MORE THAN A BEST FRIEND

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF THREE OTTAWA-BASED HUMAN-ANIMAL CONNECTION PROGRAMS
INTRODUCTION

What value is there to a dog or cat visiting a senior’s residence, sitting with a child as she learns to read, or participating in programs at a facility for teens with mental health issues? How can you help people who are living in poverty by caring for their dogs or cats? What can an animal companion achieve that a human professional cannot?

For animal lovers, the innate value of these activities is assumed. As human-animal connection programs increase in number, however, the need for them to demonstrate value in the broader community increases. There are now over twelve major research facilities around the world\textsuperscript{2} that study our complex relationships with animals, and numerous animal therapy programs in Canada, alone. This is clearly a growing field worthy of focused exploration.

This report centers on three programs being delivered in the Ottawa Region — Community Veterinary Outreach, the Ottawa Humane Society LEAD Program, and Ottawa Therapy Dogs. Like many initiatives around the world, these organizations work to improve the lives of vulnerable populations by supporting and encouraging interaction and bonding with companion animals. But do these programs actually benefit communities, and if they do, how are they improving lives?

In this report, Measuredoutcome has gathered data and anecdotal information while providing context through historical and selected research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

Measuredoutcome.org was commissioned by a private donor to examine these three programs with a particular focus on the following questions:

- What benefits do these programs have to the communities they serve?
- How can they be improved to create greater value for participants?
- What enhancements can be made in measuring the impact of these programs?

This report focuses on these three programs while drawing on best practices from similar efforts elsewhere and on supporting research.


\textsuperscript{2} See Appendix for a more complete list.

Front cover photo credits: Top left and top right photos by Rebecca Thomas, Boy and dog by Brittany Veinot of PhoDOGrapher.
Impact measurement of animal-human connection programs has long been a challenge to program managers, scientists, and researchers. Most of the data that has been collected historically on a general scale has focused on anecdotal information and outputs such as number of visits and procedures undertaken. The three agencies in this report are no exception.

New research is beginning to yield more quantitative data by tracking biological and physiological changes to program participants. However, many of the studies that have been published in recent years have come under criticism for poor design and small sample size.

Access to large sample groups and thorough evaluation design, along with the medical expertise and access to equipment needed to carry out this highly specialized research, is well beyond the scope of all but the largest of research agencies.

Each of the programs in this report is unique in its intention and delivery method. The programs are also at different stages of development in their measurement and evaluation systems. Although agencies are eager to provide anecdotal feedback and have these programs available to their communities, staff members are often more focused on program delivery than on providing crucial, formal feedback data. The group also lacks a collaborative culture which would facilitate sharing of information. As such, we are not able to undertake a comparative study for the programs, and we rely on sometimes sparse data that has been collected by each agency.
Humans have been working with animals since our ancestors began domesticating and hunting with dogs over 30,000 years ago.\(^3\) Animals, in addition to providing a strategic hunting benefit and acting as a food supply, have also been a source of companionship to humans over the course of our evolution. Although we are no longer dependent on them for hunting needs, they continue to provide social and emotional support in modern times.

Over the past century, there has been an increase in the number of people who keep animals solely for companionship in the home.\(^4\) Recent numbers indicate that 56% of Canadian households have at least one dog or cat in the home.\(^5\) Not only are animals welcomed into our homes, but for the past 80 years, we have been partnering with them in formal mental and physical therapy and wellness programs as well.

The medical community has been aware of the benefits of companion animals to human health since the 19th century,\(^6\) but it is only recently that health scientists have started to examine this connection. Companion animals ease loneliness and isolation, as well as encourage physical activity and community social interaction. More recent studies have shown direct medical benefits for people who have pets. Cardiac patients who have pets experience a significantly higher one-year incident survival rate than those without pets.\(^7,8\) Hypertension, diabetes, dementia, and depression, as well as physically limiting conditions, have also shown improvement with the introduction of animal therapy.

Researchers are beginning to look into exactly how and why people derive benefit from close connections with companion animals. Measuring the impact of these programs is a challenge that scientists have been faced with since their inception. Advances in medical equipment and techniques are helping researchers define not only what it is that bonds animals and humans, but also explain what is happening on a physiological and psychosocial level when such interactions occur.

