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Erin J. Brewbaker  
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Erin Brewbaker  
(San Francisco Community  
Clinic Consortium/Veterinary  
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Francisco, CA),  
The Experience of  
Homelessness and the  
Human-Companion Animal  
Bond: A Qualitative Study

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores homeless pet owners' perceptions regarding their experience of homelessness and the impact of companion pet accompaniment on this experience. In-person, semi-structured interviews were held with a diverse sample of 12 homeless pet owners receiving services from Veterinary Street Outreach Services (VET SOS), a volunteer-based project providing free veterinary care for the companion animals of homeless individuals in San Francisco. Participant narratives were used to explore the complexities of the experience of homelessness while being accompanied by a companion animal, personal experiences of homelessness, insights concerning the bond shared between companion animals and owner, and the experience of navigating the homeless service system. Findings indicate that the majority of participants felt that having a pet while homeless may buffer against some of the hardships associated with homelessness in a number of areas. Participant responses generally focused on their pets' helpful qualities and characteristics and the benefits afforded them by pet ownership, to which they attributed an improvement in their own emotional, social, and physical wellbeing. Implications of the findings for practice, policy and research are discussed, with emphasis on the importance of service development to support and protect the human-companion animal bond.

THE EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS AND THE HUMAN-COMPANION

ANIMAL BOND: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A project based upon an investigation at  
San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium/  
Veterinary Street Outreach Services,  
San Francisco, California, submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Social Work

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2012

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Homelessness is a result of complex and often misunderstood circumstances. Characterized by loss, the experience of homelessness is rarely without hardship. Homeless individuals are commonly exposed to psychologically traumatic conditions that may precede as well as result from their experience of homelessness (Goodman, Saxe, & Harvey, 1991). Many homeless individuals are hit hard with an awareness of the lack of available resources to meet their needs, and the marginalization of the social group to which they now belong. The harsh realities of homelessness and the demands on those who experience this condition can exhaust individuals' resilient traits as a means of survival. Consequently, the psychological impact of homelessness can endure and spill into one's experiences even after an individual is no longer homeless.

According to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, there were 649,917 people in the United States experiencing homelessness on a single night in January 2010 (HUD, 2011). Although there is currently no reliable data on the prevalence of pet ownership among the homeless population, informal estimates by advocacy organizations range from between 5 and 10% of the U.S. homeless population, to as high as 24% (Pets of the Homeless, n.d.). Based on this estimate, the number of homeless individuals living with companion pets could range anywhere from approximately 32,400 to 156,000 on any given day. While it is likely that the number of homeless individuals with pet companions is sizeable, homeless pet owners

are poorly represented in studies of homeless populations and rarely the focus of general research on homelessness. Further, such data is generally not collected by regions and localities in annual surveys used by the U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in the determination of grant allocations. The dearth of reliable data argues for research that can significantly add to our knowledge about this population.

Informal estimates of large numbers of individuals experiencing homelessness who care for pets speaks to the need for research that can better uncover the reasons that a sizeable population would choose to care for a pet under such conditions. These estimates also invite in-depth exploration of the experience of homeless pet owners that could illuminate the relational provisions offered by their pet, as well their experience interacting with the homeless service system.

The need for research describing the unique situation of pet owners experiencing homelessness formed the context for this study. This study investigates the relationship shared between a homeless individual and companion animal and explores the perceptions of homeless pet owners regarding the effect of this relationship on perceived emotional or environmental challenges accompanying the experience of homelessness. The principle question that this study sought to explore was: *How is the experience of homelessness impacted by the accompaniment of a companion pet?*

Due to the scarcity of research focusing on this population, this study was seen as an effort to increase knowledge on the relational provisions that companion animals impart onto their owners. By studying this population the impact of this relationship, this study begins to pave the way for future study comparing the experience of homeless pet owners to that of the homeless population without pet companions on a number of variables, including differences and

similarities in the way each group experiences trauma or hardship leading up to and/or resulting from homelessness. A cross-sectional qualitative research design was selected for the purpose of exploring in-depth the experience of homelessness among people accompanied by a companion pet. The exploration of perspectives of homeless individuals in their natural environment incorporated researcher observation and nurtured participant insights and natural flow of thought in the context of the interview. It was hoped that the narratives elicited from participants would add to the body of literature on homeless pet owners and raise questions and hypotheses regarding the coping patterns of this population, suitable for further study.

The process of finding an appropriate setting for recruitment proved challenging at the beginning and paralleled the very real, existing barriers to accessing pet-friendly services. This process also shed light on possible reasons for the lack of focus on this population in the literature; that is, even among services that do address this need, access to the population for purposes of study was difficult to gain. In due course, this researcher was directed to the Veterinary Street Outreach Services (VET SOS), an agency providing services to pets of homeless individuals which agreed to partner toward implementation of the study. This agency shared with the researcher an interest in learning more about the perspectives and needs of pet owners and in utilizing new knowledge to enhance services to meet their needs and the needs of their pets. The VET SOS consumers who were asked about their interest and volunteered to participate in the study were quite willing and interested in sharing their experiences. Their willingness and interest in participating testifies not only to the helpfulness of the service milieu in which interviews occurred, but also to the potential for future research and the need for homeless pet owners to share their story.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship shared between a homeless individual and companion animal, and to further an understanding of the perceptions of homeless individual pet owners with regard to the effect of this relationship on perceived emotional or environmental challenges. While research remains limited regarding the relational impact that companion pets have on their homeless caretakers, the literature encompassing this topic illuminates potential insights related to study purpose. For this reason, the following literature review gives emphasis to exploration in three main topics: the impact of loss and trauma for homeless individuals; the treatment and prevention of trauma within the homeless community; and the theoretic attributes of companion animals to their owners. Much of this review includes work from of the literature on trauma, attachment, and animal-assisted therapy. These topics provide a conceptual framework for an exploration of the experience of homelessness as impacted by the accompaniment of a companion pet. This chapter concludes with a review of Weiss's (1974) social provisions framework, providing a constructive lens through which to view study findings.

#### **Trauma and Homelessness**

In a meta-analysis of trauma research, authors Goodman et al. (1991) used disaffiliation and learned helplessness as key concepts in their understanding of the effects of homelessness (p. 1220-1221). The authors further identified three common reasons for psychological trauma that can impact homeless individuals. First, trauma is caused by an

awareness of immense loss in the experience of events that may have led to, or resulted in, homelessness (p. 1220). These losses can range from material goods or items, to social connectedness and social identity. Second, trauma may result from the effect of harsh conditions and environments in which people are quickly thrust, suddenly encountering the demand to adapt or risk not surviving (p.1221). Lastly, the authors acknowledge the reality that many individuals and families often enter homelessness after having experienced physical and/or sexual abuse; that is, traumas that may or may not have been resolved (p. 1222). The authors remark that these circumstances represent pressures for short and/or enduring psychological trauma that can result in a sense of hopelessness, a decline in self-worth, and a fear of well-being (Goodman et al., 1991, p. 1223).

Van der Kolk (2003) further illuminates this discussion, linking the issue of impairment in individual cognitive capacity resulting from trauma. Ultimately, a trauma-induced shift in cognition can alter one's coping capacity as well as deplete one's self-concept (Van der Kolk, 2003, p.170). Others have written on the depletion of one's self-concept as especially strenuous for young people who are homeless. It is believed that children experiencing homelessness are often more susceptible than adults to the effects of psychological trauma (Bloom, 1999). This is in part a result of the overpowering negative effect of homelessness on personality development and identity formation for young children due to traumatic hardships that accompany this experience. The impact of such trauma on personality development and identity formation threatens to weaken the development of resiliencies and may later be displayed in inhibitions and behavioral rigidities (Bloom, 1999; Van der Kolk, 2003).

Goodman et al. (1991), Van der Kolk (2003), and Bloom (1999) all call for the need for further research examining the unique psychological effects of homelessness to inform the design of interventions that impede preventable trauma.

### **Companion Animal and Trauma: The Relational Impact of Attachment and Social Provisions During Times of Stress**

Findings from research focusing on companion pets in the treatment of trauma or hardship indicates that companion pets have positive impacts on the emotional, social, and physical well-being of its owner (O'Haire, 2010; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006; Sable, 1995; Yorke, 2010). In a systematic review, Sable (1995) combined Bowlby's ethological framework of attachment and Weiss' social provisions of relationships to examine attachments shared between the companion pet and its owners. With the integration of these frameworks, Sable identified the positive attributes of attachment shared between the companion pet and its owners and found that they were related to an increase in the owners' well-being (Sable, 1995). Risley-Curtiss et al. (2006) extend these positive attributes of attachment in their descriptive study that found that, as objects of attachment, companion animals can reduce owner feelings of loneliness and/or act as a buffer when the owner is faced with a life crisis or stressful transitions.

An understanding of the positive attributes of the relationship that forms between companion pets and their owners has been woven into the foundation of animal-assisted therapy, supporting assertions of the success of this therapeutic approach (Levinson, 1969; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006; Sable 1995; Walsh, 2009). Boris M. Levinson was one of the first professional clinicians to formally introduce and document the positive attributes that companion animals bring to animal-assisted therapy (Levinson, 1969). Emphasized in his work was the empathetic tendency of companion pets, including the recognition of pets' capacities for empathy as one of

the many resilient and empowering qualities that pets share with their owners and provide in therapy. Others, however, have expressed concerns about this empathetic quality, focusing attention on the implications regarding pet welfare, and questioning the ethics of using pets for such care. For example, a study by Cain (1983) showed that animals were likely to mirror family tension during critical periods. Furthermore, animals would often manifest physical symptoms during such critical periods, such as loss of appetite and diarrhea. An ethical issue is raised regarding the appropriateness of using animals as a means for care (Cain, 1983).

### **Companion Pets and Homelessness**

While research remains limited regarding the relationship shared between homeless individuals and their companion pets, studies carried out within the last two decades have indicated similar findings to those in the area of trauma treatment, revealing positive value imparted by companion pets during the stress of homelessness (Cronley, Strand, Patterson & Gwaltney, 2009; Singer, Hart, & Zasloff, 1995; Kidd & Kidd, 1994; Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; & Rew, 2000).

A recent qualitative study by Labrecque and Walsh (2011) examined five homeless Canadian women's relationships with companion animals. Although based on a small sample, study findings described commonalities among the range of feelings reported by study participants regarding the positive value imparted by companion pets during this stressful period in life. Participants often reported feeling that companion pets offered love, affection and unconditional acceptance. Furthermore, participants reported that having a pet also allowed them the opportunity to participate in a "giving" relationship. The women could nurture the animal, and the pet, in turn, could provide a sense of security and protection from unsafe obstacles (Labreque & Walsh, 2011).

These findings resemble those of an earlier qualitative study of homeless youth and families (Rew, 2000). Rew's (2000) findings indicated that animals provided their caretakers with unconditional love and a sense of responsibility as well as a relationship that mitigated the effects of loneliness. Similarly, study findings indicated that animal-owning homeless individuals might also avoid substance abuse or other high-risk behaviors because of a sense of responsibility for their companion animals, demonstrating that companion animals assist not only in mental well-being, but also in physical well-being (Rew, 2000).

**Access to homeless services and companion animals.** Homeless individuals face unique structural obstacles that make access to services challenging. In a national study prepared for the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research, Burt et al. (2010) identified three key structural and systematic challenges that many communities and agencies in the U.S. face in providing accessible mainstream benefits and services to homeless people. According to these authors, barriers to accessing services included: 1) *structural barriers*, or obstacles that prevent eligible people from acquiring services, such as a lack of transportation or means to communicate (p. 78); 2) *capacity barriers*, or inadequate or unavailable resources (p.115); and 3) *eligibility barriers*, or eligibility restrictions that are often rooted in federal policy (p.131). Distinguishing among these barriers, the researchers sought out and obtained data on a range of creative and successful approaches employed by several U. S. communities to overcome some of these barriers. The authors conclude with the call for agencies and communities to document and develop evidence that can be shared with other communities (Burt et al., 2010, p. 186).

