SOCIAL WORK IN ANIMAL WELFARE (SWAW):

Best Practices Guidelines for Practitioners & Organizations

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Abstract

Key Words

Social Workers, Human-Animal Bond, Hospitals-Animal, Scope of Practice, Social Work, Animal Welfare, Health Services Accessibility

Social workers are increasingly employed in animal welfare settings to address the human needs that emerge alongside relationships with and care of animals. Until now, no comprehensive guidelines existed to inform practice in these contexts. To fill this gap, the Social Work in Animal Welfare (SWAW) Guidelines were developed through an 18-month participatory action research (PAR) process with 25 social workers from across the United States and Canada. Using collaboration and consensus building, participants created guidelines that outline emerging best practices at micro (individual and small group), mezzo (organizational), and macro (community and policy) levels. Focus areas include client-centered and trauma-informed support for human–animal families, expanding access to veterinary and pet-related care, promoting staff well-being, advancing equity in service delivery, and fostering community and policy advocacy. Grounded in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, the guidelines provide a foundational framework for ethical, sustainable, and effective integration of social work in animal welfare, with overarching goals of expanding access to resources and care for people and their animals, strengthening staff well-being and resilience, enhancing organizational sustainability, and supporting community and environmental health.

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Veterinary Social Work (VSW) addresses the emergent human needs at critical intersections of human and animal relationships. This specialized area of social work practice supports meaningful change toward well-being for animals, their caregivers, and the communities that support them (IAVSW, 2018). VSWs attend to the human side of the human–animal bond, knowing that the well-being of humans and animals is interconnected. They are increasingly employed in animal welfare settings (e.g., animal shelters, rescues, veterinary hospitals, private practices using animal-assisted interventions) to support human well-being and access to resources for people and animals (Vincent et al., 2025).

In such settings, social workers provide a range of services within the scope of social work practice* including trauma-informed care, crisis intervention, advocacy, resource linkage, program and service development and evaluation, and community engagement. While social work roles in private and academic veterinary practices have become increasingly established, along with policies and protocols, no comprehensive practice guidelines currently exist to support social workers in nonprofit animal welfare contexts such as animal shelters, humane societies, and other welfare settings.

The Social Work in Animal Welfare (SWAW) Practice Guidelines offer emerging best practice guidelines for social workers in nonprofit animal welfare settings. These guidelines were identified by a team of 25 social workers with social work employment experience in animal welfare settings across North America, who collaborated for over 18 months using participatory action research to identify, discuss, and refine best practice guidance.

As with practice in other areas of social work, the SWAW Guidelines unequivocally emphasize ethical service delivery; interprofessional and community collaboration; advancing diversity, equity, inclusion,

and belonging (DEIB); and supporting sustainable program development. The SWAW Guidelines are grounded in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (NASW, 2021) and aim to support the well-being of both humans and animals while explicitly staying within the scope of practice of social workers.

Animal welfare activities are the responsibility of the organization with guidance and input from the social worker around the emergent related human issues. Organizations may wonder whether they need a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) to do this work. A BSW or MSW-level social worker can fulfill many social work practice roles - an LCSW is not necessary for many social work practice activities*.

The SWAW Guidelines are not intended to prescribe singular job descriptions or narrowly define the role of social workers in animal welfare contexts. Rather, they illustrate the breadth and versatility of ethical social work practice in these settings. Depending on a given organization's needs and priorities, a SWAW position may be more public- and community-facing with an emphasis on outreach, diversion, and human–animal support services; focused more internally on staff well-being; centered on program development and community partnership building; or encompass a combination of these roles. It is our hope that the SWAW Guidelines empower social workers in animal welfare settings, animal welfare professionals, and the communities they serve to better draw on social work skills and expertise to strengthen supports for people and their animals, enhance organizational capacity, and build healthier, more compassionate communities.

*NASW (2019) defines social work practice as: *"…the professional application of social work values, principles, and techniques to: helping people obtain tangible services; counseling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, and groups; helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; and participating in legislative processes."*

Executive Summary of SWAW Guidelines Project

Through research funding from the ASPCA, this project, Increasing Access to Veterinary Care (AVC) Through Best Practice Guidelines for Veterinary Social Work in Animal Welfare Settings, entailed the use of participatory action research (PAR) to collaboratively develop the first-ever professional practice guidelines for social workers employed in animal welfare settings. Prior to beginning this project, the project processes were IRB reviewed and determined to be exempt.

Over an 18-month period, a diverse group of social workers (N = 25) from across the U.S. and Canada - with full-time social work practice experience in animal welfare settings - collaboratively engaged in an iterative process of knowledge generation, data analysis, and consensus building. The guidelines resulting from their efforts outline emerging best practices for social work practice in animal welfare settings.

Examples of how these guidelines can support animal welfare missions include but are not limited to: increasing community engagement and access to veterinary and pet-related supports; enhancing staff well-being; and strengthening the integration of social work practice skills in animal welfare organizations in accomplishing mission-related goals. The SWAW Guidelines aim to strengthen access to people–animal supports, enhance organizational capacity, and foster more compassionate communities by integrating social work skills and knowledge within animal welfare services.

Co-Authors

This manuscript is the result of the collective team effort of 25 professional social workers, one of whom elected to remain anonymous. All authors listed contributed to the conceptualisation, writing process, and editing of these guidelines. The 24 named co-authors are listed alphabetically for organizational purposes and should not be interpreted as reflecting the extent of individual contributions.

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Micro Level (Individual and Small Group Focus)

Client Interaction and Support

Access to Care and Service Navigation

- **The social worker should recognize the human client–pet dyad as a family unit, as well as recognize additional family members, and offer assessment with the family to address safety and emergent needs.**

  Assessments of families, in keeping with basic social work practice tenets, should be strengths-based, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive. Use holistic frameworks that view families in the context of their environment, relationships, and social determinants of health. Acknowledge pets as integral members of the family and explore the human–animal bond as part of the family's emotional, social, and cultural life.

  Incorporate open-ended, nonjudgmental questions to understand each person's relationship with their pets, caregiving responsibilities, and the role animals play in daily routines. When helpful/appropriate, include pets in family genograms or eco-maps to reflect their significance.

Assess for safety concerns, including housing instability, domestic violence, and suicidality.

Follow all regulatory and ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and mandatory reporting requirements. Ensure documentation is clear, respectful, and reflects professional expectations.

Use an equity lens to avoid assumptions or bias related to race, income, ability, sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, family composition, religion, political view, or other demographic characteristics.

Examples of common guiding questions in an equity lens include but are not limited to:

- o Who benefits?

- o Who is burdened?

- o Who is missing or excluded?

- o Whose voices are centered/prioritized, and whose are absent in decision-making?

- o What barriers (structural, cultural, financial, geographic) might limit access or participation?

- o How will this decision/program affect historically underserved groups?

- o What data do we have, and is it disaggregated enough to reveal disparities?

- o What actions could reduce inequities or promote greater inclusion and justice?

Engage families as experts in their own lives, using motivational interviewing and collaborative dialogue.

Tailor assessment to reflect generational, cultural, linguistic, and other contextual needs, to ensure that the process is inclusive and empowering and maximizes utility for the client(s) and their pet.

Standardize social work team approaches to assessment where possible to promote consistency across staff, especially for those new to the field.

