

THE ROLE OF COMPANION ANIMALS FOR IMPROVED MENTAL HEALTH

*A Report by the
Human Animal Bond Research Institute*



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword 3

Introduction 4

Section 1: Research 5-10

Section 2: Practice 11-16

Section 3: Policy 17-21

FOREWORD

By Steven Feldman, President, Human Animal Bond Research Institute



The human-animal bond can be one of the most profound connections in our lives, a bond that offers comfort, companionship, and, as research has increasingly shown, critical benefits for mental health and well-being. The Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) is dedicated to advancing scientific understanding of this relationship and advocating for the policies and practices that can help more people experience these benefits.

As society grapples with increasing mental health challenges, the role of pets and animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) in improving public health has never been more vital. From easing anxiety to reducing loneliness, the presence of companion animals in our lives has measurable positive effects. The question is, how do we maximize these positive effects?

The HABRI Spring Policy Forum, held in May 2024, brought together researchers, practitioners, policymakers, experts in veterinary medicine and human health advocates to explore the latest findings on the human-animal bond and to consider how we can better integrate this knowledge into health care systems, public policies, and community initiatives. This year's forum focused specifically on the intersections of research, practice, and policy necessary to support pet ownership and AAIs, and to ensure that more individuals and communities can access the mental health benefits of the human-animal bond for improved public health.

By fostering collaboration across sectors and sharing evidence-based solutions, we can work toward a society where the human-animal bond is recognized for its essential role in promoting better health for all. Thank you for joining us in this important conversation, and for your commitment to improving lives through the healing power of the human-animal bond.

INTRODUCTION

The Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) is a not-for-profit organization that funds innovative scientific research to document the health benefits of companion animals. Our mission is to advance, through science, education and advocacy, the vital role of the human-animal bond in the health and well-being of people, pets, cultures and communities.

HABRI's 2024 Spring Policy Forum assembled leaders from the health and wellness space, pet care community, academia, and government to discuss the vital role of companion animals for better mental health. The event served as a springboard for conversation, collaboration and action, bringing like-minded professionals together from across disciplines to explore the positive role of pet ownership and animal-assisted interventions for those impacted by mental health challenges.

The event was organized into three sections:

- 1. Research** – Experts shared findings from the growing body of scientific research on the mental health benefits that human-animal interaction (HAI) can provide. Research from both veterinary professionals and human health experts shed light on how pets are shaping our mental health and the need for greater awareness of this information.
- 1. Practice** – Leaders in animal-assisted interventions, pet care, and public policy provided a glimpse at how the deployment of pets for better mental health is currently happening. Model practices and programs were shared, and attendees discussed how these offerings could grow in scope and extend to new communities.
- 1. Policy** – Government and elected officials educated attendees on current Federal policies that recognize the value of pets to our mental health and discussed future legislation that would allow for increased access to care for pets.

This report summarizes the findings from the HABRI Spring Policy Forum, sharing how scientific research serves as the foundation for advancing model practices and programs relating to pets and mental health, and underscores the importance of policies that support the human-animal bond.

What became increasingly clear from the vibrant discussions at the HABRI Spring Policy Forum is that pet ownership is a significant contributor to public health and has the potential to become even more so. Ensuring access to companion animals and the ability to care for them boosts mental health and creates a healthier society overall.

SECTION 1: RESEARCH

A significant body of evidence exists in support of human-animal interaction (HAI) and pet ownership for improved mental, physical and social health. Research has documented these tangible health benefits, from activation of brain activity associated with well-being to prevention of cardiovascular disease to alleviation of loneliness and social isolation. Many of these studies are documenting the key role of pets as valued contributors to public health. Research findings clearly justify the need for stronger societal support for keeping pets and people healthy together by proliferating on-the-ground practices, model programs and supportive policies.

A recent HABRI survey found that 1-in-5 pet owners had a doctor or therapist recommend pet ownership for better health. Society is becoming increasingly pet-friendly as pets are welcomed in places of work, leisure and socialization. The majority (66%) of U.S. households are pet owners and 98% consider their pet to be an important member of the family. HABRI research has also found that the human-animal bond is universal across countries and cultures. There's no denying that humans believe in the power of animal companionship. However, to take beliefs and turn them into actionable progress, scientific evidence is needed.

DATA ON THE EXPERIENCES, BENEFITS, AND CHALLENGES RELATED TO PETS AND MENTAL HEALTH

HABRI partnered with Mental Health America (MHA), the nation's leading community-based non-profit dedicated to the promotion of mental health, well-being, and condition prevention, to conduct a survey of MHA's constituents asking about the role of pets in their lives and to understand their needs related to resources and information on pets and mental health.

Understanding the Strength of the Bond

Of the more than 4,000 MHA constituents surveyed, approximately 3,500 of them were pet owners. To gain an understanding of the strength of the human-animal bond among this audience, MHA and HABRI used the HABScore, a scale developed to measure and quantify the strength of the human-animal bond among pet owners. Seventy-four percent of the pet owners in this survey indicated a strong bond with their pets and 78% described their pets as either "like a child" or as a "family member." A key takeaway from these results aligns with what other HABRI research has previously demonstrated – pet owners are highly bonded to their pets. This appears to be particularly true for MHA constituents who are clearly focused on mental health and who were also younger than the general population.

