

HELPING PEOPLE AND ANIMALS TOGETHER

**TAKING A TRAUMA-INFORMED,
CULTURALLY SAFE APPROACH
TOWARDS ASSISTING PLACED-AT-
RISK PEOPLE WITH ADDRESSING
ANIMAL NEGLECT**

JUNE 2021

Acknowledgments

This report has been made possible by funding from the Government of British Columbia's Ministry of Agriculture through their Canadian Agricultural Partnership initiative. We thank them for their support of this project. The views expressed in this report do not reflect the views of the funders.



We would also like to thank the Animal Welfare Foundation of Canada and the Vancouver Foundation for supporting this project as a whole, particularly in its next steps, which will be an online training course informed by the findings of this report.



We are truly grateful for the 28 participants involved in this project. Thank you for sharing your invaluable stories experiences, reflections, and ideas. The recommendations within this report are grounded in your stories, and we thank you for helping to make the world a better place for humans and animals. The opinions expressed by the interview participants for this report are their own. However, any errors are the responsibility of the Vancouver Humane Society.

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ISBN: 978-1-7775005-1-1

Published in Vancouver on the stolen, unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish) & sel̓ilwítulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

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PROJECT TEAM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While people from all walks of life enjoy the companionship of animals, a person's ability to meet their animal's care needs can vary based on their life circumstances. People who have been placed-at-risk by structural and systemic barriers and discriminations often experience a lack of access to sufficient services, resources, and opportunities for caring for their pets. Often, these individuals have also faced different traumas during their lives, including trauma when accessing services from settler-led charities and governments.

To those who observe a human-animal relationship without an understanding of the context, placed-at-risk peoples' animal care can appear to be neglect or even abuse.

In situations of surrender or seizure of a pet that is labelled as neglected, the current practices in the animal services sector have the potential to re-traumatize people and their pets by focusing on breaking up the human-animal relationship rather than addressing the root of the issue. This can lead to a cycle which protects some animals but puts humans and future animals in their care at greater risk. In addition, workers in the animal services sector who continuously see this trauma cycle and situations of animal suffering often experience negative mental health impacts.

This report provides recommendations for improved training, changes to practices, and policy suggestions for the animal services sector, which encompass both trauma-informed and culturally safe practices. It shares learnings from other fields that apply trauma-informed practices, such as the mental health and child protection fields.

In order to best understand the current context and how these learnings can be applied to the animal services sector, the report uses data collected through interviews with trauma-informed social service workers, animal services workers, and people from across Canada who have had negative experiences with animal services.

The interviews highlighted several themes prevalent in the current system, including:

- a lack of training for animal services staff;
- people accessing services feeling unsupported;
- a lack of cultural understanding and respect of Indigenous communities;
- the need for more accessible and non-triggering language;
- a lack of transparency of processes;
- a lack of collaboration with other social sectors and agencies;
- inadequate mental health supports for animal services staff; and
- a lack of formal oversight of organizations engaged in removing animals from communities.

The interviews highlighted a recurring theme of the current system's top-down, reactive approach modelled after colonial systems. This has led to a distrust of services and increased stress for animals, animal guardians, and workers in the sector.

The interviews in this report also reveal positive practices used within social services sectors. Best practices in sectors already using trauma-informed approaches include:

- a strengths-based approach;
- a non-judgmental approach;
- healthy mental wellness policies;
- meeting a person where they are at; and
- building trusting relationships.

These practices are transferrable to the animal services sector and can be used in conjunction with positive practices already being used in the sector; namely, supportive and respectful follow-up, clear communication, and finding commonalities with people and communities.

Based on the interviews and learnings from other sectors, this report lays out the following best practices to implement a trauma-informed and culturally safe approach:

1. Implement a trauma-informed approach: understand triggers; use accessible language; employ transparency in processes; centre a person's voice and choice; meet the person where they are at; challenge biases; use a strengths-based, non-judgmental approach; and employ cultural sensitivity.
2. Update practices to ensure cultural sensitivity: build trusting relationships with communities (particularly Indigenous communities); have a cultural and historical understanding of communities; and implement a cultural sensitivity training policy.
3. Move away from a 'surrender first' model by building an outreach-first and prevention-based model: practice community collaboration, including by increasing outreach service provision; have knowledge of available resources and services; formalize networks to better provide resources to people accessing animal services; and implement a community engagement policy.
4. Address staff experiences of compassion fatigue and burnout: recognize compassion fatigue and burnout in staff; prepare staff for high-stress situations, model mental health practices in leadership roles; practice debriefing or other healing practices with coworkers, community members, or oneself; offer culturally appropriate counselling and mental wellness activities during work hours; and implement an improved mental health policy that encompasses culturally appropriate mental health resources and activities.

The findings from this research will be used to create free online training courses for staff and leadership in the animal services sector, addressing these best practices in order to improve outcomes for animals, their guardians, and animal services workers.

01

INTRODUCTION

Like most sectors, the animal services sector[■] is focused on the well-being of those it serves, including their health, safety, and emotional well-being. Some services have always been focused on people and pets, such as reuniting lost animals with their guardians. However, some services have historically been solely focused on the animal's well-being without regard for the guardian.

This approach of focusing on the animal's well-being without regard for the guardian is reactive, rather than prevention-based. An animal that is removed because the guardian cannot afford or access veterinary care, for instance, might end up in a home that has more resources; the animal might also experience poor mental health consequences from the trauma of that transition and the loss of an important relationship. At the same time, the guardian who could not afford veterinary care may experience the trauma from the loss of their companion animal. They might get another animal, with the same cycle repeated.

The traumatic consequences of this cycle can be avoided.

This report will share insights from other service fields about how to apply trauma-informed practices to animal services work. It will also highlight, through interview-collected data, the lived experiences of individuals working in the social and animal services field. People who required assistance from animal services agencies and were impacted by the absence of trauma-informed services were also interviewed and shared their experiences. The information gathered from these interviews, including stories and quotes, are made available to provide perspective for animal services workers.

- For the purposes of this report, animal services includes animal rescue and transport, animal welfare and sheltering, animal protection and enforcement, and animal bylaw enforcement

The findings from this research project will be used to create a training course with modules relevant to various job types and roles within the sector, which will be available for free online. The online training course will be reviewed by academic and Indigenous experts to ensure that the training is culturally safe and appropriate. With collaboration from the sector, we will all work to prevent animal neglect from a trauma-informed position.

The aim of this report is to provide all of us within the animal services sector an opportunity to do better for the animals and people we serve, leading to better outcomes for everyone.



We invite readers to reflect on the following questions, and to use these as a 'guide' while reviewing this report:

- Who else needs to read this report in my workplace?
- Can the report be broken down into sections and delegated amongst leaders in my organization?
- With which communities or groups can we collaborate in developing trauma-informed and culturally safe practices in our organization?
- Can a meeting with leadership in my organization be set up to discuss the learnings from the report and the corresponding action steps?

Why is this research important?

The animal welfare movement exists within the broader context of the social welfare movement (García Pinillos, 2021; Hawes, Hupe, & Morris, 2020). People, for a variety of reasons, experience trauma and the related negative consequences. Marginalized communities are placed at higher risk of trauma due to discriminatory social and systemic structures, including employment, economic, and health inequalities, alongside racism and social exclusion. These structural conditions create vulnerabilities such as



barriers to service access (housing, healthcare, stable employment), which results in further marginalization.

We have embraced the term ‘placed-at-risk’ to collectively refer to individuals and groups who are marginalized, recognizing that the vulnerabilities and risks are structurally rooted and often not within the control of the individual. Placed-at-risk populations include people experiencing pervasive poverty (poor nutrition, homelessness), people who use drugs, people experiencing mental health challenges, people who may be geographically isolated from services (rural or remote communities), and people dealing with current or past trauma (such as situations of domestic violence, intergenerational or cultural trauma). These individuals co-exist with domestic animals as companions, protectors, and mental health supports (Irvine, 2013; Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; Lem, Coe, Haley & Stone, 2013).

In Canada, there is an overrepresentation of Indigenous people among marginalized and at-risk groups (Arriagaga, Hahmann, & O’Donnell, 2020; NCCAH, 2017a); this is a product of the colonial history and continued discriminatory attitudes in Canada. Indigenous peoples are overrepresented in Canada’s criminal justice system (Malakieh, 2020; Moreau, Jaffray, & Armstrong, 2020) and among precariously housed and homeless groups (NCCAH, 2017a), and have poorer health outcomes (Turpel-Lafond, 2020). We discuss more about the impacts of colonialism below.