- **The social worker should provide client linkage/advocate for client access as needed to veterinary care, pet-friendly housing, temporary/crisis boarding, pet food and supplies, and human services (e.g., utility assistance, food pantries), and/or provide resources to equip animal welfare staff and communities to be able to do so.**
  Resource linkage should be intentional, collaborative/client-driven, and rooted in relationships. Maintain an up-to-date network of community-based resources, including animal welfare services, veterinary partners, housing supports, behavioral trainers, domestic violence shelters, pet-food pantries, and mental health providers.

  211 and www.pethelpfinder.org may be helpful in locating up-to-date, vetted resources.

  Exercise caution in presuming what clients need or can access; instead, ask about prior attempts, perceived obstacles, and their comfort navigating systems.

  Before making referrals, verify that the resource is still available, accessible, and trustworthy. Confirm that intake criteria, eligibility requirements (such as income thresholds or catchment areas), and contact details are current. Whenever possible, personally vet resources or consult partners with established credibility.

  Focus on mitigating individual and structural (economic, cultural, geographic, etc.) barriers to accessing care.

  Economic and financial barriers are major structural impediments to accessing needed veterinary and pet support services. In public-facing veterinary service settings, social workers should provide leadership, advocacy, and ongoing support in the organizational use of financial equity tools to increase access to veterinary and other needed resources. This includes but is not limited to:

- Learning about, educating decision-makers on, and advocating for organizational inclusion of financial/payment tools that expand access to care (e.g., no–credit-check payment-over-time plans, grant or subsidy programs, crowdfunding platforms, etc.).
- Educating animal welfare staff (AWS) on how to comfortably integrate financial discussions up front as a normalized part of providing veterinary and other pet services and providing direct support during these discussions as needed.
- Providing direct client referrals to financial/payment tools and advocating when barriers are encountered.
- Training animal welfare staff (AWS) in the use of financial/payment tools that support access to care.
- Offering ongoing support and advocacy to clients and AWS in addressing financial equity barriers to veterinary and other needed care.

Linkages should be strengths-based and culturally responsive. Resources should match the client's language, identity, and community context. Use trauma-informed, transparent communication when discussing the limits of support and the scope of what is available.

Establish clear communication protocols and prioritize interdisciplinary teamwork to ensure seamless service navigation for both clients and their companion animals.

Offer warm handoffs by calling ahead or connecting directly with referral partners to facilitate trust and continuity.

- **The social worker should provide crisis intervention as needed within the animal welfare services context, including suicide risk assessment and linkage to community crisis support and stabilization resources.**

988 (call, chat or text), a 24/7 nationwide resource that immediately connects to local crisis support, is a useful resource to provide to staff and clients, and can also provide real-time phone support to the social worker and/or staff via calling and putting the 988 staff on speaker phone to support during a crisis.

Crisis and safety planning interventions should be immediate, inclusive, trauma-informed, and client-led. Begin by assessing both human and animal safety (relying on animal welfare/veterinary professionals for animal-specific factors in keeping with scope of practice), especially in contexts such as domestic violence, housing instability, suicide risk, or natural disaster. Plans must recognize the interconnected risk and well-being of all household members including pets.

Use evidence-based assessment tools and practices to evaluate human safety concerns and follow all mandated reporting laws, including cross-reporting of suspected human or animal abuse, neglect, elder abuse, or suicidality. Collaborate with crisis teams, domestic violence shelters, mental health professionals, and first responders who are trained in trauma-informed and pet-aware approaches. Collaborate with animal welfare/veterinary professionals who can explicitly assess pet safety and well-being as needed.

Create pet-inclusive safety plans that identify trusted individuals, temporary housing, or foster options for animals. Plans should be co-developed with clients using a person-centered approach that honors autonomy, cultural values, and individual readiness to act. Avoid coercive interventions to the extent legally possible and remain flexible to changes in a client's situation.

Document clearly, ethically, and with awareness of access and privacy especially when working with vulnerable clients or in cases involving interpersonal violence. Follow established agency protocols and standard operating procedures, and ensure/create secure record management for sensitive client information.

Crisis planning should also include follow-up, particularly within the first 48–72 hours after an acute event. Support clients not only with physical safety, but also with emotional regulation, empowerment, and connection to resources via warm handoffs and collaborative coordination.

- **The social worker should work with clients through linkages to needed resources and supports to divert pet relinquishment when possible unless otherwise indicated by client, ensuring that options are shared with dignity, choice, and respect for both the people and pets involved.**

  Support alternatives to relinquishment with a harm-reduction, nonjudgmental, and equity-informed approach. Begin by exploring the root causes behind the potential surrender and identify solutions that are realistic and client-driven.

  Provide education about what relinquishment means and affirm the grief and loss that can accompany this decision. Help clients understand available alternatives and avoid framing diversion as a moral obligation or means to outsource euthanasia. Respect the client's right to choose what is best for their situation without shame or pressure.

  Offer early interventions and connect clients to barrier-specific supports like pet-inclusive housing programs, crisis or temporary boarding, pet-food pantries, low-cost veterinary care, and behavior consultations. Assist clients in identifying personal support networks to establish temporary arrangements.

  Use creative problem-solving to co-design short-term safety nets. Normalize pragmatic solutions such as rotating care among trusted family or using a crate temporarily when alternatives are limited.

  Social workers should also engage in advocacy when gaps in services are identified, partnering with shelter leadership and community organizations to grow programs that preserve the human–animal bond. Build relationships with housing partners, real estate brokers, tenant groups, and other allies to increase access to pet-friendly options.

Client-Centered Practice

- **As in other areas of social work practice, the social worker should recognize clients as experts of their own experiences.**

Clients are the foremost experts on their lives. They bring lived experience, insight, and care that may not always align with professional expectations but must always be respected. Honoring client expertise begins with humility, empathy, and an intentional refusal to judge.

The social worker should maintain a nonjudgmental stance, reflect on their own positionality, and commit to continuous education and accountability. Honor client dignity by trusting their knowledge, supporting their autonomy, and walking alongside them as a partner, not an expert.

Social workers should meet clients where they are and assume positive intent, especially when support is sought under difficult circumstances. Even when animals appear neglected or families are in crisis, the act of seeking help reflects care and concern. The human–animal bond should be affirmed as real and meaningful, even when it differs from traditional or professional norms.

Practice should be grounded in cultural humility and responsiveness. This includes acknowledging diverse worldviews, values, and spiritual beliefs related to caregiving, healing, and companionship. Social workers must remain aware of systemic barriers and power dynamics, particularly those that impact marginalized communities.

In keeping with social work ethics and values, practitioners should support client autonomy, dignity, and self-determination. Strengths-based, person-centered approaches should guide engagement, with clients treated as collaborators and decision-makers, not as recipients of services. Educational materials may be offered when welcomed, but resources should never be presented as ultimatums. Clients should be trusted to decide what fits best for them and their pets.

Social workers should listen actively, ask open-ended questions, and avoid assumptions about financial capacity, cultural practices, or caregiving routines. They should validate the insights of community-based caregivers and rescuers, many of whom carry significant emotional, physical, and financial burdens. Creating space for storytelling, grief, and feedback fosters authentic connection and trust.

The social worker should practice reflexivity and remain aware of personal bias. Relationships should be rooted in curiosity, openness, and a shared goal of preserving both human and animal well-being.