For a more in-depth look at the history of human-animal connection programs, and recent research into the effects of these programs on human health and well-being, please refer to the Appendix: Selected Research into Human-Animal Connection History and Research.
TYPES OF PROGRAMS

PROGRAMS ARE DIVIDED BETWEEN FOUR MAIN AREAS OF THERAPEUTIC FOCUS. THE PRIMARY DIVISION EXAMINED IN THIS REPORT IS BETWEEN ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY (AAT) AND ANIMAL ASSISTED ACTIVITY (AAA) PROGRAMS. ANIMALS IN AAT AND AAA PROGRAMS ARE SELECTED FOR THEIR OVERALL HEALTH, THEIR CALM TEMPERAMENT, AND THEIR LEVEL OF TRAINING.

ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY (AAT)

AAT programs have specific therapeutic goals, and typically have a trained teacher or mental or physical health worker present during the interactions with participants. This includes programs serving people who are in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and those with PTSD or autism. Practitioners working with AAT dogs include physicians, physical therapists, nurses, social workers, speech therapists and mental health professionals.

ANIMAL-ASSISTED ACTIVITIES (AAA)

AAA programs tend to be more informal, often involving program volunteers visiting sites with their own trained and vetted companion animals. Hospice or hospital visits, seniors’ home visits, and children’s reading programs are some examples of these types of activities. Formal practitioner supervision is not a necessary part of these programs.

The variety of human-animal connection programs is expanding as their benefits become better understood. The first AAA programs helped calm children who were in formal mental or emotional therapy settings. There are also instances of Corrections Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces using animal therapy programs to help their at-risk populations.

SERVICE ANIMALS

Not to be confused with AAT or AAA programs, service animals are generally dogs specifically trained to live with their human counterparts in a working capacity. Service animals help people with disabilities such as PTSD, mental illness, diabetes, epilepsy, autism, or visual or hearing impairments, among other issues.

HUMAN-ANIMAL EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Working with animals can provide a platform for professionals to guide individuals through experiential learning programs that are designed to achieve specific goals in the presence of a nonjudgmental animal.

9 Dogs and horses are most widely used in animal-assisted programs, but cats, birds, rodents, and even dolphins, among other animals, have also been shown to have a positive impact on the mental and physical well-being of humans.


Community Veterinary Outreach

Over the past 12 years, the clinic has examined, treated and vaccinated over 2,200 animals and provided connections to human health programs for over 1,400 people. Most of the program participants return to the clinics on a regular basis, enabling longer-term trust relationships to be formed with clients who may not access other services.

One Health

Clients who bring their pets in for Outreach veterinary care are encouraged to access special on-site human health programs through the One Health initiative. Public health nurses are present at each clinic and provide basic healthcare services, such as flu vaccinations and dental care, as well as education on such topics as smoking harm reduction and nutrition. Outreach clients are also connected to other support programs, such as food banks and housing services, as well as to local mental and physical health support programs.

“Having this clinic in the building brought the community together in a very positive way. Through the veterinary care, we were able to engage tenants in conversations about their smoking practices, addictions, housing and mental health issues.”

CVO Vet Clinic
Ottawa Community Housing

PARTNER PROFILES

THE THREE OTTAWA-BASED ORGANIZATIONS FEATURED IN THIS REPORT WORK IN UNIQUE WAYS TO ENHANCE HUMAN WELLNESS THROUGH THE HUMAN-ANIMAL CONNECTION.

Founded in 2003, Community Veterinary Outreach provides basic preventative healthcare to the companion animals of marginally housed people. Originally serving the Ottawa area, the outreach has expanded to serve four additional cities in southern Ontario. Its influence spreads through the broader veterinary community by way of articles and speaking engagements.

The Outreach partners with community agencies to identify clients in need of veterinary services and hosts clinics in its local facilities. The program is volunteer driven, and each clinic is made up of a team of veterinarians, vet students, public health nurses and community workers. Access to the Outreach program is available only to individuals who meet specific financial and housing criteria.
EVALUATION SYSTEM

The founder of the Outreach, Michelle Lem, DVM, as well as many of the primary veterinarians involved in the program, are closely linked to veterinary colleges and research institutions. Lem’s own research fellowship at the Ontario Veterinary College was a major factor in the development of the organization.