In describing the general barriers for homeless people and families in accessing services, however, Burt et al. (2010) fail to include a discussion of the specific barriers to access faced by

homeless individuals accompanied by a pet. Findings from two studies that sought to identify dilemmas of homelessness associated with the accompaniment of a pet indicate that having companion animals presented unique challenges in obtaining *veterinary care* (Kidd & Kidd, 1994) as well as *finding housing* (Singer, et al., 1995). Both studies indicate that homeless pet owners often place the continued care for their pets before their own needs for housing. These findings point to the possibility that caring for a pet may present as an additional stress as well as a barrier for homeless pet owners in acquiring housing, and could be considered a factor in the maintenance of homelessness among pet owners who choose to remain on the street.

An additional barrier experienced by homeless pet owners is the apparent restriction in social workers' knowledge about the human-animal bond and use of animal assisted therapy, as illustrated in a descriptive study by Risley-Curtiss (2010). Based on data collected through a mailed survey of a random sample of 5,012 members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) who identified as clinical-direct practitioners, study findings suggest that most social workers are "semi-aware" or "intuitively-aware" of the positive attributes of companion animals on their owner's well being (Risley-Curtiss, 2010). Furthermore, the majority of participants in this study described the lack of specialized training or coursework on animal-assisted therapy as a major ethical barrier to their use of animal-assisted therapy on behalf of clients (Risley-Curtiss, 2010). It is possible that limited background or training in this area is factor in the inability and/or unwillingness of many homeless shelters to provide space in the shelter for companion pets. Risley-Curtiss (2010) concludes by calling on social workers to obtain information through research or further education on the human and animal bond and animal-assisted therapy in the field, and encourages this increase in knowledge to promote the human-companion animal bond in their practice.

## **Social Provisions**

The forgoing literature highlights the theoretical underpinnings of conceptual aspects of homelessness and companion animals that has both informed and provided structure to this study. One framework particularly useful in understanding the connection between social interaction and psychological wellbeing offered in relationships is Weiss' (1974) work on social provisions. In his analysis of the role of relationships during times of hardship, Weiss (1974) linked six specific criteria necessary for wellbeing and essential for adequate adjustment. These social provisions include: guidance; reliance alliance (confidence in the reliability of others during stressful times); reassurance of worth; attachment; social integration; and opportunity for nurturance. Viewed through the lens of Weiss' social provisions, the relational qualities that companion animals provide to their owners during homelessness can be more readily distinguished.

Referring to Weiss' framework, this research attempts to touch upon the unique psychological effects of homelessness, focusing on the relational qualities that companion animals provide to their owners during this time. Further, it endeavors to gain a deeper understanding as to how this relationship can be recognized as buffering against or exacerbating emotional stress directly related to homelessness.

## **Summary**

There is a substantial amount of research indicating positive characteristics of the companion pets-owner relationships (O'Haire, 2010; Risley-Curtis, 2010; Sable, 1995; Yorke, 2010; Walsh 2009), as well as a literature that relates these findings to homeless populations regarding their mental and physical health (Cronley, Strand, Patterson & Gwaltney, 2009; Singer, et al 1995; Kidd & Kidd, 1994; Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; & Rew, 2000). Findings from

existing research in this area suggests the possibility that the emotional benefits seen in animal-assisted therapy, and in the bonds between companion animals and their owners, may also be revealed in homeless individuals when accompanied by a pet.

This study builds on previous research exploring the impact that companion pets have on the homeless experience. It adds to our understanding of the nature of the relationship that develops between animals and owners and the impact of this relationship on the individual's experience of homelessness. While similar in purpose and design to Labrecque and Walsh's (2011) study, this study seeks to bring to light the perceptions of a more diverse sample of homeless pet owners. This research will also seek to learn more about the interactions between homeless participants and the homeless service system, as seen through the eyes of the homeless pet-owner, understanding the ways that companion pets impact the use and experience of services designed to meet the needs of the homeless population. Further, this research seeks to learn more about the homeless pet owner's interactions with others, including those who may be experiencing homelessness, and the mitigating aspects of pet ownership on these relationships or interactions. Finally, the location of this study within the context of supportive services offers a unique opportunity to compare and extend the findings of extant research to a population making use of services on behalf of their pets .

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perception of homeless individual pet owners regarding how their experience of homelessness is impacted by the accompaniment of a companion pet. Pertinent to this focus, this investigation sought to shed further light on the potential for a buffering versus an intensifying effect of the companion pet relationship on perceived emotional or environmental challenges accompanying the experience of homelessness. Some supplementary questions to this focus include: What qualities do companion pets bring into the experience of homelessness? Do these qualities add to owners' resilience and act as a buffer to some of the challenges of homelessness? What are the challenges of caring for a pet while homeless? What theoretical attributes from animal-assisted therapy, trauma treatment, and a social provision framework correspond to the experience of a homeless individual accompanied by a pet?

The study utilized a cross-sectional qualitative research design to explore in-depth the experience of homelessness among people accompanied by a companion pet. To collect data that reflected a participant's insights and natural flow of thought, a semi-structured in-person interview was employed. Data analysis incorporated the application of theory to data gathered from observation and conversation, exploring and elucidating the perspectives of homeless individuals in their natural environment.

## **Sample**

Given this study's exploratory design, a non-probability, purposive sampling procedure was used to recruit participants. Recruitment took place in collaboration with Veterinary Street Outreach Services (VET SOS), a sector of The San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium (SFCCC) and non-profit organization that offers free urgent and preventive veterinary care in their mobile clinic for the companion animals of homeless individuals living in San Francisco.

Recruitment occurred as clients moved through the intake process for VET SOS services, on a first come, first served basis. Inclusion criteria were assessed by VET SOS intake staff. Inclusion criteria for this study were: being homeless (as assessed by VET SOS intake staff, based on the SFCCC's adopted definition of homelessness for service eligibility, and by participant report), aged 18 and older, accompanied by a companion pet(s), receiving services from the San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium/Veterinary Street Outreach Services (SFCCC/VET SOS), fluency in English, and ability to comprehend and respond lucidly to questions, as assessed by VET SOS staff. The study was limited to adult participants as a means to protect homeless youth from potential harm that could result in being asked to recount their experiences of homelessness. Further, excluding homeless youth protected their identity and avoided the need to obtain permission from parents or guardian to participate. As the use of a translator would introduce complexity into the study design that must accommodate a limited timeline for completion, it was necessary to require that participants be English speaking.

When eligibility of a participant was determined, the client was then introduced and invited to participate in the study. Intake staff ensured client understanding of the voluntary/optional nature of the study through clarification that the decision regarding participation in the study would not in any way impact eligibility for or delivery of VET SOS

services. Further, it was also explained to the client that if they chose to participate in the study, they would be provided with the options to partake in the study either 1) while VET SOS outreach staff service their pet or 2) after their pet has been serviced.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews took place in San Francisco between the months of March and April at agreed-upon VET SOS clinic locations. Before beginning the interview, the researcher reviewed the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) with the potential participant whose signature on the form indicated agreement to participate. Following the signing of the Informed Consent form, the VET SOS intake staff reviewed the SFCCC Media Consent Form (Appendix B) with the participant whose signature authorized release of data to the media by SFCCC. Participants were provided with a copy of both forms, along with a list of service referral sources (Appendix C), which was attached to the Informed Consent form. Participants also received a \$10 gift card to Petfood Express immediately following completion of the interview, even if interviews were incomplete and/or certain questions unanswered.

Interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed and coded by the researcher. All interviews took place at pet servicing clinic site and interviews ranged between six and 40 minutes, with an average length of 15 minutes.

Interviews took place near the VET SOS van, within sight, but outside hearing distance, of staff. The interview (Appendix D) began with questions aimed towards gathering demographic data, including: age, race, gender, education level, marital/ partnership status, and past home location. Demographic data was pertinent in providing insight as to the participant's characteristics and background as it relates to the experience of homelessness.

Following the collection of demographic information, five open-ended questions were included. These questions were designed to elicit qualitative data focusing on the trajectory and experience of homelessness as a pet owner, and the relationships they may share with their community, service providers, and companion pets. Follow-up questions or probes were used when relevant to obtain specific information related to the question asked and to elicit the full richness of participant narratives.

### **Ethics and Safeguards**

The focus of this study was the psychological and social impact companion pets might have on homeless owners. There was a potential risk that eliciting information from participants regarding their experience of homelessness may have been experienced as psychologically strenuous. Similarly, it was possible that homeless individuals with companion pets might have felt uneasy disclosing information that they perceived as potentially endangering their relationship and/or custody of their companion pet. Therefore, necessary care was taken to avoid such risks beginning with a thorough review of the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) and including VET SOS staff in the review, with participants, or their Media Release Form (Appendix B). These forms included the purpose of the study, the role of the participant, and an explanation that data collected in the interview would be included in the researcher's thesis and possibly in future presentations and publications by the researcher and/or the San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium/Veterinary Street Outreach Services.

Due to the nature of the recruitment methods, there was an increased possibility of identification, limiting the provision of confidentiality. The researcher, through the informed consent process, informed participants of the limits to confidentiality as well as notified the participants of the actions that would be taken to remove identifiable information in data

provided to the agency as well as in the researcher's master thesis. The voluntary/optional nature of participation was also explained in detail through clarification that the decision regarding participation in the study would not in any way impact access to service, outreach experience, and/or the receiving of a gift card and list of referral sources.

Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any or all questions once the interview had begun and throughout the interview process, and that they could ask to have their participation withdrawn from the study at any time before April 1, 2012. The participant was made aware that if they so chose to withdraw from the study at any time prior to April 1, 2012 the data from the interview would be immediately destroyed. It was also explained that after this date, interview data would become a permanent part of the study.

Other assurances that were taken to reduce potential risks of participation included providing participants with a list of referral sources obtained through the sponsoring agency (Appendix C), and collaborating closely with VET SOS staff throughout the recruitment and interview process. By utilizing VET SOS intake staff with knowledge and experience in working with homeless individuals in the recruitment process, participants were introduced to the study by a familiar person. Further, in utilizing VET SOS staff to assess individuals as meeting study criteria, including having the capacity to comprehend and respond to questions, the possibility of participation by individuals for whom an interview might be experienced as unduly confusing or distressing was minimized. In instances in which participants required any assistance during the interview, VET SOS staff was always available nearby.

### **Data Analysis**

Key to gaining insight about the subjective meaning of the homeless experience among those most affected/impacted by this topic, this study undertook a qualitative, exploratory

approach, utilizing Weiss' social provision (1974) concepts as a framework through which to examine study findings.

Demographic data was analyzed for the purpose of describing the sample and to explore possible associations with qualitative data gathered. Demographic data collected was also used to illustrate how the sample population is reflective of the general homeless population as well as to illustrate potential limitations of the sample in this regard.

To analyze the data for relevant themes, recordings were transcribed by the researcher and then coded. This process used an "open-coding" method, wherein code categories emerge as natural patterns and themes arose in narratives. As different categories were notated, the researcher simultaneously began making memos to be reminded of term definitions, theoretical descriptions, or thoughts that were useful when analyzing and deciphering data. With the use of this technique, the most relevant of codes were distinguished and used to identify patterns and irregularities throughout the different transcripts.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

This chapter contains the findings from interviews conducted with 12 homeless pet owners who met selection criteria. In addition to gathering demographic information, the interview included six open-ended questions, with possible probes dependent on participant response. Questions were designed to elicit responses and insights in three main areas: 1) the experience of homelessness, 2) the perception of being a homeless pet owner, and 3) access to homeless services.

In the first field of questions, participants were asked to provide demographic information, both for descriptive purposes as well as for the purpose of uncovering possible associations between participant characteristics and their experience of homelessness as a homeless pet owner. Following this, participants were asked more directly about their experience of homelessness, the events that led to their homelessness, their current living circumstances, and identified challenges during homelessness. These questions were designed to provide context to the experience of homelessness as it relates to the relationship shared between homeless owners and their pets.

