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Using data to decrease pet relinquishment

New research reveals important insights into the reasons pet owners surrender their pets to shelters. Reversing the trend will require careful attention to the humans behind the pets.

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Having to relinquish a pet to a shelter, even when it feels like the only option, can create a huge emotional toll for many families who love their pets and don't want to be separated from them. Veterinary teams suffer as well when they learn that a patient they have been treating has been surrendered to a shelter and the human-animal bond has been broken. Many shelters, overburdened with pets and limited in resources to care for them, also feel the pain when families decide that giving up their furry family member is preferable to any other available option.

One of the goals of AAHA's 2024 Community Care Guidelines is to help keep pets and their families together. To accomplish this goal, it's important to not only provide accessible veterinary care, but also to reduce the number of pets who are relinquished to shelters by their owners. Human Animal Support Services (HASS) published an important resource to aid in this effort: [A list of reasons why owners surrender their pets](#) to shelters in the United States as reported at the time of surrender. The hope is that by studying this information, solutions can be offered by veterinary teams and the community at large that in many cases preempt the need to surrender.

Research methodology

Amanda Foster, assistant director of implementation and analysis for HASS, said that this project was a collaboration with many industry stakeholders, including the Humane Society of the United States, Shelter Animals Count, veterinary professionals, behaviorists, animal welfare groups, and pilot shelters. Together, they collected data from 22 different organizations across the country from as far back as 2019, conducted interviews, and

reviewed shelter intake software to look for any gaps in data collection capabilities.

The goals were two-fold: to standardize the intake data shelters collect when a pet is relinquished and to better identify the underlying causes of owner surrender. Understanding the reasons for a pet's surrender not only helps place that animal in the most appropriate new living situation, but it also can help to address some of the challenges pet owners face that lead to surrender.

Holes in the data

One of the first conclusions drawn from the study was that shelters were not capturing the full picture in their documentation of pet surrenders. "Thanks to research that has been conducted," Foster said, "we know that the way intake reasons have been collected is not sufficient for actually understanding why pets are entering shelters." This may be because shelter intake software is not able to capture multiple contributing factors, but human bias can also play a role, Foster added.

"For example, upon hearing a pet owner's story during the intake process, a staff member may choose to select a medical reason for the pet's surrender if it is brought up by the owner," she said, "even if the medical reason was not the main reason the person was surrendering, [but] because the medical reason is most important for staff to be aware of when determining the pet's next steps. . . While the pet does need medical care in this scenario, the root cause of this person seeking surrender may be that they are unable to afford medical care for their pet."

The importance of the human element

Because of cases like this example, Foster expressed the importance of listing the challenges pet owners face in their own lives that may contribute to a pet being surrendered (such as finances, job status, a new baby, or the death of an owner), not just the animal's needs and challenges, since both contribute to the decision to keep a pet in the home or surrender them.

Unfortunately, the human element was often largely missing from the initial data analyzed in this project. "The data told us more about the animal's needs than the human circumstances of their owner that led them to entering the shelter," Foster said. This was a problem, she explained, because "it told us nothing about what the needs were in the community to support pet owners and prevent unnecessary intake."

By the end of the study, it was clear that human circumstances were a huge part of the pet surrender story for many families. According to HASS, the top five reasons for owner surrender were:

- housing challenges
- having too many pets
- having no time/being overwhelmed
- financial constraints
- experiencing a short-term life crisis

How the veterinary community can help

"Veterinary professionals are a huge piece of the puzzle when it comes to keeping more pets in their homes and out of overburdened shelters," Foster said. Many of the strategies that she recommends we follow to help keep pets with their families are covered in the Community Care guidelines.

One of her main recommendations is to practice "incremental care," a variation of spectrum of care, and to discuss it with clients regularly. "In the data we are collecting from our pilot study," she said, "we see that finances

are playing a major role for pet owners right now and their ability to keep their pet.”

It’s not just veterinary care that creates financial challenges for families, Foster added. Many pet owners who can’t afford veterinary care also struggle to afford their pet’s food, training resources, and other pet necessities. While veterinary professionals can’t be expected to provide all these resources to their clients, they can refer their clients to other organizations in the community that provide free or low-cost resources for both pets and their human family members. Foster recommends forming relationships with local animal shelters, attending community events, and spreading awareness to clients so that they know what resources are out there.

HASS has created a number of resources specifically for shelters and other community organizations that support pets. Many of these resources contain valuable guidance that veterinary professionals can incorporate into their discussions with pet owners to foster productive conversations and help determine which types of support would be most helpful to each family. These include:

- [How shelters can triage support for people and pets today](#)
- [Building trust with the public seeking pet support services](#)
- [Collecting better intake data](#)
- [Intake triage guide](#)
- [The HASS Playbook](#)

HASS reports on their website that 86% of families surveyed across nine pilot shelter communities indicated that they wished for additional resources that would have allowed them to keep their pet instead of surrendering them. By learning more about the challenges pet owners face, we can hopefully not only keep more pets and families together but keep them happy and healthy too.

Further reading

[AAHA 2024 Community Care Guidelines for Small Animal Practice](#)

[Pets for Life increases access to care for underserved communities](#)

[Flexibility training: Educating the next generation of veterinarians in spectrum of care](#)

[What prevents us from practicing a spectrum of care?](#)

[Why do we need to talk about spectrum of care?](#)

[What is the spectrum of care?](#)

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