The Humane Society of the United States explains that resource inequity and a lack of access to pet services are social justice issues[■] as they are both caused by systemic poverty and discrimination by organizations and businesses (institutions). For example, information about pet care and access to veterinary services is often unavailable to residents in underserved communities.

Ly et al. (2021) note that “owner-related issues”, such as cost and housing, are common reasons for the relinquishment of companion animals to animal shelters. These facts point to the importance of engaging with pet guardians with patience, absence of judgment, and an understanding of the specific barriers of people in placed-at-risk communities when it comes to meeting the needs and improving the lives of the animals they care for.

Placed-at-risk people provide care for animals with their limited resources, which can lead to rationalization of neglect and relative normalization of harm to the animals.

However, the homeless youth discussed in Lem et al. (2013) argued that their dogs were happier, more socialized, and enjoyed more freedom living rough on the street than dogs who lived in homes and were always kept inside. These Canadian youth also reported feeding their animals before themselves, and prioritizing the well-being of their animals with what little resources they had (Lem et al, 2013). These experiences were echoed by the participants in Irvine (2013), who were also experiencing homelessness while caring for their pets.

■ social justice: refers to creating a fair and equal society where each individual matters, their rights are recognized and protected, and decisions are made in ways that are fair and honest.

¹One Welfare is an organization based in London, UK.

²These elements are adapted from a healthcare service context, but are still applicable to other service sectors.

The current practices in the animal services and sheltering field include removing neglected animals from placed-at-risk people through legal apprehension warrants (seizures) and coached surrenders. This focus solely on the animals is a reactive approach to animal neglect which, while making a difference in the life of one animal, does not improve the person's well-being or that of subsequent animals in their care.

This research sets out to answer the question: **What changes can be made to prevent the re-traumatization of placed-at-risk people and improve their well-being, while also encouraging and promoting the long-term protection of animals in their care?**

What is One Welfare?

The idea of 'One Health' has been discussed in the field of animal welfare. It recognizes that social systems providing services to people are interrelated with animal welfare systems. According to Arkow (2015), more than 1,000 publications recognize that animal neglect is linked to human health and safety and is worthy of a multi-disciplinary professional response. The term 'One Welfare' has emerged, which acknowledges these interconnections between animal welfare, human well-being, and the environment (onewelfareworld.org, n.d.; García Pinillos, 2021).



One Welfare (credit: onewelfareworld.org)

In practice, One Welfare seeks to improve animal welfare in order to improve human well-being (and vice versa), coordinate actions between animal services and other social services, and protect the environment as a fundamental step for both human and animal welfare (National Farmed Animal Health and Welfare Council [NFAHWC], n.d.).

In the context of the current research, a One Welfare approach calls attention to the ways in which relationships between companion animals and humans contribute to well-being. A positive relationship with an animal can lead to positive physical, emotional, and social impacts (Jordan & Lem, 2014). These human-animal bonds are important in supporting the intersecting physical and mental health concerns among placed-at-risk individuals in Canada. Research also shows that placed-at-risk individuals are very attached to the animals in their care and these animals motivate positive behaviour change in their caregivers (Irvine, 2013; Jordan & Lem, 2014).

Why is a culturally safe approach necessary for the animal services sector?

A service environment that is culturally safe recognizes and respects the cultural identities of others without challenging or denying a person's identity, who they are, or what they need (Turpel-Lafond, 2020). A culturally safe service environment is physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually safe (Turpel-Lafond, 2020). In this report, we recognize that a culturally safe environment embraces all cultural identities, including newcomers to Canada, established multigenerational communities, and Indigenous peoples.

The First Nations Health Authority [FNHA] (2018) explains that a culturally safe approach supports an environment that is free of racism and discrimination, where people feel safe receiving supports. Further, this approach develops and maintains respectful, reciprocal relationships with people accessing services based on mutual trust. People who work for organizations that aim to implement a culturally safe approach should continuously reflect on personal and systemic biases in order to maintain respectful and trusting relationships with people accessing services.

Key elements of a culturally safe approach include:

- Recognizing the role of history, society and past traumatic experiences, and their impacts on shaping a person's health, wellness and service experiences;
- Workers' self-reflection on their own assumptions and positions of power;
- Humbly acknowledging oneself as a life-long learner when it comes to understanding another person's experience;
- Understanding that we cannot assume we know about another person's cultural experience, including that culture is an important part of a person's identity and is important to discuss in relation to service contexts;
- Developing an awareness of how workers' own cultural experience shapes their perspective; and

- Recognizing that every person is the expert on their own unique experience (FNHA, 2018).

Cultural safety is intrinsically linked with a trauma-informed approach because it takes into account the trauma that a person may have experienced in their life, including intergenerational trauma, interpersonal trauma, historical trauma, cultural trauma, and racial trauma (Poole et al., 2017).

Turpel-Lafond (2020) explains that:

Colonizers are groups of people or countries that come to a new place or country and steal the land and resources from Indigenous peoples, and develop a set of laws and public processes that are designed to violate the human rights of the Indigenous peoples, violently suppress the governance, legal, social, and cultural structures of Indigenous peoples, and force Indigenous peoples to conform with the structures of the colonial state. (p. 3)

On the land that is today known as Canada, Western settlers forced assimilation upon Indigenous peoples through language, disease, and imposition of European cultural beliefs and values in institutions like residential schools. The history of colonization lives on today in the forms of intergenerational trauma, systemic poverty, and discrimination. For example, during the writing of this report in May 2021, the remains of 215 children were discovered on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential school site on the Tk'emlups te Secwépemc First Nation, triggering continued grief, anger, and rage at the ongoing impacts of colonization. Turpel-Lafond (2021) notes that this devastating news is “a too-common unearthing of the legacy, and enduring reality, of colonialism in Canada” (para. 1).

The ongoing effects of colonization have a detrimental impact on the availability of animal services in Indigenous communities, and contribute to the lack of respect by some animal services agencies who work with and in Indigenous communities. A culturally safe approach recognizes the continued traumatic impact of these actions.

Through the interview process, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of what trauma looks like in accessing animal care services, including trauma related to colonial practices.



What was the purpose of this project?

Three factors are involved when providing services to people with animals at risk of or presently experiencing neglect: the well-being of the people accessing animal services, the animals they care for, and the animal services worker. People who require assistance from animal services have often experienced trauma in their lives, which can affect their service provision experience when a worker does not understand the reactions that can occur because of trauma.

Workers in the animal services field also face particular workplace stressors that can cause them to experience trauma. The combination of these can result in negative effects on the person accessing animal services, the worker, and the animal.

Given these issues, the intent of this project is to provide tangible learning opportunities for the animal services sector resulting in a One Welfare, culturally safe, and trauma-informed service delivery approach. The following questions guided the research:

1. What are the current practices in place related to the surrender and/or seizure of animals for reasons related to neglect?
2. What are the impacts of these current practices on both service workers and people who require assistance from animal services?
3. What changes need to be made in order to improve the current practices?
4. What recommendations can be made to animal services agencies/workers to be used for training purposes and to improve related policies?

02

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is a trauma-informed approach?

In order to understand a trauma-informed approach, it is important to understand trauma. Trauma can be defined as “an experience that overwhelms an individual’s capacity to cope” (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction [CCSA], 2014, p. 1).

Traumatic experiences can affect one’s sense of safety, self-efficacy, and ability to regulate emotions and navigate relationships. It is also common for those who have experience trauma to feel fear, shame, helplessness, and powerlessness (CCSA, 2014).

Klinik Community Health Care Centre (KCHCC), based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, developed a Trauma-Informed Toolkit (2013) which explains that a trauma-informed service provider, system or organization does the following:

- Realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential ways for healing;
- Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in staff, persons accessing animal services, patients, residents, and others involved in the system; and
- Responds by incorporating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices and settings

When systems or organizations are trauma-informed, they “provide for everyone within that system or organization by having a basic understanding of the psychological, neurological, biological, social and spiritual impact that trauma and violence can have on individuals seeking support” (p. 16). Trauma-informed services also “recognize that the core of any service is **genuine, authentic and compassionate relationships**” (p. 16). When an agency or organization utilizes a trauma-informed approach, the workers embody the values of a trauma-informed approach as well.