The second set of questions gathered information about the relationship participants share with their companion animals. Further inquiry included questions regarding participants' perceptions on how this relationship impacts their experience of homelessness, particularly in terms of having a possible buffering or intensifying effect on their experience.

The final segment of questions directed participants' attention to their experience interacting with homeless service system. Participants were asked to reflect on the ways in which having a companion animal impacts the use and experience of services designed to meet the needs of the homeless population. Lastly, participants were asked whether they had any recommendations regarding services, based on their experiences.

### **Demographic Data**

Interviews were held with 12 homeless pet owners residing in San Francisco who were asked if they would like to participate as they waited for services from VET SOS. Interviews were conducted at three different VET SOS outdoor clinic sights in San Francisco that proved to offer unique sets of individuals. Demographic data was collected in the following areas: age, race, gender, education level, marital/partnership status, and geographic area raised and currently residing.

Half of the participants (N=6) identified as female, while five identified as male, and one stated that they identified as "either one" gender, sharing that they were awaiting reconstructive surgery to define their gender.

Participants' age ranged from 20 to 63, with the largest sub-grouping of participants (N=5) being in their 40's. Participants' identified race and ethnicity was diverse, including: White/Caucasian (N=4); African American (N=2); Native American/Indian (N=2) ; and racially mixed (N=4), including German-Irish-Italian-Dutch-Indian (N=1), Scottish and Native American (N=1), Irish and Mexican (N=1), and Hispanic and Native American (N=1).

The majority of participants (N=8) reported that their geographic place of origin was out of state. Of the remaining four participants, three stated that they originated from the Bay Area, and one did not share the geographic area from which he had originated.

The highest completed educational level or degree ranged from some special-education to some graduate school. All except two participants reported having either completed high school (N=4), some college (N=4), or having graduated college and/or some graduate school (N=2). The remaining two participants reported having less than a high school diploma.

In response to the question regarding their family, marital, or partnership status, 75% of participants reported being single, while 25% indicated that they had a partner. Of those who indicated that they were single, four shared that they had divorced, and three mentioned having family nearby or assisting in some way. Participants were not specifically asked whether they had children, however two participants (one male and one female) indicated that they had children; one of these indicated that their daughter currently resided with them.

Analysis of possible associations between demographic characteristics and other variables in the study yielded no differences among the sample based on these characteristics.

### **Experiences of Homelessness**

In Goodman et al. (1991) meta-analysis of trauma research as it relates to homelessness, the authors identified three common reasons for psychological trauma that can impact homeless individuals. These include: 1) awareness of immense loss; 2) harsh living conditions; and 3) untreated trauma that preceded or led to homelessness. As purposed in this meta-analysis, this research found similar themes in participants' responses. This section of the interview endeavored to understand participants' perceptions of their own experience of homelessness, offering context to the central question posed by this study; that is, how companion animals might buffer or intensify an owner's experience of homelessness. The information gathered provides a window into participants' history, current circumstances, and the perceived challenges they have faced while homeless.

**History of homelessness.** Participants were asked the following questions: “How long have you been homeless?” and “Can you tell me what led you to your homelessness?”

**Length of homelessness.** Participant length of homelessness ranged from three weeks to 20 years, with the largest grouping (N=5) having experienced homelessness for one to four years. Of the remaining participants, two reported having been homeless for less than a year; one indicated that they had been homeless for six years; two reported being homeless for 12 and 15 years, and two participants reported having been homeless for 20 years.

**Factors contributing to homelessness.** The second question, concerning what led to a participant’s homelessness, elicited a range of responses varying by participant. Several contributory factors were named by participants (See Table 1). These included, in order of prevalence: 1) Financial/Economic; 2) Housing; 3) Employment, 4) Accident, 5) Health issues, 6) Chemical/alcohol dependency, 7) Misconduct, and 8) Choice.

Table 1  
Factors Leading to Homelessness by Participant Report

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n= 12

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Financial/Economic	11
Housing	4
Accident	3
Alcohol/Drug Dependence	2
Employment	2
Fire	1
Divorce	1
Chemotherapy	1
Misconduct	1
Raised on the Road/Choice	1

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All but one participant (N=11) indicated that their homelessness was a result of financial hardship and/or poor choices, testifying to the pervasiveness of economic hardship as a factor

leading to homelessness. This was reflected by one participant who suggested in her interview, “The 80% of the people out here aren’t out here because they want to be, they’re not out here because they’re derelicts; they’re out here because of either some bad choices, or some bad circumstances.”

The majority of participants (N=9) identified loss of housing as a contributory cause or as a component that led to their homelessness. One participant shared that she had been in a car accident and, while she on disability, lost her job due to her manager’s loss of employment, disrupting her income and resulting in eviction. This was an example of loss of housing as a factor that may have led to a person’s homelessness. Four of the nine participants who mentioned loss of housing as a contributory cause of their homelessness identified this as the main reason for their homelessness. The following exemplifies some of the reports:

I had two jobs out there, but then my current like living situation, people I was living with, they moved back to Montana, so it kind of left me without somewhere to live.

I was married, and ah, you know, divorced, and she put us (he and his daughter) out, so I’ve been homeless ever since.

There are basically two ways, in San Francisco basically, that you can be thrown out of your long term places. One is an owner moves in and one is called the LS ACT... So, anyways, I, yeah. It was through no malice, not... you know, not keeping up with my end of the bargain; it was just a matter of, a guy wants my flat, you know, to live in, and he can legally do it.

“Accidents” was another category of events leading to homelessness, stated by three participants. One of these participants reported,

I was in a coma for 4 months... and there was identify theft involved. After the accident someone came up and took my purse... So obviously I was Jane Doe for four months, and there was no one to pay my rent, there was no one to do anything. And who ever did the identity theft stole, used it to buy two vehicles while I was in a coma... So I came back with my credit, having an eviction, and my credit was just in the trash.

Housing is brought up as a secondary effect to the accident and the events that followed. Later in the interview, this participant revealed that she couldn't return to work, due to the head trauma she experienced as a result of the accident.

This participant's account shares in detail the reports of other participants who indicated that an "accident" had led to their homelessness, often involving challenges with returning to work and making payments. The impact on ability to work was also reflected by one participant who reported that chemotherapy was what led her to homelessness, stating, "I couldn't even get up and go to the hospital, let alone do anything else, get my rent paid, that's when I lost my place."

Two other participants attributed their experience of homelessness to drug and alcohol dependence; according to participants, this dependence provoked misconduct, followed by the loss of their housing.

One participant informed that his experience of homelessness was by preference, stating that he was "raised on the road, the only life I'm only really happy with, traveling around." And another participant, while homeless as a result of a loss of employment and not by choice, noted that, "After a while, it got easier, eh, ah, less pressure, less, less pressure, I guess... guess, well that's one thing that lead to ah... less pressure."

While most participant responses identified financial/economic and housing issues as contributing to their homelessness, additional factors that they considered to be "primary" emerged in their description of what had led to their homelessness. By comparing participant length of homeless to primary contributory cause for homelessness (See Table 2), an interesting pattern emerged: the clarification of "housing" as the primary contributory factor was provided only by participants who reported shorter lengths (< 3 years) of homelessness (N=4). Of the

remaining participants (N=8) with three or more years of homelessness, while “housing” may have been among the contributory factors mentioned, it was not mentioned as primary. Instead, these participants indicated other issues as primary, with “accident” being the most prevalent contributory factor mentioned. This may speak to the possibility that lengthier periods of homelessness are more likely to be associated with factors other than housing.

Table 2  
Primary Contributory Factors by Length of Homelessness

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n=12

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LENGTH OF TIME EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS BY PARTICIPANT	PRIMARY IDENTIFIED INCIDENT LEADING TO HOMELESSNESS BY PARTICIPANT
3 weeks	Housing
4 months	Housing/ Employment
1 year	Fire/ Housing
2.5 years	Divorce/ Housing
3-4 years	Accident
4 years	Accident
4 years	Alcohol Dependency
6 year	Accident
12 years	Chemotherapy
15 years	Employment
20 years	Drugs/ Misconduct
20 years	Raised on the Road/ Choice

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**Current circumstance, experiences, and challenges of homelessness.** To elicit their perceptions and insight into their experience of homelessness, participants were asked, “Can you tell me a little about your current situation?” In response, all participants offered responses about their current living situation and referred to their emotional appraisal of such conditions.

Depending on the amount of detail shared, the following probes were offered to elicit more in-

depth response: “How would you describe your experience of being homeless?” and “What are some of the challenges you have faced since becoming homeless?”

Woven through each participant’s unique narrative were themes of loss and hardship. For some (N=3), these challenges were mere problems to overcome or move past; for others (N=5), these challenges were invasive and demanding on their livelihood, self-confidence, and identity. Staying positive, or maintaining a good attitude about one’s circumstances, was also conveyed by participants (N=5), including those who reported intense hardship since becoming homeless. Participants also shared their experience and circumstances involving moving between places, staying in shelter, parks, and mobile homes.

*Moving between places/couches.* Four participants moved between other people’s homes/couches. Two of these participants mentioned their appreciation of having a place to stay at night, and all four conveyed in their reports that this was one of the central challenges that they face. For one participant, living in someone else’s space was the most significant challenge, stating,

The hardest thing, with the whole homeless thing, is not being able to have my own, and then having to deal with other people. You know, going into your stuff, and telling you what to do, and like, making up stuff... but that’s the roughest thing, you know, is being used to your own stuff and then... going back to kind of ground zero...

This participant’s perspective illustrates the hardships of immense loss, in material goods as well as in self-concept or worth.

For the participants who reported moving between places, additional challenges identified as accompanying the experience of homelessness included: having to live in dangerous neighborhoods; searching for housing with a child and a pet; making the best decisions when options are limited; medical issues; food stamps; “not having enough to live by”; living “frugally”; bed bugs; and the challenges of getting a new lease.

**Shelter.** Three of the participants stated that they were currently staying in a shelter that permitted certified service animals. All of these participants were offered shelter through being discovered by someone or by a program and one participant shared that she utilizes her monthly disability allowance to fund her living circumstance. Prior to residing in a shelter, participants reported sleeping consistently on the streets for periods ranging from three to 13 years. The following exemplifies some of their experience:

I was on the housing list for 5 years... and got nothing. I would go down and volunteer at the coalition all the time and stuff and got nowhere until I got sick... I was in the hospital like 9 times last year. Like every time I got a cold it would turn into pneumonia. And so Doctor [name], my doctor I got from the medical bank, she was on the medical bank, and she works really hard to get me inside.

I was in a wheel chair for three and a half years, and my adopted brother, Officer [name]... helped me get housing.

They started a program here, and found me in a park, they took us in and they offered us a place to stay ... before that I stayed up here [park], and recycled, and ah, played guitar... and camped out.

Other insights into personal challenges offered by these participants include: illness; interacting with other people; finding places to sleep; having to move or having to trust someone to watch their belongings; the weather; food; funds; and laundry. Each of these participants reported a feeling of gratitude for their current living circumstances and two of these participants' experiences illustrated the traumas and hardships they carried with them into homelessness as they struggled to gain assistance for their health concerns.

**Staying in the park.** Three of the participants reported residing in the park. Of the 12 participants, these three participants expressed the least dissatisfaction with their current living situation. In spite of this dissatisfaction, these participants also mentioned the ample resources offered in San Francisco, and commented on several favorable attributes of homelessness, particularly the flexibility to be able to travel and the "close-knit community" of other homeless

individuals. Some challenges that these participants identified included: persecution; common dangers with “scary people”; being perceived negatively by others; finding a dry spot after bad weather; and feeding oneself. After mentioning some of these challenges one participant offered, “it’s just a crazy world out there but the really cool experiences make up for the shwaggy stuff that happens.”

**“Mobile” home.** In two instances, participants reported living in what could be termed “mobile” homes; one participant resided in a trailer located in a junkyard, and the other in a bus located on a parking lot where they provided night security.