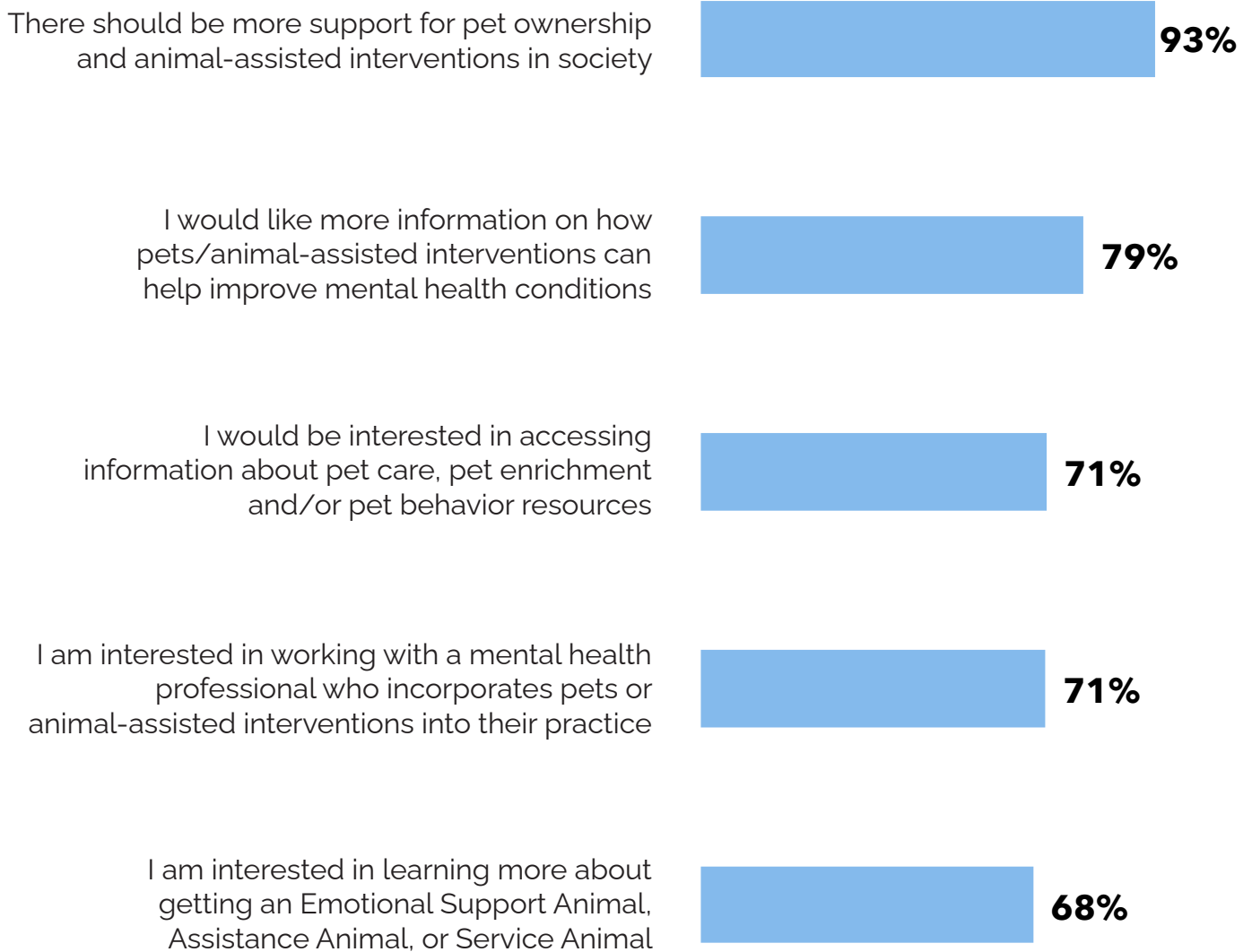
The Impact of Pet Ownership on People Living with a Disability

The MHA-HABRI survey included the unique perspective of individuals living with a mental or physical disability. The survey found that those with a disability are more likely to be highly bonded to their pets (60%) compared to those without a disability (49%), and those with a disability (79%) are more likely to say they are interested in pets to support their mental health compared to those without a disability (50%).

More than half of the pet owners surveyed shared that their pet makes them feel less lonely, provides them comfort when they are feeling sad, makes them laugh and feel happy and that caring for their pet provides them with a sense of purpose.

Interest & Need for Resources on Pets & Mental Health

T2B Resource Interest (strongly agree/somewhat agree)



Base: Total Answering N=3897

Q7. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Accessing Information and Care

The MHA-HABRI survey established that while individuals living with a mental health condition feel a strong connection to their pets, many find it difficult to access credible information on the human-animal bond and animal-assisted interventions (AAs) with 43% reporting that it is difficult to find reliable information about pets and mental health. There was also high interest in pet care overall with 71% saying they were interested in accessing information about pet care, pet enrichment and/or pet behavior resources.

71% of all respondents and 76% of those living with a disability are interested in working with a mental health professional who **incorporates pets or animal-assisted interventions (AAI)** into their practice.

There is great interest and significant need for resources related to pets and mental health for this population.

Importantly, pet owning respondents in the MHA-HABRI survey had better self-reported mental health on average compared to the non-pet-owning respondents, with 98% reporting at least one health benefit resulting from their pet.

These results show that an opportunity exists to better support young people experiencing mental health challenges and those living with disabilities by supporting pet ownership. We can do this by providing reliable information about pets and animal-assisted interventions, and by helping mental health professionals incorporate AAs and pets into clinical practice.

Educational Partner Spotlight: Mental Health America



Established in 1909, Mental Health America is the nation's leading community-based non-profit helping all Americans achieve wellness by living mentally healthier lives. The organization supports prevention services for all, early identification and intervention for those at risk, and integrated care and treatment for those who need it with recovery as the goal.

Through aligned missions, HABRI and MHA share an ongoing commitment to elevate the role of mental health and pet ownership as essential parts of overall wellness.

More information can be found at mhanational.org

HOW COMPANION ANIMALS IMPROVE HUMAN HEALTH

Anyone who has spent time with a pet can speak to the tangible lift in mood such interactions provide. Scientific research has the ability to measure the pleasant feelings we experience when spending time around animals, documenting how our mental, physical and social health are significantly influenced by these interactions.