In order for an organization to support a trauma-informed approach when working with people and their pets, trauma-informed practices should be embedded throughout all levels of the organization (Poole et al., 2017). This requires “leadership, policies that set clear expectations for trauma-informed approaches, professional development of all staff, a focus on worker wellness, and interagency collaboration” (p. 10).

KCHCC (2013) notes that the core principles of a trauma-informed approach are:

- acknowledging that trauma is pervasive;
- safety;
- trust;
- choice and control;
- compassion;
- collaboration; and
- using a strengths-based approach.

KCHCC also suggests practices for integrating trauma-informed principles into organizational policy:

- focusing on the power and control of the person accessing services;
- doing with and not doing to;
- explaining what, why, and how;
- flexibility; and,
- offering real choices (p. 17).

Makokis and Greenwood (n.d.) note that there are challenges that organizations can face in aiming to become trauma-informed. These include internal challenges like organization readiness (e.g., leadership practices), internalized oppression, and marginalization. There are also external challenges such as a willingness to find and try new approaches and hesitance to challenge the status quo (Makokis & Greenwood, n.d.).

Why is a trauma-informed approach beneficial and necessary?

Trauma-informed approaches are necessary because trauma is widespread and much more prevalent than one may think. Individuals “who have experienced trauma are at risk of being re-traumatized in every social service and health care setting” (KCHCC, 2013, p. 6, as cited in Makokis & Greenwood, n.d.). The risk of re-traumatization applies outside the realm of social services and health care as well; however, it is within the boundaries of service provision that individuals should feel safe and supported. A trauma-informed approach is the foundation for this safety.

Taking a trauma-informed approach does not mean that an organization has to be focused on treating the symptoms of trauma. Instead, it means that **the main commitment is to provide services in a way that is both welcoming and appropriate to the needs of those who are affected by trauma** (Harris & Fallot, 2001, as cited in KCHCC, 2013).

A key benefit of trauma-informed practices is that they create an environment where the potential for further traumatization or re-traumatization is lessened, and where people can feel safe within their service experience (Poole et al., 2017). **Trauma-informed practices allow individuals to build self-efficacy (belief that they can succeed) and resilience (ability to recover well from difficult situations), and provide opportunities for choice-making and collaboration** (Poole et al., 2017).

Trauma-informed practices are also beneficial for workers implementing the services. **The safety of workers is an aspect of a trauma-informed service approach**, meaning that this approach promotes awareness of the stress and trauma that workers may experience, utilizes staff education and coaching, and incorporates other policies or activities that support workers' self-care (Poole et al., 2017).

Why is a trauma-informed approach beneficial for animals?

Implementing trauma-informed practices is not only beneficial for guardians, but for the animals in their care as well. Because of the nature of a trauma-informed approach, a person who has access to trauma-informed services is likely to feel better supported, safer, and more open to learning about resources that benefit the animals in their care. Furthermore, a person is more likely to take advice and instruction about the needs and well-being of the animal in their care if the service interaction is positive and non-judgmental. A trauma-informed approach for humans allows for the opportunity to improve living conditions for animals.

The compassion, understanding, and communication inherent in trauma-informed practice creates a pathway to open communication. In this light, people who have experienced trauma-informed care



from an organization may be more likely to reach out for or accept help before a situation becomes harmful for the animals in the event that they face challenges in the future.

With a trauma-informed approach, people who work in the animal services field will be better able to recognize and respect the bond of the animal to the human. As animals grieve the loss of relationships and experience stress from unexpected situations (Tedeschi & Jenkins, 2019), this adds the animal's perspective to the list of priorities.

Trauma-informed care for Indigenous peoples

In Canada, there is a lack of culturally competent mental health services of adequate quality, as well as inadequate access to these services (Kumar & Tjepkeme, 2019).

An article written by three Indigenous authors who are “licensed marriage and family therapists and citizens of state and federally recognized tribes in what is now the United States” (Lewis et al., 2018, p. 331) explores how to decolonize mental health services for Indigenous peoples. The authors suggest that many “mental health professionals are ill-equipped to work with Indigenous families” due to:

- lack of knowledge about the population;
- use of stereotypes and bias from mainstream culture;
- lack of training in and out of graduate school; and
- language used to discuss mental health that relies on settler-colonial belief systems, which are directly in contrast with the belief system of many Indigenous families (Gone, 2007, 2008, 2010; Wendt & Gone, 2012, as cited in Lewis et al., 2018).

Lewis et al. (2018) suggest that training programs that identify colonial practices and promote decolonized practices are “essential to the provision of culturally sensitive and appropriate care for Indigenous people” (p. 331). They recommend training programs that “increase knowledge of and empathy for Indigenous people and culture” in order to improve services for Indigenous peoples (p. 330). Training programs should be grounded in cultural competency, cultural humility, and decolonialism.

Cultural competency involves:

- understanding one's own culture and the culture of others (specifically those being served);
- being aware of one's own biases and assumptions about others;
- making an effort to correct biases and understanding of how biases can interfere with providing the best services; and,
- learning specific skills needed to practice ethically and effectively with culturally diverse people.

Engaging with cultural humility means using continuous self-reflection and critique to create partnerships with people accessing services and communities (rather than authoritative relationships), where their own knowledge, values, and ways of being are favoured (Hook et al., as cited in Lewis et al., 2013).

The authors suggest following Rincón's (2009) model of cultural humility which has six main components:

- engaging in self-reflection and self-critique that includes analyzing biases and assumptions;
- understanding that no culture is better than another;
- admitting when we do not know about the culture or context of people accessing services;
- seeking out knowledge and resources about the contexts of people accessing services;
- seeing the person as the expert on their own culture, values, and beliefs; and
- place assumptions aside.

A cultural humility model encourages workers to ask the person who is accessing services about their contexts and experiences. This model can provide a more reciprocal relationship between the worker and the person accessing services, where both parties share their contexts and experiences to establish a common ground and promote a culturally safe space. It is important to have personal “working knowledge of the histories of various marginalized groups, above and beyond the narratives in dominant society” (p. 333).

Applying a framework of cultural safety involves:

- criticizing and challenging colonialism;
- legitimizing and embracing Indigenous knowledge;
- understanding the traditions and practices of different cultures; and
- having the historical and present-day knowledge about the effects of colonialism necessary to analyze and critique it.

Learning about the history of Indigenous peoples is incredibly important to service delivery as it allows for:

- understanding the current barriers to accessing resources and services;
- challenging biases and stigmas; and
- employing understanding and accountability.

Lewis et al. also note the importance of understanding historical trauma as a means to better understand Indigenous people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. This involves understanding intergenerational trauma and the lasting impacts of the residential school system ■ .

■ Residential schools in Canada were established by Western colonizers to forcibly assimilate Indigenous children, who were taken from their communities, into European values, language, religion, and culture. Indigenous children were not allowed to speak their language and forced to deny their heritage. Many Indigenous children were subjected to physical, mental, and sexual abuses. The traumatic impacts of the residential school system on survivors as well as the extended traumatic impacts on Indigenous families and communities continue today. For additional information on residential schools, please see https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_residential_school_system/.

By understanding intergenerational trauma, service providers can:

- learn how to be more compassionate and collaborative with people accessing services;
- challenge their own beliefs and attitudes which can often prevent workers from creating healthy and safe working relationships with people accessing services; and
- develop genuine and authentic relationships with people accessing services who have experienced trauma, which includes fostering safety, compassion, respect, kindness, and trust.

KCHCC (2013) also provides many relevant suggestions for organizations on how to work with Indigenous peoples and communities using a trauma-informed approach:

- strive to be culturally appropriate and informed;
- understand how the person views their trauma from their own cultural perspective;
- understand what healing means to the person within their cultural context;
- become involved in the cultural community that is being served; and
- work through historical distrust, as issues might exist from past services that negatively affect seeking new services (Brokenleg, 2008 , as cited in KCHCC, 2013).

Where are trauma-informed approaches currently implemented?

As detailed in the above section, trauma-informed approaches are often used within mental health and counselling services (see Muskett, 2014). Knowledge about trauma-informed practices is also being used to improve the design of service systems within the health and social services sector.

