



Program Report

**NO PET LEFT BEHIND
BETTER TOGETHER**

No Pet Left Behind Better Together

PROGRAM REPORT

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PROGRAMS

Paws for Hope Animal Foundation (Paws for Hope) strives to keep people and pets together, ensures BC pets survive and thrive, and supports positive change in the BC Animal Welfare Sector. The Better Together and No Pet Left Behind programs support pet families by improving access to veterinary care through a one health veterinary health model and temporary foster care for pets whose people are experiencing a crisis. In the past year, Better Together has enrolled over 160 families and No Pet Left Behind has provided foster care for over 100 pets.

This report provides a small snapshot of some of the diverse clients that Paws for Hope was able to help through the Better Together and No Pets Left Behind programs. Eighteen clients served by the two programs agreed to share their experiences with human and animal social services systems. All data shared through this report was consented to by the clients.

Sixteen pet guardians were part of the Better Together program, which aims to keep human-animal families together by providing pet families with services or resources to care for themselves and their pets. Examples of support include veterinary care, pet food or supplies, and connections to social services and public health services.

Two pet guardians were enrolled in the No Pets Left Behind program, which provides temporary safe care for pets of individuals who are experiencing a crisis. One participating pet guardian sought out the program due to being hospitalized for sickness; the other was in the process of leaving an abusive relationship.

CLIENTS

Across the two programs, the clients represented a wide range of demographics. Pet guardians were located in many areas of the province, including Vancouver (n = 7), Surrey (n = 6), Chilliwack (n = 2), Abbotsford (n = 1), Maple Ridge (n = 1), and Victoria (n = 1). There was also a range in age group. Most of the pet guardians were between 30 and 45 years old. Nine pet guardians were female, eight were male, and one preferred not to say.

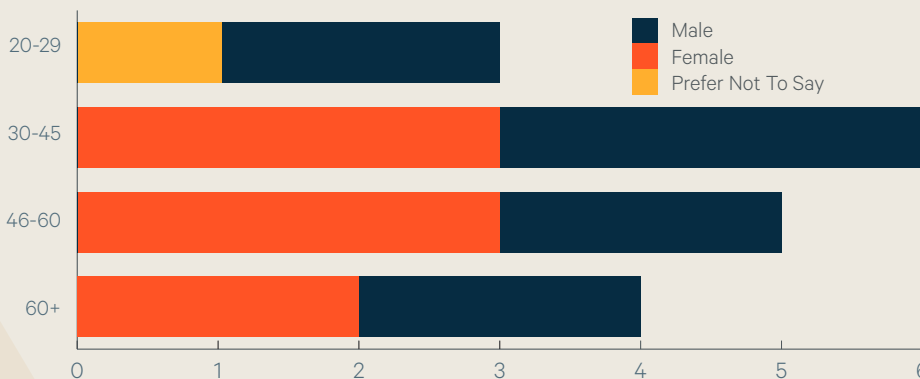


FIGURE 1. THE NUMBER OF PET GUARDIANS IN THE BETTER TOGETHER AND NO PET LEFT BEHIND PROGRAMS BY AGE AND GENDER.

Paws for Hope also serves a diverse range of pet families. The majority (n=12) of pet guardians were single. Four pet guardians were divorced, one was married, and one was in a common law relationship. Of the two pet guardians that were enrolled in the No Pet Left Behind program, one was single and one was divorced. Six respondents also had children in the household in which they lived. The number of children ranged from 1 to 4.

Pet guardians also had a variety of employment statuses. The majority were unemployed at the time of the survey (n = 13) and received their income from means such as disability insurance, employment insurance, income assistance, and a pension. Of the five pet guardians who were employed, four were employed full-time. Clearly, these services and supports are needed across all demographics.

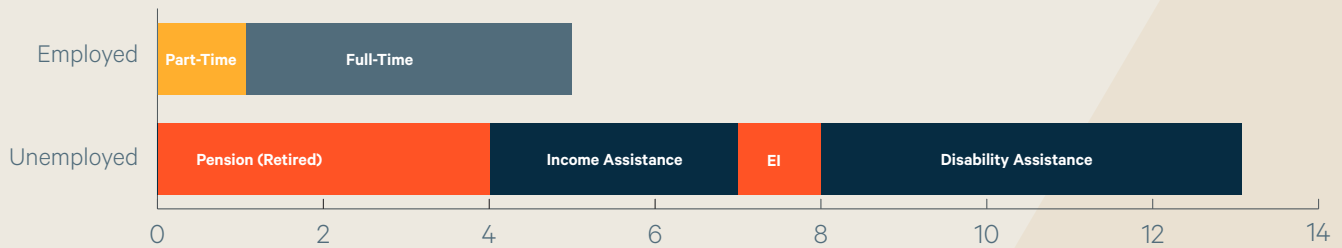


FIGURE 2. NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS THAT ARE UNEMPLOYED VERSUS EMPLOYED, COLOURED BY THEIR MEANS OF EMPLOYMENT/UNEMPLOYMENT

PETS

The majority of pet guardians (n = 11) reported having one pet. Of those who reported having one pet, 10 of those pets were dogs and one was a cat. The respondents with more than one pet reported having a combination of animals (mostly dogs and cats; one had a dog and a rabbit; one had cats, snakes, and fish).