Physical Health Benefits

During the Spring Policy Forum, Dr. Susan Trachman, Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry at The George Washington University, dove into how companion animals improve human health, exclaiming "I have recommended pets to my patients, on more than one occasion."

With the intertwined relationship between physical and mental health, Dr. Trachman first shared scientific research demonstrating how interactions with animals benefit human nervous system function, cardiac function and immune system function.

Dr. Trachman discussed findings of a studyⁱ that examined the effect of pets on stress-related hypertension. The study compared two groups of individuals with hypertension, one group of non-dog owners on antihypertensive medication, and one group of dog owners on the same medication. The results found that dog owners had significantly reduced blood pressure in response to stress compared to non-dog owners.

Dr. Trachman also shared evidence supporting the physical health benefits of animal exposure, particularly in children. Resultsⁱⁱ of one study found that exposure to animals was linked to healthy gut permeability in adolescentsⁱⁱⁱ, and children who grew up around animals were less likely to develop allergies^{iv} or autoimmune diseases.

SPRING POLICY FORUM
Mental Health & Companion Animals



Pets Reduce Feelings of Loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness are a growing public health epidemic^v. Individuals that lack social connections and report frequent feelings of loneliness tend to suffer higher rates of morbidity and mortality, as well as infection, depression and cognitive decline. Scientific research indicates that pet ownership facilitates social interactions and decreases loneliness^{vi}.

Given the poor health outcomes connected to loneliness and isolation, we have an opportunity and obligation to boost pet ownership as a force for good and encourage animal-assisted interventions as an effective public health intervention.

Pets as a Social Conduit

Dr. Trachman presented findings that indicated pets, in general, increase feelings of joy and pleasure. Companion animals improve low moods by providing company and being physically affectionate, and for those with anxiety disorders, the physical touch and petting of an animal provide feelings of comfort, an increased sense of safety and help to regulate breathing.

Beyond being sources of joy, pets also play a significant role as social connectors, facilitating interactions and fostering connections among people. A study^{vii} conducted across the United States and Australia examined the social support that pets provide to their owners, specifically examining if they aid in friendship formation. The results indicated that owning a pet was one of the most common ways for respondents to meet neighbors, with dog walking being the most common variable. The study revealed that about half of pet owners got to know people in the neighborhood as a direct result of their pets, and a quarter of all pet owners considered one or more of the people they met through their pets to be friends.

For individuals with autism^{viii}, animals provide an alternative, less stressful way to experience social human contact. Pet owners perceive animals as a bridge that allows them to better connect to others in their community while feeling less anxious.

Why is it that pets play such a major role in connecting humans? Previous HABRI and Mars Petcare research found that pet owners feel less shy when they are with their pets, and research shared during the Spring Policy Forum indicates that community interactions are increased when a pet is present.

Dr. Helen Brooks, Senior Lecturer at the University of Manchester, conducted a comprehensive analysis of 17 studies (eight qualitative, six quantitative, three mixed methods) published globally which included 1,727 pet owners as participants^{ix}. These participants had either a diagnosed mental health condition or mental health problems associated with a physical health condition or developmental disorder. Dr. Brooks' study found that pet ownership provides emotional support in times of crisis and helps to manage symptoms as they occur.

We interact because he gets so much attention and with the attention focused on him, I can get engaged in all sorts of conversations with people who like dogs.

- Study Participant
Brooks et. al. (2018)

Pets Provide Purpose

A critical finding Dr. Trachman discussed was the increased sense of purpose that pets provide for older adults^x. For those over the age of 65, the responsibility of having a pet provided them with a renewed sense of meaning. Noting that pets are often considered part of the family, these older adults found that raising a pet provided daily motivation and helped them maintain a routine.

Qualitative research included in Dr. Brooks' analysis demonstrates that pet ownership contributes to pet owners' sense of identity and self-worth.

In addition to addressing loneliness, social isolation and self-worth, the research shared during the Spring Policy Forum shed light on how the human-animal bond can provide additional support for those living with a mental health condition, such as:

- Reducing anxiety
- Coping with stress
- Serving as a distraction for those with obsessive compulsion disorder
- Providing hope and protecting against dark thoughts

RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

The human-animal bond can be influenced by many factors that warrant further investigation, and HABRI continues to fund a diverse array of research studies to increase our knowledge and understanding of its impact on health. What can be taken away from the research presented during the Spring Policy Forum is that there is concrete scientific evidence demonstrating the benefits of pets for improved mental health and well-being.

While many practitioners see the value of the human-animal bond in supporting those experiencing mental health challenges, there is still more space for these benefits to be acted upon in practice. Relationships with companion animals are not currently considered or incorporated into healthcare planning or health-related discussions as much as they should be, resulting in a valuable opportunity to address some of the most critical public health concerns we face as a society. The strength and clarity of the research to date must ultimately be matched by the incorporation of animal-assisted interventions in mental health practice and the necessary access to reliable resources and information to better support pet owners or those interested in pet ownership for better mental health.

SECTION 2: PRACTICE

The power of animal companionship in fostering mental well-being has been recognized and validated through research. Building on this foundation, the Spring Policy Forum sought to uncover the practical implications of these findings, examining successful programs, practices and resources that harness the human-animal bond for improved mental health outcomes.

A central theme that emerged from this exploration is the demand for heightened protection of an individual's right to experience the mental health benefits of pet ownership within their own homes. Therefore, increased availability of pet-inclusive housing is a critical component of mental health strategies. The prevalence of well-designed programs and the support of mental health practitioners are necessary to make the system work for millions of people with pets who are faced with mental health challenges.

ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO CARE FOR PET OWNERS IN CRISIS

At the Spring Policy Forum, James Glenn, MSW, Behavioral Health Administrator & Business Strategist at University Health Kansas City, offered professional and personal insights related to how pets can positively impact those facing a mental health crisis and/or chronic homelessness.

The bond with a pet often offers a sense of stability and unconditional love, which can be crucial for mental well-being in a challenging life situation. The companionship of a pet can provide significant emotional support, reducing feelings of loneliness, anxiety and depression for those facing chronic homelessness.

As mentioned in the previous section, research has documented how pet ownership increases a sense of responsibility and encourages a daily routine, which can be stabilizing for individuals transitioning from homelessness to supportive housing. This routine can help individuals develop better life skills and foster a sense of purpose, aiding in their overall recovery and adjustment to a stable living environment. Pets can also serve as a bridge to the community. Whether it is through interactions with neighbors, participation in pet-related activities or visits to veterinarians, pets often create opportunities for social engagement that might otherwise be limited.

Despite the benefits, having a companion animal can also present challenges in supportive housing settings. However, supportive housing programs have the opportunity to recognize these challenges by offering services and resources to help individuals keep their pets, recognizing the overall positive impact they have on the residents' quality of life. Glenn shared the insight that "housing is not about housing; it is about belonging."

Programs that incorporate pet-inclusive supportive housing can instill a sense of belonging, purpose and connection for those experiencing mental health crises and homelessness and reduce the stigmas associated with these challenges.

Shared Responsibility for a Pet

Pets have a unique ability to build and strengthen community bonds, creating connections that might otherwise go unnoticed. One powerful way to foster these connections is through the concept of shared responsibility for a pet. By involving multiple individuals or groups in the care and support of a pet, the well-being of the animal is enhanced and a shared sense of purpose and belonging among those involved is created. This approach can be particularly impactful in communities facing challenges, such as homelessness, where the mutual care of a pet can lead to deeper relationships, greater stability and a stronger, more cohesive community.

In his remarks, Glenn shared anecdotal evidence of both individual and business outcomes of shared pet responsibilities. He discussed how one individual felt more empowered and trusted because he was given the responsibility to care for a pet. When you entrust someone with caring for a pet, you're offering them more than just a task—you're giving them an unspoken message that says, "I trust you." For someone who has experienced homelessness and the sense of invisibility that often accompanies it, that trust can be truly life-changing. From a business perspective, Glenn shared that through this approach, he has observed a reduction of behavioral symptoms including anxiety, depression and substance use, in addition to a reduction of emergency interventions.



Educational Partner Spotlight: BestyBnB



BestyBnB is an online platform providing temporary foster care for pets when their owners are in crisis or need temporary accommodations. The platform connects social service agencies with local pet caregivers who can provide temporary homes for pets so clients can seek help during times of crisis.

This service is particularly beneficial for individuals who are facing situations such as domestic violence, hospitalization, homelessness or other emergencies that prevent them from caring for their pets. BestyBnB aims to keep pets and their owners together by offering a temporary solution, reducing the likelihood of pets being surrendered to shelters during difficult times. The founders were intentional about building a program to be flexible enough to work for any type of social services, agency or animal welfare organization in the community, so that no one has to choose between getting the help they need and the well-being of their beloved pet.

More information can be found at mybestybnb.com

SUPPORTING PET OWNING CLIENTS: BEST PRACTICES FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Including the high-level findings from her extensive work as a mental health counselor and animal behavior trainer, Dr. Taylor Chastain-Griffin, Executive Director of the Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Professionals (AAAIP), spoke at the Spring Policy Forum on the correlation between enhanced mental health care through interactions with pets and therapy animals.

Therapy animals provide affection and comfort to many people, typically in settings such as hospitals, assisted living facilities, and schools. These pets and their handlers are trained to safely interact with members of the public and enjoy doing so.

Regardless of the type of client engaging in mental health care, having access to therapy animals and/or pet ownership provides far-reaching effects when handled professionally and with knowledgeable and trained counselors. Ensuring mental health professionals are trained to work in conjunction with therapy animals to support clients of all backgrounds can help provide a successful outcome for those in care.

Engaging Mental Health Counselors with Pet-Informed Care

Along with the team at AAAIP, Dr. Chastain-Griffin engages a pet-informed care methodology when supporting adults, children in protective custody, and individuals who are incarcerated. Keeping in mind the history of pet ownership in the family, experiences of pet loss/grief, and family dynamics surrounding pets, the team creates a plan that includes caretaking, vulnerability, and playfulness with pets in a standardized and professional manner.

Through her work with a non-profit providing support for domestic violence survivors, Dr. Chastain-Griffin saw in many clients that having the love and care of a pet provided hope and empowerment in the darkest of situations.



There were days when I could barely keep going, but I knew I had to because my dog was waiting on me. He was my light at the end of the tunnel.

- domestic violence survivor



Preparing for Success

Engaging with therapy animals is a great way to inspire meaningful change to foster a love of pets, and to improve overall health and well-being. It's also important to recognize the biases of practitioners and to understand and learn the context if clients have had a troubling past with pets. Before therapy animals are introduced in a clinical setting, the AAAIP team encourages conversations about previous pets that have been in the family including early memories of pets, current pets, any pet loss, how owners reacted when pets did not behave how they wanted them to, and any past interpersonal violence or problematic backgrounds. Setting both the client and the therapy animal up for success is vital.

Encourage Client-Training of Pets

With the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice, Dr. Chastain-Griffin brought in therapy dogs when working with children in juvenile detention and provided shelter dogs for them to train, an experience that offered responsibility, accountability, and some playfulness. She reported that some children thrived following rules when the best interest of their pet was in mind, while others were able to see how positive reinforcement enhanced their training success. For many of the children, it was their first opportunity to see results with a caretaking outreach focused on positivity rather than dominance and control.