Social service organizations that work with people who use alcohol and drugs often implement trauma-informed practices (see Nathoo et al., 2018). People who are accessing treatment for substance use often report “overwhelming experiences of trauma”, and often the use of substances is a means to help the person cope with trauma-related stress (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction [CCSA], 2014, p. 1)⁴.

To facilitate meaningful change and healing, treatment providers aim to ensure their services:

- are emotionally and physically safe;
- create opportunities for learning;
- build coping skills; and
- offer opportunities for practicing choice and control (CCSA, 2014).

Another social service sector that has begun to embrace a trauma-informed approach is child protection (see Johnson, 2014; Fraser et al., 2014; Akin et al., 2017). Practicing trauma-informed care in this sector is essential, as it is vital to ensure that the child is not further traumatized during the processes

⁴Originally authored under the former organization name ‘Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse’.

of investigation, removal, and re-homing by the system that is helping them (Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services, n.d.).

Because of this, it is essential that child protection workers are able to recognize trauma and provide early and appropriate interventions for both children and families who have experienced child abuse and neglect. Further, it is suggested that trauma training should be introduced from the beginning of each staff member's employment in order to work towards effective trauma-informed practices (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020).

Yet another example of the importance of implementing trauma-informed practices has been discussed in the context of Indigenous peoples (see Linklater, 2014; Makokis & Greenwood, n.d.), recognizing that Indigenous peoples' experiences are rooted in multigenerational, cumulative, and chronic trauma, injustices, and oppression. The effects of these traumas can persist through individuals, families, communities, and entire populations, resulting in intergenerational trauma and ongoing inequalities (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health [NCCA], 2015).

Other sectors where trauma-informed approaches have been utilized include:

- the nursing field (see Isobel & Edwards, 2017);
- social services for survivors of abuse and violence (see Lewis-O'Connor & Alpert, 2017); and
- social services for people experiencing homelessness (see Prescott et al., 2008).

What are burnout and compassion fatigue, and what is their connection to trauma?

A trauma-informed approach to services is essential in helping workers and employers understand the interaction between trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout.

Workers who provide services to emotionally distressed or traumatized individuals very often empathize with others' suffering and want to relieve it. This empathy is vital in building trust, but it can also have negative effects. One of these effects is compassion fatigue[■] (Figley, 1995). Hearing about others' trauma can cause symptoms of compassion fatigue, such as avoiding tasks to reduce exposure to suffering, being on edge, feeling fearful, and viewing the world more negatively (Figley, 1995). Compassion fatigue has been reported in social workers and psychologists (Craig & Sprang, 2010), nurses (van Mol et al., 2015), child protection workers (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006), and animal services workers (Figley & Roop, 2006; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017).

Everyday workplace stressors can also affect a worker's health and functioning. Such stressors include daily hassles, inadequate staffing levels, deadlines, and a high work-

- **Compassion fatigue/secondary traumatic stress:** The emotional exhaustion and reduced compassion that may result from chronically using empathy when helping those who are suffering (Berzoff & Kita, 2010; Newell et al., 2016). It is sometimes referred to as secondary traumatic stress.

load. Repeatedly facing these stressors with limited personal or workplace resources often leads to feeling overwhelmed. The outcome of this is called burnout[■].

The main symptoms of burnout are:

- emotional and physical exhaustion;
- cynicism or feeling detached from one's job;
- a reduced sense of accomplishment; and
- feeling inadequate (Maslach, 2003).

Burnout and compassion fatigue can occur together (Cieslak et al., 2014). For example, compassion fatigue can lead to traumatic stress symptoms that reduce a worker's ability to cope with workplace stressors, increasing the risk of burnout. Both are associated with negative effects on the worker and the workplace such as depression, a desire to leave work, reduced work performance, job dissatisfaction, errors, and absenteeism (Peters, 2018; Salvagioni et al., 2017).

Animal services workers experience many workplace conditions that put them at risk of developing compassion fatigue and burnout. Several workplace stressors are often inherent to this field, such as large caseloads, emergency calls, aggressive animals, challenging interactions with people requiring animal services, and environmental hazards (Figley & Roop, 2006). Workers repeatedly witness the suffering of both animals and people.

An animal's seizure or relinquishment can be a traumatic process for the guardian, worker, and animal. Due to limited resources or lack of available training, workers might receive inadequate support to help them cope with these emotional demands. In addition, workers may also find themselves providing support to colleagues in distress.

The few studies that have examined compassion fatigue and burnout in the animal services field suggest that these are areas of concern (Kogan et al., 2020). For example, a survey of 1,000 shelter workers and caregivers found that 68% were at a high or extremely high risk of compassion fatigue, while 18% were at a similar risk for burnout (Figley & Roop, 2016). Compassion fatigue was also found amongst animal services workers in Taiwan (Wu, 2020). Coulter and Fitzgerald (2016) highlighted multiple working conditions of animal services workers in Ontario that contributed to negative mental health, compassion fatigue, and burnout.

It is important for workers to recognize symptoms such as exhaustion, reduced empathy, traumatic stress symptoms, and cynicism, and how these might affect themselves and their relationship with people accessing services (BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council, 2013). For example, workers might attempt to reduce their trauma symptoms by avoiding people accessing services (Bourassa, 2009). These reactions can interfere with a worker's ability to provide an emotionally

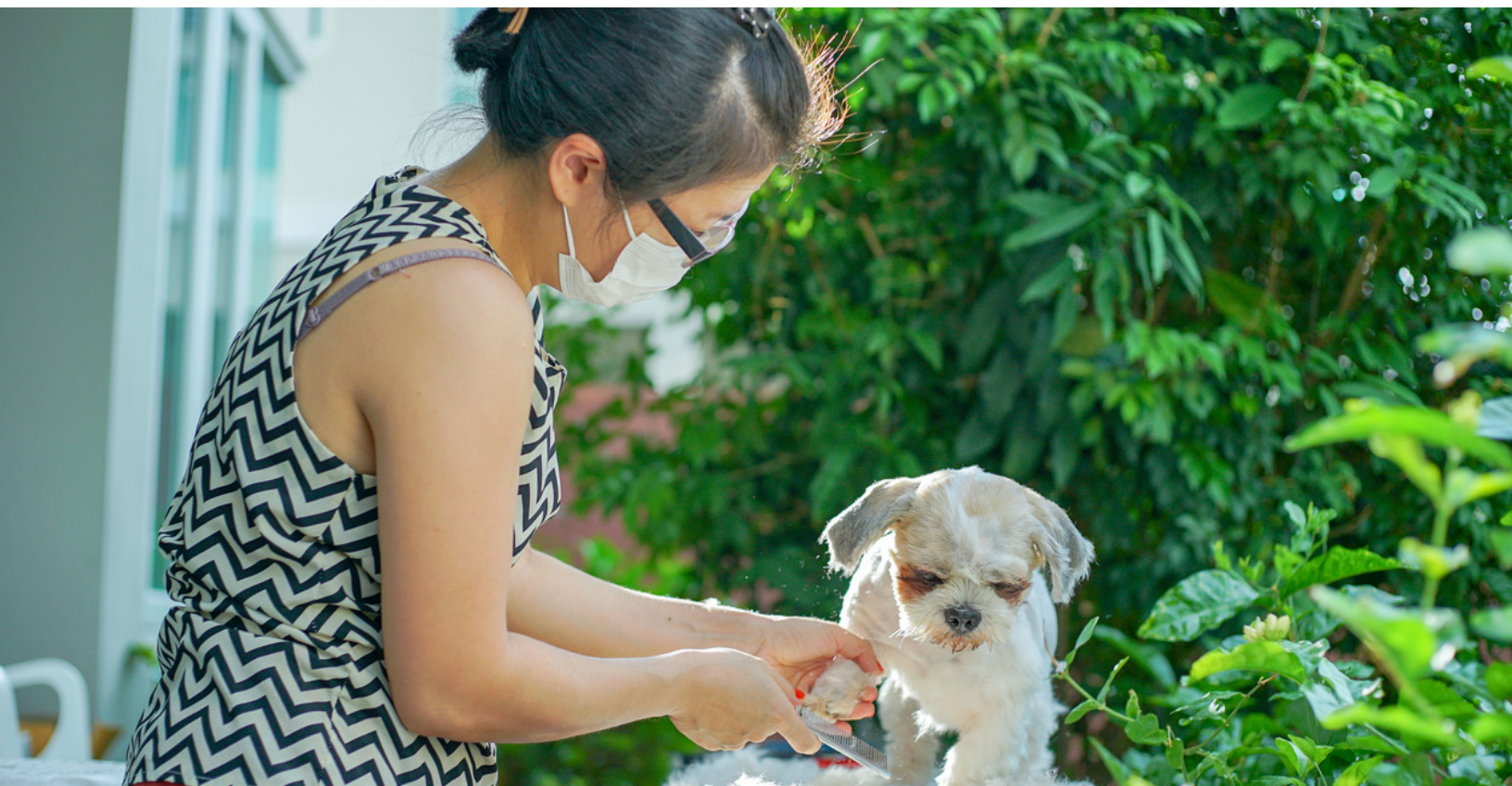
■ **Burnout:** Occupational burnout results from chronic work-related stress, with symptoms characterized by feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job, feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job, and reduced professional efficacy.

safe environment, increasing the risk of the person accessing services being further traumatized and compromising animal safety.

