

A Radical Act of Self-Care

Is the Cure to Burnout Helping Pets of the Homeless?

by Jen Reeder

A dozen years ago, Kwane Stewart, DVM, was feeling burned out from his work as a veterinarian in shelter medicine in California. He felt depressed dealing with so much euthanasia and was considering leaving the profession altogether.

Then a chance encounter with a homeless man and his dog outside a 7-Eleven changed everything.

Stewart stopped and asked the man about his dog, who was suffering from a bad skin condition. The next day, he returned to treat the dog.

“It was three dollars out of my pocket, two minutes of my time, and the dog was transformed,” Stewart recalled. “I saw the same dog 10 days later, and she was happy. The infection was gone, her hair was growing back, and the man just said with tears in his eyes, ‘Thank you for not ignoring me.’”

From that moment on, Stewart started keeping a medical bag handy. He stops to offer help whenever he sees pets of people living unhoused and even actively seeks them out, garnering renown as “the Street Vet.”

Since he was still paying off his student loans, a few years ago he launched a crowdfunding campaign to help finance his volunteer work. He was named a GoFundMe Hero in 2020 around the time he launched the nonprofit Project Street Vet.



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Now Project Street Vet has volunteer veterinary teams in Atlanta, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco—and it continues to grow.

“In big urban areas, there’s always pockets of homeless communities where you’ll see a small tent city. So we go directly to the people,” he said.

Stewart, who is also chief medical officer of HolistaPet, is moved by the unique bond between the pets and people he meets on the street since they spend every minute of every day together. He’s had people tell him they’ve gotten clean and sober because they needed to be able to care for their pets.

Caring for pets “for passion, not for pay” has revitalized Stewart’s outlook.

“One small act of kindness can change someone’s day, but a gesture of kindness can also change someone’s life,” he said. “I get caught up complaining about the stupidest things, but when I go out and talk to these people, I realize I have the best life. So in many ways, it’s saved me, too.”

Antidote to Burnout

Volunteering to help pets of people experiencing homelessness might seem like an impossibility to veterinary professionals who are already stretched thin due to the heightened challenges of the pandemic. But some find that this rewarding work counteracts burnout and compassion fatigue and offers a welcome respite from awkward cost-of-care conversations in animal hospitals.

Plus, the need is great, according to Genevieve Frederick, founder and president of the nonprofit Feeding Pets of the Homeless, a national nonprofit that offers free pet food and veterinary care to people experiencing homelessness and gives pet crates to homeless shelters.

Frederick noted that of the approximately 3.5 million Americans living unhoused, 5–10% have dogs or cats—a number that reaches as high as 24% in some areas. In the past 15 years, the nonprofit has received calls for help in over 1,000 cities and every single state.

“We have three full-time case managers handling over 100 cases a week,” Frederick said. “It’s crazy how many people are reaching out to us. We are finding a lot of elderly people being pushed out of their homes because of past-due taxes, past-due rent, foreclosures. All it takes is one major medical problem, and these people are thrown right into homelessness. And there are not enough homeless shelters that allow pets, so these people are on the streets.”

Feeding Pets of the Homeless will also pay some costs of emergency veterinary care once verification from a social worker, police officer, or other advocate proves that the client is unhoused. Over 1,400 animal hospitals have offered discounted care to treat pets for issues ranging from ear infections and tooth extractions to gunshot wounds or being hit by a car.

“We ask them to give us a 20% discount, and we pay at time of



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service,” she said. “Our great hospitals are so generous.”

Sometimes a veterinarian or technician is so moved after helping with an emergency case for Feeding Pets of the Homeless that they want to do more, like host a free wellness clinic at a local food bank or another place where people with low incomes congregate. Veterinarians offer exams, vaccinations, ear cleanings, and other basic care. Some partner with other nonprofits to give spay/neuter vouchers or with the city to provide dog licenses.

Frederick recognizes burnout is high in the veterinary profession, but often hears from volunteers that it’s rewarding to help this population while also promoting public health by offering vaccinations and parasite protection. Parvo cases in homeless encampments skyrocketed in 2022, she noted, as well as the cost to treat it.

If an unhoused individual comes to an animal hospital requesting emergency care, she suggested sharing the phone number for Feeding Pets of the Homeless (775-841-7463) so they can call to talk to a case manager. After an intake interview, the nonprofit can step in with financial assistance.

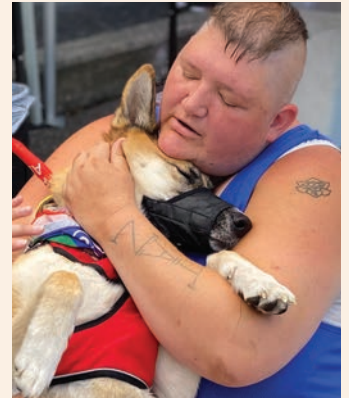
“There are so many reasons why people become homeless: spousal abuse, a bad decision, they lost their job and went into a depression and now they’re in a spiral,” she shared. “We get a lot of testimonials from homeless people saying, ‘You have given me hope because you answered the phone and helped my animal.’”

Should People Experiencing Homelessness Have Pets?

We’ve all heard someone express the sentiment that homeless people shouldn’t have pets. But veterinary professionals who work with people experiencing homelessness have a completely different mindset based on their experiences:

“It’s so easy for us to judge and say, ‘You shouldn’t have an animal if you can’t afford to take care of it.’ But that’s such a flawed way of thinking because we all know the human-animal bond is so incredible and important, and everyone deserves to have that.”