- **The social worker should utilize trauma-informed care, harm reduction, and motivational interviewing techniques as appropriate to center client well-being and autonomy in interactions.**

  The social worker should use trauma-informed, harm reduction, and motivational interviewing approaches to promote client autonomy, safety, and well-being. These frameworks support respectful, nonjudgmental engagement and are especially effective in high-stress or crisis settings. When used together, they help build trust, reduce shame, and empower clients to make decisions that align with their values and goals.

  Trauma-informed care should include attention to physical space and sensory input during client intentions - such as maximizing privacy and minimizing exposure to harsh scents and lighting - to the extent possible in a given animal welfare context.

  In keeping with basic social work practice tenets, the social worker should emphasize client strengths and cultural values.

  The social worker should maintain a nonjudgmental stance, reflect on their own positionality, and commit to continuous education and accountability. Honor client dignity by trusting their knowledge, supporting their autonomy, and walking alongside them as a partner, not an expert.

  Tips for being culturally responsive in animal welfare settings include but are not limited to:

  o Culturally responsive, strengths-based practice begins with the recognition that every individual and family brings their own expertise, values, and resilience to the table.

- o Practitioners must actively avoid deficit-based thinking and instead highlight creativity, adaptability, and communal strengths that emerge in response to systemic barriers.

- o Social workers should approach each client and community with cultural humility, openness, and a commitment to learning. Approach differences with curiosity and without assumptions.

- o Ask before interpreting or assuming. Let the client tell their story in their own words.

- o Avoid viewing any cultural or racial group as a monolith/recognize that people within groups are unique individuals.

- o Expect and acknowledge variation within and across groups and communities.

- o Build relationships and listen deeply to understand how cultural context shapes pet-caregiving norms, grief practices, and family roles. Learn from, not just about, the communities you serve.

- o Respect multigenerational and communal human and pet caregiving practices, which may differ from individualistic Western norms.

- o Use inclusive language and communication styles. Be aware of translation needs and make materials available in the top-spoken languages in your area. When feasible, use video translation services and offer multiple ways to engage, including home visits or virtual options.

- o Recognize that concepts like microchipping, spay/neuter, or euthanasia may be unfamiliar or carry emotional weight depending on cultural or immigration status. Always explain clearly and respectfully, and provide alternatives/options when possible.

- **The social worker should strive to honor and understand human–animal relationships within wider social and cultural contexts and promote human–animal bond preservation programs.** The human–animal relationship is often profound, complex, and life-sustaining. In many cases, pets serve as emotional anchors, protectors, companions through trauma, and trusted members of the family system. Social workers must approach these relationships with deep

respect and understanding, recognizing that clients often know their animals better than anyone else.

Human–animal bonds come in many forms and meanings. Animals may be companions, working partners, spiritual figures, cultural symbols, or protective presences. Their roles can vary widely depending on the household's structure, life stage, and lived experiences. These bonds are shaped by systemic contexts such as poverty, displacement, discrimination, and chronic stress.

The bond between a person and their animal may be the only stable or supportive relationship in their life. It can also be a mutual source of healing for both human and animal, especially in shelter settings or following shared trauma. In any context, whether the client is a caregiver, a shelter worker, or a veterinary team member, these relationships should be seen as valid and meaningful.

Grief, guilt, and loss related to animals may be invisible to others but are often deeply felt. Support should be nonjudgmental and inclusive, regardless of how someone defines their relationship to an animal. Avoid assumptions and affirm the wide range of ways people love and care for animals.

Social workers should be mindful of intersectionality and the influence of structural inequities on how care is given and received. Preserving the human–animal bond often means advocating for resources, reducing barriers, and providing space for clients to define what that bond means to them.

End-of-Life, Grief, and Loss Support

- **The social worker should provide education on animal quality-of-life assessment resources, while being careful to stay in scope of practice and refer to veterinary/animal welfare professionals as needed.**

Quality-of-life discussions should center both the pet's and the caregiver's well-being. Use accessible tools like quality-of-life scales to guide conversations, and incorporate objective information about pain, behavior, and physical decline. Provide clear, nonjudgmental education resources using existing education resources created by veterinary/animal welfare professionals on how pets express or mask discomfort. Validate the emotional complexity of euthanasia decisions and serve as a decision-making proxy for pets.

Discuss limitations of available care (e.g., community medicine vs. specialty care), and present all viable options without assumptions about finances.

Avoid coercive options, such as suggesting rehoming, unless initiated by the client.

Emphasize shared decision-making, cultural humility, and the importance of rapport.

Frame these conversations with empathy and compassion. Normalize quality-of-life check-ins early, before a crisis. Include anticipatory guidance around euthanasia logistics and aftercare, using client-centered language. Recognize that decision-making may unfold over time, and support clients across that process.

Consider broader impacts on the family and community, such as caregiver stress, financial strain, or public health risks. Respect cultural, religious, and spiritual beliefs that shape understandings of suffering, dignity, and death. Encourage clients to engage their personal support networks and veterinary team, and remain mindful of systemic mistrust, especially among marginalized populations.

- **The social worker should offer grief support pre- and post-surrender or euthanasia.**

Grief support should be grounded in empathy, cultural humility, and an understanding that grief is individual, nonlinear, and deeply shaped by the human–animal bond. Recognize pet loss as a form of disenfranchised grief, and acknowledge other forms such as anticipatory grief and ambiguous grief related to surrender or rehoming.

Normalize grief responses and avoid pathologizing them; emphasize that emotional reactions like sadness, guilt, anger, or isolation are valid and varied. Honor the uniqueness of each person's loss, and provide options for support that reflect individual needs and identities. These may include one-on-one check-ins, peer-support spaces, written materials, or referrals to licensed grief counselors or therapists.

Stay within the social worker's professional scope and refer out when appropriate. Include guidance on suicide risk (utilize 988 as needed for additional 24/7 consultation), trauma-informed responses, and crisis protocols. Be attentive to systemic barriers and past trauma that may compound grief, particularly for marginalized clients.

Support may include rituals, memorialization, or storytelling. Encourage client autonomy and choice around euthanasia presence, aftercare, and emotional processing. Offer continued check-ins and validate that grief may resurface over time or shift in intensity. Above all, respond without judgment and create space for each person's way of grieving.

- **Many animal welfare settings offer public-facing veterinary services. The social worker should support client/caregiver involvement in palliative care and euthanasia decision-making (unless declined by caregiver) in such service settings.**

Support for caregivers should prioritize empathy, validation, and nonjudgmental presence. Recognize caregiving as emotional labor that is often accompanied by anticipatory grief, moral stress, and decisional burden. Normalize a wide range of grief responses, including those tied to disenfranchised or ambiguous loss, and affirm that every caregiving situation is unique.

As in other areas of social work practice, it is critical to: listen closely and support caregivers in making sense of their thoughts and emotions; avoid assumptions or pressure; and be mindful not to project personal values and honor decisions even if they differ from what the social worker may elect. The social worker should recognize that choosing euthanasia for a companion animal is regarded by many caregivers as an act of dignity and compassion.

Through supportive dialogue and active listening, the social worker should help clients/caregivers identify their own needs and boundaries alongside those of their pets'. Discuss compassion fatigue, and connect them with services such as mental health counseling, peer-support groups, or respite care as appropriate. Respect cultural, developmental, and socioeconomic differences, and provide practical support as needed.

Caregivers often need reassurance that they are not alone and that there is no "right way" to grieve. The social worker's nonjudgmental presence, patience, and ability to hold space are among the most powerful supports that can be offered.

