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# Exploring Ways Shelters and Rescues Can Close Gaps to Accessing Care

**Liz Finch:** Last week we ended [our interview](#) just as we were getting to the good stuff: how shelters and rescues can work around the current challenges in veterinary care to make sure communities are getting the services they need. So where do you want to start?

Aimee St. Arnaud: I would start by saying we all have to be mindful that, as much as we are frustrated that we can't get a pregnant cat in for a spay or that prices have doubled, clinic staff are just as frustrated by their circumstances. Many of these people live for spay/neuter and it's really hard on them when they can't meet the demand.

If you want to preserve a good working relationship with your vet team or with outside clinics, make sure you are showing up for your appointments, paying bills on time and educating fosters or volunteers about what to expect and how to be respectful of that staff's time and demands. Be kind to the staff and understand that they are working as hard as they can.

Beyond just preserving those relationships, we can build on them with creative partnerships that allow each organization to stay true to its mission while also providing access to affordable care. There would be less incentive for clinics to add revenue-generating services and reduce spay/neuter if they could find solutions to covering those costs in the wake of fewer grants, for instance.

**Since cost is a major concern for everyone, let's start with that.**

Everyone is the key word, because many of us are just one health issue, accident, job loss or pandemic away from not being able to afford a large veterinary bill. The Global Financial Literacy Excellence Center [defines financial fragility](#) as a household's ability to come up with \$2,000 within 30 days and it affects families of all income levels.

*// I also feel like I need to stress that we have to stop saying, "If you can't afford an animal, you shouldn't have one." It's time to stop equating money to love. //*

Sure, the largest proportion of households classified as financially fragile—60%—are low-income. However, middle- and upper-income households aren't exempt from being unable to manage a sudden large expense. More than 30% of middle-income households and 15% of upper income households also identify as financially fragile. So, it is all of us.

Providing care to everyone, no matter their circumstances, has always been an important issue for me. That's why [Open Door Veterinary Care](#)—the clinic I'm affiliated with in Asheville, North Carolina—has

public-private partnerships with [Asheville Humane Society](#) and Advocates for Animals in WNC to make sure people who can't afford care can still get it.

Both decided that instead of taking on the cost of operating a clinic, they would partner with veterinary clinics and set up medical funds that cover up to certain amount of care for a pet at a participating clinic. Asheville Humane covers up to \$150 per pet at 50 participating veterinary clinics. You can do a lot to help a pet for \$150 and it makes a huge impact in the community.

I would encourage organizations of all kinds to explore such partnerships, and [Brown Dog Foundation](#) has a good model. It raises funds through a variety of programs, like Adopt a Family, and then offers grants of up to \$400 to help people cover their vet costs. If those individuals can pay some money towards the total grant, Brown Dog will work with them on a payment plan. That leaves more funds available to help others.

Brown Dog partners with online payment management platform [VetBilling](#), which frees up staff from administrative tasks. Clinics, shelters or other nonprofit animal agencies can work with VetBilling on grant repayment plans, like they do with Brown Dog, but the platform also provides other options to extend the reach of limited grant dollars, including pay-in-advance and pet savings accounts.

[Hearts Alive Village](#) in Las Vegas uses VetBilling and does something similar through the Village Fund, which allows individuals and businesses in the community to fund veterinary care for families who can't afford it. They share the successes on their website.

Organizations that don't tap into crowdfunding are missing out on many opportunities. In addition to using your own social media, [Waggle](#) lets individuals and groups promote pets in need to their network. And since Waggle partners with celebrities, social influencers and other nonprofits, pets in need can qualify for additional networking, matching grants or sponsorships.

Even if an organization doesn't build programming around such tools, everyone should direct the public to them by putting the info on their websites or in resource listings.

**Speaking of resource listings, it's one thing to just keep something handy so that staff can direct individuals to veterinary care resources. But not everyone who has an animal in need will get in touch with an animal welfare agency for help.**

Right. Animal welfare organizations connect a lot of people to vet care through things like a spay/neuter voucher program, but not always. A fair number of people who need veterinary help or access to a food bank—and here I'm thinking of community members who don't feel comfortable interacting with government animal services, people without access to the internet, people who are experiencing homelessness, or even those who don't speak English—may be directed to those resources by social workers or home health care workers. That's even if social workers or home health care workers know where to send them.

