



Toward a Humane Society for Us All

The Social Impacts of Animal Welfare Nonprofits

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Toward a Humane Society for Us All

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London, Ontario, 2024, the traditional territories of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, and Chonnonton nations, on lands connected with the London Township and Sombra Treaties of 1796 and the Dish with One Spoon Covenant Wampum.

Further details are available at humanejobs.org

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Executive Summary

Animal welfare nonprofits provide temporary shelter and care for companion animals like dogs and cats with the goal of adopting the animals into loving homes. Across Canada, many are also responsible for enforcement of animal welfare law. Simultaneously, these organizations provide other programs and services, and the purpose of this study is to provide a fuller picture of the current and developing work of humane societies and SPCAs in Canada.

To do so, leaders of 52 animal welfare nonprofits across Canada were invited to complete a survey focused on their organization's work. The survey results were supplemented by analysis of the organizations' web sites.

Four key findings emerged:

- 1 Most animal welfare nonprofits provide tangible assistance to low-income animal caregivers.
- 2 Many animal welfare nonprofits deliver lifesaving support for families experiencing violence.
- 3 Many animal welfare nonprofits are actively promoting diversity and inclusion in their organizations and communities.
- 4 Animal welfare nonprofits offer an increasingly broad range of programs and services that reflect leadership priorities and community needs.

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Focusing not only on responsive approaches that support animals in need of help but also working to prevent potential problems, harm, or other challenges illustrates what Coulter calls both “downstream and upstream strategies,” and reflects of a broader trend in animal welfare work across North America in particular.¹ The combination of responsive and proactive strategies for companion animal welfare is more likely to ensure positive outcomes for animals – and for people.

The data also reveal that leaders would further expand and strengthen the social impacts of their organizations if additional funding were available. These are nonprofits reliant almost entirely on donations, a limited and unreliable source of revenue.



Animal Welfare Nonprofits in Canada

For more than a century, nonprofit animal welfare organizations, commonly known as humane societies or SPCAs (short for Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals), have provided life-saving services for animals of various kinds ranging from water troughs for horses pulling carts to animal ambulances. As our relationships with animals and social values have evolved, so, too, has the work of animal protection.

The temporary sheltering and adoptions of companion animals (pets) has become a central focus and helped change popular misconceptions about animals who are in need of adoption by matching them with suitable and loving individuals and families. This work remains at the heart of many animal welfare nonprofits' priorities. In 2021, nonprofit shelters in Canada welcomed 60,000 cats and 21,000 dogs.ⁱⁱ Helping animals find loving homes saves and improves their lives and they bring immeasurable joy to people in return.



In countries of the Commonwealth such as England, Scotland, Wales, Australia, and New Zealand, responsibility for frontline enforcement of animal protection laws has long been offloaded to nonprofits, rather than being seen as a core governmental responsibility and both funded and delivered by the public sector.

The Criminal Code includes provisions prohibiting animal cruelty, but Canada currently has no dedicated national animal protection legislation or agency. Instead, provinces and territories have distinct laws and different approaches to investigations. The agencies responsible may be animal welfare nonprofits, policing services (including one specialized animal cruelty investigation unit in the Edmonton Police Service, the first of its kind in Canada), dedicated public animal protection teams, and, occasionally, municipal animal care and control agents who are appointed as peace officers.

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At this time, in the following areas, nonprofit organizations have been assigned primary or some responsibility as first responders for suspected animal abuse or neglect:

- British Columbia
- Calgary
- rural Alberta
- Saskatchewan
- Winnipeg
- Montreal
- Nova Scotia
- Prince Edward Island
- New Brunswick

Further details are available at animalprotection.ca

Animal welfare laws normally both prohibit harmful acts and establish the minimum standards which must be met when caring for animals. Potential violations need to be investigated and remedies, corrections, or punishments correctly and effectively applied. Because animal cruelty can be linked to the abuse of people and other crimes, what is known as the human-animal violence link, this further augments the importance of properly investigating suspected offences. In most areas of Canada, animal welfare nonprofits, despite being reliant on charitable donations, are providing a core public service that helps protect animals and people, and improve community safety.