- **Proactively identify or help develop client-education tools that are inclusive, accessible, and grounded in veterinary/animal welfare content provided by qualified professionals.**

  Social workers should proactively seek or co-develop tools that are inclusive, evidence-based, and accessible to clients with diverse needs, including children and individuals with cognitive disabilities. All tools should be created with veterinary content provided by veterinary professionals, and should support client understanding, participation, and decision-making.

  Accessibility must be intentional and equity-driven. Considerations include:

  o Language and literacy: Offer tools in multiple languages and ensure they are written in plain, inclusive language at appropriate reading levels. Avoid jargon and account for varied levels of comprehension and communication.

  o Cultural relevance: Use examples, imagery, and phrasing that reflect clients' lived experiences, values, and beliefs. Be sensitive to differences in cultural, spiritual, and family norms.

  o Disability and neurodivergence inclusion: Ensure cognitive and sensory accessibility by offering flexibility in format, pacing, and presentation. Accommodate clients who are neurodivergent or who have intellectual, developmental, or learning disabilities.

o Multiple formats: Provide tools in visual, digital, print, and verbal forms. Ensure they are mobile-friendly and usable by individuals with limited technology access or low digital literacy.

o Cost and availability: Tools should be free, fillable, and available both online and in person.

o Standardization and consistency: Use reputable, evidence-based materials that are easy to share, explain, and integrate into routine communication by veterinary team members.

- **The social worker should provide decision-support tools (e.g., QOL scales) and promote client self-determination to the extent possible in all animal-welfare setting contexts.**

Decision-support tools should center client autonomy, dignity, and informed consent. Tools must be evidence-based, culturally inclusive, and designed to reflect a wide range of client values, backgrounds, and experiences. They should support, not override, clients' right to self-determination.

Use formats that are flexible, non-directive, and easy to understand. Avoid presenting a single "right" answer. Tools should offer reflection space, values clarification, and the ability to tailor responses based on the individual client and pet. Include population-specific adaptations and translation services to meet diverse needs.

Ensure that tools are paired with empathetic, client-centered dialogue, rather than used in isolation. Clients should understand how the tools are used and feel ownership of the process. Whenever possible, co-design tools with people who have lived experience, especially from historically marginalized communities. Prioritize transparency, trust, and accessibility throughout.

Well-Being Support for Animal Welfare Staff (AWS)

Compassion Fatigue, Burnout Prevention, and Secondary Trauma

- **The social worker should provide AWS education and raise awareness about the physical and mental health risks associated with chronic exposure to high stress in animal welfare and veterinary settings. These risks should be recognized as occupational hazards requiring proactive support.**

   The social worker should raise AWS awareness that chronic stress in animal welfare and veterinary work is a serious occupational health risk. This includes helping AWS identify and understand compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary trauma, and promoting strategies for prevention and support. Compassion fatigue and secondary trauma are particularly prevalent in high-euthanasia environments, highlighting the need for targeted emotional support and policy responses to reduce cumulative harm.

- **The social worker should use and encourage staff use of self-assessment tools to assess/monitor staff well-being.**

   The social worker should use and promote self-assessment tools, such as the ProQOL scale, to help staff monitor their own well-being and recognize early signs of compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary trauma.

- **The social worker should facilitate voluntary individual and group debriefings, other forms of peer support, and referrals to external resources when needed.**

   The social worker should facilitate voluntary individual and group low-impact debriefings to support emotional processing after challenging events. They should also encourage peer support as a meaningful tool for connection and resilience and provide referrals to external mental health or wellness resources when additional care is needed. These practices help

create a culture of psychological safety and shared support.

- **The social worker should encourage, advocate for and/or organize self-care strategies and opportunities (e.g., guided meditation, time off).**
  The social worker should encourage and help organize self-care strategies that support staff well-being and resilience. This may include activities such as guided meditation, mindfulness practices, identification of individualized self-care activities, flexible staff scheduling, or encouraging use of time off. Promoting self-care as a shared value helps normalize rest and recovery as essential components of sustainable, compassionate work.

Euthanasia Support for AWS

- **The social worker should offer pre/post-euthanasia support for staff and publicly owned euthanasia cases.**
  The social worker should provide supportive space for AWS before and after euthanasia procedures, including those involving publicly owned animals. This may include emotional check-ins, normalization of grief responses, and opportunities to process difficult feelings.

  The social worker can also help navigate conflicts or moral distress related to euthanasia decisions by facilitating open dialogue and supporting respectful communication. Acknowledging the emotional weight of euthanasia helps reduce isolation and fosters a more compassionate workplace culture.

- **The social worker should support AWS development of compassionate euthanasia communication skills and self-advocacy when needed to maintain well-being.**
  The social worker should support AWS in developing compassionate communication skills for discussing euthanasia and in advocating for breaks or rotation when needed or possible during periods of high exposure to euthanasias or end-of-life events. These practices help AWS navigate emotionally charged situations with care while protecting their well-being and

reducing cumulative stress, and also build a culture of empathy, sustainability, and shared responsibility within the team.

- **The social worker should strive to increase AWS understanding and empathy for euthanasia decisions related to behavioral, medical, or financial considerations.**
  The social worker should strive to increase staff understanding and empathy around euthanasia decisions, especially those driven by behavioral, medical, or financial considerations. By providing context, encouraging open dialogue, and reducing stigma, the social worker can help foster a more compassionate and nonjudgmental approach when dealing with these difficult choices, that ultimately can help support AWS well-being in demanding environments.

Skill Development and Training for Animal Welfare Staff (AWS)

- **The social worker should support AWS knowledge and skill development in working effectively and respectfully with human–animal relationships recognizing the diversity of human backgrounds, belief systems, and cultures.**
  The social worker should support AWS in developing the knowledge and skills needed to work effectively and respectfully with human–animal relationships involving people from a wide range of backgrounds, belief systems, and cultures. This includes helping AWS understand how cultural identity, life experience, and systemic inequities can shape how individuals care for, relate to, and seek support for their animals. Training and/or resources provided should emphasize cultural humility, reduce assumptions and bias, and encourage curiosity, empathy, and nonjudgmental communication. By strengthening this awareness, AWS are better equipped to meet clients where they are and build trust across differences.

- **The social worker should support AWS knowledge and skill development in trauma-informed approaches and processes.**

The social worker should help staff build trauma-informed processes and communication skills, including active listening, validation, and compassion when addressing sensitive topics, while also fostering awareness of cultural differences and personal biases related to diverse human–animal relationships. Such knowledge and skills reduce conflict, strengthen client and team relationships, and support staff well-being in emotionally charged situations.

- **The social worker should support AWS knowledge and skill development in de-escalation techniques.**
  The social worker should play a key role in supporting animal welfare staff (AWS) in developing de-escalation skills by offering training, modeling effective techniques, and fostering a trauma-informed approach to high-stress interactions. This includes but is not limited to: helping staff recognize signs of human stress and escalation in themselves and others; providing strategies for regulating their own responses; and coaching on responding to clients or colleagues with active listening skills that build empathy and clarity and help reduce escalation. By building staff capacity in these areas, social workers help create a safer, more supportive environment for both people and animals.

Documentation, Ethics, and Laws

- **The social worker should use or help develop case note practices that align with organizational standard operating procedures (SOPs) and social work ethics and laws.**
  Social work documentation is crucial for maintaining ethical, accountable, and effective social work practice. Documentation serves as a record of assessment, intervention, and decision-making, promoting professional accountability and transparency with clients and organizations.

