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Serving Pets in Poverty: A New Frontier for the Animal Welfare Movement

By Amanda Arrington and Michael Markarian*

This article is dedicated to JC Ramos who meant so much to the Pets for Life (PFL) program. He not only inspired PFL to do more in the fight against injustice and discrimination, but he served his community with extreme dedication and compassion. There will never be another person like JC, and the PFL team was lucky to call him family.

Most people are aware of how poverty and structural inequality create challenges and barriers to accessing healthy food, education, jobs, health care, and housing. There is less awareness of how limited affordable veterinary and pet wellness services create similar obstacles and how that lack of access disadvantages millions of people and their pets across the United States. Currently there are at least 19 million pets living with U.S. families whose income level is below the poverty line, which is triple the number of dogs and cats who enter animal shelters each year, and there are millions more in working poor and middle-class families struggling with the cost of caring for their pets.

With 78 million dogs and 86 million cats in 80 million American households, pet ownership transcends geographical, racial, religious, and socio-economic boundaries demonstrating that love for pets is a consistent societal value. However, lack of access to information, advice, and direct animal care services produces hardships and heartaches for many pet owners in underserved communities. This denial of access to knowledge, counsel, and support generates a social justice issue in its own right.

Perpetuated by a lack of access to fundamental resources, race and income-based segregation is a centuries old problem. For example, food deserts are impoverished parts of the country with little or no access to fresh produce or full-fledged grocery stores. While they lack fresh fruit, vegetables, and whole foods, they are overrun with fast food chains and processed foods heavy in fat and sugar that contribute to the nation’s obesity and disease epidemic—causing people in underserved communities to suffer at disproportionate rates.

Similarly, there are animal resource deserts—entire neighborhoods with no veterinarians, no pet supply stores, no groomers, and no animal welfare infrastructure. When there are no veterinarians in a community, standard wellness care is not the norm—and familiarity, experience, and knowledge concerning common pet health concerns do not exist. When there are no pet supply stores or big box retailers, simple items like pet food or a collar and leash are out of reach. Pet owners end up spending more, thus experiencing disproportionate financial burdens because prices are higher and selections fewer at small corner stores, and many must wait until situations are dire to address a pet’s medical needs.

Additionally, the majority of people who live in poverty have to work extremely hard to provide even the most basic pet care, yet are frequently accused of being irresponsible with their pets or even punished with fines and criminal charges because of access issues that are largely out of their control. Many people in low-income neighborhoods rely on public transportation, and they cannot take their pets across town on the bus or subway. An animal may be unaltered because there are too many barriers to having the surgery done. A dog may live outside because a landlord does not allow indoor pets, and affordable housing with pet-friendly options is hard to come by.

In some cases, animal welfare professionals have formed negative opinions about people based on the location of their residence or perceived economic status with misperceptions and stereotypes of being cruel toward animals. Too often, these opinions exist without much understanding of the impact of poverty and systematic bias, which frequently isolate certain demographic populations and diminish or completely remove options and choices when it comes to pet care.

This physical divide creates negative assumptions and little to no positive engagement on the part of animal care agencies and service providers. Stereotyping entire communities of pet owners is not uncommon, both within and outside of the animal welfare movement, and it creates an “us versus them” mindset that furthers the trust gap between service providers and the community. Fear and judgment lead to continued lack of engagement, which creates further segregation and inaccessibility to resources. This in turn spreads more misconceptions among people outside of the affected groups.

In a lasting insight gained in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) saw that the poorest communities of Louisiana and Mississippi were places where people loved their pets but simply did not have access to basic services. Nationwide, about 86% of dogs and 90% of cats are spayed and neutered. The HSUS vowed to rebuild and strengthen the animal welfare capacity of the Gulf Coast and brought these critical spay and neuter and wellness care services to underserved pet owners.