Affecting Results in Clients

Engaging in counseling sessions alongside therapy dogs, Dr. Chastain-Griffin found an outlet for clients to expand client perspectives and encourage consideration of the feelings and perspectives of others, whether animal or human. Such engagement also supported appropriate behavioral modification strategies. There were other numerous benefits when animals were included in therapy and counseling sessions:

- **Elevated Self-Care**

Engaging regularly with therapy dogs or pets encourages prioritization of self-care. No longer an abstract idea or goal, pets can motivate healthier behaviors and positive lifestyle adjustments, specifically for those with over- or under-eating tendencies.

- **Boundary Setting**

Pets also helped owners with setting boundaries when they would appropriately convey guidelines and rules needed for their pets to be safe. Especially when training therapy animals, advocating for their needs is essential.

Incorporating Animal-Assisted Interventions in Practice

AAAIP provides several recommendations for incorporating animal-assisted interventions in practice:

1. **Partner with therapy animal-handler teams:** elevate your ability to benefit from the human-animal bond in your work with clients.
2. **Practice animal-related engagement:** Engage in activities that promote the remembrance of the feelings associated with human-animal interaction if animals aren't permitted in a facility or home.
3. **Support pet-related volunteerism among clients:** Amplify a client's love for animals and help them develop self-confidence, facilitate social connection, and inspire passion.

Educational Partner Spotlight: Pet Partners



Since 1977, Pet Partners has been a driving force behind science and research on the benefits of therapy animal visits. Volunteers have registered nine different species of therapy animals including dogs, cats, llamas, horses, guinea pigs, rabbits and more. Together with their handlers, the therapy animals visit schools, senior living communities and hospitals.

A key motivating factor for the work of Pet Partners is to bring the human-animal bond to those who otherwise wouldn't have access.

The primary role of a therapy animal is to benefit many people. Therapy animals are safe to approach in public places and have been evaluated to be tolerant of a wide variety of environments.

More information can be found at petpartners.org.

Veterinary Mental Health

Veterinary professionals, those dedicated to providing health care for our companion animals, are not only incredibly important to the human-animal bond, but they are also a unique population that is significantly impacted by mental health challenges related to their professional work. Despite their passion and dedication to the well-being of animals, research shows that veterinarians are faced with job-related burnout, depression, emotional exhaustion and an elevated risk of suicide^{xi}.

Despite facing considerable mental health challenges, many veterinary professionals are hesitant to discuss mental health or utilize available resources and support. Destigmatizing mental health is crucial for creating safe and inclusive environments where veterinary teams feel comfortable seeking help and support. It is necessary to challenge stigmas, foster open conversations about mental health, promote early intervention, and ensure people receive the care they need without fear of judgment or discrimination.

Veterinary social work offers critical support by addressing the mental health needs of veterinarians, technicians, and staff, providing counseling, crisis intervention, and wellness programs. Additionally, veterinary social workers help bridge the gap between veterinary care and client support, assisting pet owners in coping with the emotional and psychological impacts of animal illness, loss, and end-of-life decisions. This holistic approach fosters healthier veterinary practices and enhances the overall care experience for both animals and their owners.

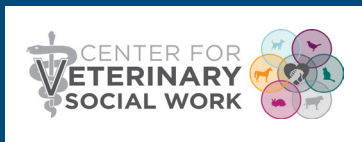
By prioritizing the mental health of veterinary teams and the clients they serve, we strengthen the entire ecosystem that supports the human-animal bond. Such an approach ensures that veterinarians can continue to provide the compassionate care that nurtures the well-being of both pets and their owners.

PRACTICE CONCLUSIONS

It is imperative to increase understanding among mental health professionals and social service providers that pets should be viewed as a mental health resource. It is also vital to share model programs, new technologies and educational resources to help them protect and ensure access to companion animals. There is also a clear need to expand and develop additional resources and innovate service delivery models to reach a wider population.

Continued collaborations will be instrumental in harnessing the power of the human-animal bond within professional settings. Through the integration of animal-assisted interventions (AAI) and pet-inclusive policies in housing, social services and more, we can create a more supportive and compassionate environment for individuals in need.

Educational Partner Spotlight: The Center for Veterinary Social Work



The veterinary social work certificate program was established in 2002 through a collaboration between the University of Tennessee Colleges of Veterinary Medicine and Social Work, with the intent to tend to the human needs that arise in the human animal relationship. In 2023, the vision of the organization was expanded, and The Center for Veterinary Social Work was born.

The organization's work balances a teamwork approach between animal health and mental health professionals resulting in transdisciplinary knowledge, which can be shared with other professions and therefore inform interprofessional practice and transdisciplinary knowledge.

Today, The Center for Veterinary Social Work focuses on a four-tiered mission:

- Leading and delivering innovative interprofessional education and training.
- Employing access to care strategies that provide direct services to enhance the welfare and well-being of humans and animals.
- Facilitating connections and collaborative opportunities among social and animal scientists, as well as human and animal welfare professionals and teams.
- Creating and disseminating adaptive, participatory and transdisciplinary (APT) research and scholarship.



More information can be found at vetsocialwork.tennessee.edu

SECTION 3: POLICY

The human-animal bond and its power to support better health should be viewed from a policy perspective as a sound public health strategy. Sustaining the bond with supportive policies is therefore a necessity and can be supported based on the following core principles:

- The benefits of the human-animal bond are indisputably vital to the mental and physical health of individuals, families, communities and cultures.
- The universal health benefits pets provide and the ability to acquire and keep a healthy pet should be considered an equitable right for all.
- Pet health and welfare is integral to the human-animal bond and must be supported through both the removal of barriers and expanded access to pet care, regardless of cultural differences or socioeconomic status.