Existing data on program participants has been output driven, focusing primarily on volunteer hours and number of clients served, procedures undertaken, and referrals made. This data has been reasonably well maintained over the years. Detailed information on the users of the Outreach is collected in confidence by the partner agencies who host the clinics. The host agencies ensure that participants are eligible for Outreach services, as well as gather the basic history and health of the pet and the people accessing the services.

CASE STUDIES

Community Veterinary Outreach and Family Crisis

A little girl came with her mother and their two dogs to one of the Toronto outreach clinics at the Yonge Street Mission (YSM). The mother and daughter were not previously engaged with the YSM, but came in to the vet outreach clinic for their dogs which had never seen a veterinarian. Having their pets examined and vaccinated was a priority. The love the girl had for her dogs was obvious. She never left their side and she was constantly reassuring them that everything would be all right. The dogs were her family.

While speaking with the veterinarian, the girl’s mother shared that they were experiencing challenges at home. Her husband had been in the hospital for several months with a terminal illness and unlikely to return home. Without his income or any savings or other social support, she and her daughter were facing eviction in the coming days. With this knowledge, vets engaged social workers on how to support this family including its animal companions. It was arranged that the girl and her mother would access a family-friendly shelter, while volunteers worked to secure a temporary foster home for the dogs.

Three weeks later, the father passed away. The following day, the girl and her mother were approved for social housing and were on their way to pick up their dogs from foster care and move to their new home. Because the dogs were part of this family and accessing veterinary care was a priority, despite facing imminent eviction, intervention was possible at a critical moment.

The Outreach has grown organically over the past decade. Data collection and evaluation measures have not been consistent across all locations. With the introduction of the One Health initiative, the Outreach is working to establish a more comprehensive, unified database and formal feedback and evaluation system.

The Outreach also conducts and publishes evidence-based research and hosts student practicums.

Outreach Clinic Growth

2012–2014

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*Data on volunteers in 2012 was not collected

The work of the Outreach has appeared in books, academic journals, and proceedings from professional conferences (see Appendix for further details).

At time of this publication, the Outreach has hosted two Masters of Social Work, one Bachelor of Social Work, and two Masters in Public Health practicum students.

The CVO is a place of miracles. I love the energy, the sincerity and the recognition of community - everyone there knows how important animals are to the mental, physical and emotional health of all pet owners.

CVO Community Referral Partner
The Ottawa Humane Society (OHS) offers a number of human-animal connection programs to residents of the Ottawa area, including a volunteer-based animal visit program at hospitals and seniors residences, a variety of animal welfare programs, the Humane Education Program (available in age-appropriate classes to all levels of school children), and the LEAD Program.

**LEAD (Leadership Education with Adolescents and Dogs)**

The LEAD Program at the OHS works by matching carefully selected shelter dogs with eligible at-risk youth through local social service organizations serving young people with mental health issues. Under the guidance of facility staff, a professional trainer, and an OHS specialist, the youth work with their matched dogs through a basic training and socialization program. The program runs on weekdays for two weeks, and typically serves 4 youth and shelter dogs.

The LEAD program promotes the animal-human bond while encouraging youth participants to develop personal responsibility, empathy, self-esteem, and compassion. It also increases the adoptability of shelter dogs through basic obedience training and socialization. Youth explore animal-related topics including responsible pet ownership, the link between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence, dog behaviour, and safe dog-handling techniques.

At the end of the program, youth graduate and celebrate their accomplishments with staff, friends, family, and canine partners. The youth and their dogs demonstrate the skills they have learned to staff and their guests. Following this, dogs will usually go straight into a permanent adoptive home, and youth tend to report higher levels of confidence and functioning at the end of the program.

A great opportunity for the youth to meet and get to know other people outside the secure facility. It allows participants to express affection and have it returned by the dog without reservation.

