



Integrating Veterinary Social Work Into Animal Shelters

Introduction: The Importance of Veterinary Social Work

Veterinary Social Workers (VSW) “attend to the human needs that arise at the intersection of veterinary and social work practice”. ([UT-Knoxville's Veterinary Social Work Program](#)) They help facilitate relationships between humans and animals in a variety of medical settings including clinics, hospitals, and shelters. Social workers serve to support veterinary staff in emotionally demanding workplaces, support clients as they navigate the medical needs of their pets and access to veterinary care, and serve a critical component within the One Health approach of veterinary medicine. The University of Tennessee - Knoxville Veterinary Social Work Program highlights four key categories of VSW:



Credit - UT-Knoxville VSW Program Website

Roles of Veterinary Social Workers:

- Provide support for shelter/adoptions staff and animal control officers/animal services officers/humane law enforcement:
 - Programmatic support
 - Increase programmatic/operational support of shelter agencies by putting Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and guidelines in place
 - Support moving towards more progressive animal control strategies



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- Animal abuse and human abuse recognition; Assess human side of animal cruelty investigations
- Culture sensitivity training
 - Using trauma-informed language and practices
 - Implicit bias training
 - Motivational interviewing training
 - Active listening training
- Health and wellness staff resources
 - Awareness of compassion fatigue indicators
 - Brief supportive counseling
 - Setting healthy boundaries
 - Compassion satisfaction goals
 - Resiliency
 - Consultation for moral distress and ethical dilemmas
 - Conflict resolution/meditation
 - Suicide prevention
 - How to interact with the human resources (HR) team
- Sample Job Description:
 - [Social Work Program Sample Job Duties and Description](#)
- Provide support for clients
 - Client services and engagement
 - Communication with veterinary service providers and animal welfare organizations
 - Facilitate overcoming of cultural barriers (language, belief systems)
 - Discussing and addressing financial limitations
 - Transportation challenges
 - Assessing other client needs
 - Supportive counseling, referrals as needed, and create resource binder/files
 - Medical-specific
 - Quality of life assessments and end of life decision making support
 - Veterinary cases
 - Animal Control/Public safety cases
 - Pet loss, grief, and bereavement support
 - Individual or group support
 - Follow up bereavement outreach calls post-euthanasia
 - Cards, memorial events, grief folders
 - Anticipatory grief (fospice (hospice foster) support or support for client adopting a pet with a terminal diagnosis)
 - Communicating wants, needs, preferences
 - Spay/Neuter resources
- Community building
 - Collaborate with community stakeholders (Veterinary service providers, animal welfare organizations, social service agencies, etc)
 - Keep families together by increasing access to care (Linking animal welfare and humane welfare resources)



- Support for instability (food, housing, emotional, psychological, social, physical/medical)
- Housing, mental health, and substance abuse crisis intervention and referral

Scope of Work for Veterinary Social Workers:

Veterinary Social Workers (VSW) can play a versatile role within sheltering. In a larger shelter with a high caseload, a VSW may serve as a team lead for case managers who are working on pet relinquishment prevention and outreach programs. In a shelter with a lower volume of cases, a VSW may serve as a direct case manager for such programs. Veterinary Social Workers can also serve to support health and wellness for shelter staff.

In larger shelters, a Veterinary Social Worker may serve as a team lead for Case Managers and have some of these tasks:

- Develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), flow charts, trauma-informed training, and more for staff
- Lead case staffing meetings (Case Management rounds)
- Develop and maintain relationships and a referral system with social service agencies
- Consult with staff on Case Management and client-centered planning
 - Support foster, behavior, adoption, and intake work
 - Situational and contextual support when medical or behavioral care is not working
 - Provide additional support for staff in difficult crises situations
 - Create a resource guide on pet retention
 - Develop a script for the intake line
 - Work with intake staff to refine intake counseling
- Implement trauma-informed practices
- Develop and implement systems to help decrease compassion fatigue for staff

In smaller shelters, a Veterinary Social Worker may serve as a direct/hands-on Case Manager and have some of these tasks:

- Connect clients with other social service agencies
- Provide crisis management for clients
- Provide support around euthanasia
 - Pet loss/bereavement support

The Value of Veterinary Social Workers in Your Practice

Offset doctor time

- Limits the amount of time a veterinarian needs to spend with the pet owners.
- Discussions about cost, diagnostics, and/or treatment
 - These can include the pet owner's constraints such as financial, time, shelter, and transportation.