This section will dive into proposed policies meant to ensure that all individuals have access to the benefits of pet ownership. These are related to pet-inclusive housing, which was a recurring theme at the Spring Policy Forum. As well, the Spring Policy Forum offered an opportunity to announce a new policy that aims to help make veterinary care more affordable for pet owners and individuals with service animals.

ASSISTANCE ANIMALS AND FAIR HOUSING

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is a federal agency responsible for national policy and programs that address America's housing needs and for the enforcement of fair housing laws. HUD works to ensure access to affordable housing, support homeownership and provide rental assistance to low-income individuals and families. During the Policy Forum, Lynn M. Grosso, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Enforcement and Tiffany Fleming, Acting Director, Enforcement Division of Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity (FHEO) at HUD, shared insights on how the agency also plays a key role in implementing regulations and guidance related to service and assistance animals in public housing, ensuring that individuals with these animals are protected from discrimination.

Understanding the Difference Between Service Animals, Assistance Animals and Support Animals

A service animal, as defined by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)^{xii} is any dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual or other mental disability. The work or tasks performed by a service animal must be directly related to the individual's disability. Other species of animals, whether wild or domestic, trained or untrained, are not considered service animals under this definition. This definition does not affect or limit the broader definition of "assistance animal" under the Fair Housing Act.

Fair Housing Act



Individuals with disabilities may request a reasonable accommodation for any assistance animal, including an emotional support animal, from any housing provider covered under the Federal Fair Housing Act and/or Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Issued by FHEO HUD, FHEO-2020-01^{xiii} is a guidance document that clarifies the responsibilities of housing providers under the Fair Housing Act (FHA) about requests for reasonable accommodations involving assistance animals. It provides detailed instructions on how housing providers should handle requests, including verifying the need for an

assistance animal, differentiating between service animals and emotional support animals, and ensuring that individuals with disabilities are not unfairly denied housing or subjected to discriminatory practices based on their need for an assistance animal.

The FHA ensures that all individuals have equal access to housing opportunities and prohibits discrimination in housing-related activities based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status or disability. The FHA applies to all housing regardless of whether the dwelling is linked to federal funding and includes apartments, condominiums, cooperatives, single-family homes, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, group homes, mobile homes, college and university dormitories and faculty housing, shelters and supportive housing, along with services in connection with housing.

For individuals with disabilities, the FHA provides reasonable accommodation protection. Housing providers must make reasonable accommodations in rules, policies, practices or services when such accommodations may be necessary for a person with a disability to use and enjoy a dwelling, which includes accommodations for assistance animals.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life including jobs, schools, transportation, and public and private places open to the public. The goal of the ADA is to ensure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else.

Titles II and III of the ADA are applicable to individuals with service animals. Title II encompasses public services and applies to public entities that provide housing such as public housing agencies, state and local government housing, and housing provided at state universities and other places of education.

Title III of the ADA covers public accommodations and requires that public places such as rental offices, shelters, some types of multifamily housing, assisted living facilities and housing at places of education are accessible and provide reasonable accommodations to those with disabilities requiring service animals.

Both the ADA and FHA work together to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities, ensuring equal access to public spaces, employment and housing.

Reasonable Accommodation Requirements

Whether tenants have service or support animals, landlords must provide reasonable accommodations as defined by the FHA and ADA. According to HUD, reasonable accommodations for a service animal can be requested any time before rental, while a tenant, and even when facing eviction because the animal was discovered. There is no required federal form to complete such a request but landlords may recommend a written request.

Common Defense from Landlords	Regulations
We have a "no pet" policy	Service animals are not classified as pets.
We have breed and weight restrictions	Landlords may not limit the breed or size of a dog used as a service animal or support animal.
The tenant did not fill out my form	There is no form to be completed; the landlord may recommend a written request.
The landlord would have to make an accommodation for everyone	Reasonable accommodations are required for all tenants as described in FHEO-2020-01.
The tenant must pay a pet deposit	The FHA requires that no fees, deposits or other charges be imposed for an assistance animal, but a landlord may charge reasonable fees for damages done by an assistance animal, assuming that the landlord does this for all tenants.
The tenant must provide a release from the doctor	This is only required when the disability is not obvious or the need for the accommodation is not obvious. There are no broad releases and the document doesn't have to be from a doctor.
Insurance won't permit it	Request a copy of the insurance policy; if true, file for reasonable accommodations with the insurance company.
The town doesn't permit that breed	Request an accommodation from the town.
Someone next door is allergic to the animal	Landlord is required to identify reasonable accommodations through an interactive process with both individuals.

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Pets & Housing Legislation

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to update and protect the rights of pet owners through legislation, with a focus on those living in public housing. Two recent bills, the Pets Belong with Families Act^{xiv} and the Providing for Unhoused People with Pets (PUPP) Act^{xv}, have been introduced to address these concerns. Both bills strive to reduce and remove housing-related barriers for pet owners. The Pets Belong with Families Act protects the rights of pet owners living in public housing. It seeks to prohibit agencies from imposing breed restrictions on these owners, allowing residents to keep their pets regardless of breed. This policy change, if enacted, will help to ensure families and pets stay together and maintain a stable housing situation.

The Providing for Unhoused People with Pets (PUPP) Act supports funding and resources for shelters and service providers for unhoused people to accommodate pets, ensuring that homeless pet owners do not have to choose between keeping their pets and accessing safe shelter. The bill includes provisions for Federal grants that would be used to cover expenses like pet food, veterinary care and the construction of pet-friendly facilities.

MAKING VETERINARY CARE MORE AFFORDABLE: THE PEOPLE AND ANIMALS WELL-BEING (PAW) ACT



HABRI and its many partners have worked together with leaders in Congress in supporting the recently introduced H.R. 9508, The People and Animals Well-being (PAW) Act. This bill will help pet owners and individuals with service animals, including our nation's veterans, with additional means to pay for veterinary care.

