**Accessible and Crisis Veterinary and Petcare for Vulnerable Communities: A Community Conversation** - **19 September 2022**

**Panel Discussion**

**Some background issues**

There has been **a massive increase in pet ownership** during the pandemic and an estimated extra 2 million pets in households over that period. Now some 69% of households had a pet. Also large percentage of older pet owners in the population and those numbers are rising. There are flow on effects with increasing numbers of pet owners facing economic hardship and pressure on shelters and overflow pressure on crisis services and emergency boarding.

Another factor was **major** **vet shortage** which was getting worse with more than 50% of vets not practicing after 5 years, so they are finishing the degree (a long period of study), but not practicing for long; this needs to be addressed in some way.

There is growing pressure on vet clinics to deal with **cases of economic hardship** with hard decisions for treating vets. In the ACT, ACT Pet Crisis Support, <https://www.actpetcrisis.com>, RSPCA, <https://www.rspca-act.org.au/>, Pets in the Park <https://www.petsinthepark.org.au/act/> and Rainbow Paws <https://rainbowpaws.org/about-us/> all help with people experiencing financial hardship, but resources are stretched and reliant on donor funding.

Domestic Animal Services has seen **a significant increase in surrenders** and there is a challenge to manage the flow through of these to rescue groups; AFP assist cases (mental health, domestic violence, arrests) has risen dramatically in the past year and this a recurring issue.

**Possible solutions**

Suggested free bulk billing for pet owners who are pensioners. Noted there is **a proposed Veticare** scheme in Victoria – govt funded Medicare for pets – subject to election outcome, which could be instituted elsewhere. The Veticare scheme has been proposed by the Animal Justice Party.

**Financial issue**s are a key one for economically distressed owners. Noted that Care Finance, a community-based organisation, <https://www.carefcs.org/about> can give interest-free loans up to $1500 for distressed clients which can be used for emergency boarding, desexing and vet care. The loans can be paid back via Centerpay. One of the big risks for economically distressed clients was predatory lenders, and a big risk to their long-term welfare in using ‘open pay schemes’ to cover pet care costs. Govts were currently looking at regulating these open pay schemes. Catholic Care is campaigning for better regulation of this industry. Mention made of the no interest loan scheme via the Good Shepherd Foundation.

Noted that financial counsellors can be on the front line of dealing with distressed pet owners – to the extent of providing pet food for their clients and making referrals such as to Pets in the Park. <https://www.petsinthepark.org.au/act/> Noted that Pets in Park in Canberra has monthly clinics with about 20/30 clients per month – some are repeats. This covers vaccinations, microchipping and preventative care. Every three months there is also a desexing clinic conducted at a private practice and this is free to needy clients but needs a letter from a social service agency

**Desexing** is required by law in the ACT and Rainbow Paws <https://rainbowpaws.org/about-us/> also has a snip/snip program. It generally charged $100 per dog ($50 for a cat) but can discount if social workers make contact or can fully subsidize if required. RSPCA <https://www.rspca-act.org.au/> has a public vet clinic for low-income clients which is very heavily used and this has heavily discounted services where the owner can use Centrepay. It also runs discounted desexing services annually.

**More on the Cherished Pets model** <https://www.cherishedpetcare.com.au/> : noted that funding is a centrepiece and generally some contribution is required from economically distressed clients, however small. NDIS and aged care packages form part of available funding. Noted too that regular private clients often helped to fund the Foundation’s work through donations in gratitude for the vet help to their pet.

Cherished Pets uses **impact measurement** to help with making the case for funding. Cherished Pets estimated it could make $750,000 pa economic benefit on services costs to govt and that impact measurement was essential to making the case for funding.

On **emergency crisis care**, had been noted earlier that RSPCA and Rainbow PAWs had a capacity to offer some emergency boarding, but resources overstretched given the need. Cherished Pets does not have an emergency boarding facility but, as part of their project, also partnered with boarding kennels/cattery on a permanent lease to take these cases. They were also working long term on a project for a dedicated boarding facility, that would cover boarding, doggy day care and crisis care. It would be a social enterprise, which would give at-risk students training in animal care and help with studies.

On **staffing**, Cherished Pets ran a ‘Community Pet Hub’ with volunteers as dog walkers, respite carers (not referred to as foster carers), and pet transporters but with key staff members, including social workers, administration staff, vet nurses and vets being the paid staff. Volunteers perform specific roles, rather than ongoing roles that require more training, responsibility and management.

Note made of the much higher number of people contacting dog rescue groups for **surrenders due to affordability or behavioural issues**. This was a major challenge to rescues. When rescue contacted about surrenders there was an effort to offer other solutions where they could not be taken by rescue, such as contacting Rainbow Paws and others, but would be good for rescue groups to get a **comprehensive list of available services** to help handle these inquiries.

AVA could consider getting up a **list of vets in ACT who offer behavioural advice** for those needing this help. Noted however that this advice could be quite costly as the process took time.

Note was made that part of the solution is **early intervention through** **education** and that all stakeholders needed to be working to prevent the problem. DAS has a program in schools (from pre-school) which is about living safely with dogs and this helps to cover welfare too. One of those covered was Galilee School. It is a long-term project. Noted that Delta Dog also did educational training in the community.

AVA had an education program for 5-11yrs, PetPep <https://www.ava.com.au/about-us/programs-awards/ava-petpep/> which was still going in WA and would be worth following up to do nationally again.

Issue raised of the impact of the **current tight rental situation** for people with pets. Note was made that applying with a pet was troublesome as the owner could be put to the bottom of a long list of applicants. If however the application to keep a pet was made after the rental was in place then it would be up to the landlord to go to ACAT to prevent this. ACT govt was considering reforms in this area to make it easier for those with a pet at the time of rental and would be helpful for relevant agencies to be in touch with ACT govt and support these reforms.

Noted that another critical issue for pet owners was **access to public transport** – very limited at the moment - and in other areas such as shopping centers such as happened in other place around the world.

A key issue to help all in the relevant sectors was **better communication about the available services**.

**Next stages**

In conjunction with ACT Pet Crisis Support, RSPCA ACT, Rainbow PAWS and others, PAPA plans to get up a list of available services on the PAPA website. PAPA also plans to contact relevant groups/organisations about a further session on Zoom about the Cherished Pets model.