Summary: What is the research gap and why does the animal services field need to incorporate trauma-informed practices?

Before the compilation of this report, little to no research had been conducted on the animal services sector's approach to animal seizure and surrender practices. Research allows for the animal services sector to update service delivery models and provide support to employees that improve both human and animal well-being.

The outcome of the current and most common service delivery approach is that placed-at-risk people are re-traumatized and new animals are acquired with the same neglect issues presenting. There are multiple points within service delivery in the animal services field where traumatization can occur for both workers and people requiring assistance from animal services. Among other benefits, an update to service delivery models will improve the well-being of workers and people accessing services, and promote the long-term care, safety, and protection of animals.



03

DATA COLLECTION

By conducting interviews, we wanted to better understand animal services agencies' current surrender and seizure practices, the lived experiences of people who have gone through these processes, and how trauma-informed practices are utilized in other sectors. The data collection plan outlined below was approved by the Thompson Rivers University Research Ethics Board.

Who was interviewed?

We interviewed a total of 28 participants for the project, consisting of:

- 11 workers in the animal services sector who have experience with surrender and/or seizure of animals
- 9 workers in different sectors that already implement trauma-informed practices in their work
- 8 people with lived experience of surrender and/or seizure of animals, or negative experiences with an animal services organization

We spoke to people from 6 different provinces and 20 different communities within Canada, and from a total of 16 unique organizations. The ages of the participants ranged from 26 to 59.

The interview participants were asked about the primary race/ethnicity with which they identified as a way to gain a better understanding of who our participant sample was made up of. We share this information to provide context to the quotes we share below, and we used the language that the participants used to describe themselves. The participant groups identified with the following races/ethnicities:

- Workers in the animal services sector

- ◆ 1 person identified as **Mixed** (9%)
- ◆ 10 people identified as **White** (91%)
- Workers in trauma-informed sectors
 - ◆ 3 people identified as **Indigenous** (including First Nations or Aboriginal) (33%)
 - ◆ 6 people identified as **White** (67%)
- People with lived experience
 - ◆ 1 person identified as **Latinx** (12.5%)
 - ◆ 2 people identified as **Indigenous** (25%)
 - ◆ 1 person identified as **Métis** (12.5%)
 - ◆ 3 people identified as **White** (37.5%)
 - ◆ 1 person identified as a **Settler** (12.5%)

We share this demographic information here, and with the quotes below, as a means to provide transparency and context to the participant groups and their lived experiences. No further demographic information is shared in order to protect the participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

The interview participants were found through Facebook ads, a media release, a news article, related social media posts, targeted emails, and word-of-mouth; all promotional communications invited potential participants to contact us if they were interested in the study. Social media posts and targeted emails were used to seek animal services and trauma-informed workers, where potential participants were invited to contact us if they were interested in the study. Facebook ads, a media release, a news article, and social media posts were used to seek people with lived experience of surrender or seizure, where potential participants were also invited to contact us if they were interested in participating in the study.

All participants provided free and informed consent before the interview began, and were told that they could withdraw from the interview at any time during the interview, and up to 15 days after the interview. Each participant received a gift card valued at \$50 CAD for their participation. Further, participants were given the option to review the transcript of their interview to decide whether they would like to remove or add any information. Participants were provided with information about the research project before the interview began, were given the opportunity to ask questions or address concerns, and were told at the outset of the interview that they were welcome to skip questions and take breaks throughout the interview given the nature of the topics of discussion. Further, participants were given the option at the end of the interview to receive a list of mental health resources, which included culturally appropriate resources, in the event that the interview brought up any difficult emotions. Please see Appendix C for the list of mental health resources.

For an overview of the questions that were used to guide the interviews, please see Appendix A. While participants were not involved in the development of the interview questions, the interview guide was

flexible, allowing for the participants to shape the interview based on aspects they found important to share.

What was the participants' role?

The participants engaged in phone interviews with the project's lead researcher. Interview length ranged from roughly 40 minutes to 3 hours. A loosely structured interview guide was used, which included specific questions but also gave the opportunity for participants to take the interview in whichever direction they felt was important. Hearing the lived experiences of people was critical to this project in order to learn about the real challenges that people face and the ways that they felt their experiences could have been improved.

Document collection

The initial research plan included the analysis of policy and procedure documents, such as operating procedures for conducting seizures and forms that the guardians sign for surrender of an animal. The intent was to analyse these documents for the language used and the type and framing of questions.

While the participants who worked in the animal services sector were asked if they were able to provide us with the documents they currently use for surrenders/seizures, we were only able to collect three documents from one organization, as most people were unable to share these documents without their organization's permission. Participants chose not to ask their organization, as in most cases, people participated in the research as individuals rather than as a representative of their organization. This number of documents was insufficient for analysis, and so we focused on the interviews for this phase of the research. Future research studies could consider incorporating document analysis as an additional area of interest by engaging organizations themselves in the research.

04

WHAT DID WE FIND?

Many themes emerge from reviewing the interview data. We summarize these themes below. The following sections provide interview quotes to add context and ideas for next steps.

The interview data demonstrates **challenges within the practices of the animal services sector**, which fit into the following themes:

- Challenges in the policies and practices within the animal services sector, including:
 - ◆ inadequate staff training;
 - ◆ people accessing services feeling ignored and unsupported;
 - ◆ a lack of cultural understanding and culturally respectful relationships;
 - ◆ an absence of accessible and non-triggering language;
 - ◆ a lack of collaboration, understanding, and communication between organizations providing social assistance; and
 - ◆ inadequate mental health supports for staff.
- Challenges in the public policies as they relate to the animal services sector, specifically regarding the lack of formal government oversight of the sector.

Four themes highlight the **negative impacts of the current animal services practices**:

- emotional impacts;
- social impacts (employment, financial etc.);
- burnout; and

- compassion fatigue.

Conversely, four themes were identified that **demonstrate best practices in the field of trauma-informed care**:

- using curiosity and a strengths-based approach;
- implementing healthy mental wellness policies and practices for staff;
- meeting a person where they are at and practicing non-judgment; and
- building trust and relationships.

In regards to **practices that are currently in place in the animal services sector that have a positive impact**, two themes surfaced:

- the importance of follow-up; and
- finding commonalities with communities.

We discuss these themes in depth below as well as quotes that participants shared with us.

Current challenges in the policies and practices of the animal services sector

Organizational practices

Theme: Inadequate staff training

Workers in the animal services sector indicated that their training processes need to be improved in order to reflect the nature of the work within the animal services field. Workers noted that customers can be aggressive and emotional, and that workers are often treated differently because of their gender. A worker in the animal services field who identified as Mixed race shared the following sentiments on the need for improved staff training:

"I just had a new staff that I hired, [they're] doing fantastically with everything admin...with everything CRM [customer relationship management] wise I have no problem with [them] being on [their] own, [they] did three weeks and I'm like, yeah, you can be by yourself, you do solid work, but [their] biggest stress right now is dealing with the public even though [they] come from a customer service role, like a strong service role. In [their] training [they've] probably seen a lot of situations where it might be scary for [them] because we do get clients who get aggressive. Like why can't you help me?... Why aren't you like doing things for me to help me out? I can see why [they] would be intimidated by trying to handle those situations. So...we've had the whole...training thing with [how to] be a good customer service representative, but I still don't think that it really prepares you for dealing with the sorts of situations we often find ourselves in."