The work of animal welfare nonprofits has also expanded and diversified. Today, many of these organizations do far more than sheltering unhoused animals and frontline cruelty investigations. This report reveals a fuller picture of the programs and services animal welfare nonprofits provide today across Canada.

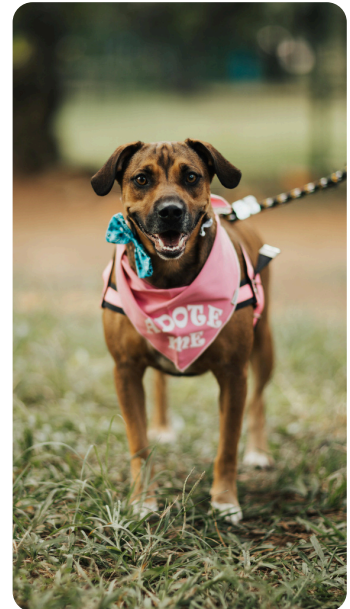
This Study

This project extends from nearly a decade of Coulter’s research on animal protection. To generate the specific findings that inform this report, Coulter and Jones designed and undertook a focused study concentrating on the organizational members of Humane Canada.

Humane Canada is the country’s national federation of humane societies and SPCAs. Through research, analysis, advocacy, education, and coordinating strategies, its mission is to “drive positive progressive change to end animal cruelty, improve animal protection and promote the humane treatment of all animals.”

Most local and provincial animal welfare nonprofits are members of Humane Canada, and these represent a majority of the organizations working on companion animal welfare around the country. The large majority of the members have sheltering and adoption services, but some are foster based or pursue other kinds of animal protection work.

Animal welfare nonprofits are independent organizations that normally employ a small number of full- and part-time staff and are governed by hired leaders and a board of directors. The organizations rely on fundraising and donations from individual community members and organizations, not governmental funding. Volunteers are often involved in at least some of the organizations’ operations.



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A survey was sent to the executive directors of the 52 member organizations of Humane Canada and completed by 36 of them, a strong participation rate of 70%.

The members of Humane Canada are:

Alberta Animal Rescue Crew Society, Calgary
Alberta SPCA, Edmonton
Alliston & District Humane Society, Everett
Animatch, Ile Perrot
British Columbia SPCA
Burin Peninsula SPCA, Burin Bay Arm
Burlington Humane Society, Burlington
Calgary Humane Society, Calgary
Canadian Association for Humane Trapping, Hamilton
Central Alberta Humane Society, Red Deer Cochrane and Area
Edmonton Humane Society, Edmonton
Exploits Valley SPCA, Grand Falls-Windsor
Fort McMurray SPCA, Fort McMurray
Gander and Area SPCA, Gander
Greater Moncton SPCA, Moncton
Guelph Humane Society, Guelph
Hamilton/Burlington SPCA, Hamilton
Happy Valley-Goose Bay SPCA, Happy Valley-Goose Bay
Humane Society, Cochrane
Humane Society Dawson, Dawson City
Humane Society London & Middlesex, London
Humane Society of Kawartha Lakes, Lindsay
Kitchener-Waterloo Humane Society, Kitchener
Lincoln County Humane Society, St. Catharines
Medicine Hat SPCA, Medicine Hat
Miramichi SPCA, Miramichi East
New Brunswick SPCA, Fredericton
Northwest Territories SPCA, Yellowknife