—HILARY WHEELER, DVM



“In my 25 years of doing this as a vet in clinic, you just rarely see this type of bond. These people rely on their pets in ways that we don’t: for hope, companionship, love, inspiration. I hear often, ‘I get up every morning because I know I have to take care of him. If I’m not around, no one else is going to look after him.’”

—KWANE STEWART, DVM



“I didn’t anticipate how truly remarkable the people are. They’re so resilient and so determined to care for their pet. I think that that the human-animal bond is stronger for people living homeless and low-income even than it is in housed communities.”

—HANNA EKSTROM, DVM



Rewards and Challenges

Hanna Ekstrom, DVM, founder and executive director of the nonprofit Seattle Veterinary Outreach in Seattle, Washington, has been a veterinarian for over 30 years and feels working with people experiencing homelessness is the most rewarding work she's ever done.

"When you remove the barrier of cost, it allows you to connect in another way to people as human beings and honor their love for their pet," she said.

To that end, she takes a One Health approach and partners with other agencies to provide referrals for social services. In 2022, Seattle Veterinary Outreach cared for over 2,600 pets and distributed over 4,000 referrals for services, including dental, vision, and medical care and insurance; substance use;

basic needs like housing, water, and transportation; legal assistance; help getting identification cards, government phones, and mailing addresses; and domestic violence and family support centers. The group also facilitates COVID vaccinations.

"We care for the pet, and it builds trust with the person, and then that improves the uptake of social services," she explained. "It's really a win-win-win (for the pet, person, and community)."

All services are mobile since clients can't travel far for various reasons, including the risk of their tent being robbed while they're gone; one client lost his mother's ashes that way. Ekstrom and the other veterinarian on her team—as well as volunteers—use AAHA standards when practicing medicine to treat pets, just as she'd treat a pet of a paying client.

(In fact, she plans to start offering mobile pet services to paying clients next spring to help cover the cost of helping pets of people experiencing homelessness.)

Still, she enjoys the challenge of being like "MacGyver" to serve clients. For instance, when she first started the nonprofit in 2018, around 80% of clients couldn't read the paperwork because they didn't have reading glasses. So she started bringing a few pairs along.

Records like proof of vaccination are another issue. Some clients don't have access to electronics, so emailing a record is out. So she explores alternatives, like handwritten records or uploading a photo of a document to a record and keeping copies in case a client's paperwork gets stolen or wet.

"There's a lot of what people would consider banal practicalities that are absolutely critical to people's lives," Ekstrom said. "If they don't have verification that the dog is spayed or neutered and vaccinated, they can't get into housing."

One Health is also a key tenet for The Street Dog Coalition, a national nonprofit founded by Jon Geller, DVM, DABVP (emeritus), that provides free veterinary care to pets of people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The Street Dog Coalition is also offering ongoing veterinary care to pets affected by the invasion of Ukraine; the ASPCA awarded Geller a 2022 Humane Award for his efforts overseas and at home.

Geller, an emergency veterinarian, felt inspired to start his nonprofit



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while attending AAHA’s 2014 annual conference in Nashville, Tennessee. While visiting the city, he noticed a person who was homeless and his dog both gazing at him.

“The message I thought I received was, ‘Can you do something—not just for me and my dog, but all the people that have no money?’” he recalled.

He started a pilot program in Fort Collins, Colorado, that involves veterinarians and veterinary students providing One Health mobile outreach to take care of “both ends of the leash.”

Now there are veterinarian-led volunteer teams in over 50 US cities offering care and partnering with homeless shelters and social service providers to offer haircuts, dental care, meals, mobile showers, Wi-Fi hotspots with computers, spay/neuter vouchers, and other services. Merck Animal Health donates preventive medications and will supply around \$500,000 of products in 2023.

Geller is grateful for all the collaboration to help people in need, including military veterans.

“There are 38,000 homeless veterans in the United States. And 20–22 veterans commit suicide every day. They’re overrepresented in incidents of suicide, just like veterinarians are,” he said. “I really appreciate when I get to work with a veteran that’s struggling—most of them have PTSD. I look at it as an opportunity to engage in a more meaningful way with the world.”

The “Helping High”

Hilary Wheeler, DVM, a partner and founder of The Whole Pet Vet Hospital and Wellness Center in Los Gatos, California, and west regional medical director for The Street Dog Coalition, credits volunteering for the nonprofit with getting her through the pandemic.

“I call it ‘the helping high,’” she said. “The level of gratitude is so striking for doing sometimes the simplest

thing for their pets. It’s so different from what we do on a regular basis at our day jobs. And it’s so fulfilling.”

Many clients are women whose pets provide joy as well as protection. One recent client fled an abusive partner with her two children; their dogs help the kids feel happy and safe despite their circumstances.

“They have these dogs to remind them that there’s a reason to keep going and to give them purpose by caring for them,” she said.

Her advice to veterinary professionals who feel like they’re too burned out to volunteer in this work is simple.

“Just show up once and see what it’s like,” she said. “I promise that anyone who does it is going to go home feeling recharged and refueled.” ✨

Links for More Information:

- Project Street Vet: ProjectStreetVet.org
- Feeding Pets of the Homeless: PetsOfTheHomeless.org
- Seattle Veterinary Outreach: SeattleVet.org
- The Street Dog Coalition: TheStreetDogCoalition.org



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.