Using these same insights, The HSUS launched its Pets for Life (PFL) program in 2011. PFL embraces the human in humane, extends compassion and respect to all audiences of pet

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owners, and promotes the understanding within the larger animal protection movement that a lack of financial means does not equate to lack of love for a pet. The program not only delivers direct care to thousands of pets in underserved communities each year, but it also works to promote greater recognition within the animal welfare movement of how institutions produce and perpetuate unjust systems and policies. Today, The HSUS operates PFL programs in underserved areas of Los Angeles and Philadelphia, and partners with and trains local animal welfare groups, shelters, and animal control agencies in thirty-two other communities—from major metropolitan cities to extremely rural regions—to share these ideas around the country. Nationwide, the Pets for Life program has served more than 130,000 pets in underserved areas, and of those, 88% were unaltered—showing the much lower prevalence of spaying and neutering in underserved communities compared to the national rate of only about 10% of owned pets being unaltered.

The program has also helped to overcome a long-held misconception that people in low-income communities or communities of color are opposed to spaying and neutering—thus the reason for low sterilization rates. Free spaying and neutering services combined with transportation to and from veterinary appointments and positive engagement has resulted in almost 90% of these pets sterilized through the program. This proves that high percentages of unaltered pets is due to lack of access and not because of differing belief systems or how much people care for their pets. Race and ethnicity are not primary determinants in utilizing veterinary services. In fact, decision-making by pet owners who are Latino and African-American is consistent with that of the behavior of non-Hispanic white pet owners around spay and neuter.

A large majority of people in underserved areas do not know animal welfare agencies exist as a potential resource because information is simply not being shared by service providers in an effective way or with the community’s perspective in mind. Also, some people are apprehensive to reach out to service providers for fear of unfavorable outcomes, such as having their pets taken away from them or being punished for not having the resources to provide medical care.

Additionally, 84% of pet owners served by PFL had never reached out to the local shelter or animal control agency. However, 89% of pets came from sources within the pet owner’s immediate area. There are many reasons for this connection deficiency. For instance, many in the animal welfare field have discussed and treated the issue of companion animal cruelty and neglect the same way for decades, resulting all too often in underserved neighborhoods being stigmatized as places where cruelty is prevalent. Therefore, the experience that many of these pet owners have is negative either because they are insulted and belittled by service providers, or at times even punished with fines or criminal charges for neglect or cruelty. There is an immense need to repair distrust and show that animal welfare extends compassion beyond animals, to include treating people with dignity, respect, and understanding.

The story of Kevin and Boss Lady illustrates how people and pets suffer the injurious consequences of complex societal issues and then see their difficulties compounded by the animal welfare system. Kevin was walking his dog, Boss Lady, down the street one day when a police officer, in a case of mistaken identity, shocked him with a stun gun. Kevin was taken to a hospital and Boss Lady was taken to the local animal control agency. When authorities realized their error and released Kevin, he went to retrieve Boss Lady only to find there were expensive fees that he had to pay to get her back. The police department and shelter denied Kevin’s requests for help even in light of the police department’s error.

On his own, Kevin would not have been able to pay the fees to take his dog home, and the two would have been unfairly separated. Kevin would have lost his companion and Boss Lady would have entered the shelter system with her fate unknown. The sad circumstances involving Kevin and Boss Lady are not rare or extraordinary, but rather are representative of discriminating processes and policies that some people must face on a regular basis, and that ultimately tear families apart. Keeping people and pets together is a much better outcome than adding to the intake of overburdened shelters that are already working hard to increase adoptions and reduce euthanasia rates. Strengthening the options for animals can also be a pathway to connect people with other social benefits and services. In one example, caseworkers with a needle exchange program had been trying to provide services to a group of drug users squatting in an abandoned building, but the inhabitants rebuffed them at every turn. The drug users were taking care of a colony of cats nearby, and PFL staff members were able to gain their trust by providing services to the cats. This relationship in turn made the clients more open to being introduced to the needle exchange program.

Recognizing the barriers to services that exist for many pet owners and taking a deeper look at the system’s imbalances is not only the right thing for animal welfare but also the way to achieve long-term, sustainable change in countless communities. The driving force behind the PFL program is to provide services that people want and need for their pets and to be a catalyst for widespread availability to veterinary care, supplies, and information. There is a cumulative effect from long-standing practices and prejudices that requires patient, consistent, proactive outreach, and careful listening to all perspectives. However, no short cut will instill faith in the system and build bridges to underserved communities. Nothing will replace face-to-face, positive connection, and empathy in the effort to create sustainable, long-term access to resources, and to guarantee their effective use. The social, psychological, and medical benefits of having a pet should not be available or viable only for select groups or classes of households.