The participant living in a trailer on a junkyard reported some positive and many negative experiences faced since becoming homeless. One of the positive things this participant reported was time to appreciate nature. Since discovering this appreciation, this participant has gone to great efforts to liberate nature that is being imposed upon by maltreatment. In her efforts she has met a variety of strong advocates who have assisted her in liberating habitats and animals. While this participant attempted to address the positive impact of homelessness, she admitted that, “This (homelessness) is not fun, this is a hardship, this is truly a hardship. You can make the most of it by keeping a good attitude, but it’s still a hardship.”

This participant named some challenges of homelessness, including not getting depressed about her circumstances and obtaining housing when her pet has a record of biting. The most prominent challenge that this participant reported, however, was protecting herself against dangerous individuals who might make advances or attempt to draw her into unlawful activities. In discussing some of the methods she employed to repel dangerous individuals - including putting on weight, equipping her mobile home with protective gear, and setting physical barriers around her place of residence - the participant confessed that even with resourceful and clever

armor, “it’s scary out here, . . . , if you don’t divorce yourself from your principles. And there comes a time when you to do some honing and some pairing.”

Another challenge named by this participant was persecution by officers of the law stating that,

There’s a police officer here in [geographic location] who has a predecessor that is the scorch of homeless population. She somehow has it twisted in her mind that she’s doing good when she beats on someone’s motor home in the middle of the night, and if they answer, or make a noise, she takes them out and takes their motor home, cause it’s illegal to sleep in a vehicle now, from one to five in the morning.

This participant’s experience illustrates the many complex and confusing systematic and structural barriers that homeless individuals must manage and endure. This was mirrored in other participants’ accounts concerning law enforcement as well as frustrating experiences with eligibility for services.

The other mobile home participant resided in a bus with a partner and the many cats that they have adopted over the years. This participant described having assumed a role as a nighttime security guard in the location where they resided. According to the participant the role as a nighttime security guard afforded them the ability to receive running water for their bathroom, as well as electricity. The following are challenges that this participant named.

You don’t celebrate any holidays, you know, you don’t, it’s not anything of like when you, when I was indoors I would get prepared to go to the show or something like that, being homeless... you just survive from day to day...my lover....works every day, doing odd jobs, or filling sealant.

### **Perceptions of Being a Homeless Pet Owner**

The following section presents participant responses to questions about the relationship they share with their companion pet. Questions were designed to elicit depictions of the verifiable aspects of the relationship between pet and owner as well as the effects of this relationship on the owner’s experience of homelessness. The principle question asked was “Can

you tell me about your experience of being homeless and having a pet?” with clarifying questions or probes including the following: “When did you start caring for your pet?”, “Is this the first pet you’ve had?”, “What are the needs of your pet?”, “How has having a pet been helpful or challenging while being homeless?”, and “As a pet owner, can you tell me about your experience with other people experiencing homelessness who may or may not be a pet owners?”

**History of being a pet owner.** Most participants (N=11) were the owners of dogs. The remaining participant owned a multitude of cats. Length of ownership of companion animals varied among participants and ranged from three weeks to 20 years. The participant who reported 20 years of pet ownership explained that their pet had transitioned with them into homelessness; following becoming homeless, this participant began caring for several stray animals in addition to the original pet. The responses of the remainder of participants reflected how long they have been caring for their current companion animal.

Two participants reported caring for their pet for less than a year; two participants reported having their pet for a year to two years; five participants reported having their companion animal between two and 10 years; and three participants reported having their companion animal between 11 and 20 years. An analysis of participant reported length of time since becoming homeless by length of time caring for their current pet indicates that more than half of the participants (N=7) transitioned into homelessness with their current pets.

In response to whether their current pet was the participant’s first pet, participants’ responses fell into several categories, including: 1) Not first pet, 2) Yes, first pet, 3) First pet since becoming homeless, 4) Has had several pets since being homeless, and 5) previously owned pets. Most participants (N=8) reported that they had previously owned a pet both before (N=5) and since becoming homeless (N=4). One participant is represented in both categories

(before and since), reporting that they had owned a pet before becoming homeless and then after becoming homeless took on the care of another pet. Of the participants whose current pet was their first (N=4), all reported that their current pet had transitioned with them into homelessness.

**Needs of companion animal.** Participants were asked directly about the needs of their pets. They offered a variety of responses that included a description of the demands generated by their efforts to meet their pets’ needs. These pet needs/owner demands were grouped into the following categories (See Table 3): 1) Basic Necessities, 2) Training, 3) Companionship, 4) Affection, and 5) Attention.

Table 3  
Needs of Companion Animals and Demands on Owners by Participant Report

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n=12

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Basic Necessities	Training	Companionship	Affection	Attention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Vet. Care (12)</li> <li>•Food (8)</li> <li>•General Care &amp; dependence on provider (5)</li> <li>•Walks (1)</li> <li>•Exercise (1)</li> <li>•Play (1)</li> <li>•Cat litter (1)</li> <li>•Water (1)</li> <li>•Friendly environment (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Setting limits (4)</li> <li>•Training &amp; socializing pet (2)</li> <li>•Patience while pet learned &amp; matured (1)</li> <li>•Understanding pet needs due to traumatization (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Companionship w/ humans (3)</li> <li>•Companionship for pet (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Love (2)</li> <li>•Groomed/ Rubbed (2)</li> <li>•Constant affection (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constant attention (2)</li> </ul>

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The following needs/demands were grouped in the analysis under the heading “Basic Necessities”: food (N=8), walks (N=1), exercise (N=1), play (N=1), cat litter (N=1), water (N=1), friendly environment (N=1), health care/veterinarian care (N=12), and care/dependence on their provider (N=5).

The second category of needs/demands, “Training”, includes participants’ emphasis on being “patient” with their pet while they learned and matured (N=1), the need to train and socialize companion animals (N=2), the ability to commiserate with an animal who had been traumatized (N=1), and setting limits with pets (N=4).

Under the category “Companionship” was included the following needs/demands named by participants: pet’s need for companionship with humans, and pet’s need for companionship and/or the opportunity to reproduce with a partner pet.

In the fourth category, “Affection,” were grouped two participants’ suggestion of the pet’s need for “love,” one participant’s suggestion of the pet’s need for “constant affection,” and two participants’ statement of their pet’s need to be petted, groomed, or rubbed. The final category “constant attention” was mentioned by two participants.

In response to the question asking about their pets’ needs, participants also alluded to the difficulties their pets had with being separated from the participant-owner. Although not every participant used the term, these responses can be seen as falling into the general category of “separation anxiety.” In three separate accounts by participants of their pet’s anxiety, participants referred to the harsh beginnings their pets experienced prior to coming into their care. Further, each of these three participants shared similar, although somewhat different, accounts of efforts to address their pet’s symptoms of separation anxiety that revolved around modeling for a healthy relationship for their pets. Each of these participants emphasized the feeling that by providing consistent and loving companionship and attention to their pets, they were able to effect a decrease in their pet’s level of distress.

**Helpful and challenging aspects of having a pet while homeless.** In the previous sections we examined participants’ experience of homelessness - including the stresses

encountered - their history with their pet, and their perceptions of their companion animals' needs. The following discussion presents their perceptions of the ways in which the relationship between a companion animal and homeless pet owner can affect the experience of homelessness, including as a perceived help or additional challenge.

The following distinguishes the helpful or challenging aspects of being a homeless pet owner by participant report and organizes these aspects into thematic categories, including mental/emotional, physical, social/relational, occupational, and structural attributes. A final section addresses participant responses describing their pet as more than just a companion animal.

An analysis of participant responses to the question, "How has having a pet been helpful or challenging while homeless," revealed a total of 79 aspects of pet ownership that participants considered either helpful or challenging. Most (73%) aspects of pet ownership were considered "helpful", while the remaining 27% were characterized as "challenging" aspects of caring for a pet while homeless.

*Helpful aspects of having a companion animal while homeless.* Participants offered a range of benefits that their pets and pet ownership offer them. The following presents participants' responses in thematic categories including: physical, protective, mental/emotional, social/relational, occupation/ motivational characteristics. There are innate alliances among many of these categories, so it is not surprising that the categories weave through each other. Lastly, there is a section dedicated to participant responses that describe their pet as more than a pet.

*Contribution to owner's physical well-being.* Three participants expressed appreciation for their pet's ability to keep them warm at night. Two of these participants extended this

positive attribute to also having regular snuggling comfort with their pets. Several participants suggested that the basic responsibilities of pet ownership also allow them to keep their physical health better than if they didn't have a pet, because with a pet they needed to walk or play with their pet, and being responsible for their pet also motivated some to avoid certain harmful substances.

Another positive aspect of pet ownership noted by participants was, as one participant described, that the “cute and adorable aesthetics,” possessed by their pets often led to more profit on the street. One participant stated, “She’s a better spanger than I am... she better at getting spare change than me, she goes walking down the street, and she’ll get a cheese burger before I will.”

*Contribution to owner’s protection.* Eight participants conveyed in their interviews that their companion animals’ protective attributes were felt to provide much aid in their experience of homelessness. These protective attributes were offered in a literal sense, as well as by virtue of the relationship. For one participant she mentioned that,

It’s so much better having an animal with you. Cause they protect you. They, they’ll make sure no weirdos come up to you, and stuff like that. Especially when you’re sleeping in the park by yourself, you know, a dog’s a great animal to have.

One participant described his pet as his “alarm”, while another described his dog as his “fidelity fighter.” On the emotional front, several participants emphasized how the positive mental/emotional attributes helps them feel more protected from the stress that surrounds them.

*Contribution to owner’s emotional well-being.* Several participants stated that they believe that their pet assists in improving their mood or overall mental health by decreasing their stress, increasing their happiness, improving their perspective, and offering consistent love. One participant stated that he appreciates that his dog doesn’t judge him for their situation, always

offering, “The same ‘I love you anyways’.” Another participant stated, “They are always nice to you when I feel bad. I feel bad a lot.” One participant shared that her day is brightened when her pet joins her, and several other participants mentioned how their pets improve their moods by calming them from the regular stresses of life. The following are two examples statements offered by participants.

“It’s been good, see, I’m bipolar, ok. I’m epileptic and I have bone disease in both my hips, I was born with it. SO having [Pet’s Name], it keeps me a lot calmer, I don’t get as angry as I used to, I don’t want to fight like I used to, you know... so having him keeps me real calm.”

“I look at her like a service dog. You know? Cause I mean, shit, we all got problems, you know what I’m sayin’? Ha, I mean my dog is, you know, she keeps me grounded, she really helps me... she helps me chill out.”

These statements illustrate participants’ common belief in the beneficial impact pets have on their owner’s general mental health.

*Contribution to owner’s social and reciprocal relationships.* Many participants enthusiastically responded to this question by painting their responses with descriptions about their pet’s endearing qualities that offer substance to the relationship between pet and owner. The most common descriptions about participants’ pets included words like: loyalty, predictable friendship and love, comfort, consistency, and connectedness. Participants also expressed appreciation for their pet’s fun personalities, along with their cute, adorable, and easygoing nature. In many instances, statements about these characteristics coincided with those that spoke to the pet’s support for participants’ emotional equilibrium. In a few instances, participants expressed feeling that these characteristics were responsible for improving their relations with other people, cheering people up, and encouraging more pleasant and warm interpersonal interactions.

Embodied in participant responses was the sense that their pet's characteristics and impact on reciprocal relations encouraged emotional closeness, assurance of support during times of stress, a sense of belonging or being connected to something, and reassurance of worth.

*Contribution to owner's occupational and motivational well-being.* This section extends the relational and emotional attributes and presents responses that suggest how participants' companion animals influence their actions. For one participant, owning a pet was rewarding because it gave her something to do and something to care for. For several other participants, their pets were described as keeping them going even during the toughest times. The following statement captures how one participant's pet helped her move past her depression.

“I went through a very bad bout of depression and I mean, I had him before I became homeless, but if it wasn't for him, I probably still would be locked in a room not coming outside, you know, so he's definitely a spark in my life, you know. And then he makes me have to go outside, and he makes me have to be productive you know.”