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- Veterinarians can then see an increased number of patients as a large part of a typical appointment is relieved by a Veterinary Social Worker.

Increase staff retention and morale; Reduce stress and compassion fatigue/burnout

- Reduce staff turnover
 - Additionally leads to cost savings. Estimated veterinarian turnover cost equals 1-2x annual salary.
- Reducing staff stress and fatigue, and easing communication handling difficult/sensitive situations such as:
 - Pet owner's limitations in being able to help their pets.
- Facilitate shelter staff training in working with clients that have experienced trauma.
 - Facilitate counseling/intake (trauma-informed engagement)
- Shared staff decision-making with a VSW to balance out the emotional burden of having to make difficult choices by shelter staff/leadership.

Improve customer service

- Provide service-oriented engagement with clients
 - Can help with pet retention, cross-departmental support.
- Create better community engagement
 - Promotes better donor relations and positions your organization as more knowledgeable and a resource center
- Create funding opportunities
 - This type of work can open up to a wider array of grants and donors that may be more interested in human social services and not just animal welfare.
- Train staff to engage with clients/pet owners more effectively and more compassionately
 - Coach clients towards the best outcome possible for themselves and their pets. This may include:
 - De-escalation techniques
 - Coaching towards optimal outcomes

Increase pet retention

- Connect pet owners to other social services to assist the pet owner in caring for their pet.
 - Many animals are surrendered to shelters or euthanized due to poor access to care, whether it be medical care, food, or shelter. A VSW may help direct them to an appropriate resource to keep families and pets together.
 - This may utilize similar finances but without the added expense of animal care costs within the shelter.

Connect clients with cross-departmental resources

- Link animal welfare and humane welfare resources.
 - VSWs have knowledge and connections to other community resources that can help pet owners care for themselves and their pets.
 - Pet owners at times have to decide between caring for themselves or their pets. By connecting with other social services, they may be able to avoid that difficult decision.



Where to Find Veterinary Social Workers:

- Local college outreach
- Social services organization outreach
- Shelter volunteer outreach
- [National Association of Social Workers \(NASW\)](#)
- [Resource from UTK on how to find a social worker](#)
- [International Association of Veterinary Social Workers](#)

- Send job posting to someone who subscribes to the [Listserve](#) or is on the “UTK” [Slack](#)
- Hire a VSW consultant ([Consultant Website](#))
- Consider connections to other social services workers in addition to Veterinary Social Workers, such as hospice or medical social workers
- Train from within your organization
- If hiring a full-time VSW is not feasible, consider providing incremental support using this resource: [UT Veterinary Human Support Certificate Program](#)
 - This is a certificate for animal-related professionals who either have state licensure (DVM, LVT, etc) OR have a bachelor's degree and animal-related field experience.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs):

With regards to human resources, who should supervise/oversee a Veterinary Social Worker? Where should they fit in an organizational chart?

- This position will have involvement with the medical team, human resources, and community programs. Depending on your shelter's leadership organization, any of these departments could help run a Veterinary Social Work program.
- A VSW may also help to lead a department or other staff. This may include patient/family case management, resource or call center, community outreach.
- Regular meetings and check-ins will be needed to ensure interdepartmental communication about cases, community needs, staff/volunteers' mental health needs, etc.

How can we convince stakeholders that a Veterinary Social Worker on the team is valuable?