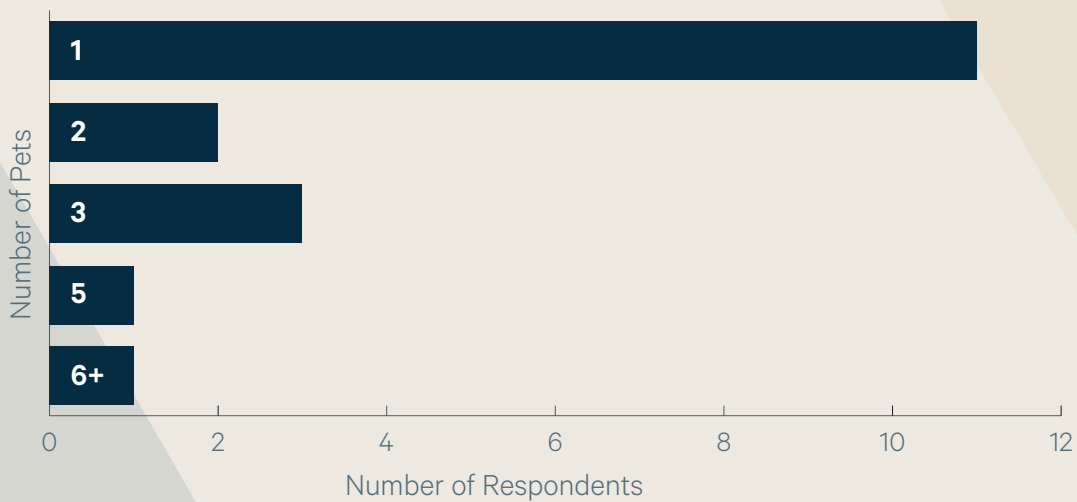


FIGURE 3. THE NUMBER OF PETS CARED FOR BY EACH RESPONDENT.

The most common source of acquiring their pet was from a family or friend who could no longer care for the animal (n=7). The next most common sources were pet stores (n=3) and shelters/rescues (n=3). Some of the other sources included breeders (n=2), online sites (n=2), receiving animals as a gift (n=1), a friend’s pet’s litter (n=1), or finding the animal as a stray (n=1). Three respondents acquired their animal from an “Other” source not included on the list.

PET SERVICES

In addition to emergency veterinary care, the Better Together program also includes other offerings and resources such as veterinary services and support with obtaining a license or identification for companion animals. Most of the pet guardians that participated reported that at least some of their pets were spayed or neutered. The majority (n = 15) also reported that their animals had some sort of permanent identification, such as a microchip or tattoo.