As an industry, we are well-aware of the many animal resources available in our communities, and we should actively be closing that gap by making the information readily available to other social service support agencies. We have to think outside of the traditional ways we tie into the community, because we are just one small piece.

**We just talked with Heather Owen of One Tail at a Time in Chicago about something along these lines recently; she is working with a youth advocacy and homeless organization in Chicago on a mutual aid project that helps dogs and people experiencing temporary homelessness. What are some other examples of these kinds of relationships?**

Here in Ohio, my clinic Community Pet Care Clinic has created a resource guide on our website and sent it out to all human social work agencies. It paid off when we got a call from the Toledo Lucas County Homeless Board asking us to help on situations where individuals needed their pets to be vaccinated or fixed so they could access housing or other resources. We just helped vaccinate our first pet so he can go into housing with his mom and now we've solidified that relationship with the Homeless Board. Animal welfare groups can play a critical role to helping people find and keep housing through things like spay/neuter, vaccines and even behavioral resources.

And [Dallas Animal Services \(DAS\)](#) has a resource guide for people facing financial hardships that provides details on pet food assistance, options for low-cost veterinary care, housing support and financial assistance. They offer that as part of their role as a [Human Animal Support Services \(HASS\)](#) tier one pilot shelter, which focuses on putting more social service-inspired programs in place to assist those struggling to meet their pets' needs.

There's no reason to think you must launch a huge program either; you can start small. Just start networking with organizations that are reaching a population your shelter is not, and it will build naturally.

**Transportation is second to cost in terms of barriers to vet care. Some organizations offer van services or do mobile events to bring the care to the people, like they do on the Navajo Nation. What are some other ideas you can suggest?**

**Meals on Wheels America** embarked on a research project earlier this year with their pet-owning clients and found half of them cited transportation as a barrier. By identifying this gap, Meals on Wheels is positioning itself to be another player in delivering resources to people in need in the community. That ties back into what we were just discussing in terms of making connections outside of our usual sphere so that we can work collaboratively with other agencies in putting people and resources together.

I'm really excited about a pilot project my new non-profit **Open Door Vet Collective** is working on in five communities with Uber and multiple organizations. We hope to launch nationwide in the future. The project would allow animal welfare groups to set up a system where they can subsidize rides for people without transportation. Organizations will be able to set their budget, track its use on a dashboard and get billed once a month. They can choose to pay all or part of a ride from people's homes to their vet clinics. When someone requests a ride, the app is triggered to only send a pet-friendly vehicle.

One thing I really like about this model versus those where pets are picked up by a van service is that people get to go to the clinic with their dog or cat, and they get to make a connection with the veterinary staff. That's important for establishing a long-term relationship.

**There's so much to this issue, more than we can fit into this forum. What final thoughts do you have to share?**

There are so many barriers that people have around accessing vet care that I don't think we can even begin to understand. That's why we need to be so creative about what will work in our individual communities. We may not yet know the next challenge to making sure every pet gets the services they need, but I believe there is always a way to meet those needs if we open our minds.

I also feel like I need to stress that we have to stop saying, "If you can't afford an animal, you shouldn't have one." It's time to stop equating money to love.

There are many animals who are deeply loved by their families and their family's inability to afford veterinary treatment does not always indicate a lack of love or imply that they are "bad," irresponsible or neglectful pet owners. Every person deserves an opportunity to share their home with a beloved animal; and those animals deserve loving homes, too. And animals don't care if those homes are on the street or in a car so long as they have the love of their person.

Animal welfare and veterinary medicine are about people as much as they are about pets and we need to keep evolving and doing whatever is necessary to support both ends of the leash. The question we should all be asking ourselves every day is will we as a profession open the door to help people consistently access affordable veterinary care or will we close it?



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