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Nova Scotia SPCA
Oakville & Milton Humane Society, Oakville
Oromocto and Area SPCA, Oromocto
Ontario SPCA
Ottawa Humane Society, Ottawa
Prince Edward Island Humane Society, Charlottetown
Regina Cat Rescue, Regina
Regina Humane Society, Regina
Saskatchewan SPCA, Saskatoon
Saskatoon SPCA, Grasswood
Sault Ste. Marie & District SPCA, Sault Ste. Marie
SPA de l'Estrie, Sherbrooke
SPA de Québec, Québec City
SPCA de l'Outaouais, Gatineau
SPCA Montreal, Montreal
SPCA St. John's, St. John's
Thunder Bay & District Humane Society, Thunder Bay
Toronto Humane Society, Toronto
Victoria Humane Society, Victoria
Windsor Essex County Humane Society, Windsor
Winnipeg Humane Society

70% of the respondents identified as women.

To supplement the survey data, the web sites of the organizations were also assessed. These two data collection methods form the basis for this report.



Key Findings

1. Support for low-income animal caregivers

Lower and modest income people can provide immense love to their animals but may struggle with some of the costs of providing care. Animal welfare nonprofits have recognized both of these facts and responded in a range of ways.

2/3 offer pet food/supplies banks to support animal caregivers by providing complimentary food, litter, leashes, and enrichment items like toys. This service may be provided in the shelter or through mobile units that reach out into communities. Notably, the other 1/3 of the leaders said their organizations would support animal caregivers in this way if additional funds were available.

44% provide some low- or no-cost veterinary care in their facilities, and another 15% are planning this service.

1/3 have or are planning low- or no-cost mobile veterinary care that can serve animals and their people where they live.

Of these programs, up to 28% focus on spay/neuter and preventative care, including 15% who offer a “Spay Your Mamma” program that intakes unplanned cat litters to facilitate adoption of the kittens as well as offers free sterilization for the moms. Additionally, 19% offer a trap-neuter-release program for feral and colony cats.



Social Impact:

People with lower and modest incomes should not be prevented from sharing their love with animals because of financial barriers.ⁱⁱⁱ People benefit from having animal family members – and vice versa. Dog caregivers get more exercise, and companion animals bring people joy, unconditional love, ongoing motivation, and life-sustaining support which can be especially significant in times of crisis, struggle, and economic insecurity.^{iv}

Likewise, animals like dogs and cats experience less stress and anxiety remaining in stable and caring homes rather being relocated to busy shelter environments when the only barrier is financial.

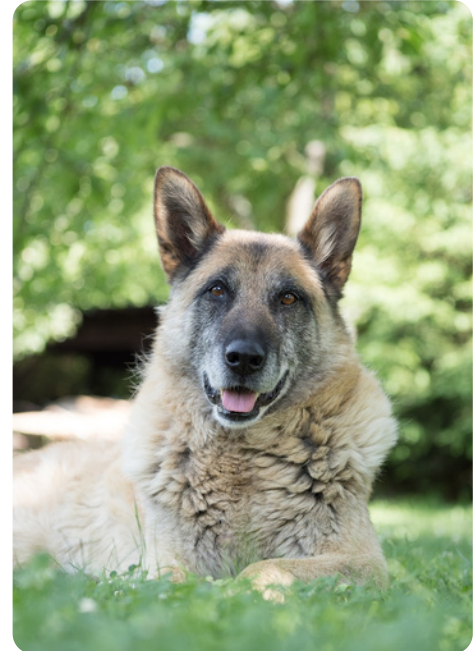
Keeping loving human-animal families together, rather than adding to already overcrowded shelters, benefits everyone. Services of this kind reflect a growing commitment to thoughtful empathy and proactive support which helps animals and our communities as a whole.



2. Lifesaving help for families facing violence

Many people now know that animal cruelty can be a red flag, a warning sign of potential subsequent abuse of people and/or other criminal behaviour. This is one facet of the **human-animal violence link**, but the link is even broader.^v People and animals can both be in danger at the same time, in the same home.

A significant body of research has found that animals are used by abusers as pawns to control and terrorize people. 89% of a sample of women in Canadian domestic violence shelters reported that the abuser threatened to harm or actually harmed their animals.^{vi} Multiple studies have found that at least half of victims delay leaving out of fear for the safety of their animals.