  Documentation should be clear, consistent, and purposeful, while protecting sensitive client information. Confidential details that are not necessary for animal welfare staff to carry out their responsibilities should be excluded or access-limited to maintain client trust and privacy,

and professional boundaries.

- **The social worker should advocate for clear SOPs around organizational documentation that protect client data and maximize accessibility of digital tools.**
  Examples of this include but are not limited to: establishing consent protocols, protecting privacy, and ensuring language justice through accessible, multilingual communication materials.

- **The social worker should use/apply ethical decision-making frameworks to navigate dual roles and potential conflicts.**
  The social worker should apply ethical decision-making frameworks, such as those outlined by the NASW or Reamer's Model, to navigate dual roles, boundary challenges, and potential conflicts of interest in animal welfare settings. These structured approaches support clarity, consistency, and accountability by guiding practitioners through key considerations like values, obligations, and potential consequences.

  Using ethical decision-making frameworks helps reduce personal bias, balance competing needs, and model ethical practice within interdisciplinary teams.

- **The social worker should understand and follow all mandatory reporting laws, including cross-reporting of human and animal abuse (e.g., "The Link"), and educate the organization leadership about such.**
  The social worker should be knowledgeable about and comply with all state/province laws and professional licensure requirements related to mandatory reporting, including cross-reporting of suspected human and animal abuse under "The Link." They should also ensure that organizational leadership is aware of these obligations and any related actions taken. This promotes legal compliance, ethical practice, and coordinated safety planning.

Mezzo Level (Organizational Focus)

Mezzo-level guidelines for social workers in animal welfare settings are intended to offer best practice guidance, while fully recognizing that social workers cannot be solely responsible for, nor do they typically have the authority to make, organization-wide operational decisions.

Staffing and Supervision

Supervision/Scope of Practice Structures

- **The social worker should be supported by or advocate for administrative supervision structures that recognize and uphold the unique role, values, and ethics of social work practice in animal welfare settings.**

  Supervisors of social workers in animal welfare settings, whether internal to the organization or external consultants, should facilitate regular, scheduled supervision sessions (individual or group), rather than offering support only during crises. These sessions should provide space to process ethical dilemmas, emotional strain, and workload challenges. Supervision must ensure

role clarity, reinforce adherence to the NASW Code of Ethics, and maintain the distinct perspective that social work brings to animal welfare settings.

- **The social worker should have access to or advocate for reflective and clinical supervision with a social worker to assist with licensure and professional development.**
Whenever possible, social work practice-specific supervision should be provided by a licensed social worker with experience in veterinary social work or related fields - and available either internally or externally as part of the employee's role or benefits. This includes reflective supervision focused on emotional processing, ethical reasoning, and professional skill building and growth, as well as access to supervision to secure professional licensing.

  Organizations should ensure that social workers, especially those in solo social work roles, have access to consistent social work feedback, peer consultation groups, and interdisciplinary case discussions when appropriate.

  Social work professional consultation should also be available for areas of lower experience, warm handoffs, or complex cases involving client safety, mandated reporting, or systemic barriers.

  Peer support and community-building opportunities are essential to reduce isolation and strengthen skill building and integrity.

- **The social worker should have, help develop, and/or advocate for clear, licensure-aligned (if applicable) job descriptions for veterinary social workers (VSWs) in their respective organization.**
A clear job description and defined expectations for social work consultation time and scope should be in place. Job descriptions should specify the expected credentials (e.g., BSW, MSW, LCSW) and ensure the level of licensure (if applicable) aligns with the complexity of the tasks assigned. The role must identify who the social worker is serving - clients, staff, or both - and

clearly outline the types of support provided (e.g., crisis response, training, community outreach).

Responsibilities should be distinct from those of human resources, animal control, or veterinary roles, appropriate for social work scope of practice, and must avoid ethical conflicts such as dual agency or role confusion.

The job description should define reporting structures, supervision access (clinical and administrative), documentation expectations, and legal obligations, including mandated reporting. It should also note competencies required - such as trauma-informed care, grief/loss support, crisis intervention, and cultural responsiveness - and reflect commitment to ethical practice, the NASW Code of Ethics, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Finally, social workers should not be made solely responsible for organizational culture change, but rather, should be positioned as partners in broader leadership and team-building efforts.

- **The social worker should be included or advocate to be included in organizational decision-making processes to ensure social work perspectives inform policies and practices.** Including social workers in decision-making helps animal welfare organizations develop more responsive, compassionate, and sustainable practices. Social workers contribute unique insights into client needs, staff well-being, and community dynamics, strengthening policies related to crisis response, access to services, and human–animal relationships. Social work involvement in animal welfare organization decision-making and planning can help: promote stronger cross-department and community partnership collaboration; reduce preventable conflict; and support mission-aligned outcomes for both people and animals.

Team Dynamics

- **The social worker should foster interdisciplinary collaboration by supporting role clarity, shared learning, and mutual respect within and across departments.**

Successful collaboration in animal welfare settings depends on clear communication, consistent role expectations, and a psychologically safe workplace. Social workers can help facilitate interdisciplinary understanding by encouraging team shadowing, shared case consultations, and cross-training opportunities across departments.

Social workers should help establish structured, respectful communication pathways and advocate for inclusive systems that prevent siloing and build collective problem-solving capacity.

Support from animal welfare organization leadership is essential in modeling and fostering collaboration and effective communication within and across departments.

- **The social worker should help shape team dynamics by promoting shared goals, clear communication, and trauma-informed culture, while recognizing that organization leadership holds ultimate responsibility.**
Animal welfare organizations benefit from strong, collaborative teams. Social workers can support healthy team dynamics by encouraging role clarity, reflective communication, conflict management skill development/use, and psychologically safe spaces for dialogue.

  Social workers can help facilitate shared language, structured check-ins, and respectful recognition of each team member's unique contributions.

  However, responsibility for maintaining team function - including workload balance, conflict resolution, and workplace culture - must be held at the organizational leadership level.

  Social workers can contribute to a supportive environment, but they should not be expected to single-handedly manage team morale or repair systemic issues.

Programs and Services

Service Access, Expansion and Evaluation

- **The social worker should participate in the design and evaluation of programs to help ensure they are accessible and responsive to community-identified needs.**

  To be accessible and relevant to community needs, program design must be community-driven and grounded in both qualitative and quantitative data. The social worker needs to facilitate and/or advocate for asking communities what they need (congruent with the social work practice tenet of "starting where the client is at") regarding programming and pets, and aligning program development to meet stated community needs. Program evaluation should entail ongoing input/guidance from community stakeholders and encompass both formative and evaluative components when possible.

  To engage and build ongoing relationships with community client systems, social workers should advocate for and prioritize deep listening opportunities and active engagement with community members and leaders through methods such as focus groups, surveys, and partnerships with trusted local stakeholders.

  Programs should reflect the strengths, values, and lived experiences of the community, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches and top-down assumptions. True responsiveness includes co-designing services, honoring cultural norms, addressing real barriers such as transportation, stigma, and language, and ensuring services meet people where they are.

  Community stakeholder input should be compensated when possible, and planning should include both short-term needs and long-term sustainability.

  Access to programs should be maximized - based on community stakeholder input and other subject matter expertise as needed/available - across multiple dimensions of access. The social

worker should educate on and advocate for addressing these dimensions, which include but are not limited to:

- Physical Accessibility

    o   Whether people can physically enter, navigate, and use the service space.

    o   Includes ramps, elevators, seating, signage, restrooms, parking, and equipment.

    o   Applies to people with mobility, vision, hearing, and/or other disabilities.

