

How 'One Health' clinics support unhoused people and their pets

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Having a pet can be expensive, but being able to access health care for your pet should not be a luxury.

[Around 25% of unhoused people](#)

[have a companion animal](#)

[that supports them](#). Beyond the [social benefits](#) of living with a pet, the connections that companion animals provide can lead to [positive physical and psychological benefits](#), assist in [recovery from addiction](#) and lead to [better emotional and mental health for unhoused people](#).

However, having a pet can sometimes [prevent individuals from accessing critical services](#), health care and community spaces. Taking pets to the vet can be expensive, and hospitals and many short-term shelters do not accept animals. Finding pet-friendly housing options can be very difficult, while those that are available are typically priced higher than other rental units, creating a challenge for those with lower incomes.

While people dealing with homelessness face a wide array of struggles, "[pet-friendly](#)" clinics can be an important way to provide health care to both unhoused people and their pets.

Struggles owning a pet while unhoused

There have been unprecedented increases in the number of people experiencing homelessness, with an increase of 32% between 2020 and 2023 in Greater Vancouver alone, according to the [Homelessness Service Association of BC](#).

Owning a pet can make it difficult to care for yourself. Pet owners in particular face challenges [getting their animals vaccinated](#), or having to [choose between feeding pets or themselves](#). Pets are frequently not welcome in [shelters or cooling centers](#). This means that when unhoused people with pets seek basic services for accommodation or try to escape extreme heat or cold, they (and their pet) are excluded from these

spaces.

When there are so many intersecting issues facing unhoused people, how can we ensure that pet ownership is not another hurdle to overcome?

% clinics

One of the most effective models to support unhoused individuals and their companion animals is [% clinics](#). These are [integrated interdisciplinary clinics that provide services for people and their pets](#). Both types of health-care services work in parallel.

For example, in [Seattle's % Clinic](#), health care for humans includes diagnostics, screening, [mental health](#), sexual health and gender-affirming care. Services for pets include routine vaccinations, treatment for fleas and ticks, and referral for more complex procedures such as spay and neutering. In this way, both a person and their pet can receive care at the same visit.

In Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, there are irregular one-day pet clinics provided by Community Veterinary Outreach (CVO), a national registered charity, with 11 locations across Canada and a 20-year-old history. The [one-day clinic](#) typically runs four times a year in Vancouver, and is funded by the University of British Columbia's [Community-University Engagement Support grant](#) to develop a One Health clinic to provide human and animal health care.

Services provided by the clinic are similar to those by the Seattle One Health Clinic but also include providing pet food and supplies, with volunteer nurses and mental health practitioners for support and referrals. These services are run in community centers on the Downtown Eastside, and have been running in Vancouver since 2016.

Other similar services are also provided by the [Regional Animal Protection Society](#), [Charlie's Food Bank](#) and [Atira Pet Outreach](#). There have been [countless positive stories](#) from clients who have benefited from CVO's One Health clinic, and it is a service that has a high demand.

Given a growing need for these kinds of facilities, governments should invest in such multicare clinics. These clinics can be less expensive than other initiatives cities undertake in response to homelessness. For example, [in 2022-23](#) CVO spent \$242,718, mostly on emergency relief, medical supplies, services and delivery. By contrast, in 2023 evicting unhoused people in the Downtown Eastside cost the City of Vancouver [more than \\$550,000](#).

Investing in long-term solutions that address health care in a holistic way can transform how we support unhoused people in our communities and their pets. By transforming our approach to human and animal care, we can begin to address some of the systemic barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

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