OHS LEAD Program Partner Agency Social Worker support programs.
EVALUATION SYSTEM

The OHS has developed a Standard Operating Procedures manual for the LEAD program. These standards ensure the safety of both human and canine program participants and provide detailed program guidelines and basic evaluation follow-up forms for both facilitators and youth participants.

With the stabilization of the full-time educational program coordinator position in 2013, the tracking and evaluation for this program has become more consistent and reliable. The program has also been able to expand with the coordinator in place.

LEAD Program Growth
2007–2015

Each session has four youth participants, with a one-to-one volunteer ratio, as well as a canine trainer and support staff.

Youth centre staff are asked to follow up with a formal opinion survey with the youth in each program cycle promptly after graduation; however, it is often a challenge to ensure compliance. Indicators in the survey include satisfaction ratings and feedback comments, as well as a group “Circle Time” exercise, where participants are encouraged to discuss their experiences in an informal group setting with their workers and the program trainers present.

The program coordinator attends each LEAD session, so immediate adjustments to the lesson pace, material, or even the participants in each session can be made in order to accommodate special needs or illness on the part of either the human or canine participants.

Volunteers and program leaders are also approached with program feedback surveys. OHS program managers keep thorough records on attendance and issues/successes and produce a detailed final report for each LEAD session.

Great collaboration with the LEAD coordinator and volunteers. This is what has made the program so successful.
Ottawa Humane Society Community Partner

I would like to see more sessions throughout the year. Have more evidence-based practice attached to the program. We sure could use this data.
OHS Program Partner
It provides a needed program within our community to ensure animal welfare is adhered to and it provides us an opportunity to have youth explore relationship and care of another in a safe manner.

OHS LEAD Program Partner Agency

Rosie (pictured here) is now a canine teacher in the OHS Humane Education School Program.
Maddie and Jason: Building Self-Confidence of Human Participants.

Maddie, a resident of a secure mental health facility, began the LEAD program as a very reserved youth who was shy around people and afraid of dogs; she was nervous to meet and pet the demo dog on the introductory day.

After meeting the four canine participants on Day 3, Maddie surprisingly expressed her preference: a large, extremely energetic and entirely untrained Doberman pinscher named Jason. Jason was two years old and had spent his entire life before arriving at the OHS chained up outside. He had no training, had never been walked on a leash, and had never lived inside a house.

Throughout the program, Maddie demonstrated patience, determination, and innovative approaches to engaging Jason. Maddie showed development in her confidence, follow-through, and compassion for animals.

By the end of the program, Maddie was not only no longer afraid of animals or uncomfortable interacting with people, but she was enthused about working a career in dog training in order to help the most challenged and neglected dogs, and to help people understand how animals can be rewarding and life-changing for people.

Only time will tell whether or not Maddie does become a professional dog trainer, but it is worth noting that the activity of thinking long-term is significant for youth with mental health issues.

Finding Homes for Canine Partners

LEAD 16 took place in partnership with a secure youth mental health facility in Ottawa. One of the four OHS shelter dogs involved was Rosie, a one-year-old border collie mix. Although sociable around people and animals, Rosie lacked basic obedience and leash skills, making her an excitable “handful.” In the LEAD program, Rosie was matched with an aboriginal youth who had little experience with dogs. Throughout the program, Rosie and her youth partner developed a remarkable bond, as the youth demonstrated patience and determination in teaching Rosie all the tricks and skills involved in LEAD. Rosie was placed on hold by an interested adoptive family during the program, and her adoption was finalized upon her completion in the LEAD program.

Less than one year later, Rosie returned to the OHS — but not as a failed adoption. Instead, Rosie’s new family had found such success with her since adoption that they applied to have her tested as a volunteer animal. Rosie passed the temperament assessment and now volunteers with her owner, visiting schools to teach children about animal care and safety as part of the Humane Education School Program.

Rosie’s youth partner has since transitioned out of the secure mental health facility into an affiliated “open” residential facility; she regularly drops in to the OHS with her housemates to visit the animals and shelter staff.

This is a program unlike any I’ve seen; I wish more youth could benefit from it as I think many different youth populations could work through a variety of barriers with the assistance of LEAD.