- Geographic Accessibility

    o   Proximity of services to where people live.

    o   Transportation availability, travel time, and location in relation to communities served.

    o   Rural/urban disparities are common issues.

- Financial Accessibility (Affordability)

    o   Whether the cost of services is affordable to clients.

    o   Potential financial resources include but are not limited to: sliding scales, grant subsidies, pet insurance coverage, payment over time options inclusive of those without hard credit checks; and crowdfunding online platforms.

- Linguistic & Communication Accessibility

    o   Availability of services in multiple languages.

    o   Plain language communication, interpreters, assistive technologies (e.g., captioning, hearing loops).

    o   Use of culturally appropriate terms and formats.

- Cultural Accessibility

    o   Whether services respect and reflect the values, norms, and practices of diverse cultural groups.

o   Reducing bias, stigma, or discrimination in service delivery.

o   Building trust with historically marginalized groups.

- **The social worker should advocate for and help implement community-based shelter models that support keeping pets and people together.**
Pet-inclusive models must recognize supporting people's bonds with their non-human family members as integral to family and community health. Social workers should support One Health-aligned approaches and advocate for services that preserve human–animal relationships, especially during crises. This includes building partnerships across sectors such as domestic violence shelters, housing programs, and hospitals; offering or supporting temporary care options like emergency boarding or co-sheltering; and striving to ensure clients never have to choose between safety and their pets.

  Community-based shelter models must include staff and community education outreach to increase awareness about the importance of keeping people and pets together, challenge bias about who can have pets, and promote autonomy and harm reduction. Policies must promote safety, well-being, and dignity for all involved: pets, people, and communities.

- **The social worker should contribute to planning for sustainable program growth by identifying service gaps and promoting appropriate resource allocation.**
Whenever possible, program scaling must be intentional, ethical, and community driven/rooted in community readiness rather than organizational urgency or pressure to expand.

  Advocate for starting small, growing gradually, and only when there is demonstrated need (as per community input/feedback) and capacity. Program expansion should align with core mission and values while remaining adaptable to local contexts.

  Social workers should help ensure that infrastructure such as staffing, partnerships, and operations is in place before scaling, and that service growth is supported by diverse, stable funding sources rather than short-term grants.

Advocate for budget integration in strategic planning, with a focus on capacity building and long-term sustainability. Feedback mechanisms and clear evaluation loops are essential to guide adjustments and measure outcomes over time.

Education, Policy, and Training Initiatives (Organization Responsibility with Social Worker Input)

- **The social worker should help establish social work internships within animal welfare settings to build future capacity and field-specific experience.**
  Strong internship programs require intentional partnerships with academic institutions, clear expectations, and dedicated staff time for support and supervision. Interns should never be treated as free labor but rather as learners requiring consistent mentorship and a structured educational experience. Programs should clearly outline scope, learning objectives, and supervision schedules.

  Cross-walking internship learning activities in the animal welfare settings with the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) competencies (the social work practice skills and knowledge the intern needs to develop at the internship site) will greatly expedite development of internship learning plans required by the academic entity, as well as creation of internship job descriptions to recruit intern candidates.

  Internships should include hands-on learning, exposure to interdisciplinary collaboration, and space for ethical reflection and trauma-informed processing. Recognize that emotional intensity, vicarious trauma, and moral distress are part of the work, and provide robust supervision accordingly. Provide both administrative and clinical supervision from staff with expertise in social work and animal welfare operations.

  Avoid rigid assumptions based on academic level. BSWs can excel with the right temperament and curiosity. Intern cohorts can offer peer learning and support.

  Intern selection should prioritize openness, cognitive flexibility, dependability, and willingness to learn.

Strive to ensure interns feel respected, challenged, and supported.

- **The social worker should support the development and delivery of ongoing continuing education and specialized training opportunities for Animal Welfare Staff (AWS).**
As in all areas of social work practice, "starting where the client is at" via soliciting AWS input on training needs/desires is critical; this can be done at staff meetings, via email surveys, or informal surveying of key staff.

  Internally, animal welfare organizations should provide training on the history of the field, power and privilege, and bias in decision-making.

  Core recommended areas include trauma-informed care, grief and loss support, motivational interviewing, suicide prevention, crisis intervention, and culturally responsive practice. Training should address compassion fatigue, burnout, boundaries, self-care, and resilience building. Equity-focused topics should include racial justice, LGBTQIA+ inclusion, disability access, and anti-oppressive frameworks. AWS should also receive training on human–animal bond frameworks such as attachment theory and attunement/co-regulation models.

  Specialized training for neurodivergent populations and community-specific cultural norms should also be included.

  While not in the social worker's scope of practice, social workers should also advocate for AWS access to animal-specific training such as basic wellness, handling, enrichment, and euthanasia-related issues. Ultimately, the social worker should work for AWS access to training that equips them to navigate complex ethical situations and support both human and animal clients, while maintaining their own well-being.

  Continuing education should align with licensing or professional development needs and reflect the actual diversity of clients served.

- **The social worker should promote/advocate for an organizational culture that values mental health and trauma-informed practice, and is culturally affirming across human identities and lived experiences.**

  Social workers should support and/or advocate for organizations to create infrastructure that centers well-being and welcomes human difference in both policy and daily practice. Such infrastructure includes but is not limited to: maintaining an active committee focused on creating an affirming and welcoming environment for people from varying cultures and backgrounds; offering paid mental health days and flexible scheduling; and intentional integration of mental health topics into regular communications like staff meetings and newsletters.

  Normalize/encourage mental health conversations through social work and leadership modeling and organizational openness, and advocate for consistent follow-through on AWS input.

  Affinity or identity-based groups (e.g., BIPOC or LGBTQIA+ staff spaces) can support connection and resilience. Foster a culture of belonging where staff and clients from a wide range of backgrounds see themselves reflected in leadership and programming.

  All mental health and inclusion efforts should be authentic, action-based, and embedded across onboarding, evaluation, and team development.

- **The social worker should contribute to and/or advocate for the development of organizational policies that proactively address occupational health and mental health risks in animal welfare work.**
  The social worker should educate about the import of and advocate for policies and resources that proactively help mitigate the occupational risks inherent in animal welfare work as a high-stress-exposed occupation.

  Policies and infrastructure that support both physical and psychological safety in high-stress animal welfare environments include: affordable and adequate health insurance/behavioral

health coverage; clear crisis response and escalation protocols; paid leave for grief and recovery (including pet bereavement); paid mental health days; flexible scheduling; remote or hybrid work options when possible; and policies that reinforce healthy boundaries between work and personal life. AWS should *not* be expected to monitor or respond to work-related communication while on leave, including PTO.

To support resilience, the social worker can help create and/or advocate for structured "low-impact" voluntary debriefing processes (such as Tend Academy low-impact debriefs for first responder support) after difficult incidents. Mental health supports such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and therapy referrals should be readily available and encouraged.

The social worker should also advocate for policies that protect staff from retaliation when raising concerns, through transparent whistleblower protections, grievance processes, and leadership accountability.

Social workers should advocate for and help facilitate policies that are inclusive of people from a wide range of cultures, backgrounds, and life experiences.

Advocacy for paid bereavement leave should reflect the reality that grief is not limited to immediate family or universally defined relationships, and should include losses such as the death of a companion animal.

