciplinary research spanning psychology, veterinary science, occupational therapy, and social work consistently demonstrates that companion animals play a vital and often life-saving role for people experiencing homelessness and poverty. Animals provide unconditional acceptance that can constitute a person's first secure attachment, particularly for individuals who have experienced childhood trauma, mental illness, or addiction (Taylor et al., 2004). Pet guardianship has been shown to reduce suicidal ideation, improve motivation, concentration and emotional regulation, support sobriety, and facilitate social reintegration (Slatter et al., 2012). Through the questionnaires guardians frequently described their animals as family, as life-saving presences, or as the primary reason they get out of bed each day. One participant shared: "They give me a reason to live. Getting up every day with a purpose." Another noted: "Everything is better with her, she motivates me to get out of bed, get out of the house."

Contrary to public assumptions, research consistently finds that animals living with unhoused guardians are generally well cared for. Irvine, Kahl and Smith (2012) found that homeless pet guardians spend nearly all of their time with their animals and routinely prioritize their pets' needs over their own. Williams and Hogg (2016) found that dogs owned by homeless individuals were less likely to be obese and had fewer behavioural issues than dogs in conventional homes. In the sample, more than 74% of the 64 animals represented had been rescued in some form. These findings underscore that the issue is not guardian commitment, but systemic barriers to care that prevent even the most dedicated guardians from accessing the services their animals need.

Structural Barriers and Service Gaps: Research Findings

This mixed-methods study collected data from 33 service users accessing BC SPCA community programs and from eight service providers across animal welfare, veterinary, housing, and social service sectors. Thematic analysis yielded 11 themes and 10 subthemes, providing a detailed picture of both available supports and significant gaps. Veterinary costs and access represented the single most significant challenge (36% of reported challenges), followed by difficulties meeting daily care demands (15%) and overall cost of pet ownership (12%). Most respondents (41%) learned about services through friends, while 33% heard through support workers and organizations such as Our Place; only 19% found services through online sources. This finding exposes a critical communication gap: a service sector that communicates digitally is failing to reach a population that learns through personal networks.

Service gaps identified by guardians included:

- Low-cost and accessible spay/neuter services (most frequently requested)
- Expanded service hours, including evening and weekend access
- Mobile or delivery-based pet food bank options and expanded geographic coverage
- Grooming infrastructure: accessible bathing stations and nail trimming
- Affordable diagnostic, dental, and specialist veterinary care
- Emergency fostering and short-term temporary animal care
- Microchipping, and lost-and-found support
- Pet-friendly housing and sheltering

Service providers painted a picture of commitment constrained by chronic under-resourcing. Only 12% of providers received government funding; the remainder depend on donations, which have been declining. Funding shortages, limited veterinary capacity for complex procedures, foster shortages, geographic barriers, and volunteer gaps restrict service delivery. Despite widespread interest—all seven responding providers expressed openness to future collaboration while only three had formalized partnerships with other organizations. The structural disconnection between people-focused social services (housing, sheltering, food banks) and animal-focused services (veterinary clinics, rescues) means that coordination depends on the initiative of individual case managers rather than systemic design.

Knowledge Mobilization: The Victoria Pet Survival Guide

The primary knowledge mobilization output of the research is the Victoria Pet Survival Guide; a plain-language, accessible resource designed for both digital and print distribution. The guide consolidates information on: free and low-cost veterinary care; pet-friendly shelter and housing; emergency boarding; pet food banks; and lost-and-found services. It includes practical 'Quick Tips' on pet insurance, microchipping, and pet-friendly campgrounds. Printed copies are distributed

through BC SPCA animal centre, food bank events and Vets for Pets clinics; digital copies are available through the BC SPCA Victoria Community Animal Centre's website. The guide was developed with a plain-language review and is designed to be updated annually to reflect changes in service availability.