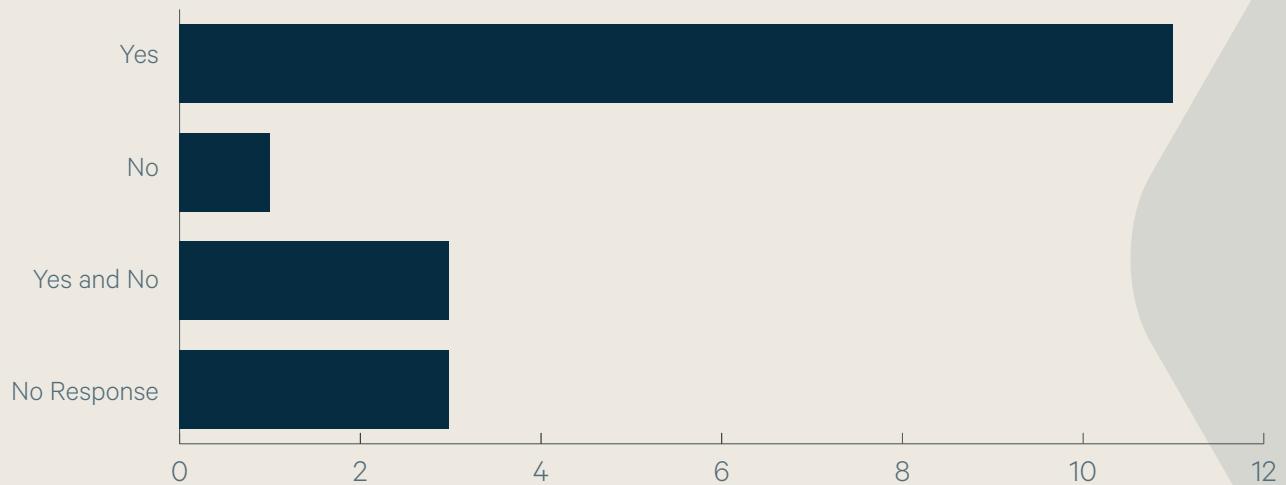


FIGURE 4. THE NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS WHO SELECTED EACH RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION: ARE YOUR PETS SPAYED/NEUTERED?

However, 10 out of the 18 pet guardians reported that their pets were not licensed. When asked if they faced any barriers to getting their pet licensed, six guardians said they did not face any barriers. Those who did face barriers identified things such as cost and transportation. Other reasons for not getting their pets licensed included not feeling as though their animals needed to be licensed (e.g., indoor-only animals) or having recently moved.

Three pet guardians—all of those who reported that their pets had permanent ID— reported that their pets had previously gone missing. (All three pets were eventually returned.) One cat returned on its own, while the other two were returned after being scanned for a microchip or tattoo. This highlights the importance of permanent identification as a means to reunite lost pets with their families and reinforces how important it is to provide this service.

VETERINARY CARE

Most pet guardians in the survey reported that they had access to a veterinary clinic—only one pet guardian out of 18 stated that they did not have a veterinary clinic in their neighbourhood. The number of times pet guardians visited veterinary clinics each year ranged from 1-5. The median number of veterinary visits per year was 4.

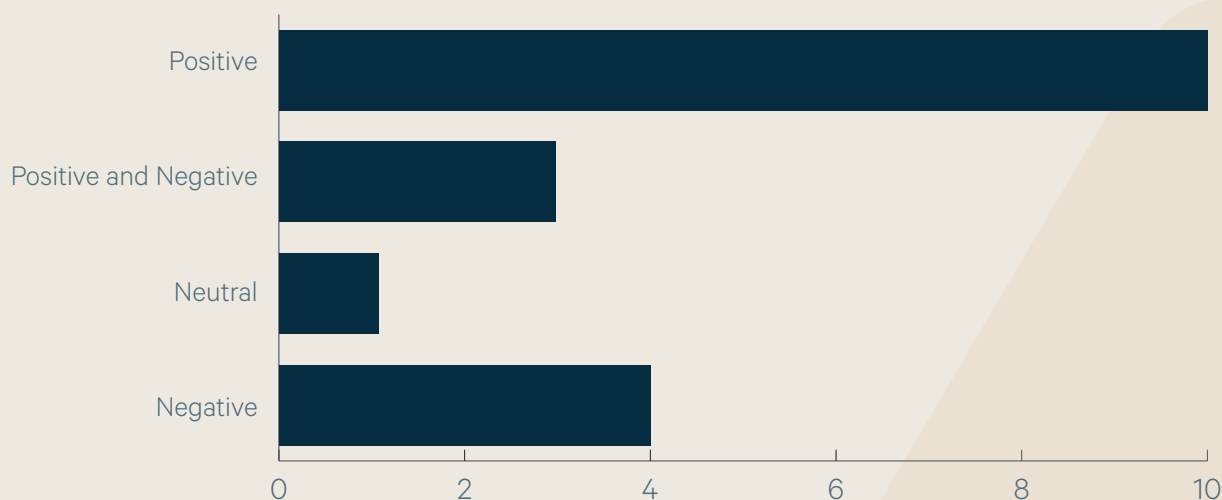


FIGURE 5. THE NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS WHO SELECTED EACH ANSWER IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION: *OVERALL, HAS YOUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH VETERINARY SERVICES BEEN POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?*

Prior to enrolling in our program, pet guardians generally reported that their previous experience with veterinary services was completely positive. Of those who did not say their previous veterinary experiences were wholly positive, three pet guardians said their reason for negative or neutral experiences was related to cost.

We also know that cost-related issues are a common reason that pets are surrendered to an animal shelter or rescue. By providing funding for veterinary care to those people who may be experiencing financial hardships, Paws for Hope is striving to improve the relationship between pet guardians and their veterinary service providers without placing an extra burden on the veterinary care system.

THE ROLE OF PETS

Pet guardians reported that their pets played a number of significant roles in their lives. Most respondents said their pets provided them with companionship. Other responses identified that pets were support animals, services animals, or provided protection.

