Community-Supported Sheltering Policy Platform for State and Local Governments

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly altered the way many municipalities and the communities they serve operate on a day-to-day basis. Nationwide, animal shelters and animal care/services workers were deemed essential in nearly every jurisdiction that issued shelter-in-place, safer-at-home, or similar orders during the COVID-19 pandemic. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, many shelters and animal care workers limited certain services and changed many of their operations to maintain social distancing. Anticipating a shortage of staff and limited operations, many called on their communities for support and those communities stepped up to help on an unprecedented level. For example, many shelters saw massive gains in the number of foster volunteers, in some cases allowing them to completely empty their shelters. Some of these COVID-prompted changes resulted in increased positive outcomes for animals in shelters, causing many in the animal sheltering industry to suggest that some of these changes remain permanent. The following document outlines suggested policy and legislative changes for local governments to maintain and enhance the gains made during the pandemic and rethink sheltering in a post-COVID world.

Prevention programs that keep pets and families together: Governments should invest in pet homelessness prevention programs and resources that keep pets with their families such as low-cost veterinary care, pet food pantries, and behavioral consultation services, just to name a few. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many shelters implemented managed intake policies like requiring appointments for owner-surrenders which allow shelters to better serve their community and identify opportunities to keep pets with their families. Governments should also allow for these types of intake policies and address any ordinances or policies that interfere with a shelter's ability to manage intake.

Budgets/investment in community-based services: Animal services are strongly supported by communities and they should be adequately funded. Municipalities should avoid models for animal services that incentivize unnecessarily impounding animals and separating families from their pets. There are a variety of possible budget models, but governments should move away from strictly intake-based fees. Governments should invest in community-based services that address the root causes of pet homelessness. Municipalities should likewise avoid raising animal reclaim fees or adoption fees as a means to augment budgets, given that such fees do not build community trust and collaborative relationships, unnecessarily separate families, and create barriers to having positive outcomes for animals.

Community cats: A large body of peer-reviewed research and the National Animal Care and Control Association's (NACA) guidelines indicate that trap and "remove" policies for cats are ineffective. Policies should support a shelter's ability to leave healthy and safe stray cats out of the shelter population and

conduct trap, neuter, vaccinate, return (TNVR) for community cats. In many municipalities, outdated ordinances prevent the implementation of these effective programs. Local ordinances like cat leash laws, mandatory impoundment of stray cats, feeding bans, and cat licensing requirements should be replaced with ordinances that facilitate TNVR.

Breed neutral policies: Breed discriminatory policies are not only ineffective at ensuring public safety, but also costly and labor intensive to enforce. Rather than pass laws that punish innocent dogs and responsible owners, communities can make better use of resources by creating breed-neutral, comprehensive dangerous-dog laws that penalize negligent or reckless owners.

Pet-inclusive housing, especially for owners/operators who receive subsidies: The majority of Americans own pets and the majority of them consider those pets to be members of their family. Nationwide, housing-related issues are the second most common reason animals end up in shelters. Pet-inclusive housing policies that prevent families from being separated reduces unnecessary burden on the local shelter by preventing them from having to take in pets that are the victims of restrictive housing policies. States and municipalities should ensure that publicly-funded housing is pet-inclusive and encourage privately-funded housing to also have pet-inclusive policies.

Working with the community to get pets home: Once a resource only used to prevent/control rabies, shelters are now relied upon as the "go to" to reunite lost pets with owners. An emerging body of research is finding that "lost" dogs are often found quite close to their homes, so the industry is questioning the value in taking these animals miles away to be impounded in shelters when empowering animal control officers or even civilians to help reunite with owners "in the field" is likely more effective and results in cost savings. Municipalities should empower finders of lost animals and animal control officers to attempt to locate the animal's owners and reunite the animal in the field, rather than impounding the animal in the shelter and requiring owners to travel to the shelter to be reunited. Animal services budgets should include funding for tools like microchip scanners that empower this work. Similarly, shelters can invite finders to foster the animal in their home while the shelter aids in locating the owners virtually. Any local or state laws or regulations that require found animals to be automatically impounded in shelters should be repealed.

Telemedicine: Telemedicine allows shelter animals and owned pets to receive veterinary care to the extent possible while maintaining social distancing and provides a good option when physically bringing the animal to the shelter or veterinarian is unrealistic or unnecessary. The use of telemedicine technologies (with the legal authority to fully utilize their capabilities) has been in place in a number of states for some time and has been used with great success for patients, clients, and veterinarians alike. Expansion of telemedicine, including allowing veterinarian-client-patient-relationship to be established via telemedicine, would allow for shelter pets and owned pets alike to receive care in a variety of circumstances.

Foster Care and Adoptions: During COVID-19, many shelters and rescues called on their communities for help and those communities stepped up in a major way. This was particularly evident with community members volunteering to foster animals with many communities seeing an unprecedented increase in foster homes. National data shows that during the height of the COVID-19 crisis shelters saw a 47% increase in dogs in foster care and a 7% increase in cats in foster care.[1] Fosters have been and will

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[1] https://www.24petwatch.com/Portals/24petwatchv2/shelterwatch/COVIDReport-Week6.pdf

be even more critical to sustaining lifesaving operations in a post-COVID world. Any laws or regulations that prohibit or impede fostering or adoptions such as home inspections, pet limits, background checks, or licensing schemes should be repealed.

Animal services has a seat at the table: Municipalities may form various community task forces comprised of local agencies and partners that provide essential services. It makes sense to include animal services in state or local planning task forces in order to best meet the needs of community members with pets. Such participation will foster greater collaboration with municipal leaders on a variety of matters.

Intersectionality with other social services: Delivering effective animal services does not happen in a vacuum. The needs of people with animals exist within the complexities of a wide variety of human needs and environments. For example, one of the major reason domestic violence victims are reluctant to leave abusive situations is fear for the welfare of the pets in the home, as abusers often use pets as a proxy for their victim and alternative housing options for victims often don't allow pets. This presents an opportunity for integration. Governments should facilitate the coordination and where appropriate, integration of these social services in the community.

Role of animal field services: Engaging citizens to resolve animal-related issues in the community has been used by some municipalities for many years and this approach is increasingly gaining popularity. This approach has been used in traditional policing with great success for decades. Field officers who engage the community utilize successfully resolve common issues involving animals. Under this model, the public is recruited to assist field services in maintaining a watchful eye on elderly or needy community members to assist in caring for their pets, assist with fence repair for animals that escape, build shelter for animals housed outside, and provide ongoing care for community cats. This model fosters goodwill in the community and allows for resources to be deployed in the areas of greatest need for public health and safety. Governments should support policies and laws that give animal field services the ability to serve this kind of role in the community, rather than simple mandates to impound all free-roaming animals.