The guide is designed as a replicable model. The BC SPCA's Regional Community Services Facilitators can adapt this framework to create localized versions for communities across British Columbia, tailoring sections to reflect regional priorities such as pet-friendly warming spaces in northern communities, or grooming stations in urban centres. The guide directly addresses the core information access failure identified in the research: that services exist but are hidden behind insider knowledge, digital access, and the stigma associated with seeking social services.

Policy Recommendations

The research supports seven priority recommendations for the BC SPCA, local governments, and community service providers:

- **Expand low-barrier veterinary access.** Develop mobile spay/neuter and wellness clinics deployable across Vancouver Island and other BC regions. Explore the feasibility of a BC SPCA veterinary hospital on Vancouver Island to address root causes of animal surrenders, support community centres, and provide accessible low-cost care.
- **Strengthen cross-sector service coordination.** Establish formal collaboration mechanisms between animal welfare organizations and social service providers, including regular multi-sector meetings, service-provider fairs, and referral pathways. Resource a coordinating function to maintain the Pet Survival Guide and broker partnerships.
- **Advocate for pet-inclusive policies in social infrastructure.** Municipal governments, BC Housing, and social service funders should require or incentivize pet-friendly policies in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and supportive housing. Pets were cited as a housing barrier by 8% of unhoused respondents in the 2023/24 Greater Victoria Point-in-Time Count, a barrier that policy can reduce.
- **Expand emergency and short-term boarding options.** Extend the BC SPCA's Emergency Boarding program to include short-duration options (up to 8 hours) for guardians attending medical appointments, housing appointments, or other essential activities where leaving animals unattended creates serious risk.
- **Invest in community humane education.** Offer quarterly, low-barrier education sessions for vulnerable animal guardians on veterinary navigation, spay/neuter, microchipping, basic grooming, and pet first aid. Support public awareness that de-stigmatizes low-income and unhoused pet guardianship.
- **Secure stable public funding for community animal welfare.** The current dependence on donations leaves organizations operationally precarious. Municipal and provincial governments should consider dedicated funding streams for community animal welfare services, recognizing their documented social and public health benefits.
- **Support ongoing data collection and community feedback.** Annual updates to the Pet Survival Guide, systematic community feedback mechanisms, and replication of the mixed-methods research model in other BC communities will ensure services remain responsive and evidence-based.

Implications for Local Governance

Victoria's experience offers lessons for local governments and service organizations across Canada. Animal welfare is not a peripheral concern but is deeply entangled with housing, social services, public health, and community wellbeing. The human-animal bond is a determinant of health for many of the community's most vulnerable residents, yet it remains largely unrecognized in social policy frameworks. Municipalities that align animal welfare programs with their homelessness and housing strategies, designate responsibility for community animal services, and fund accessible low-barrier supports will be better positioned to reduce the cycle of surrender and re-entry that currently burdens sheltering systems.

The One Health framework—emphasizing the interconnectedness of human health, animal welfare, and environmental systems—provides a useful conceptual anchor for this work. Integrated models such as co-located human and veterinary clinics, as piloted in the United States (Yang et al., 2021), represent a direction Canadian municipalities and health authorities could explore. The evidence from Victoria suggests that investment in keeping people and their pets together is not only compassionate but cost-effective: preventing unnecessary surrender reduces

BC SPCA operational costs, strengthens guardians' mental health and social stability, and supports more effective engagement with housing and social services.

Conclusion

The BC SPCA's shift toward a community-care model, supported by the research and tools developed through this research project, represents a significant opportunity to reimagine how animal welfare is delivered in British Columbia. The Victoria Pet Survival Guide provides an immediately actionable, replicable resource. The broader set of recommendations—spanning expanded veterinary access, cross-sector collaboration, pet-inclusive housing policy, and stable public funding—require coordinated effort from local governments, social service organizations, health authorities, and the province. What the research makes unambiguously clear is that for many of Victoria's most vulnerable residents, keeping their animals is deeply tied to their own stability, well-being, and ability to navigate daily life. Policies and services that honour this bond are not luxuries—they are essential community infrastructure.

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