(In regard to customer interactions) "There's a very good chance that they're going to react to me differently because I look like a man. So they might be very much more aggressive with [a female co-

worker]. I've had people grab my shirt like trying to get me to do what they want. Like they're going to hit me. I had a co-worker who, she almost got hit, the guy like geared up like he was going to hit her but she backed away. So we're not really getting a lot of training to handle a lot of these high-stress situations."

Theme: People accessing services feeling unsupported or ignored

Participants who had lived experience with surrender and seizure indicated that they felt unsupported and ignored by animal services workers in their interactions. One participant, who identified as Latinx, experienced the seizure of their animal and relayed the following about their interaction:

"...even though I would say I was the primary caretaker for the dog, it was not me that bought it but it was me that fed it and took care of it...they only spoke to my ex. They only talked to my ex and I remember actually being in the corner shaking and nobody, nobody talked to me.... I do love that animal and the fact that nobody even bothered check in with me...looking back I think that would have been a good thing checking in at least as to ownership or like what was going on or asking questions...none of that went on."

The exclusive focus on seizing the animal and the relative lack of concern for the humans contributes to the trauma of the situation for both the people and their pets. Participants with lived experience relayed that they often didn't feel heard, and that no one was listening to them.

Theme: Lack of cultural respect/understanding & relationship-building with cultural communities

In the interviews, many participants shared their thoughts on animal services organizations' relationships and interactions with the communities they work with, including Indigenous communities, expressing that there is a need for cultural and historical understanding and respect in order to have healthy, trusting, collaborative relationships.

It was shared that there was a lack of understanding about the relationship to animals that communities may have. One participant, who identified as Aboriginal, shared the following quotation regarding their experience with this:

Researcher: *[on dogs that are cared for collectively] "...that doesn't mean that it doesn't have somewhere to sleep or have somewhere to eat..."*

Participant: *"...in our community that actually was completely normal. We had dogs that would live with me for a month and then they would go to my auntie's house and live there and they are very well taken care of."*

One participant, who identified as Indigenous, shared the following quotation on how they felt their community was being portrayed regarding their relationships to companion animals:

"...our community was being vilified and [them] as dog owners were being vilified."

It was also expressed that organizations must understand that it takes time and effort to build respectful, healthy working relationships with communities.

“We’ve just been fiercely protective of our relationships...So there was a protection of those connections because...realizing how much it takes and how long it takes to actually build trust and respect and all those kinds of things and how quickly it can be swept away with some, you know, well-meaning yet harmful things [that animal services organizations do].” – Animal services worker who identified as White

“I think all agencies really need to understand that it takes time to build a relationship.” – Trauma-informed worker who identified as White

“...having someone in the community is always great.... I’m going to call them like Community Champions, someone that’s in the community and knows everyone and knows leadership. And has that relationship... knowing who that is and building that relationship I think is a really good approach because you’re not just kind of working from a top-down approach.... I think that if you are working with the community instead of going in and telling the communities how they should do things. I think that’s really the best way to go about it.” – Animal services worker who identified as White

► **Subtheme: The need for cultural respect/understanding & relationship-building with Indigenous communities**

It is important for animal services organizations to understand that Indigenous communities often have different relationships with animals in comparison to Western conceptions of animal care, but this does not mean that the animal is being neglected or mistreated. For example, one participant noted that in their community, they have “had many shared pets”. To an outsider coming in to the community, this could look like a dog roaming from house to house, but in reality, the dog is cared for collectively.

The issues expressed in the interviews are directly related to a lack of cultural respect, understanding, and collaborative relationship building.

One interview participant, who identified as Indigenous, described an experience in their community where dogs were taken from the community without consent:

“...a lot of these people [from rescue organizations] were coming in with that colonial mentality that they’re doing everybody a favour because they’re removing a dog, right? [But] they made a mistake and they took a dog that was owned.”

This participant explained that the rescue organization did not hold themselves accountable, apologize, or make changes to their interactions with the community in regard to rehoming animals. The participant also noted that rescue organizations often use problematic language when speaking or posting on social media about animals that were taken from Indigenous communities—for example, saying that an animal was ‘saved’ from a community and is ready for a ‘loving home’ implies that the animal was not loved or cared for in its previous home, which is not always the case.

Further, this participant shared their thoughts on the assumptions and biases that have been made about their communities:

“...the way people are treated, it’s kind of like how the media had to have their finger slapped, that every Indigenous woman that went missing they wrote ‘suspected sex worker’...the same kind of shaming thing happens when it comes to the community.”

(on animal services agencies making judgments about Indigenous communities) “...when people say, oh it doesn’t have anything to do with race...it does have a lot to do with race, but it might not be overt... But [people make] assumptions based upon their limited knowledge of the North and the limited knowledge of the community and the history of the community... And unless you’re looking at the community and the welfare of people and the welfare of dogs, and the services that people can access as a whole from a holistic point of view and taking all those things into consideration, then why are you blaming [Indigenous peoples]?”

This participant also pointed to the lack of understanding of the histories of Indigenous communities, including the historical and racial trauma that exists, and how animal services practices often reinforce these traumas:

“...[there is a] massive mistrust of authority and accountably so...if you don’t understand the history of the community, like history of trauma and loss in Indigenous communities...there’s a lot of things that trigger just in dealing with authority...unfortunately a lot of people in rescue don’t understand that and they also don’t understand the history of Indigenous communities.”

“...when it comes to losing things in a sense of loss...our community already has as a tradition of loss and a tradition of trauma because of residential schools, because of the Sixties Scoop, because of the Indian Act...when you take all these things and you add them up and you put them all together in one big pot and you say why are things the way they are?...I’m talking about a history of trauma and loss... I’m saying that [a rescue organization] coming to the community and taking a dog that belongs to a kid...is reminiscent to that [trauma and loss]. And it’s also adding layers of trauma.”

Theme: Need for more accessible & non-triggering language

Using more accessible and non-triggering language was another important takeaway that was found within the interview process. Both people with lived experience and workers in the animal services field expressed the importance of this practice.

An interview participant with lived experience, who identified as Indigenous, relayed their thoughts on how critical it is for animal services workers to understand what triggers might be specific to a community:

“...if you don’t understand the history of the community, [the] history of trauma and loss in Indigenous communities. There’s a lot of things that trigger just in dealing with authority.”

Other participants in the animal services sector echoed the importance of language and being aware of the impact of the terms that we use, such as surrender and seizure, and to consider alternative terms that are more understandable and less triggering.

Theme: Lack of collaboration, understanding, & communication among sectors & social services

We heard stories from both animal services workers and people with lived experience of surrender, seizure, or negative experiences with animal services that indicated a need for more collaboration, understanding, and communication among different sectors and social service agencies.

One participant, who identified as White, described their experience of having their animal rehomed by a social service agency without their permission while they were receiving treatment during a mental health crisis. The impact of this was detrimental to the participant's mental health, which already presented challenges. They explained that they were "devastated" and "in shock", calling the unconsented rehoming "such a huge loss". In regard to the social service worker they were working with, the participant said "it was unbelievable the way that they handled it". This participant had a confusing and traumatic experience with a social service agency, which they felt could have been improved by collaboration amongst social and animal services agencies.

This sentiment was expressed in other interviews as well; another participant, who identified as Indigenous, had a similar experience while experiencing unexpected homelessness:

"...we had our dog and [a] dog that [we] were looking after and I didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't even know how to get in touch with some place to stay.... I was completely oblivious and so then I ended up phoning a women's shelter and I said I got locked out of my house, I don't know where to go or how this happens...can I come and they said of course you can and I said, okay it's with my two daughters and two dogs. And they went oh, no, no, no you'll have to find someplace else for your dogs...."

When asked if there was anything that could have been done that would have been more helpful in that situation, the participant said the following:

"...like even one [night], like let me come and stay tonight and I'll figure it out tomorrow...It's now 10 o'clock at night and it's February and it's raining and cold and we're in the car and we can even keep our dogs in a kennel or something, like anything, anything...but it's not an option for us to surrender them."



Theme: Inadequate mental health supports for staff

The need for better mental wellness programs within organizations emerged many times throughout our interviews. Participants pointed to the need for a better understanding of the importance of mental health, time off, and the particular stressors of their work that require targeted interventions (e.g., sector-specific counsellors). Participants also noted that leadership is often lacking in setting an example and encouraging the use of wellness days and self-care practices.