Policies should take into account and create mechanisms to mitigate the emotional toll on frontline staff who experience frequent exposure to euthanasia and/or distressing surrender cases. Rotation of exposure to such work and/or other mitigating strategies determined in collaboration with affected staff should be built into scheduling for surrender and euthanasia policies. Quality improvement practices, workload fairness, equitable pay, and inclusive decision-making structures are also critical.

In all of this, social workers should educate on the import of and advocate for AWS voices and lived experience to guide development, implementation, and revision of organization policies.

Macro Level (Community and Policy Focus)

Macro-level guidelines for social workers in animal welfare settings are designed to inform collaborative advocacy and systems-focused practice, while fully recognizing that social workers typically do not have direct authority over policy decisions or systemic change efforts.

Advocacy efforts in 501(c)(3) nonprofit shelters and government-operated animal shelters are often limited by legal restrictions on lobbying, public funding constraints, and organizational policies that restrict staff from engaging in political or legislative activities. It is critical that social workers familiarize themselves with their organization's parameters around such while operating in the role of an organization employee.

System and Policy Practice

Legislative and Policy Issues

- **The social worker should seek knowledge of and advocate for policies that positively impact the intersections of animal welfare, human well-being, and social work.**

Social workers should be familiar with local, state, and national legislation that impacts human–animal relationships, including laws related to pet-inclusive housing, public benefits, domestic violence protections, animal control, and the classification of service and emotional support animals.

Understanding how these policies shape access to care, housing stability, and family preservation allows social workers to advocate more effectively on behalf of clients and their pets.

- **Social workers should also stay informed about the policy-making process itself - how legislation moves forward, how to track upcoming bills, and how to engage in advocacy through channels such as public comment, petitions, or testimony.**
Resources such as email and call templates, flyers, and partnerships with local or national coalitions can make engagement more accessible.

- **The social worker should strive to address systemic barriers that emerge across practice contents, such as housing insecurity, historical oppression, and intersectionality.**
Policies and systems often reflect and reinforce historical injustices that disproportionately affect BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, disabled, and low-income individuals. The social worker should critically examine how laws and practices shape access to resources, safety, and the ability to keep families, including companion animals, together.

The social worker must also balance compassion with clarity around their scope. These are deeply interconnected issues without simple solutions. While no individual can address every systemic cause, social workers can deepen empathy by understanding how structures like segregation, mass incarceration, and housing policy impact daily life. Guidelines should also support ethical decision making when professional values, such as client dignity or self-determination, conflict with institutional mandates.

To navigate these complexities, social workers should ask context-driven questions rather than make assumptions about noncompliance or neglect, and promote/advocate for supportive responses over punitive measures whenever possible.

Advocacy at both micro and macro levels is essential to ensuring more just and humane systems for people and animals alike.

- **The social worker should promote/advocate for equity-focused practices in animal welfare, such as impact assessments, decriminalization strategies, and harm reduction frameworks.**

  To help the organization avoid/eliminate policies that inadvertently penalize human hardship, the social worker should educate on/advocate for policies explicitly designed to reduce harm, expand access, and affirm dignity.

  Additional examples of such policy goals include but are not limited to: flexible eligibility criteria, individualized decision-making, and prioritizing keeping people and their animals together, especially for families affected by poverty, discrimination, or systemic barriers.

- **The social worker should seek knowledge of and actively support pet-inclusive, community-specific policies (e.g., pet-inclusive housing, access to veterinary care).**
  Community-specific policy work must be grounded in trust, collaboration, and lived experience. Social workers should build relationships with and support the work of grassroots neighborhood groups and local leaders, facilitate listening sessions, and center community guidance in the design, evaluation and revision of policies. Consistent with other areas of social work practice, goals and policy strategies must be developed in partnership with a community, rather than imposed upon it.

  Examples of community-specific approaches include: incorporating culturally specific animal caregiving models into organizational policy; minimizing barriers to services; and tailoring advocacy strategies to reflect the tone, priorities, and realities of the people most impacted.

Recognize that community needs evolve, and that successful strategies in one setting may not succeed in another. Social workers should support policies that are adaptable, dignity-affirming, and rooted in local wisdom.

Organizational and Systemic Culture

- **The social worker should advocate for and help implement equitable hiring practices and pathways to leadership within animal welfare organizations.**
  Equity in leadership requires more than representation. Social workers should advocate for practices that value lived experience, reduce barriers to advancement, and foster workplace cultures where all voices are heard and respected. This includes but is not limited to:

  - o Intentional recruitment and promotion of individuals from underrepresented groups, especially BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, disabled individuals, and those with lived experience of poverty, housing instability, or incarceration

  - o Pay transparency and wage equity

  - o Removing unnecessary educational or credentialing barriers

  - o Creating mentorship and sponsorship opportunities for emerging leaders

  - o Proactively seeking input from, listening to and incorporating the perspectives of front-line and entry-level staff

  - o Valuing relational leadership qualities such as collaboration, insight, and emotional intelligence

  - **o** Using tools like equity audits, demographic tracking, and staff climate surveys to assess and improve practices

True equity-centered leadership development must be intentional, data-informed, and rooted in the belief that people closest to the issues are also closest to the solutions.

- **The social worker should support the development and delivery of culturally responsive interventions that reflect the diverse identities and needs of the communities served.**

  Culturally informed practice is not a one-time competency but an ongoing commitment to learning, reflection, and respectful curiosity. Social workers should:

  o   Practice cultural humility by continually engaging in self-reflection, examining bias, and seeking out lived experience perspectives

  o   Respect diverse cultural relationships with animals, including caregiving roles, beliefs around euthanasia or ownership, and definitions of family

  o   Use inclusive, dignity-affirming language that avoids judgmental or deficit-based assumptions

  o   Adapt services to meet local community norms, including providing materials in multiple languages, offering flexible communication methods, and recognizing different decision-making processes

  o   Ensure access to interpretation, communication supports, and trauma-informed care

  o   Encourage organizations to engage community voices in program design and revision

  By weaving cultural humility into all aspects of practice, social workers can help ensure services are responsive, respectful, and grounded in trust. Cultural humility includes supporting efforts to decolonize animal welfare by challenging the dominance of Western norms and embracing broader definitions of care that honor diverse cultural worldviews. Tailoring approaches to meet the needs of Indigenous and rural communities - grounded in their values, leadership, and lived experience - is essential.

- **The social worker should work to identify and address systemic barriers that limit access to human–animal supports, particularly for marginalized and historically underserved populations.**

  To reduce systemic (economic, geographic, cultural, linguistic, etc.) barriers and advance equitable access to animal welfare, veterinary, and human–animal support services, social workers must be proactive in addressing structural, cultural, linguistic, and logistical barriers that prevent individuals and families from receiving care. Strategies include:

  o   Meeting people where they are by offering mobile services, pop-up clinics, home visits, and outreach at trusted community spaces such as food banks or encampments

  o   Designing programs in collaboration with communities by using advisory boards, lived-experience input, and shared planning

  o   Building trust through consistency, respect, and listening before acting. Hiring community-based staff can deepen relationships

  o   Simplifying access by reducing documentation requirements, relaxing eligibility criteria, and avoiding punitive approaches

  o   Partnering with organizations that are already embedded in the community and following their guidance in outreach and service design

  o   Ensuring language accessibility by providing interpretation services, translated materials, and support in preferred communication formats

  o   Recognizing cultural and linguistic diversity as essential to access. This includes adapting schedules, communication methods, and decision-making approaches to reflect community preferences

  o   Coordinating or combining services, such as pairing pet care with housing assistance or food access, to meet needs holistically

  These efforts should be ongoing and rooted in mutual respect rather than a one-time outreach or charity. Supporting access requires structural change and long-term commitment.