Even when backgrounds and current circumstances are diverse, there is an ease in building relationships and finding commonalities around pets. Animals provide a very natural way for people of different backgrounds to connect and they serve as a critical reminder that all people are more alike than
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diminished to 2.4 million. Popularizing pet adoption, aggressive
spay and neuter programs, community partnerships with rescue
and foster groups, retention programs to keep pets and families
together, and other innovative efforts have driven down eutha-
nasias rates. With an average of 6.5 million dogs and cats entering
animal shelters every year, our movement still needs to provide vital
services for the homeless and stray populations, but the time has
come to shift resources to focus more attention on pets living in
poverty outside the shelter: There is more work to be done, and
we need to open up new fronts of activity to help companion
animals, including the 19 million pets currently living in pov-
erty. Celebrating the human-animal bond and eliminating the
barriers that hamper the broadest possible promotion of compan-
ion animal welfare can ensure a future that takes into account all
pets in a community, not just those who end up at a shelter.
The Pets for Life program has demonstrated that a deep care
and respect for animals transcends social and economic bound-
aries and is a tie that binds us all. Everyone who wants to pro-
vide a loving home to animals deserves access to the resources
that make pet keeping possible. The animal welfare movement’s
efforts to address lack of access to animal services in under-
served communities should be strengthened as a critical priority
nationwide. As this happens, entrenched social prejudices will
diminish, with tangible benefits for humans, animals, and the
larger society. Pets enhance the lives of humans and everyone
who so chooses should have the opportunity to experience the
unconditional love and meaningful relationship a pet brings.
The bond people have with their pets should not depend on
income, which ZIP code someone lives in, or the language they
speak.

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Carolina or even windows, and how they are finally slaughtered after several years of pigs spend their lives in gestation crates barely larger than their bodies, how ASPCA it would be unconscionable to proceed without acknowledging their reality. Billions in CAFOs and slaughterhouses is not the primary focus of this Article, industry’s practice of offloading its costs onto others). Subsidies, partly by efficient methods of factory farming, and partly by the

While the suffering of the animals who are exploited and tortured by the See uSDA Fact Sheet on Factory Farms; ASPCA, http://www.aspca.org/animal-cruelty/farm-animal-welfare/animals-factory-farms (last visited Dec. 20, 2017) (describing how female breeding pigs spend their lives in gestation crates barely larger than their bodies, how their piglets are taken from them at two to three weeks of age and confined to enormous (but overcrowded) sheds with no access to fresh air, sunlight, earth, or even windows, and how they are finally slaughtered after several years of constant pregnancy and birth); The editorial Board, No More Exposes in North Carolina, N.Y. Times (Feb. 1, 2016), http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/01/


ENDNOTES: CAFOs: Plaguing North Carolina Communities of Color continued from page 12


12 See Simon, supra note 10, at xxii (“This development is driven partly by subsidies, partly by efficient methods of factory farming, and partly by the industry’s practice of offloading its costs onto others”).

13 While the suffering of the animals who are exploited and tortured by the billions in CAFOs and slaughterhouses is not the primary focus of this Article, it would be unconscionable to proceed without acknowledging their reality. See, e.g., Farm Animal Welfare: A Closer Look At Animals on Factory Farms, ASPCA, http://www.aspca.org/animal-cruelty/farm-animal-welfare/animals-factory-farms (last visited Dec. 20, 2017) (describing how female breeding pigs spend their lives in gestation crates barely larger than their bodies, how their piglets are taken from them at two to three weeks of age and confined to enormous (but overcrowded) sheds with no access to fresh air, sunlight, earth, or even windows, and how they are finally slaughtered after several years of constant pregnancy and birth); The editorial Board, No More Exposes in North Carolina, N.Y. Times (Feb. 1, 2016), http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/01/opinion/no-more-exposes-in-north-carolina.html (describing how pigs have been stabbed, beaten with sledgehammers, and boiled alive at slaughterhouses).

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