Encompassed in this statement was the participant's motivation to behave differently from the way she might desire due to the depression, and the inspiration she derived from the responsibilities involved in providing care for her pet. This motivation was mirrored in the responses of three other participants, particularly in terms of their motivation to avoid substances and criminal or delinquent activities.

“Well it's been helpful because it keeps me from doing a lot of things that I shouldn't be doing, you know... I would be out, ahh, looking for things,... ah, trying to commit to get, you know, warrant and things like that.”

“I think people who don't have pets. I don't know, they're like more inclined to do a lot of drugs and stuff like that, cause they don't have anything to take care of, you know, they're not taking care of themselves.”

“With her around, I have a reason to not to get completely trashed and you know, go off and do some kind of craziness, I have her as a responsibility to look after and you know, it it... she's my Jiminy Cricket.”

The motivation to nurture their pets and the relationships they shared was common among all participants. Furthermore, as in the case of the one participant who suggested that his pet was his own personal “Jiminy Cricket,” participants commonly suggested during the interview what their pet might say in response to their circumstance or as a means to express their affection to their owner. In such instances, pets acted as a kind of guide or motivational speaker to owners.

Another form of motivation voiced by three participants was embodied in their efforts to liberate animals or habitats that are being mistreated or neglected. In the case of one participant who had been adopting and caring for stray cats over several years, their activity in this regard had, according to the participant, gained them a reputation as being a good provider and someone to whom others could come for help with their cats. In another case, a participant shared a long history of advocating for habitats and animals that were being mistreated or neglected. For this participant, the value in advocating for animals and habitat provided her with reassurance of worth, sharing, “I was a catalyst, and no matter what station you find yourself in, in life or what, or how far you fall through the mesh, you can still have positive effect. It did a lot for turning my head.” The third participant who discussed liberating animals spoke of it as a communal effort, connecting a community with a shared interest and purpose. This participant offered in his response,

Most homeless people actually take better care of their animals than they do themselves. But if we do find somebody who happens to be mistreating, neglecting or abusing their animal, chances are we’ll just liberate them ourselves and find a better home for them. Cause that’s how we roll.

*“More than just a companion animal”*. Half of the participants (N=6) described their companion animals as a part of themselves, or voiced their perception of the relationship they shared with their pet as more significant than a pet-owner relationship. Three participants

described their pet as their “best friend”, while two other participants described their pets as “children” that they care for, viewing these relationships as an integral part of their survival and a source of reciprocal expression of unconditional love. One of these participants felt that his responsibility to his pet was to provide it with opportunities that might be viewed as human-like pursuits or dreams, stating,

I kind of look at her like a human, you know, as a person... it's like I didn't want her to get spattered before she got a chance to be a mother first. Because she's a girl dog and I wanted her to get the full life, I wanted her to be a mom first, you know what I'm saying, and then from that came another dog, and that brings companionship and camaraderie.

Three participants described their pets as a part of themselves. Two of these participants shared similar experiences, discovering their deep connection with their pet when they witnessed their pet being born. One stated, “He's been my heart ever since,” while the other participant described this experience like falling in love stating, “It felt like what it felt like to fall in love. So I'm in love with a dog. I'm in love with a creature who can't even ponder who own mortality. Ha, not very existential, you know?”

The participant who described her companion animal as her heart also shared her deep concerns about the eventuality of her pet passing away, describing this loss as the “whole world” falling apart. Similar to this description was that of another participant who described their pet as a part of themselves and stated,

If they were to take my cats, they'd take my soul. You know, I'd just be... I'd be done. Cause each one of them have a personality, each one of them are like a little child, you know, they're really like my children, you know, you can tell by all these people, you see parts of them.

For most of these participants, the loss of their pet would be more than losing a pet; it would be losing part of themselves, losing a best friend, or losing a love.

*Challenging aspects of having a companion animal while homeless.* Participants also offered a range of ways in which having a companion pet presented challenges to them. The following presents participants' responses grouped into thematic categories including: emotional, physical, social, and structural challenges.

*Emotional challenges.* One category of challenges that emerged through analysis of participant narratives had to do with the emotional dependence of participants on their relationship with their pet, as well as a kind of relational wholeness provided by the companionship of a pet. While seven participants alluded to this deep connection and highlighted it as mostly beneficial, two participants expressed much emotional distress at the thought of losing this relationship. One participant expressed much anguish at the thought that her pet could pass away before she herself was able to escape homelessness. In her discussion, she describes such a loss as her "whole world" falling apart, and expressed much concern for herself if such a loss were to happen.

Another participant similarly mentioned that he would be "devastated" if "anything happen[ed] to her". This participant also addressed the emotional challenge that accompanied this deep connection, sensing that the connection allowed his pet to gain a deep innate awareness of his own cognitive workings, and wondering aloud whether the pet was partially judging him for his current circumstance. This worry about his pet's awareness fostered feelings of guilt for his pet's and his own wellbeing. .

*Physical and financial challenges.* Several physical and financial challenges that participants mentioned included: the physical burden that pet ownership has on an owner's body; the challenges homeless circumstances has on a pet's body (such as walking long distances on hard terrain); the challenges of paying for nutritious and a substantial amount of food to keep pet

fed as well as the participant being able to keep themselves fed; and having sufficient funds to address their own needs while also paying for expensive healthcare for their pets. Another challenge that several participants mentioned was their ability to perform pet owner responsibilities such as having the time and insight to meet their pet's needs, and making sure that someone watches over them when they have to go in somewhere.

The majority of challenges reported by participants prioritized concern about having the ability to get their pet needs met. One participant stated that he desires, "to make sure that she has everything, like food... I feed them first, and **then** [emphasis added] worry about myself." Further, some of the physical challenges of pet ownership while homeless paralleled participants' desire to provide assistance or nurturance to their pet on a deeper level than the physical. However, due to lack of resources, participants were not always able to provide such care as adequately as they desired. Similar to the emotional challenge presented in the response of the participant who felt somewhat judged by his pet, participants' concerns about whether they could be financially counted on to supply sufficient provisions to meet their pet's needs during this stressful time of homelessness, also represented a challenge for these participants.

*Social challenges.* A few participants described social attributes about pet ownership as challenging while homeless. Two mentioned training their pet as a challenge. One participant was just beginning to take on the task of training her first pet while homeless, while the other participant shared that when she originally became homeless, she had not set sufficiently structured limits with her dogs and had unfortunately paid the consequences when her pet bit someone while still a pup. Because of this incident, she has found years later that her dog still has a record, thus presenting an impediment to her ability to acquire housing.

Other social challenges include the mention by two participants of an awareness of others' negative perceptions of homeless pet owners, and the mention by one participant of their pet being misperceived as "dangerous" due to the stigma attached to homelessness. Participants describe these experiences as alienating not just to themselves, but also to their pets.

*Structural challenges.* Seven participants named several challenges with owning a pet that involved structural barriers. The most prominent of these barriers, mentioned by six participants, was the struggle to acquire shelter and/or permanent housing with a companion pet. For some participants these challenges were "on the road" challenges; for others, challenges were experienced due to their pet's records; finally, others struggled for years before being discovered by another person and offered some shelter. One participant offered,

We're trying to find a place and it's like, Dang, I'm gunna have to give up [Pet's Name]? You know what I'm saying, cause you know it's about Jill (participant's daughter), and we gotta find us a place... You know? so, if I have to give up my dogs, I mean, I'm gunna cross that bridge when I have to but it stays there in the back of my mind, but I will do what ever I can to try to keep her, I mean, I'm looking at her like a service dog.

Other barriers mentioned by participants revolved around concerns about accessing proper veterinary care in fear that a service provider might try to remove the pet from their custody; other challenges lay in dealing with general regulations that require owners to leave their pets outside of buildings. Emphasized in these challenges was the fear of having one's pet taken from them.

Through the different narratives, a theme that emerged repeatedly was the participant's conscious designation of their pet as "service animal" in an effort to obtain resources or help.

The following statements exemplify this finding.

I mean, 'it was hard' before I got to turn him into a service animal...Cause, a lot of people like, freak out and stuff like that, but since I've turned him into a service animal, it's been like, so much easier for me, like.

Traveling like on trains or buses, she acts like a service animal, so it's not hard especially with that backpack to convince them that she's a service animal, but when it comes right down to it, and I have to break out paper work, it's just something that I don't have yet. So, trying to get that... when that happens things will get easier.

Although positioned differently in acquiring their service animal certification, both participants acknowledge the benefits one receives if a pet is certified.

**Experiences with others.** Participants were asked to describe their experience with others including other people experiencing homelessness who may or may not be pet owners. In response to this question, many participants offered their sense of other's positive or negative notions of homeless people who own pets. Some participants' responses reflected an awareness and understanding of why others may or may not feel positively about homeless people owning a pet. Other participants' appeared more focused on how others' actions changed, with participants noting friendlier responses when in ownership of a pet. In discussing the perceived notions of others, one participant reflected her own way of thinking prior to becoming homeless.

I remember when I was younger, and you know I was born and raised in San Francisco, and I would see people on the streets, with animals, and I just couldn't understand it, you know, and I would just be like **you can't even feed yourself** [emphasis added], **how can you feed a pet** [emphasis added], and... but now I understand you know, cause you have that companionship, and you have that relationship, that kind of helps you get through the day even though you're having a rough time. You know, so I think it's been pretty similar to the experience I've had, where you know, they keep going.

The statement "you can't even feed yourself, how can you feed a pet" highlights a perceived notion that if a person is poverty stricken, the decision to care for an animal is either fool-hardy or selfish. This expression was echoed in several interviews, while in other interviews traces of this notion could be distinguished in participants' efforts to assert attitudes about homeless people as pet owners. The following exemplify both approaches to this expression.

A lot of people have very negative ideas about people with pets. **'How can you do this, how can you it's not fair'** [emphasis added]. Well, yes and no, if you're giving the

attention, and the food, and the love, and it gives you something beside yourself to look at.

**I can't take care of myself, how am I going to take care of that pet** [emphasis added]. That's what I don't understand why homeless people out here have these pets their not being well taken care of.

I've never seen a homeless person yet neglect or abuse a dog.

As a street person, we kind of have a close-knit community, and pretty much anywhere you find us. And ah, most homeless people actually take better care of their animals than they do themselves.

While the majority of participants seemed aware of some negative notions about pet ownership while homeless, participants generally felt that having a pet improved their relations with others. Further, participants predominately felt that having a pet offered substantial emotional and relational advantages that motivated participants to live more responsibly or effectively so as to care for their pet appropriately.

### **Experience with the Homeless Service System**

In this final section of inquiry, questions shifted to participant perspectives of the way in which having a companion animal has impacted their use and experience of services designed to meet the needs of the homeless population. To elicit this information, participants were asked the following two questions: "What services have been helpful or difficult during your time while homeless?" and, "Based on your experience, what recommendations would you have for services that would be helpful to others in your situation?" Responses to both questions varied in detail.

**Helpful versus difficult services.** Participant responses conveyed a range of experiences with homeless services. While many participants indicated that acquiring certain services - particularly housing - was often a long and arduous journey, many participants also asserted that numerous services existed in San Francisco. Most participants' responses were focused on

specific services that had been found helpful. A few participants however, provided their views on some of the resources that they felt were lacking, particularly in terms of preventative resources, and inaccessibility.

Seventy-five percent of participants specifically mentioned VET SOS as offering services that met their needs. One participant mentioned her previous struggles in acquiring vet care for her pet, stating, “If you have a dog and take it to the pound... you can’t leave the building, they will take your dog... people didn’t wanna take them in because of reasons like that. And that was not good.” Other participants expressed appreciation for the accessibility of VET SOS, as well as the comprehensive care they are able to offer, including advocacy. Two participants also mentioned VET SOS’s new alliance with Pets Unlimited, which offers homeless pet owners a thousand dollars a year to spend on their pets needs, and particularly vet services.