Many organizations across sectors, including animal welfare nonprofits, have recognized this troubling pattern and the lifesaving benefits of safe housing options for both people and animals.

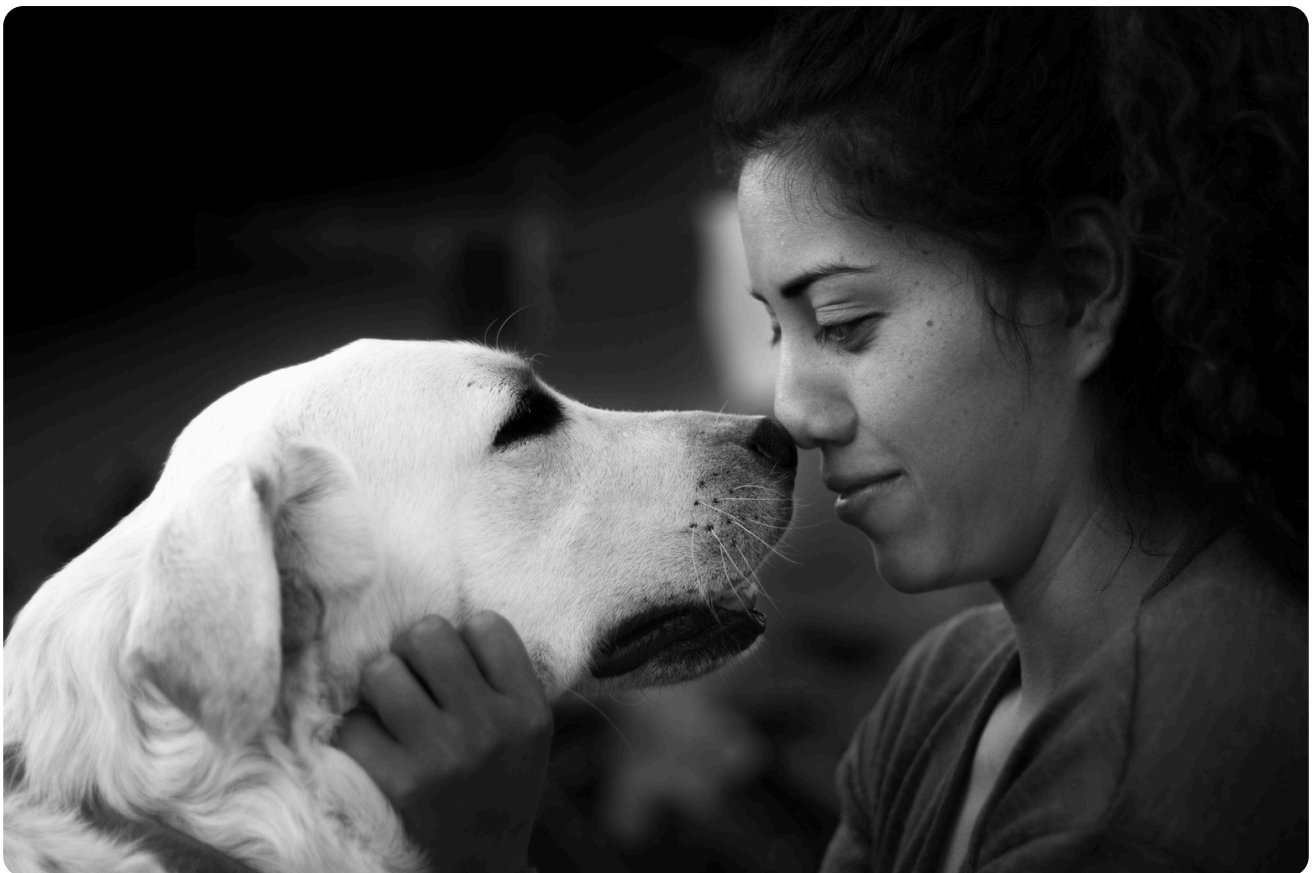
- 58% of animal welfare nonprofits can provide some temporary housing in their facilities for the animals of people fleeing abuse
- 38% have partnerships to increase the options (such as approved local foster families)¹
- 20% of animal welfare nonprofits would provide emergency sheltering options if they had more funds

¹ Some organizations that provide direct sheltering for animals also have partnerships for particular cases or if there is additional need.

