



Equity in Access: Inclusive Solutions for Companion Animal Challenges

10th National G2Z Summit & Workshops
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Katie Belt is Australia's first Social Worker based in an animal shelter. Since late 2023, she has developed and led the Home Together program at the Lost Dogs' Home, supporting pet owners in crisis and helping them navigate challenges that put their animals at risk of surrender. With eight years' experience across diverse social work sectors, Katie brings deep insight into the social and systemic issues affecting pet families. She holds a Bachelor of Social Work and is passionate about trauma-informed, innovative approaches that protect the human-animal bond and promote wellbeing for both humans and animals at individual and societal levels.

Abstract

Many people facing housing insecurity, family violence or financial crisis are at risk of losing their beloved pets - not because they want to, but because of systemic barriers and hardship. Home Together is a social work program at the Lost Dogs' Home that supports people experiencing hardship to keep their companion animals.

By integrating social work into animal welfare, the program addresses the social drivers of surrender and recognises pets as essential sources of stability and connection. In its first year, it prevented over 170 surrenders and saved an estimated \$375,000 in shelter care costs.

This presentation will explore how organisations can better support both animals and the people who care for them by embedding human-centred, trauma-informed approaches into animal services. It will share key learnings on cross-sector collaboration, access and equity, and building pet-inclusive responses in human services. This session is relevant for animal welfare professionals, social service providers, and anyone interacting with vulnerable pet families.



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The Home Together Program

The Home Together Program launched as a three-year pilot thanks to a grant from the Petstock Foundation. It was developed after The Lost Dogs' Home identified that nearly half of pet surrenders were linked to human guardians facing significant life challenges.

Program Goals:

- Reduce unnecessary pet surrenders.
- Increase pet reclaims.
- Support vulnerable pet families through tailored, person-centred interventions.
- Improve trust between pet owners and service systems.

By addressing both human and animal needs simultaneously, the program strengthens the human-animal bond while relieving pressure on the shelter system.

The Social Work Lens in Animal Welfare

Social work addresses structural and intergenerational barriers that create inequities in access to services. Similarly, the animal shelter system was historically built with a "one-size-fits-all" approach, which can leave those with complex needs unsupported.

Common challenges for vulnerable pet guardians include:

- Homelessness and housing instability
- Family violence (including pets used as coercive control)
- Financial hardship
- Limited access to culturally safe services

A social work perspective recognises these intersecting factors and works to remove barriers at both an individual and systems level.

Core Values and Approaches

The Home Together Program is underpinned by key social work values and approaches, adapted for the animal welfare context:

Values:

- Confidentiality — protecting client privacy unless safety or legal obligations require disclosure.
- Non-judgemental listening — understanding people's barriers without blame.
- Equity over equality — providing tailored support based on need.
- Cultural safety and inclusion — ensuring services are accessible, welcoming, and respectful.

Approaches:

- Trauma-informed practice — recognising the impact of trauma on behaviour and decision-making.
- Strengths-based perspective — focusing on resilience and protective actions, even in hardship.
- Systems bridging — identifying and closing service gaps through collaboration.
- Practical resourcing — connecting people to financial assistance, food resources, emergency boarding, and other supports.



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Theoretical Framework

Three key theories inform my work:

1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs — Basic needs must be met before people can plan long-term or make complex decisions.
2. Behaviour as Function — Understanding that challenging behaviours often stem from trauma or unmet needs.
3. Systems Theory — Recognising how family, community, and broader systems interact to shape attitudes and access to services.

Challenging Misconceptions

Myth

People who surrender pets don't love them

People experiencing homelessness have "free time"

Unemployed people aren't trying hard enough

Reality

Many feed pets before themselves or sacrifice housing to keep them. Surrender often results from factors outside their control.

Survival is a full-time effort: securing food, shelter, safety, and caring for pets leaves little capacity for future planning.

Barriers like injury, family crisis, or lack of jobs combine with unexpected pet costs, making stability difficult despite best efforts.

Barriers to Access

- *Visible barriers*: financial hardship, housing restrictions, reclaim fees.
- *Less visible barriers*: lack of ID, inability to leave possessions unattended, distrust of services, cognitive or mental health challenges, trauma impacts, and systemic inflexibility.

Service Delivery and Interventions

Individual Support

- Building rapport and trust.
- Providing emotional regulation support during crisis.
- Offering information and navigation of shelter, council, and service processes.
- Securing practical supports: financial aid, emergency boarding, food, transport, referrals.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

- Partnerships with pet charities for financial assistance.
- Access to No Interest Loans for reclaim and vet fees.
- Free pet behaviour assessments for crisis accommodation services, expanding pet-friendly housing options.
- Collaboration with Launch Housing to fund emergency pet boarding.

Advocacy

- Discussing with vets and councils opportunity for reduced fees or flexible processes.
- Promoting the human-animal bond to service providers.
- Campaigning for pet-friendly, affordable housing.



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Program Outcomes

After 20 months:

- 265 families experiencing hardship referred for support to prevent surrender
- 386 pets prevented from entering the shelter.
- Shelter cost savings of \$795,000+.

Beyond numbers:

- Strengthened human–animal bonds.
- Reduced pet guardian distress and reduction in escalation, violence and aggression.
- Reduced shelter overcrowding.
- Improved trust and engagement with support services.

Gaps and Future Needs

- *Emergency boarding*: need for sustainable funding and expansion.
- *Housing*: more pet-friendly crisis, community, and public housing.
- *Systems reform*: flexibility to meet complex, intersecting needs.
- *Service capacity*: addressing underfunding and understaffing in support sectors.

Conclusion

The Home Together Program demonstrates that supporting pet owners in crisis can significantly reduce surrenders, increase reclaims and improve outcomes for both people and animals. This work requires collaboration, creativity, and sustained advocacy.

Further Reading and Resources

For readers who wish to explore the topics discussed in more depth, the following resources provide valuable insights:

- Trauma-Informed Practice: Blue Knot Foundation – [Trauma-Informed Services](#)
- Strengths-Based Approaches: Australian Government Department of Social Services – [Strengths-Based Approaches PDF](#)
- Equity vs Equality: Diversity Council Australia – [Understanding Equity and Equality](#)
- Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Simply Psychology – [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#)
- Systems Theory in Social Work: Social Work Exams – [Systems Theory Overview](#)

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