- Schedule a face-to-face meeting to address this topic and come prepared
- Bring a sample job description. Make sure it fits the organization's needs. There are examples in the resources section of this toolkit if you need samples to get started.
- Acknowledge/share that this field is new but growing at a rapid rate and is supported by evidence-based data.
- Come prepared with specific examples of how a VSW could benefit the organization. What are the current challenges? Where/how/who could a VSW help?
- Use testimonials from other organizations that have benefitted from having a VSW on staff and/or from staff or clients who would benefit.



How can we find a good fit for our organization?

- It is important to hire a social worker who will be a good fit for your organizational culture. Incorporate the following into the hiring process:
 - Working interview: Assess the Social Worker's adaptability and provide a better understanding of the work environment for them if they have not worked in a shelter environment previously.
 - Ask situational questions: Share real cases and ask how they would approach these situations. This helps the hiring manager assess problem-solving abilities and gives the applicant a better understanding of what the work may entail.
 - Hire based on your priorities: Identify the top priorities for the Social Worker and use that in hiring. An organization that wants a Social Worker to create/implement policies and write grants may look for different experience/qualities than an organization looking for a Case Manager.

How do we balance the needs for supporting clients and staff?

- Identify and prioritize tasks that will be assigned to the Social Worker. Consider whether tasks will be time-sensitive (i.e. Case Management) or longer-term projects.
- Set your Social Worker up for success by establishing clear expectations during onboarding.
- Create a structured and regular check-in process to assess capacity.
- Make sure that other staff are clear on the scope of the Social Worker's role.

How do we pay for a Social Worker?

The integration of a VSW into a shelter setting is invaluable, however, appropriate financial pay must be provided to VSWs so they are valued as true team members.

- There are occasionally [grants](#) available to cover the costs of a VSW if your organizational budget does not allow it.
 - Your organization may consider specifically searching for grants in the "Access to Care" category to hire social workers.
- Split the salary cost across different departments. The indirect and direct cost savings provided by the services of a VSW may offset the cost of their salary.
- Consider a VSW in training who is needing a place to do their clinical training. Directly contact universities or specialty programs and work with their program manager to determine if this may apply.

How can we utilize Social Workers without overwhelming them?

- Establish priorities upfront. Consider starting small and over time growing job responsibilities.
- Set measurable goals and create a realistic timeline for achieving them.
- Check in regularly and modify goals/timing as needed.
- Ask for their direct input on taking on new projects and timing.
- Solicit feedback from staff/clients who work with the VSW.

How do we evaluate success?



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- Metrics
 - Number/demographics of clients assisted
 - [Sample resource](#)
 - Number of patients assisted
- Measure retention rates of staff/volunteers
 - Utilize exit interviews
 - Notate if leaving the organization or profession as whole
 - Surveys evaluating staff/volunteer happiness
 - Surveys for organizational culture/engagement
 - Professional QOL (quality of life) survey
 - Includes compassion fatigue
- Success Stories
 - Client stories of helping to keep pets together
 - Client stories of navigating difficult pet situations
 - Staff and/or volunteer coaching
 - Anecdotal stories from internal staff
 - Example: Time saved by having VSW involved
 - Stories from other social service agencies that your organization collaborated with or assisted

How can we determine the scope of work for our organization?

- Evaluate both your organization and your community to identify the highest needs
 - Staff/Volunteer surveys for internal needs
 - Community surveys for external needs
 - Gap analysis or needs assessments
- Evaluate the position priorities and focus on them to get started.
- May want to start with what things your organization is already doing and making those more streamlined, then building off of what was already being done in an informal way

Additional Resources:

- [Align Care](#) - For Clients
- [Veterinary Mental Health Initiative - Shanti Project](#) - For Veterinarians
- [Human Support in Veterinary Settings](#) - Additional information on human support for veterinary services
- [Ecosystem Mapping Toolkit](#) - Identify all services that already exist in your community
- **Sample Job Descriptions**
 - [Social Work Program Sample Job Duties and Description](#) (Also listed in “Roles” section of this toolkit)
 - [Veterinary Social Workers](#) - Sample Job Description Folder