Social Impact:

It is difficult to overstate the importance of understanding the violence link, and then acting to protect people and animals responsively, and, whenever possible, proactively to prevent abuse. Animal welfare nonprofits are demonstrating a vital commitment to human and animal wellbeing given the troubling realities of abuse, and helping to save not only animals, but also people's lives.

Fully confronting the violence link is social and legal challenge that requires both upstream (preventative) and downstream (responsive) strategies. Animal welfare nonprofits are playing an important responsive role in particular and working to treat all victims and survivors with care and respect.



3. Cultivating inclusive organizations and communities

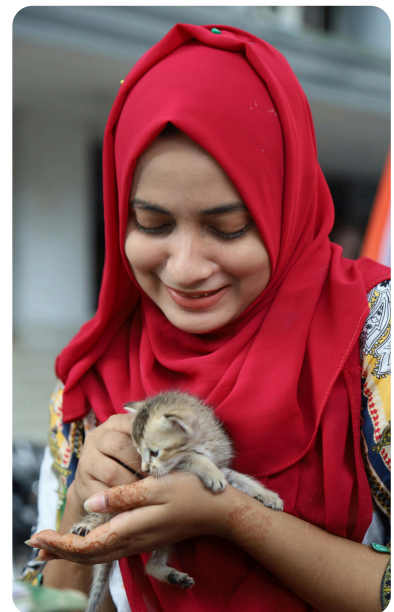
Countries like Canada are thoroughly multicultural and organizations of all kinds have a responsibility to be inclusive, diverse, and welcoming places. This includes animal welfare nonprofits.

- 78% of the organizations have or are in the process of developing an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policy
- 62% have or are in the process of developing a Truth and Reconciliation plan to recognize the particular need for fairness for Indigenous people

Social Impact:

Animal welfare nonprofits should reflect the full diversity of society and be committed to cultivating equity and belonging, within their organizations and in all engagements with members of the public. Undoubtedly, building true respect for diverse people is an ongoing and multi-faceted process, and essential to that are organizations with clear commitments and plans.

The high proportion of animal welfare nonprofits that have already taken action to establish their commitment is laudable, but more work is needed. We encourage those that are not currently planning to establish EDI and Truth and Reconciliation plans to do so, and the ongoing monitoring, evaluating, and updating of existing policies.



4. Animal welfare nonprofits provide an increasingly broad range of programs and services

These nonprofits demonstrate clear patterns of commonality, as well as distinct programming that reflects the organizational leaders' priorities and the needs of their communities. The data also suggest potential emerging areas of development.

- 40% offer a pet lost and found service
- 40% provide some education for new or current animal caregivers to strengthen the human-animal bond, encourage resilient relationships, help solve or prevent problems, including behavioural challenges, and encourage respectful guardianship rooted in facts and understanding
- 1/3 are contracted to provide services for a municipality, such as enforcement of animal care and control bylaws^{vii}
- One quarter offer humane education sessions or workshops, including for schools, and a growing number provide youth camps, clubs, or other programs for children such as birthday parties



Social Impact:

Both responsive strategies and programs that encourage understanding and respect for animals cannot easily be quantified, but undoubtedly help cultivate cultures rooted in care and compassion that benefit us all. Humane education nurtures empathy and prosocial behaviour among children, youth, and adults. It is a way to empower future generations, in particular, to become more informed and responsible animal caregivers and advocates.