OHS LEAD Program – Partner Agency Social Worker

This is an amazing program that has been a changing agent for some of our youth.

OHS Program Partner
In partnership with over 55 agencies, Ottawa Therapy Dogs has been providing therapeutic and educational programs to at-risk children and adults in the National Capital Region for over 15 years. OTD works directly with health professionals to provide services to individuals of all ages who have specific emotional or physical needs.

OTD programs include visits to hospitals for palliative, rehabilitation, and long-term-care patients. Therapy teams also travel to supervised group homes or day-use facilities that care for both young and adult people who have developmental disabilities and mental health issues.

The programs are popular in retirement residences and in homes that specialize in dementia and Alzheimer’s care, where many of the individuals receive few outside visitors. Teams also travel to schools or health facilities to help crisis intervention counsellors, in both private and group sessions.

Teams report that the dogs often trigger pleasant memories and encourage interaction from people who are generally non-communicative.

The OTD programs engage around 100 dog handler teams in over 70 health care and social service facilities across the National Capital region each year. Canine teams are volunteer based, and all receive training and must pass a temperament and behavioural assessment before participating in any of the programs.

In our memory care unit when the OTD animals arrive the residents smile more and you can see them relax and cuddle each dog... that arrives. Sometimes this might be the only program a person will come out to! It is very beneficial for everyone including staff.

OTD Program Partner Facility Staff

R.E.A.D. (READING EDUCATION ASSISTANCE DOGS’) PROGRAM
www.ireadwithdogs.ca

In 2004, OTD expanded its programming to include a literacy and education program that works with elementary school children and their teachers in libraries and in the classroom. The R.E.A.D. Program teams provide reading companionship to Ottawa-area school-aged children who have difficulty reading. Therapy dogs make great listeners, and their relaxed, nonjudgmental presence creates an inviting and motivating environment that is comfortable, safe, and empowering for children.

Each team sets up a weekly or monthly visit to their program centre. Children each receive quiet one-on-one time with the team and are encouraged to read out loud to the dog, with the trained handler and sometimes a therapist, teacher, or parent quietly supervising.

At the time of this report, OTD had 14 teams working in 12 schools, libraries, and treatment centres.
EVALUATION SYSTEM

OTD tracks volunteer teams, and is able to provide an estimate of how many people interact with their therapy dog teams. Oftentimes, especially in hospital or clinical settings, teams have a formal schedule of specific individuals to visit. The teams are always welcoming to anyone in the environment who wishes to interact with the therapy dog (including hospital staff), so most teams see a much larger number of people in a single visit than what is formally reported.

OTD has occasionally sent out different versions of feedback forms for program partners to complete. The most recent form, in 2014, was directed at facility partner coordinators, and asked for feedback on the therapy team’s professionalism and its impact on clients, as well as for impact statements. OTD has not developed or maintained a consistent, timely, longer-term feedback or evaluation mechanism.

In one survey, collected by a canine and handler team in an ALS treatment centre over six months in 2012, the number of interactions during each shift was recorded and divided into three categories: Visitor (patient and family) Interactions, Staff Interactions, and Declined Interactions with the team.

On an average one-hour shift at the clinic, this team would typically be scheduled to see 6–10 hospital patients. Over the course of six months, the average patient/family interaction was 20 individuals (peaking at 38 in one visit), and the average staff interaction included 12 individuals (peaking at 23). In total, this handler team had positive interactions with an average of over 30 people in one shift.

Over a six month period, one of OTD’s over 100 therapeutic dog teams tracked 474 interactions. It is important to note that over the course of six months, less than 1% of hospital visitors — only four individuals — declined interaction with the dog handler team.

Canine Therapy Team Interactions by Subject

Dylan is a fantastic icebreaker in the waiting area. People are happy and begin to talk about their own pets and interact with each other instead of sitting quietly looking around at the other patients.

OTD Handler Volunteer

We are a respite home for guests who have mild to moderate dementia. When our guests come to stay, there is usually anxiety at being separated from their caregiver, home and regular routine. It is noticeable to see the guest’s anxiety and stress diminish when focusing on the dog.

OTD Program Partner Facility Staff
Thanks for your care and compassion for Paige during our stay, it really was a bright spot in an otherwise pretty stressful time.