Several service groups that were named in addition to VET SOS were services that targeted homeless youth, as well as local churches and community outreach efforts. Participants mentioned that many of these services provided resources such as food, resource advice/guidance, and therapeutic resources. A particularly beneficial resource alluded to by some participants was the “service animal” certification that many of these service locations, including VET SOS, offered assistance in acquiring.

### **Recommendations for Services**

Seven participants recommended that programs model themselves after service agencies, such as VET SOS, that have developed creative and successful approaches to providing relevant services to targeted populations. The prominent features that participants emphasized in their recommendations were accessibility and affordability, and the services that participants emphasized were vet care, food, therapy, and transportation.

Two participants offered more detailed recommendations. The first critiqued society's way of preventing homelessness, stating,

What I have found is that most of the apparatus that deals with the issue isn't really focused on preventing like the trouble, it's really, it's set up for people who have already hit rock bottom, it's not really, they're not really into propping you up.

For this participant, improvement in making services more obtainable would consist in "start[ing] from the beginning" and preventing homelessness.

Another participant critiqued society's way of dealing with homelessness as failing to offer accessible services until individuals hit "rock bottom". This participant recommended the development of an umbrella of resources to provide a kind of tutorial that could teach homeless individuals how to acquire resources before they are out of reach.

Something so people know how to get services, something so like they realize that there are paved ways to get out of this before you're so heavily enmeshed in, or dropped off into drugs, where, where you give up hope. It wouldn't actually have to be a net, but there would at least be some life preservers out there on a long rope where you can grab on before you've gone completely under. There should be something where you can, where you don't have to reinvent the wheel.

This recommendation mirrors the same concept of modeling previous creative and successful approaches, but instead of advocating that one acquire expertise from a service provider, this participant encourages the development of a system that allows homeless individuals to learn from those who have already mastered certain challenges common to the experience of homelessness.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore the experience of homelessness through the eyes of homeless pet owners and to gain an in-depth understanding of the ways in which accompaniment of, and caring for, a companion animal impacts the experience of homelessness. Twelve homeless pet owners receiving services from VET SOS were interviewed and their narratives used to explore the complexities of the experience of homelessness while being accompanied by a companion animal. This chapter presents key findings regarding the experience of homelessness, the benefits and challenges of pet companionship, and the experience of navigating the homeless service system. The implications of findings for practice, policy and research, and the strengths and limitations of the study are discussed. The work of Weiss (1974) on social provisions and Goodman et al. (1991) on common causes for psychological trauma provides a broader framework for understanding study findings and implications.

### Key Findings

**Demographics.** This study collected data on 12 participants living in San Francisco. Overall the group was diverse in age, gender, and race/ethnicities. Participant modal age (in their 40s) corresponds closely to the national statistic of a large grouping of individuals experiencing homelessness who are between 31 and 50 years old (HUD, 2011). Of interest was the demographic mix of this group, with a higher proportion of females, a lower proportion of individuals identifying as African American, a higher proportion of individuals identifying as

Native American, and a higher reported educational level in comparison to the homeless population, nationally (HUD, 2011). However, as this study utilized a small convenience sample, it is not possible to state whether these differences are reflective of the demographic profile of the population of homeless individuals with companion pets, either in the San Francisco area or nationally.

**Pet companionship as an integral component of survival in the midst of challenges.**

While limited in generalizability by sample size and location in only one geographic region, findings of this research offer new insight into how the accompaniment of a pet impacts the experience of homelessness, and suggest that the relationship shared with a companion animal is an integral part of prevailing and a source of reciprocal expression of affection.

Having experienced a range of three weeks to 20 years of homelessness, and presenting an array of circumstances leading up to their homelessness, participants offered unique and vivid accounts about their experiences and perspectives as homeless pet owners. Consistent with the work of Goodman et al. (1991) describing traumatic experiences associated with homelessness, participant accounts described the common hardships of homelessness, especially pertaining to loss. Although the report of challenges while being homeless comes as no surprise, a description of the specific circumstances that provoked distress for participants, as well as their views on pet companionship, provides a window through which to learn more about the ways in which individuals experiencing homelessness cope with such feelings, as well as the role that having a companion pet plays in this process.

Many participants shared personal experiences of enduring harsh conditions, sifting through the challenges that accompany the awareness of immense loss such as the depletion of one's sense of self or sense of the world. Many of the participants described traumatic

experiences that preceded or led to homelessness, their feelings about which had continued to go untreated and unaddressed. Goodman et al. (1991), along with others (Bloom, 1999; Van der Kolk, 2003) argue that such traumas are preventable. This study's findings suggest that having a pet while homeless may buffer against some of these hardships.

While accounts of the hardships of homelessness were high compared to expressions of satisfaction, many participants utilized the interview as an opportunity to reveal their feelings about their experience in greater depth, and to share thoughts about how the accompaniment of their pet helped to diminish the challenging aspects of their experience of homelessness. The majority of responses focused on helpful qualities/characteristics that their pets possessed and the benefits afforded them by pet ownership, to which they attributed an improvement in their own emotional, social and physical well-being. The chief beneficial qualities/characteristics associated with their pets and pet ownership included emotional closeness, protection, and source of motivation. In many instances, the qualities identified by the participants align with Weiss' provisions of social relations (1974). Weiss offers six specific criteria as necessary for wellbeing and essential for adequate adjustment. These provisions include: *attachment, guidance, social integration, reliable alliance, opportunity for nurturance, and reassurance of worth*. Weiss' social provisions are woven throughout this discussion to offer a framework for understanding the impact these pet relationships offer to a homeless pet owner's psychological well-being.

***Pet companionship as source of emotional closeness.*** The social provision of *attachment* was reflected by many of the participants' accounts, displayed in the emotional closeness participants felt and described about their pets. Participants were asked to respond to several questions that focused on dynamics of the relationship they share with their pets. These

dynamics included: 1) what their pet needed, 2) how the pet was helpful, and 3) how taking care of a pet was challenging. When speaking about their pets, participants used words of attachment, such as referring to their pets as “companions.” Pets were sometimes described as a part of the owner (for example, “my soul”), and other times as “more than just a pet.” Pets were sometimes described as “best friends” or “family,” illuminating the sense of belonging, or *social integration*, that participants felt about their companionship with their pet. For many participants, the relationship they shared with their pet was an integral part of their survival and source of reciprocal expression of unconditional love. Occasionally during interviews, participants would offer their suggestions for what their pet might tell them in response to their circumstances to validate and reassure owners during challenging times, reflecting Weiss’ *reassurance of worth*. One participant described this kind of mind-reading communication as talking with the wise and loyal “Jiminy Cricket.”

***Pet companionship as source of emotional and physical protection.*** Participants also conveyed appreciation for their pet’s ability to provide both emotional and physical protection from hardships. In many instances, pets provided warmth, were credited with reducing stress, and helping in trauma recovery. Participants would remark on the *reliable alliances* that they shared with their pets, feeling assured that their pets could be counted on in times of stress. More than half (N=7) of the sample reported transitioning into homelessness with their pets, reflecting a reciprocal dedication pets shared with their owners in caring for each other so long as one is able, as seen through the eyes of participants.

***Pet companionship as source of motivation.*** For many in the study, the relationships they shared with their pets offered a source of motivation to care and be cared for. Participants often reported that caring for a pet allowed them the *opportunity to nurture* their animal, and

their pet the opportunity to offer love, affection and unconditional acceptance in return. Also conveyed in participant responses, and in keeping with findings of previous research (Rew, 2000), participants' self-care and ability to adhere to a healthier lifestyle seemed to improve as a result of the desire to provide pets with adequate care. Some participants consciously avoided alcohol or substances, while other participants increased their daily exercise as a means to meet the needs of their pets. Participant also reported that having a pet improved interpersonal relationships, often encouraging more pleasant and warm interactions with others.

**Pet companionship as a challenge in the context of homelessness: inability to provide care, fear of loss, and emotional dependence.** In contrast to the predominantly positive attributes of pet ownership were the challenges participants reported in the form of fears of inability to provide care essential to their pet's wellbeing, and fears associated with pet loss. Several participants indicated that they often provided care to their pets before they cared for themselves, corresponding to findings in previous research (Kidd & Kidd, 1994; Singer et al., 1995; Hart, & Zasloff, 1995). The potential for self neglect and/or neglect of pet needs, raised concerns for several participants regarding the ethics of caring for a pet in such circumstance.

Participants also expressed intense distress associated with the fear of loss of their pet, acknowledging their emotional dependence on this relationship. This dependence may have reverberating effects on the well-being of the pet companion, as well. Cain (1983) has written on pet companions' natural empathic tendency in response to their owner's distress that has been shown to manifest in physical symptoms during critical periods. While no participants mentioned pets' display of empathetic symptoms per se, many participants identified their pet's empathetic aptitude as key to their mutual connection and to the owner's wellbeing. The ability of participants to recognize the potential problems associated with pet ownership during periods of

homelessness, for themselves as well as their pets, is a new finding, with implications for practice as discussed below.

**Navigating the homeless service system: A long and arduous road.** Many participants recommended developing services that addressed pet needs, and mentioned the helpfulness of previously offered services that had enhanced their ability to provide care for their pets. Many participants named VET SOS as a key resource among others that they had utilized, and many perceived San Francisco as having reasonably good resources for pets of the homeless. Many participants, however, also described the experience of navigating the homeless service system on their own and their pet's behalf, as a lengthy, unhelpful, and arduous process.

The chief complaints about the services available for themselves and their pets pertained to the lack of affordability, accessibility, and systematic preventative approach to service delivery. The most recommended services included veterinarian care, food, therapy, and transportation. Participants emphasized the importance of pet and pet-friendly services, recognizing these as a doorway into accessing other needed services. The ability to certify pets as “service animals” as well as services aimed at accessing such certification, was recognized by several participants as most advantageous, providing unmatched access to essential services (mainly, housing) for themselves, accompanied by their pets. Similarly recommended by Burt et al. (2010), several participants recommended that programs model themselves after agencies such as VET SOS that successfully use creative approaches, such as on-site services, to meeting the needs of homeless individuals. Overall, participants advocated for resource improvements to protect the companion animal-human bond.

## **Implications of Key Findings for Practice, Policy, and Research**

Previous studies have suggested that trauma related to the experience of homelessness is both reducible and preventable. Such studies have called for more and well-crafted research that examines the unique psychological effects of homelessness (Goodman et al., 1991). The findings of the present study touch upon the unique psychological effects of homelessness, focusing on the resilient assets of individuals as well as of the relationship shared between a homeless individual and a companion animal. Findings indicate that the relationship between owners and companion animals leads to many positive results regarding the wellbeing of the owner, and suggest the need for development of services that support the companion animal-human bond.

**Practice implications.** In view of a general lack of awareness in the profession regarding the effects of the companion animal-human bond (Risley-Curtiss, 2010), this study's findings point to the overall importance of an increased understanding among members of the helping professions, of the nature, potential benefits, and challenges of animal companionship for homeless people.

The finding of perceived benefits of pet ownership for individuals experiencing homelessness argues for interventions that provide more effective ways to support the bond between companion animal and owner. For example, particularly in areas with a high density of population experiencing homelessness, clinicians could advocate for the creation of active outreach services to homeless people with companion animals, provision of veterinary care, shelters that allow companion animals, and help for individuals to obtain service animal certification. Furthermore, required in-service and/or continuing education curriculum for social workers and supporting staff who work with this population could include content regarding the special needs of homeless pet owners, the resources that may exist to help them, the possible

ethical concerns that may accompany their unique circumstances, and the range of approaches and interventions aimed at addressing issues specific to this population. Agency-based as well as social work program curriculum could also include content and/or courses touching upon the emotional bond that occurs between pet owners and pet, enhancing and deepening social worker awareness and understanding of the impact of owner emotional dependence on the companion pet relationship. Lastly, social workers could act as social justice advocates for services for homeless individuals with animals by contributing to efforts on the local state and federal level to create policy that protects the animal-human bond.

**Policy and program implications.** Several implications for future directions in policy and program development can be drawn from participant reflections about the specific needs and personal experiences associated with living homeless with a companion animal.