When asked to describe the favourite things about their companion animals, some pet guardians detailed their quirky behaviours. For example, one pet guardian said, “He’s got his temperament and if he decides he wants to do something you better be there to do it! He’s so funny.” Another said, “He talks!”

Pet guardians also described the ways in which their animals enriched their lives. In many responses, pet guardians described their animals as their family: “I’m single and don’t have kids so he is my family.” Others described the impact of their pets on both their mental and physical health: “It’s important to have the responsibility of taking care of someone other than yourself. He gets me outside and talking with people. I can’t imagine not having him.” Another explained that: “my dog is very intuitive and helps me manage my anxiety.”

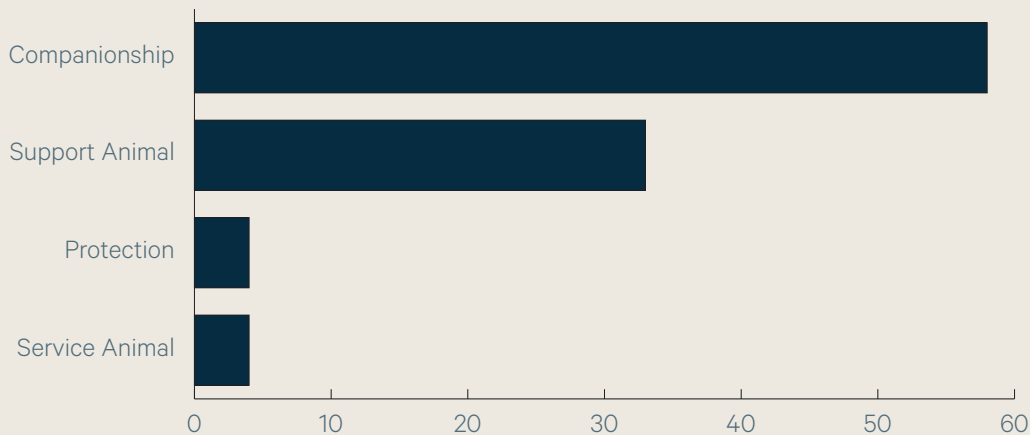


FIGURE 6. FREQUENCY OF RESPONSES TO THE “ROLE” THAT PETS PLAY IN PET GUARDIANS’ LIVES. PARTICIPANTS HAD THE CHOICE TO SELECT MULTIPLE ANSWERS.

HUMAN SOCIAL SERVICES

The survey also asked pet guardians if they had ever used any other community social services in the past. Half of those surveyed (n=9) said they had accessed community social services at some point. The services that pet guardians had accessed included mental and physical health services, food banks, family services, employment services, and support groups. Six of those who did access social services reported that the services were aware that their family included pets. Others who reported that the services were not aware of the pets explained that the knowledge of their pets was not necessary or relevant for the specific service being delivered (e.g., income assistance).

The other half of pet guardians had not previously accessed community social services. Six of those nine participants reported that they did not need to access any other social services. The other three reported that they faced barriers to accessing their local social services. Two participants said the type of services offered were not aligned with their needs. For example, one said, “The local mental health center did not have the kind of help that was needed at the time.” The third participant said that the barrier was due to allergies in the case of accessing goods offered by their local food bank.

IMPACT OF PAWS FOR HOPE

Pet guardians were also asked how they had learned about Paws for Hope’s programs and services. Most commonly, pet guardians had learned about the program they were involved in through their

veterinarian. When asked about their experience with Paws for Hope programs, many discussed how beneficial help with veterinary costs was for their family: “If we didn’t have [Paws for Hope], we would not be able to care for our dog’s veterinary needs. They do great work!” Another said, “I appreciate the help of Paws for Hope when I had [to] take my cat in for emergency treatment. It was a weight off my shoulders.” One pet guardian also said that Paws for Hope “absolutely preserved my humanity. If it weren’t for Paws for Hope, there is a high chance that I would have to surrender my dog.”

Historically, animal protection and welfare agencies have taken a punitive approach and required a pet be removed from their family in order for them to provide the veterinary care that was needed. However, such a punitive approach treats poverty as a character flaw—something that is inherently wrong with an individual. It does not consider the systemic inequities created in our society based on an individual’s race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, disability, or histories of mental health and addiction. This model essentially promotes removing pets from the poor and giving them to the rich.