She talks about the dog visit and the play room visits to her friends, it was a sign to her that the ‘big hospital’ really does care when her days were filled with so much that seemed so unpleasant or scary or painful (because it’s hard to understand that all of the treatments are for your own good when you’re just a kid). Your work (& the volunteers’) is so important!

Nellie was definitely a ‘bright spot’ in what was a very stressful and painful hospital stay for Paige. She had three surgeries and several other painful procedures to help her recover from a severe chest infection. The one thing she constantly talked about was missing our pets at home (2 dogs, 4 cats and 2 hamsters). Nellie provided the ‘fur therapy’ that she was desperately lacking. Paige thinks there should be dogs (and cats) at CHEO every day!
It is not difficult to make the case for human-animal connection programs to animal lovers, but the more quantifiable benefits of the programs have been more difficult to measure. The question of evaluating the impact of these kinds of programs has been a challenge in the past, but as programs grow in number, there is increased understanding of how and what to measure to determine program impact.

The three programs examined in this report each have strong support from their community partners, who have commented on the positive impact on the people they serve and on the greater communities they operate within. Not only do the programs help at-risk individuals develop confidence and connect to both animals and to other people, but they create bridges, bringing together social service agencies and community volunteers to support target populations.

The modest organic growth of programs as measured by various indicators, including hours of volunteering, expanding budgets and increasing numbers served, speaks to the value placed on animal-assisted activity and therapy programs by a broad spectrum of people.

As evidenced in the review of selected literature in the Appendix, there is also a growing amount of scientific research that supports the benefits of human-animal connection programs to both human and animal populations. However, small organizations are limited in their capacity to undertake effective evaluation. Reliable and timely participant, community, and volunteer feedback and program-specific longitudinal evaluation would be helpful. Tools such as the participants’ surveys in the LEAD program, the tracking of clients by Ottawa Therapy Dogs, and referrals to other services tracked in the Community Veterinary Outreach programs are a good start for each of the programs in this report. There is evidence of program flexibility and responsiveness where this system is in place.

CONCLUSION

It is likely that the experience in Ottawa is similar to the experiences of programs offered in other cities; a collection of volunteer-based efforts that support the health, education, and social services to clients on both two and four legs. Given the financial and staffing limitations of most small organizations, collaboration is highly valuable. However, in this case, and anecdotally in other communities, the sector appears to be fairly fragmented. Connections with similar and complementary agencies help focus program offerings, sharing of best practices, research and knowledge. Further attention to this would serve to strengthen agencies and increase the ability of each to deliver its best programs.

56 Refer to the Appendix for further details.
RECOMMENDATIONS

THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS ARE INTENDED TO ASSIST, IN VARYING DEGREES, THE THREE ORGANIZATIONS WHO ARE FEATURED IN THIS REPORT. SEVERAL RECOMMENDATIONS ALSO WORK TO SUPPORT INCREASED CAPACITY OF THE SECTOR AS A WHOLE.

Photo Credit: Bruce Deachman
COLLABORATION WITH PEERS

During the course of this research, some tensions related to territory, resources and approach were noted between participating organizations. These tensions are present throughout the sector, and are not unique to the agencies in this report. Opportunities for human-animal programs are growing as more service agencies realize the benefits for their populations. In order to meet growing demand for programs, agencies must look at how they can collaborate to increase resources, ensure consistency, avoid duplication of services, conduct research, and raise the profile of the sector. A starting point for this would be a mapping of the sector in Canada to identify all organizations big and small, involved in AAT and AAA.

ANIMAL-ASSISTED ACTIVITY AND ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY CERTIFICATION

One potential outcome of collaboration could be the establishment of common sector best practices. Currently there are no agreed upon standards for animal assisted therapy programs. Each agency sets its own safety and staff and volunteer training expectations. Common principles and practices would be highly valuable to organizations, participants, stakeholders, and donors.

ENHANCED INTERNAL EVALUATION

Programs can rely on anecdotal comments for a short time, but quantifiable data is required in order to show longer-term benefit. Agencies need to develop long-term evaluation plans. This includes the development of consistent indicators for program participants, stakeholders, and volunteers.