During interviews many participants offered their thoughts about mainstream services, including how services might be expanded to support the owner-pet relationship and incorporate a consideration of the relative benefits of protecting the bond between individuals and companion animals. Among recommendations was the suggestion that policy and program development consider the structural and eligibility barriers that many of the participants identified as challenging in acquiring services. Further, participants voiced the importance of incorporating the feedback of homeless pet owners' into policy and program design, particularly their thoughts and insights regarding the needs of this population, and areas for improvement in program and accessibility of services.

A common recommendation among participants was that programs design themselves after agencies such as VET SOS or other successful programs. To accomplish this task, agencies involved in providing services to homeless pet owners might showcase and highlight their

services to other agencies looking to expand or discover creative and thoughtful approaches to offering such services. For example, VET SOS has successfully involved volunteers with diverse sets of skills in the provision of services; their experience in this regard would be valuable information for other agencies to learn. Traditional homeless services looking to expand their efforts to homeless pet owners might gain from collaborating or partnering with veterinarian school; such design would offer care to the pets of homeless clients as well as opportunities for valuable fieldwork experience to veterinary students. Efforts to collaborate and/or partner with other services strengthen and weave a web of resources, decreasing the frequency of individuals slipping through the cracks and hitting “rock bottom.”

Participants discussed the challenge of obtaining help for themselves or obtaining permanent housing that allows pets due to the risk or demands of finding their pet a caretaker while they attended scheduled appointments. To permit time for owners to complete such tasks, a possible service that homeless service agencies might consider is a respite service for pets that must be separated from their owners for brief periods of time so that owners can have more opportunity to seek assistance and explore resources.

Programs need adequate funding for the provision of resources to provide more effective services. The implications of findings for policy development include the need for advocacy efforts underlining the importance of investing in the protection of the companion animal-human bond as an effective preventative measure. Such efforts can highlight the potentially buffering effect that this relationship may bestow on homeless pet owners exposed to trauma associated with homelessness. Investing in services that support the positive effects of this relationship can represent ultimate cost-savings at the federal, state and local levels, as the physical and mental

health improvements resulting from pet ownership may help prevent the use of expensive resources such as emergency room visits.

**Implications for research.** The findings of this exploratory study point to the need for continued and expanded knowledge development pertaining to the relationship shared between homeless owner and companion animals. In this regard, studies should incorporate the perspective of those most impacted by circumstances surrounding pet ownership and homelessness. This could include the homeless population with pet companions, the homeless population that has given up or lost a pet due to homelessness, and service providers who work with the homeless population.

Weiss' social provisions in past research were surmised as predictors to adaptive responses to stress. This raises the question as to whether homeless pet owners experience less stress than homeless people without pets. The relationship of adaptive responses to stress to the companion animal-human bond represents a fruitful area for further research. A longitudinal design would offer the opportunity learn more about the long-term effects of animal companionship on individuals experiencing homelessness, as well the differences in experience and outcomes over time, between those homeless individuals with companion animals and those without.

An unanticipated finding was the number of participants (N=7) who indicated that they had transitioned into homelessness with their companion animal. The literature on trauma indicates that pets may act like a transitional object, buffering against hardships experienced during stressful periods such as moving or going through a family divorce (Rew, 2000; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). This finding speaks to the need for further research utilizing a trauma theory lens to examine the role played by pets during owners' transition into homelessness.

One barrier for moving forward in developing pet friendly homeless services has been a lack of research that accurately captures the prevalence of pet companionship, and/or desire for same, among the homeless population. Homeless pet owners are rarely mentioned in national statistics and may be underrepresented in surveys conducted in settings that do not permit pets and/or permit only certified service animals. Research is needed that can more accurately quantify pet ownership among the homeless and expand on exploratory study of the relationship of pet ownership and pet-friendly policies or program design to the amelioration of trauma related to homelessness.

### **Study Strengths and Limitations**

There were several evident strengths in study design and methods. A qualitative design was selected in order to elicit participant in-depth personal understandings and perspectives about the experience of homelessness as a homeless pet owner. Interview questions were open-ended and the interview was conducted in person. This method of data collection provided participants the opportunity to expound on descriptions of their situation, and provided the researcher the opportunity to offer probes for further clarification and refinement of participant responses. Situating the study within the context of a clinic site also provided strength to the interviews because participants often interviewed with their pets in a familiar and therapeutic milieu. Utilizing an agency that uniquely serves this population as a recruitment site proved to be strength of the study in permitting a valuation of such services from the consumer perspective.

There were also several limitations. The use of a small convenience sample from one agency limits the generalizability of study findings to a larger population of homeless pet owners. The use of semi-structured, in-person interviews ran the risk of contributing to bias in participant response based on their perceptions of what the interviewer may have wanted or

expected from participants. Clinic staff were directly involved in recruitment, introducing possible bias in sample selection. Lastly, participants were all voluntary users of a service specifically focused on the needs of pet companions. Therefore, their responses reflect to some degree the perspective of individuals who choose and are able to make use of services on behalf of their pets; in addition, their perspective may also be reflective of diminished stress that may accompany the provision of supportive services.

## **Conclusion**

With continuing financial hardships caused by the present economy and the growth in the number of people living in poverty, homelessness is projected to increase in the coming years (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2011). The social work profession will continue to play a major role in service delivery and advocacy on behalf of the current and newly homeless population. The perspective of homeless individuals regarding the experience of homelessness and the services required to address needs generated by their condition is key in preparing the profession for this important role.

For the participants who offered their experiences for the purposes of this study, homelessness has been an arduous and distressing experience. While most participants relayed this message, they also similarly voiced the feeling that to survive such hardships one must try to sustain as positive an attitude as possible. Each participant relayed that their companion animal was key in their ability to maintain a positive attitude, sensing that their pet provided them with companionship, unconditional love, and affection. When recommending desired resources, participants consistently offered suggestions that supported the companion animal-human bond. These findings call for the expansion of services to meet the needs of homeless pet owners and their pets, as well as research that informs such services by accurately describing the prevalence

of homeless pet ownership and further examining the impact of the relationship shared between animal and owner and specific needs of this population.

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APPENDIX A  
Informed Consent Form

Dear VET SOS Client,

My name is Erin Brewbaker, and I am currently a social work master's student at Smith College School for Social Work, working on my master's thesis. The focus of my research is to explore the experience of people who are homeless and who are owners of pets who travel with them. The findings of my research will be included in my thesis and possibly in future presentations and publications, including those of the San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium/Veterinary Street Outreach Services.

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are over the age of 18, are currently experiencing homelessness, and care for a companion animal. I am asking you to voluntarily share your personal opinion and perspectives on the topic of being a homeless pet owner. For the purpose of describing the sample of participants and to explore possible associations with the information collectively gathered, I will be inquiring about age, race, gender, education level, marital/ partnership status, and past home location. Interviews can last up to 45 minutes. I will be tape-recording the interviews for the collection of data for my final master's thesis.

Interviews inquire about personal experiences of homelessness, a subject that for some may raise some emotional discomfort or stress. I will provide you with list of references, among which are local numbers and locations that provide service that may be relevant to your needs, and that is yours to keep.

Your opinion, unique personal experiences, and knowledge are important to many. By participating in the study, you will have the opportunity to contribute to increased understanding of services involving pet companionship that will be useful to administrators of outreach teams, shelters, and other services targeting homeless individuals. Further, your participation can contribute to the development of social and serviced-related policies that take into consideration the relative benefits of protecting the bond between individuals and companion animals. In appreciation for your participation, I will provide each participant with a \$10 gift card to Petfood Express immediately following the conclusion of our interview.

If you choose to participate, every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your identity and responses. Due to the methods of recruitment, complete confidentiality may not

be possible; however, beside myself, only the VET SOS project and my research advisor will have access to the interview data and they will be able to view the data *only* after all identifying information has been removed. If any publications or presentations result from this research, participant names will not be used and the data will be included in summary form. If a quote from a participant response is used to illustrate a point, it will be disguised to protect participant privacy. I will store original data and informed consents in a secure location within a locked file for three years according to Federal Guidelines. SFCCC will provide the same protection and compliancy to Federal Guidelines in maintaining de-identified research data within the VET SOS office. When material is no longer needed, all material will be destroyed.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to decide whether or not to participate in this study and if at any time during the course of the study you wish to withdraw, this in no way changes your relationship with VET SOS, now or in the future. If during or after this interview, until April 1, 2012, you decide to not participate in this study you are free to end your participation. After April 1, 2012, your input will be a permanent part of this study.

If you choose to withdraw, please contact VET SOS at (415) 355-2248, who will inform me of your decision to withdraw. Any concerns about your rights as a research study participant or any aspect of this study can be addressed directly to the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subject Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES that you have read and understand the above information, and that you have had an opportunity to ask questions about THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, and YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Date:

Participant signature:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Date:

Student signature:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**PLEASE KEEP A COPY OF THIS AGREEMENT FOR YOUR OWN RECORDS**

Thank you for your time and participation in this study. **If for any reason you wish to contact me about the study, you can reach me at** [REDACTED]

APPENDIX B  
Agency Media Consent Form  
**Media Release Form**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, authorize San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium to make video, audio, still images, or recordings and to use, publish and/or post in print or electronically these media for any promotional or educational purpose, as deemed appropriate by SFCCC and, with SFCCC permission, the people and/or agencies with which it collaborates.

I consent to the use of my likeness, voice, quotes, and any teaching or presentation materials for such purposes, and release SFCCC's officers, agents, and employees from all claims of liability with respect to showing, use or dissemination of such material.

I understand that my authorization is completely voluntary and optional, and that participation or non-participation in video, audio, still images, or recordings does not in any way impact eligibility for or delivery of services.

**Print Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**E-mail:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Authorizing Signature**  
(Parent or Guardian, if not legal age)

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of SFCCC Representative**

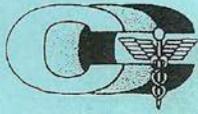
\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

**Physical Description of Person/People in Photo/s:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Physical Description of Animal/s in Photo/s:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Clinic Site/Location of Photo/s:** \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C  
Referral Sources



SAN FRANCISCO  
COMMUNITY CLINIC  
CONSORTIUM

COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS

HEALTH CENTER

**Curry Senior Center (CSC)**

Location: 333 Turk Street, SF, CA 94102  
Phone: (415) 885-2274 Fax: (415) 885-2344  
Website: [www.curryseniorcenter.org](http://www.curryseniorcenter.org)  
Hours: By appointment: Mon-Fri 9am-Noon; 1pm-5:00pm;  
Drop-in: Tue 1pm-2pm, Fri 9am-11am  
Fees: Fees according to services; Medicare, Medi-Cal, S.F. Health Plan, & other insurance plans accepted; No one will be denied services based on an inability to pay  
Target Population: Seniors 55 & older  
Languages: Spanish, Mandarin, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Loatian, Russian

**Glide Health Services (GHS)**

Location: 330 Ellis, 4th Floor, SF, CA 94102  
Phone: (415) 674-6140 Fax: (415) 673-1037  
Website: [www.glide.org](http://www.glide.org)  
Hours: Mon-Wed 9am-5pm, Thurs 1pm-5pm. Drop-in care on a triage basis, arrive 30 minutes before formal hours  
Fees: Free Services provided; Medi-Cal; sliding fee  
Target Population: Low-income & uninsured San Franciscans, generally between 18 & 64. All welcome  
Languages: Spanish & Tagalog

**Haight Ashbury Free Medical Clinic (HAFMC)**

Location: 558 Clayton Street, SF, CA 94117  
Phone: (415) 487-5632 Fax: (415) 431-9909  
Website: [www.hafci.org](http://www.hafci.org)  
Hours: By appointment & drop-in: Mon-Wed 8:45am-8pm; Thurs 12:15pm-8pm; Fri 12:15pm-5pm  
Fees: Free Services provided; Medi-Cal; sliding fee  
Target Population: Low-income & uninsured San Franciscans, generally between 17 & 64. All welcome  
Languages: Spanish & Sign (by prior arrangement)

