

Appendix O – Supporting people with companion animals



☛ Sue has been sleeping in the same park for five years. A couple of years ago a friend passed away and left his dog Jax in Sue's care. Sue has been physically and verbally attacked many times. She feels much safer sleeping next to Jax. Jax never goes a day without food - Sue feeds him before she feeds herself. Some workers have said they might be able to help Sue get a place at a local refuge, but she's heard they don't allow dogs and there is no way she's leaving her best, and only friend Jax. ☛

Each person has their own unique experience and needs. It is important to understand the intersectionality between a person's gender, race, sexual identity, culture, experiences and circumstances. Workers may refer to multiple appendices to assist their understanding, engagement and support for each person they engage.

Overview

Companion animals contribute to good physical and mental health, and quality of life. It is estimated that around one in five Australians experiencing homelessness owns an animalⁱ. For people experiencing homelessness, a companion animal can provide a sense of identity, purpose and responsibility, reduce feelings of loneliness and provide protection from external threatsⁱⁱ. Animals also provide a sense of friendship and act as social facilitators, often inspiring conversation and interaction with other peopleⁱⁱⁱ.

Workers must consider the important bond a person may have with their companion animal. In many cases, people experiencing homelessness may describe their companion animals as family members and the animals' needs are prioritised over their own wellbeing^{iv}.

However, having a companion animal can create additional barriers to sourcing accommodation^v and limit potential support options due to the exclusion of animals on most premises. Without safe and reliable animal care or temporary boarding, people may also have difficulties accessing health services or employment^{vi}. A person's separation from a companion animal can produce feelings of guilt, depression, exacerbate feelings of loneliness and lead to increased substance use^{vii}.

When engaging or offering assistance, a worker should consider support options that address the needs of both the person and their companion animal. There are often local services that can help a person experiencing homelessness care for their animal. Local councils, veterinary care services, community groups, and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) may provide support to people in their local area. Workers should be familiar with local services that can provide accommodation and/or support to people experiencing homelessness who have a companion animal.

Engagement strategy

Things to consider before engaging:

- Companion animals are different to Assistance animals. Assistance animals are legally considered medical aids and are trained to assist the person living with a disability. They are granted full Public Access Rights and must go through annual accreditation. Companion animals are considered pets and do not have set standards or an accreditation process, nor public access rights^{viii}.
- Companion animals are reported to provide a sense of responsibility and a reason to live, reduce substance use, and seek healthcare^{ix}.
- Dogs owned by people experiencing homelessness are as healthy and cared for as those owned by people with housing. Dogs owned by people experiencing homelessness are less likely to have behavioural issues, such as aggression toward strangers and separation anxiety^x. However, workers should still exercise caution when approaching companion animals.
- Companion animals can be a reliable source of emotional support and protection offering unconditional love and acceptance to people experiencing homelessness.^{xi}
- A person experiencing homelessness, and their companion animal, may become stressed when someone approaches them if they have experienced abuse in the past^{xii}. Workers should use trauma-informed principles throughout the interaction.
- A person may choose to continue sleeping rough or reject support offered to avoid separating from their companion animal. Workers must remain non-judgemental and demonstrate understanding of the person's choice.
- Local council rangers or the RSPCA may be able to provide support for health or safety concerns of a companion animal.

Strategies for engagement:

- Be mindful when approaching a person with a companion animal and maintain appropriate distance to reduce risk, identifying if the animal is on a lead or secured.
- Introduce yourself in a friendly manner, stating your name and the agency/organisation you work for.
- Only touch/pat the animal if the person gives you verbal consent.
- Offer practical support to both the person and the companion animal where possible, and if the person requests it, such as provision of food, bottled water, bowls, towels, blankets etc.
- If the animal requires veterinary assistance, provide information regarding local veterinary care services, community supports, or other relevant animal services.
- If support is requested, be sure referrals and services are appropriate and can accommodate their animal/s.



- i The Big Issue, [A Housing Tail: Pet Friendly Crisis Accommodation](#), The Big Issue website, 2022.
- ii N Kerman, S Gran-Ruaz and M Lem, 'Pet ownership and homelessness: a scoping review', *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 2019, 28(2): 106-114, doi: 10.1080/10530789.2019.1650325.
- iii L Scanlon, P Hobson-West, K Cobb, A McBride and J Stavisky, 'Homeless People and Their Dogs: Exploring the Nature and Impact of the Human-Companion Animal Bond', *Anthrozoös*, 2021, 34(1): 77-92, doi: [10.1080/08927936.2021.1878683](#).
- iv Ibid.
- v Ibid.
- vi N Kerman, M Lem, M Witte, C Kim, and H Rhoades, 'A Multilevel Intervention Framework for Supporting People Experiencing Homelessness with Pets', *Animals (Basel)*, 2020, 10(10): 1869, doi: 10.3390/ani10101869.
- vii B Henwood, E Dzibur, H Rhoades, P St. Clair. and R Cox, 'Pet ownership in the unsheltered homeless population in Los Angeles', *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 2021, 30(2): 191-194, doi: [10.1080/10530789.2020.1795791](#).
- viii Assistance Dogs Australia, [What is the difference between an Assistance Dog and an Emotional Support Dog?](#), Assistance Dogs Australia website, n.d.
- ix Kerman et al., 'A Multilevel Intervention Framework for Supporting People Experiencing Homelessness with Pets'.
- x Ibid.
- xi Kerman et al., 'Pet ownership and homelessness: a scoping review'.
- xii Ibid.

RESOURCES

CRISIS SUPPORT		
Name	Service	Contact Details
Ask Izzy	A website directory that connects people who are in need with nearby services such as housing, food, health care and legal services in their local area.	Website: https://askizzy.org.au
Link2Home	A statewide telephone service providing information, assessment and referral to specialist homelessness services, temporary accommodation and other appropriate services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week every day of the year.	Phone: 1800 152 152 Website: https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/ways/are-you-homeless
OTHER SUPPORT		
Name	Service	Contact Details
Local Councils	Local councils have rangers and other support staff that conduct regular patrols in their local areas to check on people experiencing homelessness and their companion animals.	Website: https://lgnsw.org.au/Public/Public/NSW-Councils/NSW-Council-Links.aspx
Paws and Recover	Offers practical help such as dog walking, respite care, vet transportation and support services for owners and their companion animals during times of crisis. Support is provided by local volunteers where available.	Email: pawsandrecover@gmail.com Website: https://pawsandrecover.com
Pets of the Homeless Sydney	Provides information on pet friendly shelters, housing and support.	Email: petsofthehomelessydney@gmail.com Website: https://petsofthehomelessydney.wordpress.com/pet-friendly-shelters-housing
RSPCA Community Homelessness Program	Assists pet owners who are currently experiencing homelessness by providing temporary foster accommodation, financial assistance for veterinary treatment and provides pet friendly refuges.	Phone: (02) 9782 4408 Email: mail@rspcansw.org.au Website: https://www.rspcansw.org.au/what-we-do/working-in-communities/community-homelessness-program
RSPCA Indigenous Community Companion Animal Health Program (ICCAHP) – Regional NSW	Provides veterinary services for Aboriginal children and families that have companion animals	Phone: (02) 9770 7555 Email: outreach@rspcansw.org.au Website: https://www.rspcansw.org.au/what-we-do/working-in-communities/icahp