Along these lines, programs that involve repeat participants should develop multi-year evaluation plans to track impacts on their target populations. This kind of measurement tool might include markers such as: grades for school children, health or lifestyle changes, or positive changes in behaviour. This would benefit not only the agency, but also the larger animal-human bond research community.

THIRD-PARTY EVALUATION

Agencies that are dependent on volunteers are always at risk should key individuals step away. Management of volunteers, including board development, training, acknowledgement initiatives, and succession planning are necessary to ensure program sustainability. Many accessible supports exist to help non-profit organizations manage and develop their volunteer base.

VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT

Agencies that are dependent on volunteers are always at risk should key individuals step away. Management of volunteers, including board development, training, acknowledgement initiatives, and succession planning are necessary to ensure program sustainability. Many accessible supports exist to help non-profit organizations manage and develop their volunteer base.

CAPACITY

Like most operations in this sector, the agencies in this report are modest in their scope and capacity. They rely on a small number of larger donors along with smaller, personal donations to support their programming. Identifying a larger and more diverse set of funding sources will help sustain the programs, allow for more focus on infrastructure development, and enable leaders to sustain operations and plan programs into the future.

Photo Credit: Sandy Sharkey
The first known formal animal therapy program was established in 1792 at the York Retreat, a mental health hospital in England. In the 19th century, Florence Nightingale observed that, "A small pet animal is often an excellent companion for the sick, for long chronic cases especially."ii

In the 1930s, Sigmund Freud noted the calming effect his dog, Jofi, seemed to have on his patients,iii but it wasn’t until the 1960s that formal research into the human-animal connection began. Like Freud, Boris Levinson, an American psychologist, noted the positive effect that his own dog, Jingles, had on autistic children in his practice.iv Levinson went on to study these human-animal interactions more closely, and published texts that are now widely regarded as providing the first outline for modern Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) programs.v,vi

In 1981, the American Veterinary Medical Association developed the Human-Animal Bond Task Force. In 1989, The Delta Society (now known as Pet Partners) developed one of the first formal research and certification programs for AAT teams in the United States. In Canada, certification is available through individual agencies and is not standardized.

Human program participants are generally screened for their receptiveness to animal interaction, as well as their own ability to behave in a way that is considered to be safe for the animal. The emotional health and well-being of the animals involved in formal, certified programs is also monitored by the team handlers.

Careful monitoring of animal health and grooming prevents zoonotic disease spread and controls any possible reaction or spread of infection to people. There have been no indications to date that any outbreaks or diseases have ever occurred because of animal related therapy programs.xii

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Recent research studies show that children and adults benefit from human-animal connection programs and interaction in many ways, including these listed here:

**CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

**Developmental Health**
Interaction with animals while children are growing up has been shown in some studies to promote a stronger immune system and reduce the risk of developing allergies, asthma, and eczema. viii

**Emotional Development**
Animals in the home can support the general healthy development of children by providing unconditional emotional and social support. Increased levels of empathy and social interaction have been indicated in young adults who reported having pets as children. ix

**Learning and Literacy**
Dogs, both in a responsible family home and in a formal education setting, can provide nonjudgmental, supportive companionship and help children learn and develop critical thinking and literacy skills. x

**Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**
Dogs can calm children with autism, who often have emotional outbursts and frequent sleep interruptions. Animals can serve both as companions and as therapy partners for ASD children. AAT dogs, horses, and smaller animals can also help children with ASD better learn social skills and behaviour. xi

**ADULT HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

**Cardiovascular Health**
Individuals who have either suffered a myocardial infarction or who have a history of cardiovascular disease and hypertension have been shown to lead healthier, longer lives if they own a dog or cat. Survival rates, post-surgery, also indicate that individuals who already have a dog in the home have higher long-term survival rates. xii, xiii, xiv, xv

**Hospitalized Populations**
Interaction with AAA and AAT dogs has been shown to reduce anxiety and improve pain management in hospitalized children xiv and adults. xvi, xviii There has been a link between a decrease in analgesic medication dose and use in long-term care patients, xix as well as reduced hospital stays for shorter-term patients. Many studies also show a link between program animal contact with patients and stress reduction prior to invasive treatments. xx