**Lyon-Martin Women's Health Services (LMWHS)**

Location: 1748 Market Street, Suite 201, SF, CA 94102  
Phone: (415) 565-7667 Fax: (415) 252-7512  
Website: [www.lyon-martin.org](http://www.lyon-martin.org)  
Hours: Mon 11am-7pm; Tue 9am-5pm; Wed 11am-7pm; Thurs 1pm-5pm; Fri 9am-5pm. Call for appointment  
Fees: Sliding fee scale; Medi-Cal, Medicare, S.F. Health Plan  
Target Population: Women & transgender people (MTF, FTM) 18 & older, especially those who are low-income, people of color, lesbian or bisexual, HIV positive, and/or older  
Languages: Spanish

**Mission Neighborhood Health Center (MNHC)**

Location: 240 Shotwell Street, SF, CA 94110  
Excelsior site: 4434 Mission Street, SF, CA 94112  
Phone: (415) 552-3870 Fax: (415) 431-3178  
Website: [www.mnhc.org](http://www.mnhc.org)  
Hours: Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri 8am-5:30pm, Wed 10am-5:30pm  
Excelsior: Mon-Fri 8:30am-Noon, 1:30pm-5:30pm  
Fees: Sliding Fee Schedule, based on income & family size; Medi-Cal; Medicare; Private Insurance, Healthy Families, S.F. Health Plan. Medi-Cal, Medicare, & Healthy Families application assistance available  
Target Population: Emphasis on Latino clientele. All welcome  
Languages: Spanish, limited Tagalog & Cantonese interpreters available

**Mission Neighborhood Health Center; Resource Center**

Location: 165 Capp St., SF, CA 94110  
Phone: (415) 869-7977 x1001  
Hours: Mon 10am-Noon TB testing only. 2pm-5pm, Medical Services Drop-in; Tue & Thurs 9am-Noon & 2pm-5pm, Medical Services Drop-in.  
Fees: No fee Medi-cal, Medicare  
Target Population: Emphasis on Latino clientele. All welcome  
Languages: Spanish

**Native American Health Center (NAHC)**

Location: 160 Capp Street, SF, CA 94110  
Phone: (415) 621-8051 Fax: (415) 621-3985  
Website: [www.nativehealth.org](http://www.nativehealth.org)  
Hours: Mon-Fri 9am-5pm by appointment  
Fees: Sliding Fee Schedule, Medi-Cal; Medicare; Healthy Families; S.F. Health Plan, Private Insurance  
Target Population: Native Americans & the Mission district community. All welcome

**North East Medical Services (NEMS)**

Locations: Chinatown/North Beach Clinic - 1520 Stockton Street, SF, CA 94133  
Visitation Valley Clinic - 82 Leland Ave., SF, CA 94134  
Sunset Clinic - 2308 Taraval, SF, CA 94116  
Phone: (415) 391-9686 Fax: 433-4726  
Website: [www.nems.org](http://www.nems.org)  
Hours: Chinatown/North Beach, Visitation Valley & Sunset Clinic - Mon-Fri 8:30am-Noon, 1-5pm; Sat 9am-Noon, 1pm-4pm by appointment  
Fees: Fees are based on a sliding scale; Medi-Cal, Medicare, Healthy Families, Healthy Kids, Homeless, S.F. Health Plan, private insurance accepted  
Target Population: The Asian community from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. All welcome  
Languages: Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin), Vietnamese, Korean, Burmese

**Saint Anthony Free Medical Clinic (SAFMC)**

Location: 105-107 Golden Gate Ave., SF, CA 94102  
Phone: (415) 241-8320 Fax: (415) 241-8322  
Website: [www.stanthonyssf.org](http://www.stanthonyssf.org)  
Hours: Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri 8am-Noon, 1pm-4:30pm; Wed 8am-Noon.  
For drop-in care on a triage basis, line forms 30 minutes prior to open  
Fees: Free  
Target Population: Homeless, low-income, uninsured, 55 & under, children, residents of San Francisco. All welcome  
Languages: Spanish, Chinese (Cantonese), Mien, Vietnamese, Lac, Thai, French, Russian, Hindi, Gujarati

**San Francisco Free Clinic (SFFC)**

Location: 4900 California Street (at 11th Ave.), SF, CA 94118  
Phone: (415) 750-9894 Fax: (415) 750-1966  
Website: [www.sffc.org](http://www.sffc.org)  
Hours: Mon-Thurs 10am-Noon, 1:30pm-4:30pm;  
Fri 10am-Noon, 1pm-4pm  
By appointment only, call between 1pm-4:30pm Mon-Fri.  
Fees: Free for uninsured patients only  
Target Population: Uninsured San Franciscans, with a large patient population of Asians and Russian immigrants. All welcome  
Languages: Translation for both Cantonese & Mandarin available

**South of Market Health Center (SMHC)**

Location: 551 Minna Street, SF, CA 94103  
Senior Health Center: 317 Clementina Street, SF, CA 94103  
Phone: (415) 626-2951; Dental: (415) 626-2380 Fax: (415) 626-1096  
Website: <http://www.sfccc.org/sfcccclinics/smhc.htm>  
Hours: Mon-Thurs 8am-5pm; Fri & Sat 8am-3:30pm; By appointment & drop-in  
Fees: Fees based on a sliding scale & Medi-Cal, Medicare, S.F. Health Plan, Farm Pact, Healthy Families & private insurance are accepted.  
Target Population: Low income residents of the South of Market & Tenderloin areas. All welcome  
Languages: Tagalog, Spanish, Chinese (Cantonese), Farsi, Russian Interpreters available.

**Street Outreach Services (SOS)**

Location: Mobile Medical Van  
Phone: (415) 355-2222; VET SOS: (415)355-2248; Fax: (415) 355-9960  
Website: [www.sfccc.org](http://www.sfccc.org)  
Hours: For SOS Van routes and suitcase clinic information, please call or visit our website  
Fees: Free  
Target Population: Homeless San Franciscans, and through VET SOS, their Companion animals.  
Languages: Spanish

*\*Due to demand, appointments may not always be readily available. Clinic hours may change.*

APPENDIX D  
Interview Questions

1. First I'd like to know a little bit about you...
  - a. What is your age?
  - b. What race or ethnicity do you identify with?
  - c. What gender do you identify with?
  - d. What would you say is your family/marital/ partnership status?
  - e. What is the highest educational degree or level you have completed?
  - f. Are you originally from the Bay Area? If not, in what general area did you reside prior to moving to this area?
  - g. How long have you been homeless?
  - h. Can you tell me what led you to your homelessness?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about your current situation?
  - a. Possible probe questions:
    - i. How would you describe your experience of being homeless?
    - ii. What are some of the challenges you have faced since becoming homeless?
3. Can you tell me about your experience of being homeless and having a pet?
  - a. Possible probe questions:
    - i. When did you start caring for your pet?
    - ii. Is this the first pet you've had?
    - iii. What are the needs of your pet?
    - iv. How has having a pet been helpful or challenging while being homeless?
4. As a pet owner, can you tell me about your experience with other people experiencing homelessness who may or may not be pet owners?
5. What services have been helpful or difficult during your time while homeless?
6. Based on your experience, what recommendations would you have for services that would be helpful to others in your situation?

APPENDIX E  
Human Subject Review Approval Letter



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

March 6, 2012

Erin Brewbaker

Dear Erin,

Your project is now officially approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee. Your responses were professional, very clear, and easy to follow and the denoted comments also made the process easy. Thank you.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Best of luck with your work!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David L. Burton', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Beth Lewis, Research Advisor

APPENDIX F  
Agency Approval Letter



**San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium**

1550 Bryant Street, Suite 450 • San Francisco, CA 94103 • Phone 415/355-2222 • Fax 415/865-9960 • www.sfccc.org

December 13, 2011

Smith College  
School for Social Work  
Lilly Hall  
Northampton, MA 01063

To Whom It May Concern:

San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium (SFCCC) and Veterinary Street Outreach Services (VET SOS) has reviewed the proposed study materials and gives permission for Erin Brewbaker to locate her research in this agency, pending Smith College Human Subject Review approval. We do not have a Human Subjects Review Board and, therefore, request that Smith College School for Social Work's (SSW) Human Subject Review Committee (HSR) perform a review of the research proposed by Erin Brewbaker. SFCCC and VET SOS will abide by the standards related to the protection of all participants in the research approved by SSW HSR Committee.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ilana Strubel".

Ilana Strubel, DVM  
VET SOS Project Coordinator

APPENDIX G  
Memorandum of Understanding

**Memorandum of Understanding between  
San Francisco Community Clinic Consortium/  
Veterinary Street Outreach Services (SFCCC/VET SOS)  
and  
Erin Brewbaker, Master's Student  
Smith College, School for Social Work**

**Summary of Project:**

Erin Brewbaker is conducting research for a Master's thesis. The research explores the experiences of homeless people with pets, examines the day-to-day reality of pet ownership while homeless, and extracts themes that reflect their personalities and the development of relationships with their pets. SFCCC approves VET SOS participation in this research under the following conditions:

**Erin Brewbaker Agrees To:**

- 1) Accompany VET SOS on 3-4 pre-arranged VET SOS clinic days to interview VET SOS clients who express interest in participating.
- 2) Conduct and record up to 15 individual, face-to-face interviews with participating VET SOS clients for 15-45 minutes each, using researcher-submitted and SFCCC-approved research questions.
- 3) Provide each VET SOS client with a \$10 gift card to a local pet food/supplies retail store immediately following completion of his/her interview.
- 4) Respect the confidentiality of all VET SOS clients by not using or discussing any non-research-related VET SOS client information outside the operation of VET SOS or without the client's written permission.
- 5) Refrain from the following behaviors with VET SOS clients:
  - Providing &/or accepting money or gifts, other than approved gift cards for study participation;
  - Engaging in photography of any kind;
  - Accepting an "ownership" role of animals (e.g. providing boarding, financial support, etc) &/or releasing animals to someone who is not the animal's designated owner;
  - Maintaining contact outside the context of pre-approved VET SOS clinics for any purpose.
- 6) Ensure that research is approved by and meets the standards of the Smith College's Institutional Review Board.
- 7) Provide a timely summary of VET SOS client interview results and a copy of the published thesis to SFCCC for its use, crediting SFCCC/VET SOS, staff, volunteers, and clients for their participation in research where appropriate.

**SFCCC/VET SOS Agree To:**

- 1) Provide an appropriate history and context of SFCCC, SOS, and its VET SOS project for approved research as appropriate.
- 2) Facilitate access to up to 15 pre-approved VET SOS clients on 3-4 pre-arranged clinic days for individual, face-to-face interviews of 15-45 minutes each, using author-submitted and SFCCC-approved research questions.
- 3) Obtain written consent from each VET SOS client on a pre-approved SFCCC media consent form prior to interviewing.
- 4) Ensure that VET SOS clients understand that participation in research is completely voluntary and optional, and that participation or non-participation does not in any way impact eligibility for or delivery of VET SOS services.
- 5) Maintain copies of completed consent forms in VET SOS files, to be made available to SFCCC's Development Department as needed.
- 6) Credit Erin Brewbaker and Smith College, School for Social Work as appropriate when research data is used for SFCCC/VET SOS purposes.
- 7) Provide appropriate volunteer accident/injury insurance coverage during pre-scheduled VET SOS clinic days/times.

**Timeline:**

The time line for this project is 4 months, beginning January 1, 2012 and ending April 30, 2012.

**Ownership:**

All information gained from VET SOS clients, including data and quotes, are for the aforementioned thesis project only (& for no other purpose) and must be pre-approved by SFCCC prior to submission for other publication. SFCCC retains the rights to all VET SOS client data and quotes, after all project-related identifying information have been removed.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Allen Meyer  
Vice President, Programs  
SFCCC

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Erin Brewbaker  
Researcher, MSW Student  
Smith College, School for Social Work

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Beth Lewis  
Faculty Advisor  
Smith College, School for Social Work