Other services, like behavioural support, can also reduce the number of dogs and cats who are relinquished or rehomed and support better integration for new adoptees and their families. This is mutually beneficial and can foster healthier relationships.



Conclusions and Next Steps

The diversification of the work of animal welfare nonprofits is clear. These efforts reflect an important commitment by animal protection leaders and staff members to serve community members and communities in a full sense, humans and animals alike. Having a range of tools, services, and cross-section of different programs available allows organizations and frontline workers to respond to the range of needs and situations facing animals and their people every day.

The human-animal violence link is an alarming reality that powerfully demonstrates how our lives are interconnected, within and across species. Barbara Cartwright, CEO of Humane Canada, also identifies a broader “vulnerability link... [and that] people are made more vulnerable by a society that does not support their love and concern for their animals. This shows up in a myriad of ways [including] in services for those vulnerable people with pets who can’t access pet food or veterinary care for their animals due to cost or transportation.” Properly recognizing and addressing the connections between human and animal harm and wellbeing requires humane leadership and collaboration within and beyond the animal welfare sector.

Also noteworthy is that nonprofit leaders would like to be providing more and/or strengthened programs and services but are constrained by a range of barriers.

High demand was identified as the most significant barrier. Put simply, there are many animals and people in need of support or assistance.

Similarly, the challenges of having limited or inadequate space and insufficient funding were highlighted, and these create material limits on what animal welfare nonprofits can provide. Very few receive any governmental funding or grants, and these organizations are heavily if not entirely reliant on donations. Increased revenue would lead to improved and expanded services.

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Notably, the difficulty of recruiting reliable staff was recognized, though retention rates for these organizations were not identified as a significant barrier. This suggests that many motivated and skilled job seekers may not immediately see animal welfare as a rewarding sector within which to work, but once employed, they are remaining in the field, and likely feel proud of their labour.

Despite the challenges, animal welfare organizations' multi-dimensional work benefits vulnerable animals, people, and whole communities, and is helping to make Canada more caring, fair, and humane.



Acknowledgements

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ⁱ Coulter, Kendra. 2023. *Defending Animals: Finding Hope on the Front Lines of Animal Protection*. The MIT Press. and 2022. “The Organization of Animal Protection Investigations and the Animal Harm Spectrum: Canadian Data, International Lessons.” *Social Sciences* 11 (1).

ⁱⁱ See the most recent data from Humane Canada in the “2021 Animal Shelter Statistics” report.

ⁱⁱⁱ Arrington, Amanda, and Michael Markarian. 2017. “Serving Pets in Poverty: A New Frontier for the Animal Welfare Movement.” *Sustainable Development Law & Policy* 18.

^{iv} See, for example, the study by Westgarth, Carri, Robert M. Christley, Christopher Jewell, Alexander J. German, Lynne M. Boddy, and Hayley E. Christian. 2019. “Dog Owners Are More Likely to Meet Physical Activity Guidelines Than People Without a Dog: An Investigation of the Association Between Dog Ownership and Physical Activity Levels in a UK Community.” *Scientific Reports* 9 (5704).

^v See, for example, the Canadian Violence Link Coalition’s “What is the Violence Link?”; the Saskatchewan SPCA’s “What is the Violence Link?”; the National Link Coalition’s “What is the Link?”

^{vi} Fitzgerald, Amy J., Betty Jo Barrett, Allison Gray, and Chi Ho Cheung. 2020. “The Connection Between Animal Abuse, Emotional Abuse, and Financial Abuse in Intimate Relationships: Evidence From a Nationally Representative Sample of the General Public.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37 (5–6): 2331–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520939197>.

^{vii} Municipalities (such as cities, towns, or regions) may have publicly funded animal care and control services that can include animal rescue and adoptions, or may contract animal ‘control’ work (such as collecting strays and free roaming animals) to either a nonprofit like a humane society, a business such as a kennel, or an individual person.