Co-sponsored by U.S. Congresswomen Claudia Tenney (NY-24) and Deborah Ross (NC-2), this bipartisan bill proposes to include veterinary care expenses under tax-advantaged Health Savings Accounts (HSAs) and Flexible Spending Accounts (FSAs).

Providing a Pathway to Care

People who have regular pet interactions save the U.S. healthcare system \$22.7 billion annually^{xvi}. The PAW Act will support the health of people, pets, and service animals by:

- Increasing the ability of all pet owners to benefit from a healthier lifestyle with their pets, ranging from better mental health to better heart health to reductions in obesity, social isolation and all-cause mortality.
- Providing people with disabilities, including our nation's disabled veterans, with more affordable means to keep and care for service animals, improving and possibly saving lives.
- Increasing the ability of the 66 percent of American households with pets to access veterinary care to improve public health^{xvii} and prevent zoonotic disease.
- Preventing pet surrenders by enabling access to savings already designated for health to pay for veterinary care, reducing the burden on the animal welfare system, and keeping people and their pets healthy and happy together.

Key features of the legislation include:

- Allowing up to \$1,000 of HSA or FSA funds to be used for veterinary care or a pet health insurance plan for a pet.
- Permitting any amount of HSA or FSA funds to be used for veterinary care or a pet health insurance plan for a service animal.
- Adopting a more complete existing Federal definition of “service animal” for purposes of HSA and FSA eligible expenses, which includes service animals for both physical and mental disabilities.
- Minimizing the impact on the Federal budget by not raising the annual HSA or FSA tax-advantaged contribution levels beyond existing limits.

Safeguarding Care for Pets and Service Animals

The body of scientific research supporting the measurable impact of pets and AAls on human health is considerable. Safeguarding care for pets is therefore essential in maintaining and strengthening the human-animal bond. The PAW Act ensures that pets and service animals can be appropriately taken care of, increasing their access to lifesaving veterinary care.

Additional considerations to support the human-animal bond include strong encouragement for pet owners to purchase pet health insurance and to access veterinary telehealth opportunities, both of which are increasingly being offered by employers as valuable employee benefits.

Veterinary telehealth is a valuable tool that bridges the gap between pet owners and veterinarians, especially in rural or remote areas where access to in-person care may be limited. It also offers convenience for pet owners and can reduce stress by helping to triage emergency situations. In addition, telehealth can be used for follow-up appointments after in-person visits, ensuring that pets receive ongoing care and monitoring.

Pet insurance provides financial protection for unexpected veterinary expenses, and premiums are included as an eligible veterinary expense in the proposed PAW Act. Pet insurance coverage can alleviate the potential financial burden associated with caring for a beloved pet and encourages pet owners to engage in more preventive veterinary care.

POLICY CONCLUSIONS

The bond between people and their pets is undeniably strong and documented by a growing body of scientific research findings. However, policies and regulations have not always kept pace with the persuasive evidence showing the health benefits that companion animals provide. To foster a pet-inclusive society where pets are seen as necessary to public health, policymakers must prioritize pet-friendly regulations and initiatives.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Engage in Advocacy to Protect the Human-Animal Bond

- Learn more about the pet-friendly legislation discussed in this report and its potential impact on individuals, families and communities.
- Contact your Representatives and ask that they take action to support these policies.
- Help raise awareness of the importance of the human-animal bond for mental health.
- Talk to your colleagues, friends and family about the impact of the human-animal bond on mental health.
- Talk to your doctor, therapist or other health care provider about the practice of animal-assisted interventions.

Get Involved in your Community

- Consider becoming a certified therapy-animal handler team through organizations like Pet Partners.
- Learn about local programming in your communities that work to advance the human-animal bond and explore ways to support those efforts.

As we move forward with advocating for pet-friendly policies and initiatives, it is imperative to continue building on the foundation established at the Spring Policy Forum. By prioritizing research, fostering partnerships, advancing best practices and advocating for pet-inclusive policies, we can unlock the full potential of the human-animal bond to improve mental health outcomes for countless individuals.

IN SUMMARY

The HABRI Spring Policy Forum sought to inspire meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and action among key stakeholders committed to advancing the science and societal understanding of the mental health benefits of the human-animal bond. By focusing on research, practice, and policy considerations, our goal is to ensure that the mental health benefits of pet ownership and animal-assisted interventions are accessible to all. Through this Forum, we hope to shape and advance policies that support the well-being of people and animals, promote better mental health, and build a future where the power of the human-animal bond is fully recognized and integrated into public health strategies and societal frameworks. Thank you for your dedication to this important cause and for helping us create a healthier, more pet-friendly society.



THANK YOU EVENT SPONSORS:

The HABRI Spring Policy Forum would not be possible without the support of its sponsors. Along with HABRI's partners, these companies and organizations are committed to supporting better mental health for pet owners, veterinarians and everyone who can benefit from the research-backed benefits of the human-animal bond.



American Pet Products Association (APPA)

The American Pet Products Association (APPA) is a membership organization focused on business, relationships and innovation. APPA is a leading industry association representing more than 1,000 pet product manufacturers, importers and suppliers of pet care products.

APPA has played a chief role in driving and developing significant programs designed to strengthen the industry, increase pet ownership, and build awareness of the joys and health benefits of pet ownership, including its founding support for HABRI.

For more information, please visit americanpetproducts.org



Petco Love

Petco Love is a national nonprofit aimed at improving the lives of pets and their people. Through its many programs, Petco Love creates families through pet adoption, reunites lost pets with their owners and offers access to veterinary care. Since its founding in 1999 as the Petco Foundation, Petco Love has empowered animal welfare organizations by investing \$375 million in adoption and other lifesaving efforts. The organization has helped find loving homes for more than 6.75 million pets in partnership with Petco and organizations nationwide. Petco Love champions initiatives to keep pets healthy by providing free pet vaccines and affordable treatment options, and its innovative Petco Love Lost is helping to reunite the 1 in 3 pets that go missing every year with their families.