**Marginally Housed and Street-Involved**
Limited qualitative studies show that the pets of people who are marginally housed or street involved help people deal with loneliness and are often a sole source of trusted companionship. xxi

Animals can provide a sense of purpose and identity, as well as a form of structure and responsibility to people who otherwise might have unstructured lives. Caring for a beloved pet can be a catalyst that encourages many street-involved people to reduce or stop drug and alcohol use and stay out of jail in order to care for their companion. xxii

The practice of “pet before self” xxiii is a common theme with this group. Most street-involved people who participated in these studies will feed their animals before they feed themselves, and will stay on the streets instead of checking into a “no pets” shelter in order to care for and protect their companions. xxiv
Mental Health
In addition to animals helping reduce social isolation, anxiety and depression in the general population, interaction with therapy animals has been shown to reduce anxiety in psychiatric patients. AAT animals have also been beneficial in helping survivors of abuse through their post-trauma interviews and therapy.

Cancer Patients
Dogs are often brought in to hospitals to emotionally soothe patients and to normalize the cancer treatment experience for children, adults, and families. In a laboratory setting, dogs have been able to detect certain kinds of cancer by sniffing out specific chemical biomarkers in urine or breath samples. Currently, sniffer dogs are only used in study and lab environments, but it is not uncommon to hear of companion dogs that consistently paw at or sniff cancer in their human family members.

Justice-Involved Youth and Adults
Correctional institutions in the US have been using Prison-Based Animal Programs (PAPs) since 1981 to help alleviate mental stress in incarcerated populations. In addition to decreasing stress levels, human-animal bond programs in prisons aim to help people develop trust and bonding skills, as well as learn patience and have positive social interactions.

Correctional Service Canada has implemented human-animal bond programs at facilities across the country, including: the Pawsitive Directions Canine Program at Nova Institution for Women, Bishops Falls Correctional Centre in Newfoundland, Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility, Burnaby Correctional Center for Women (BCCW) Canine Program in Burnaby, British Columbia, and the Stoney Mountain Institution in Manitoba, which runs in conjunction with the Winnipeg Humane Society.

Veterans of Conflict and War
Dogs and horses help returning Canadian war veterans through programs such as Can Praxis, an equine therapy program for veterans with PTSD and their families, as well as the St. John Ambulance PTSD therapy dogs program.

Veterans Affairs Canada has had a formal partnership with both agencies since 2013. VAC committed $500,000 to a 2015 pilot project that will match up to 50 veterans with trained PTSD service dogs. In the US, there are multiple programs that work to match returning war vets who have PTSD with trained service dogs.

Healthcare Workers
Far from benefitting only those who are living in healthcare facilities, therapy animals also have been shown to benefit individuals and staff who work in the facilities.

AGING POPULATION
Seniors Residential Homes
Animal interactions in seniors homes or medical centres can relieve feelings of isolation and depression and provide a physical, empathetic, and nonjudgmental contact point for residents and patients. Interaction with the animal handler, as well as physical and eye contact with the dog, helps to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation for many residents.

Alzheimer’s and Dementia
People with dementia and Alzheimer’s have been shown to become more engaged and calmer with therapeutic animal interaction, as well as experience a reduction in aggression and agitation.

Overall, there is little doubt that the human-animal bond is a strong one that has roots that trace back to prehistoric times. The benefit of interaction between species positively impacts both humans and animals. Larger and more quantifiable studies are needed in order to accurately explain and capture the reasons behind the positive effect that animals have on human health and well-being.

The studies noted in this brief history represent a sample of research on this subject matter. There are conflicting views on the veracity of some studies, and some research projects contradict findings from other projects. Increasingly, researchers in this field are working to examine larger study populations, using more quantitative methods.
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Boris Mayer Levinson, Pets and Human Development (Springfield, Ill: Charles Thomas, 1972).


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If you are a group who runs a similar program, or if you are interested in the work that Measuredoutcome.org does, we’d love to hear from you. Please contact us at: (416) 487-9114, or write to us at info@measuredoutcome.org.

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