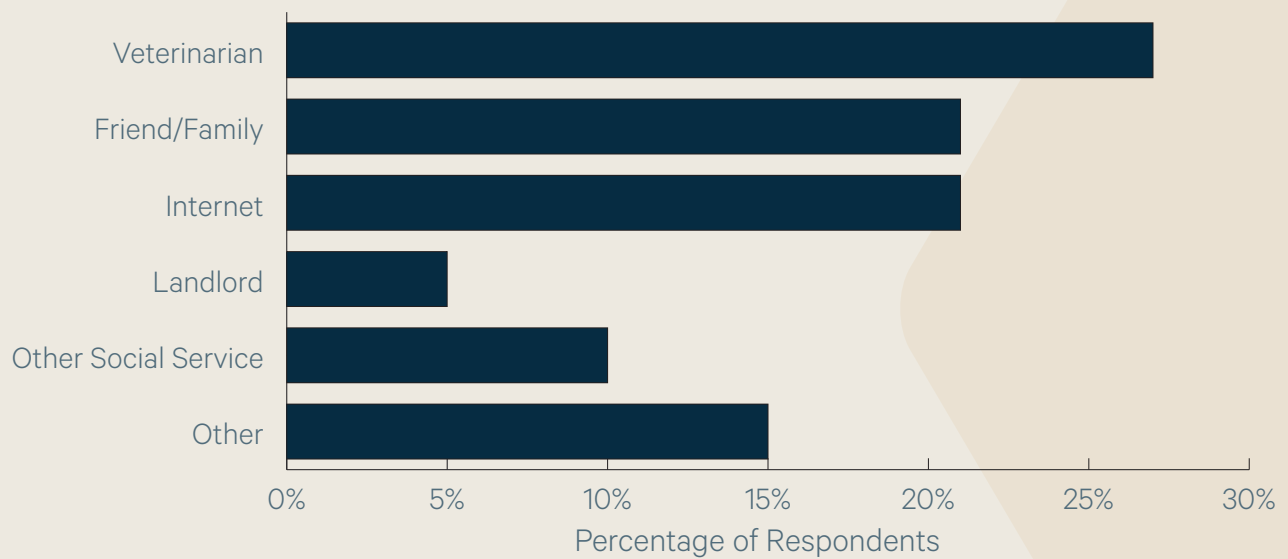


FIGURE 7. THE WAYS IN WHICH PARTICIPANTS LEARNED ABOUT PAWS FOR HOPE SERVICES. PARTICIPANTS WERE ALLOWED TO SELECT MORE THAN ONE ANSWER.

While animal cruelty is a very real problem, in many cases pets are not being removed because their people intentionally neglected or harmed them. These pets are being apprehended and removed because their people face systemic barriers that prevent them from having access to things that the rest of us take for granted — things like adequate pet food, veterinary care, stable shelter. And simply as a result of their circumstances they lose a very important part of their life and a member of their family.

CONCLUSION

In order to truly appreciate the significance of pets in our families, we need to understand and view them as family members. When we use this language, we can really see how important it is to take the entire family into consideration when providing assistance. Even if that family is just one other person, it is a family unit, and the well-being of the unit is dependent on the well-being of both or all family members.

We see the significance of the bond between people and their pets all the time. People experiencing homelessness sacrifice a place to live if it means they would have to give up their pet or non-human family members. Individuals living in violent situations will not leave if it means they must leave their non-human family member behind. People seek treatment only if they have someone to care for their family members while they are away. We see people making sacrifices for their non-human family members all the time, just as they would for a child.

We also see the physical, social, and emotional benefits living with a pet can have for people. We know that having a pet can play a significant role in combatting isolation and loneliness, particularly for elderly people who live alone. We understand that this relationship can also have an incredible therapeutic impact on individuals suffering from anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions. And we also know that the grief caused by the loss of a non-human family member can mirror that of the grief caused by the loss of a human family member.

From a social work and public health perspective, the well-being of non-human family members can be a good indication of the well-being of the family. There is a lot of work currently being done to understand and create tools to address the links between human violence and animal violence. An appropriate understanding of this link enables first responders and front-line workers responding to a domestic violence call or animal cruelty call to pay attention to what is going on in the whole family.

We need to re-think and re-imagine how we respond to pets in need and help both them and their people. It is time to outgrow the punitive approach to animal welfare that assumes every person behind a pet in need has done something intentionally to harm the animal or is wilfully neglecting them. We need to stop judging and punishing families if they are struggling to provide adequate veterinary care and instead reach out with compassion and support.

To do this work effectively, we need to stop approaching animal welfare work as separate and distinct from social services and develop models that support the family unit as a whole. Our programs and services could be significantly enhanced through a collaborative cross-sector approach involving a wide range of helping profession, such as outreach workers, animal rescue workers, counsellors, and even veterinarians. In order to support pets over the long term, we must ensure that their people are supported as well.