Petco Love's President, Susanne Kogut, serves the Chair of HABRI's Board of Trustees. Petco Love and HABRI together strive to ensure a brighter future where pets are recognized as essential to health and happiness—and where every individual has the opportunity to experience the unconditional love that only pets can provide.

For more information, please visit petcolove.org



Mars Petcare

Mars Petcare is a leading provider of high-quality, science-backed nutrition and therapeutic health products. Collectively, their portfolio of pet food, care and treats is designed to meet the individual needs of pets across the world.

Mars Veterinary Health supports over 70,000 Associates, including 15,000 veterinarians and 12,000 veterinary nurses. They provide the tools and resources they need to deliver the highest quality veterinary care and develop their careers. Across the Mars Veterinary Health practices, they're committed to inspiring change that supports all who choose this profession—and to easing mental health burdens, so caregivers can focus on their passion for pet care.

For more information, please visit mars.com/our-brands/petcare



American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)

The AVMA is the nation's leading advocate for the veterinary profession. AVMA protects, promotes, and advances the needs of all veterinarians and those they serve, and is committed to advancing the shared interests, values and goals of its 105,000 members while striving to improve the health and well-being of animals, humans and the environment we share.

As part of its longstanding commitment to the human-animal bond, the AVMA produced some of the first educational materials on this subject for veterinarians and the public. The AVMA Steering Committee on Human-Animal Interactions advocates for the human-animal bond, and works to develop policies and resources in specific areas, such as guidance for veterinary hospice and improving access to rental housing for pet owners.

For more information, please visit avma.org



As the leader in veterinary telehealth, whiskerDocs is bridging the gap between pet parents and their local veterinarians.

The whiskerDocs team of veterinary telehealth specialists is comprised of licensed veterinarians with an average of 20 years of hands-on small animal practice and experienced veterinary technicians. In over 500,000 interactions, the whiskerDocs team has combined their expertise and deep love of animals to assist pet parents in making the best decisions on behalf of their pets.

For more information, please visit whiskerdocs.com

REFERENCES

- i. Allen K, Shykoff BE, Izzo JL Jr. Pet ownership, but not ace inhibitor therapy, blunts home blood pressure responses to mental stress. *Hypertension*. 2001;38(4):815–20.
- ii. Williams Turpin, Ph.D., "Environmental factors associated with risk of Crohn's disease (CD) development in a prospective cohort of healthy first-degree relatives of CD patients," abstract 793, Presentation: Digestive Disease Week (DDW) 2022.) <https://ddw.org/living-with-dogs-but-not-cats-as-a-toddler-might-protect-against-crohns-disease/>
- iii. Xue, M., Leibovitzh, H., Jingcheng, S., Neustaeter, A., Dong, M., Xu, W., ... & Panacionne, R. (2024). Environmental Factors Associated with Risk of Crohn's Disease Development in the Crohn's and Colitis Canada-Genetic, Environmental, Microbial Project. *Clinical Gastroenterology and Hepatology*.
- iv. Ownby, Dennis R., Christine Cole Johnson, and Edward L. Peterson. "Exposure to dogs and cats in the first year of life and risk of allergic sensitization at 6 to 7 years of age." *Jama* 288.8 (2002): 963-972.
- v. U.S. Public Health Service (2023). Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>
- vi. Kretzler, Benedikt, Hans-Helmut König, and André Hajek. "Pet ownership, loneliness, and social isolation: a systematic review." *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology* 57.10 (2022): 1935-1957.
- vii. Lisa Wood et al. PLOS ONE The Pet Factor-Companion Animals as a Conduit for Getting to Know People, Friendship Formation and Social Support (2015). <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0122085>
- viii. Gray Atherton, Emma Edisbury, Andrea Piovesan, Liam Cross. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (2023) 53:3280–3294
- ix. Brooks, H.L., Rushton, K., Lovell, K. et al. The power of support from companion animals for people living with mental health problems: a systematic review and narrative synthesis of the evidence. *BMC Psychiatry* 18, 31 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-018-1613-2>
- x. Genieve Zhe, Hui Gana, Anne-Marie Hillb , Polly Yeungc , Sharon Keesinga and Julie Anne Nettoa. *Aging and Mental Health* Vol. 24 No. 10 2020.
- xi. Nett, Randall J., et al. "Risk factors for suicide, attitudes toward mental illness, and practice-related stressors among US veterinarians." *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 247.8 (2015): 945-955.
- xii. (28 C.F.R. §§ 35.104; 36.104)
- xiii. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020. Assessing a Request to Have an Animal as a Reasonable Accommodation.
- xiv. Pets Belong With Families Act of 2023, H.R. 3989m 118th Cong. (2023)
- xv. Providing for Unhoused People with Pets Act of 2023, or the PUPP Act of 2023, H.R. 3957, 118th Cong. (2023)
- xvi. Clower, Terry & Thornton, Tonya. (2023). Health Care Cost Savings of Pet Ownership Report. Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI). www.habri.org/health-care-cost-savings
- xvii. American Veterinary Medical Association. (2023). Veterinarians and public health. <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/one-health/veterinarians-and-public-health>



HABRI.ORG

CONTACT

STEVEN FELDMAN

President
sfeldman@habri.org

LINDSEY BRAUN

Vice President,
Research & Operations
lbraun@habri.org

SAMANTHA BARZILAY

Manager of Events & Engagement
sbarzilay@habri.org

MATT CRYER

Program Associate
mcryer@habri.org

For media inquiries contact:

HAYLEY MAYNARD

Inspire PR Group
hayley@inspireprgroup.com