Networking and Partnerships

- **The social worker should proactively build partnerships and foster ongoing collaborative inter-agency relationships with social services, veterinary organizations, advocacy groups, and other community-specific resources.**

  Effective inter-agency collaboration is built on relationships, trust and transparency. Social workers should take time to understand the goals, scope, and values of potential partners and approach relationships as opportunities for shared learning and *mutual benefit*, not just requests for support.

  Key strategies for successful inter-agency collaboration include but are not limited to:

  o Clarifying shared mission and goals at the outset, with a focus on improving outcomes for both people and animals

  o Clearly defining roles, responsibilities, and expectations, and revisiting them regularly

  o Practicing power-sharing, especially when partnering across differences in size, funding, or institutional prestige

  o Approaching all partnerships with cultural humility, openness, and a willingness to listen and adapt

  o Establishing transparent communication channels and protocols for conflict resolution

  o Planning for sustainability, including how to navigate leadership changes, funding shifts, and long-term continuity

  o Centering equity throughout the partnership, ensuring all voices, including those from marginalized communities, are heard and valued

  Social workers should also be mindful of reciprocity, asking how their work can advance the goals of others and showing genuine care for the missions of their partners.

- **The social worker should engage in cross-sector advocacy that reflects the interconnectedness of human and animal well-being and centers the voices of those most impacted.**

  Cross-sector advocacy is most effective when it is grounded in shared values, mutual respect, and unified messaging. The social worker should approach advocacy as a collaborative effort that brings together housing, public health, social services, and animal welfare to address structural issues, not just symptoms.

  Key elements of effective cross-sector advocacy include:

  - Framing people and pets as interconnected, with policies that reflect and support the human–animal bond

  - Centering equity by including individuals with lived experience in shaping policies and messaging

  - Ensuring advocacy is co-created and community-driven

  - Using data and stories together to build support for systemic change

  - Advocating for decriminalization and barrier reduction, especially around poverty, trauma, or access to care

  - Building coalitions that align on shared goals and speak with a collective voice across sectors

  - Adopting clear, inclusive language that resonates across systems while respecting the unique values and missions of each partner

  Advocacy should prioritize long-term, structural change, such as funding for pet-inclusive shelters, renter protections, or co-located services, over temporary or charity-based fixes.

Ethical and Legal Considerations

- **The social worker should ensure adherence to all licensing laws and clearly defined professional boundaries, including practicing only within their scope, using their title**

appropriately, and collaborating ethically with other disciplines in shelter settings.

The social worker in an animal welfare setting must operate within the boundaries of their professional licensure and jurisdiction. This includes understanding the difference between generalist and clinical licensure, and ensuring that licensed social work professionals only provide services they are qualified and authorized to deliver.

The social worker should not provide veterinary advice, conduct cruelty investigations unless specifically trained and authorized, or otherwise assume roles outside their scope. Clear role definitions help prevent liability issues and uphold ethical standards.

The social worker should complement, not replace, other professionals in the shelter. Title protection is also critical, only those appropriately degreed and/or licensed should use the title "social worker." Non-social work staff should be educated on what social workers can do and when referral or consultation is appropriate.

- **The social worker should uphold social work professional ethics.**
  Ethical practice in animal welfare requires navigating complex dynamics related to confidentiality, dual roles, cultural humility, and reporting obligations.

  The social worker must establish clear boundaries to avoid dual relationships, especially when asked to support both AWS and clients in emotionally charged environments.

  Confidentiality protocols for social work practice should be explicit and proactively explained to AWS and AWS leadership, particularly when working across disciplines and with shared data systems. Social workers must clarify their role to clients, obtain informed consent, and uphold client autonomy without judgment or coercion.

  Informed consent is required before providing services, collecting or sharing personal information, or conducting evaluations. Social workers must clearly explain the nature and purpose of services, risks, confidentiality limits, and clients' rights to decline or withdraw. Consent must be voluntary, informed, and in language the client understands.

In an animal welfare setting, informed consent might involve the social worker clearly explaining their role to a client who is seeking help, such as support around pet surrender, housing challenges, or grief. The social worker should outline what services are being offered (e.g., resource navigation, emotional support), how personal information may be used or shared (e.g., with shelter staff or partner agencies), and the client's right to decline or stop services at any time. This explanation should be given in plain, accessible language, with interpreter support if needed, and documented before services begin.

The social worker needs to honor cultural differences in animal care and grief, and practice trauma stewardship to reduce harm.

The social worker should also proactively strive to become knowledgeable of and uphold/advocate for community-specific ethics, including culturally safe approaches with immigrant, marginalized, or trauma-exposed populations.

The social worker should maintain client confidentiality while clearly explaining mandated reporting obligations. This includes ensuring clients understand when information may be shared and why, in accordance with legal and ethical standards.

- **The social worker should strengthen cross-reporting protocols by applying "The Link" framework, which recognizes the connection between human and animal abuse, and facilitates coordinated responses between animal welfare, child protection (CPS), and adult protective services (APS).**
  The social worker must be familiar with their state's specific cross-reporting requirements, which can vary widely and may involve different reporting pathways depending on the county or agency involved.

  Guidance should include how to identify and respond to suspected abuse or neglect, whether of animals or humans, and how to determine what, when, and to whom to report.

Effective protocols should address documentation standards and confidentiality, including how to share information ethically across systems such as CPS, APS, or animal control while honoring privacy and minimizing harm.

The social worker must pay explicit attention to ensuring that abuse and neglect reporting protocols, as guided by relevant legal statutes, do not replicate or reinforce disparities in responses based on race or socioeconomic status.

The social worker should engage in relationship-centered reporting when safe, involving clients in the process to promote transparency and reduce the risk of re-traumatization or distrust. They should also be mindful of well-documented disparities in child protection systems and seek to offer support and resources, particularly when concerns stem from poverty or unmet basic needs, while continuing to uphold legal and ethical mandates.

Cross-training is essential to help inter-disciplinary teams understand one another's mandates, roles, and documentation styles in an animal welfare organization. For example, a veterinarian's notes may differ significantly from those of a social worker.

Coordinated partnerships and escalation protocols should be in place, supported by trauma-informed training and collaboration with local law enforcement, public health agencies, and advocacy organizations. Resources like the National Link Coalition can support ongoing education and practice development.

Conclusion

Social work in animal welfare represents a transformative practice that centers human–animal families, advances equitable access to care, and strengthens the capacity of organizations to meet the complex needs of both people and pets within community-specific contexts. Through culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and community-rooted practice, social workers bring essential tools to reduce barriers to accessing care, navigate ethical challenges, and foster healing-centered care for clients and staff alike. At every level - micro, mezzo, and macro - social workers can help shift the field toward more inclusive, accessible, relational, and sustainable models of care.

These guidelines aim to support and equip social workers, animal welfare organizations, and interdisciplinary teams in building a future where no one has to choose between their well-being and their bond with a beloved animal family member. When we support the whole family - human and non-human - we build healthier communities for all.

Acknowledgment

Disclaimer

The results of this participatory action research project do not necessarily reflect the views or the opinions of the ASPCA.

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