“I definitely think that...all Humane Societies should have someone who works in mental health like on site” – **Animal services worker who identified as White**

“I just do feel like there could be better support systems in place for staff. For example, like the animal care workers. They are the bloodline of the shelter. They are going around cleaning, they’re going around changing supplies like they’re doing all of the hard work that other people don’t want to do and they are paid the least and they have the highest turnover rate. No protections. Things like that that kind of get under my skin.... So yeah, it’s not the people, [they] are great, the people do a good job they’re trying their best, but I do think that they’re missing a lot more changes in terms of the kinds of support available for us.” – **Animal services worker who identified as Mixed race**

Public policies

Theme: Lack of formal oversight of rescue organizations

The notion that animal rescue organizations should have more formal oversight was also brought up by interview participants, with one interviewee noting the following:

“The biggest thing is I honestly believe that rescues need to be regulated...there needs to be criteria set in place because otherwise anyone can hang your shingle up on the wall, call themselves a rescue and start fundraising.” – **Participant with lived experience who identified as Indigenous**

Negative impacts of current policies and practices in animal services sector



Content warning: This section reviews four themes, sharing quotations and experiences of participants. The topics of suicide, trauma, and abuse are mentioned in some of the quotes in these sections. We acknowledge that this may be triggering for some people. If you find it difficult or potentially traumatizing to review these quotations, we encourage you to move to the next section, called *“Current best practices in trauma-informed practice”*.

Theme: Emotional impacts

A significant theme that arose from the interviews was the long-lasting emotional impacts that the current practices in the animal services field have had on people. We found that workers in the animal services field and people with lived experience both experienced traumatic and negative emotional

impacts because of these current practices. Below, we share some participant quotations and discuss their implications.

► **Subtheme: Worker experiences**

As the reviewed literature illustrates, many aspects of animal services work can cause stress and trauma and result in negative emotions and impacts to mental health.

Participants described the uncertain nature of their work, and the difficulty of upholding empathy when continuously seeing neglected animals:

"...that's what I think is the hardest thing for us because...we're not gonna lose our empathy for animals, animals are why we do what we do, animals are not held to blame.... It is people that we lose empathy for. And I think that can become a problem especially if you're dealing with people who already have trauma.... I think we've all had trauma, right? But if we've lost our empathy for people, I don't think that's useful. The hardest thing for animal welfare work is losing your empathy for people"

— **Animal services worker who identified as White**

In reference to their first few years working in the animal services sector, one participant shared the following:

"...it's been a rollercoaster really. From all good to a lot of bad experiences too. A lot of things I didn't anticipate affecting me in the ways they did. I'm a very soft-hearted person to a degree but when it came to work with animals...I felt like I had already seen a lot...of pain and suffering on the human side as well as animal side, but that didn't really prepare me for what happened [in this role]"

— **Animal services worker who identified as White**

One animal services worker described a colleague of theirs who had to take leave from work because they had attempted suicide. They felt the difficult situations they experienced, including attending animal seizures, contributed to the colleague's decline in mental health. The participant explained that when the worker wanted to come back to work, the agency was unsupportive and dismissive, demonstrating a lack of mental health supports and understanding both during and after a work-related mental health crisis.

► **Subtheme: Experiences of people accessing animal services**

The participants we spoke to who had lived experience with animal services agencies expressed the lasting trauma and emotional impacts of their experiences, including the shame involved with surrendering their animals or having them seized.

"After the first seizure, I developed agoraphobia...that is the fear of going outside or [to] open spaces...you know, it's usually trauma-based...for me having gone to a fundraiser to adopt out cats and then come home to find out mine were taken created this anxiety that if I leave the house then [the] animals aren't safe...I still have my [redacted] dogs and there's still [redacted] cats in foster care...but once those animals are rehomed, that's it...so what the [animal services agency] has done...they have broken me. (crying) So once all the animals are rehomed, I can find homes for my [redacted] dogs. I hope to, in the future, to end my life. So that's what the [animal services agency] has done."

— **Participant with lived experience who identified as Métis**

“...it’s really hard. It’s not only really hard emotionally, but on the other hand, it’s also shameful to walk in [to an animal shelter]. If a person is willing to risk the shame and the judgment and the heartbreak that comes with that, they’re automatically demonstrating that they’re trying to do the right thing” –

Participant with lived experience who identified as Latinx

One participant we spoke to is a survivor of domestic violence. They described their experience of going to surrender their animal because the animal was also being abused and they wanted to keep the animal safe: *“I asked to surrender it and they asked me why and I explained that the cat [was not] safe.”*

After being told they had to pay a surrender fee, the participant explained to the worker that they were not employed and could not afford the fee: *“I didn’t have any money for the fee...I think it was 50 dollars or something...but you know that’s like a grocery shop. Well, I did not have it...at that time, I was basically not allowed money. So it’s just not something that I had in my pocket”*

The participant explained what the worker told them after they explained that they could not pay the fee: *“the [worker] was very insistent that from then on I will never be able to adopt another animal...and honestly it broke my heart.”*

In this situation, the participant loved their animal and decided to surrender the animal to protect them from a dangerous and abusive person, but felt that they were met with judgment and a lack of empathy: *“They didn’t treat me very well. They were quite rude, the tone of voice was quite jarring. The [worker] was quite intimidating and I did walk away crying”*

Other participants we heard from described their experience as “heartbreaking” and devastating, with one participant noting that “people’s hearts are...only reserved for people who aren’t on reserve,” pointing to the lack of empathy that often exists for Indigenous peoples and communities.

Theme: Social impacts (employment, financial, etc.)

Some participants expressed that the current practices of the animal services field had negative repercussions on their employment. One participant shared the impacts of their workplace trauma on their employment at an animal services organization:

“...the restrictions they’ve placed on me is that I cannot be exposed to animal trauma or the description or depictions of animal trauma ... so [the workplace] basically said well, then we’ve got nothing for [them] which you know, I still struggle with because ... I still have I think a lot of fire in my furnace in that area, but [the workplace], they didn’t come up with any options.” –

Animal services worker who identified as White

In this situation, the worker experienced trauma because of the nature of their work in the animal services sector, but they were unsupported by their workplace and despite wanting to go back to work, the workplace did not facilitate a trauma-informed return to the organization.

Theme: Burnout

The experience of burnout was found to be extremely common within workers in the animal services sector. Many participants discussed their experience with burnout, as well as a lack of support in deal-

ing with this. The following participant quotes demonstrate workers' experiences of burnout and how it affected them.

"...there were definitely moments where I felt like I don't want to go back. I don't want to continue doing it. And again I think if I ever stop working with [workplace] then that will be the reason." – **Animal services worker who identified as White**

"...it's a high workload, we're constantly getting requests for surrenders, assistance for owned animal treatments, strays, calls about people just needing public veterinary services... veterinary services are very expensive and not necessarily accessible for most people." – **Animal services worker who identified as Mixed race**

"I've seen burnout for us and it is scary. You know, we lost everybody...like all the volunteers [due to burnout]" – **Animal services worker who identified as White**

"...dealing with the cases that we deal with and just the volume of work in general definitely has led to a bit of burnout" – **Animal services worker who identified as White**

The following quote details that in this participant's experience, even talking about burnout and mental health was uncommon. When workers were referred to counselling services, their needs were not being met:

"I can remember when saying burnout was taboo...let alone PTSD or general anxiety or anything. None of that. It was taboo, there was nothing. Nothing. I think we had a couple of phone calls we could make to a counselling line, but what we did was so far beyond the skill sets of those counselors..." – **Animal services worker who identified as White**

The impacts of burnout on the organizations themselves were obvious through the participants' voices, from losing volunteers to the potential for losing the lives of staff members.

Theme: Compassion fatigue

Compassion fatigue was also experienced by workers in the animal services sector. The below quotes detail participants' feelings about compassion fatigue in the animal services field.

Researcher: *"...looking at the terms compassion fatigue and burnout, are either of those something that you've experienced with your work?"*

Participant: *"Yeah. Absolutely. I think it's kind of rampant...in our sector for sure."* – **Animal services worker who identified as White**

Researcher: *"...have you ever heard of the term compassion fatigue?"*

Participant: *"Oh, yeah. "*

Researcher: *"Is that something you feel like you've experienced with your work?"*

Participant: *“For sure...you always worry about the animals, right? 24/7...Like I see enough. I see it repeats on the news, it repeats on social [media]... I just want to turn it off...a lot of my fatigue comes from that...because I deal with a lot of things on my own like when I do see a seizure or whatever, you know for five days I cry”* — **Animal services worker who identified as White**

Mental health in general was a topic that many participants who worked in the animal services field noted as an area in need of attention, specifically noting the pressure to minimize or hide any mental health concerns.

Researcher: *“...Is there anything in place right now, any policies or anything in place right now? So if someone was feeling burnt out or having compassion fatigue and they dealt with something particularly difficult at work. Are they able to take a mental health day or...does any direction about that come from leadership? Or is that a place that has room for improvement?”*

Participant: *“Yeah, it’s definitely room for improvement for sure. Not to my knowledge. I don’t think we could just take a mental health day or a lieu day, I think we would have to take a sick day and whether or not we disclosed what it was about obviously is up to us...and I wouldn’t really say leadership really makes that obvious or makes it known or really provides other alternatives, maybe because they’re also still trying to figure it out. I’m not quite sure.”* — **Animal services worker who identified as White**

“I think it’s important to talk about...I think we hide how bad our mental health is in the organization.”
— **Animal services worker who identified as White**

Current best practices in trauma-informed practice

Workers in different sectors that center trauma-informed approaches shared with us many best practices that are utilized in their fields, and are applicable to the animal services sector.

Theme: Curiosity & strengths-based approach

Participants who use trauma-informed practices in their work noted that they use curiosity in asking the person accessing the service questions and identifying what strengths they have. The idea of using a ‘strengths-based’ approach was noted by participants as a means to find out what supports the person might have, what has worked in the past for them, and focus on these strengths to help them.

“We’re starting with that curiosity. So what’s been going on for you, and then moving to really strengths-based reframing and looking for strengths to build off of rather than focusing on the negative deficit stuff.” — **Trauma-informed worker who identified as First Nations**

“...[using] those sort of strength-based questions about if you know, [was there] a time before COVID [when there was someone] who supports you and who helps you when...you’re going away for a night and your dog needs to stay home. Like what does that look like for you? What’s happened in the past? Is that still an option for you? Could that person play a larger role now, all of those questions.” — **Trauma-informed worker who identified as First Nations**

The participant went on to explain:

“There’s a very classic tool that’s used in trauma-informed practice...so instead of asking a lot of ‘why’ questions which can be threatening or perceived as confrontational, like why did you do that, so approaching that more from ‘what’s happened for you that made you make that decision’, which is reframing the question instead of accusing...[for example] you’ve walked into a disheveled house, ‘there seems to be a lot going on for you, can you spend a minute talking about what that is right now?’”

Theme: Healthy mental wellness policies & practices

Many participants that work in sectors with trauma-informed approaches indicated that their organization’s mental health policies and practices were quite sufficient in taking into account employee mental wellness and days off. Below are some of the practices that participants shared about their organizations’ approaches to mental wellness:

“...so one of my staff who was close to burnout, we actually sat down and we put a Wellness Plan together for [them]. So it was what are the things that we could do on the team to support you? Who are your supports in your life? What are you going to ask them to do to support you? And what are you going to do yourself? And then we’re going to check in a week and we’re going to see if those things are in place and if you’re following through and where you’re at on the burnout scale, so we might say on the scale of one to ten, you know ten being the worst it could be in one being the best, where you at now, and then let’s really look at that in a week’s time and see whether these things we put in place or working. And if not, then we’re going to readjust it.” — Trauma-informed worker who identified as White

“We have...six wellness days a year. Where we take the whole agency and we plan...a fun day, basically we get a pretty healthy budget and we go out.... We’ve had all different kind of things, all different kind of wellness days, where we done all different kind of activities. Sometimes we...do a couple activities and everybody goes home and it’s usually on a Friday so people can unwind. We have our sick days and...we have a family day too...if we have an issue with our family we can go.” — Trauma-informed worker who identified as White

“...pretty much weekly at our staff meetings we have a check in. How are people doing? Where are you at? What can we do to support you if you’re feeling overwhelmed? What self-care practices are you continuing to use? So we’re always debriefing and checking in with each other and making sure that self-care happens first” — Trauma-informed worker who identified as White

The participants from these organizations illustrated a few seemingly small practices that could be incorporated in an organization which can have a large positive impact on staff and therefore the well-being of people and animals receiving services.

Theme: Meeting a person where they are at & practicing non-judgment

Some participants in trauma-informed fields also indicated that they use practices that center non-judgment, which involves ‘meeting the person where they are at’ in their life and not making assumptions or letting biases interfere.

“Right from the beginning we’re starting where the person is at. We’re not making any judgment about the way they live their lives, the choices they make. We’re coming in it with a values bias, so...that’s when...[we are] recognizing our own biases and being able to know where those biases lie so that when we’re dealing with people we know we already have these biases but also looking for hidden biases. We discuss this at our staff meetings and things like that, what gets in the way of us being able to take a non-judgmental approach. So we meet weekly and we discuss challenges that we have and why we’re having those, what is that about and challenging our own values and biases and always trying to improve and grow as humans. So that we can provide a non-biased...judgment about how clients come to our service. But making everyone feel welcome and included, coming from a perspective that they’re the experts in their lives and they know what’s best for their lives and themselves right now.” –

Trauma-informed worker who identified as White

“...try[ing] to come in without a bias or imposing our values on others is all trauma-informed...taking down barriers to people getting to our service and being open to meeting them where they’re at [is important]” –

Trauma-informed worker who identified as White

Theme: Building relationships & trust

Workers in the trauma-informed field indicated that it is extremely important to build trusting relationships through forging connections and being transparent when sharing information.

“...being very informed, making sure you’re sharing as much information to decrease anxiety... having a good working relationship is important and connection. Everything is relational. So building and working on that relationship and that connection.” –

Trauma-informed worker who identified as Aboriginal



“...asking questions to that person, getting to know the community...my agency does community engagement dinners so that we have the opportunity to interact with [people] and just getting to know [people] and developing that trust and just listening to Elders when they speak at events...those opportunities allow me to learn through oral history.” — **Trauma-informed worker who identified as White**

“I find that being consistent with the way we communicate, the way I communicate with [people] is important for trust and safety.... I try to be transparent” — **Trauma-informed worker who identified as White**

Practices with a positive impact in the animal services sector

Theme: Follow-up & communication

Following up with animal services staff and people who have accessed services was indicated as an important practice in the animal services sector. The outcome of this practice indicates better support for people requiring assistance from animal services and prevention of future animal neglect issues from occurring:

Participant: *“If there’s no follow-up with your staff, you’re not following up with the [person]...”*

Researcher: *“Yeah. So, you know it’s very likely then that the same neglect issues might happen again.”*

Participant: *“Mhm, and they always do, they always do.”* — **Animal services worker who identified as White**

“I almost wonder if a better approach would be to have individuals take on specific cases and see them through from beginning to end...you know, just so that there’s less room for confusion. I think everything could be finalized by one person solely, all the paperwork. [The person] is aware they can follow up with any questions, as opposed to reaching out and having five different people answer.” — **Animal services worker who identified as White**

Theme: Finding commonalities with animal guardians & communities

A useful practice already in place by some organizations in the animal services field is to find commonalities with animal guardians and communities; for example, discussing the shared goal of community well-being. The following quotation from an interview participant demonstrates how they identified what was important to the community, and how they were able to collaborate and build understanding with the community to keep both humans and animals safe:

“...we are reaching out to the guardians before and...taking a community safety approach... we really notice people are more receptive to it if we’re talking about...safety and health within the community. Because dogs at large usually mean that the children are in the situation where they can get knocked over...and dogs form packs and aggressive behaviour by male dogs. Basically explaining that situation and then showing or explaining possible outcomes in a negative way [about] what could happen if [there are] more dogs at large and what it means for the community on that level. That really seemed to trigger a lot of understanding.” — **Animal services worker who identified as White**

05

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING CHANGE?

Historical/systemic issues

Over the past 125 years, animal services agencies have undergone drastic changes. Early humane organizations were focused on the well-being of women, children, and animals. Historical records demonstrate that at their inception, they were led by White male settlers. Over the years and in conjunction with the women's liberation movement, women began to assist in governing and leading these organizations. Today, the makeup and employment of these organizations has shifted to represent the diversity of the local communities they serve. However, a critical lens reviewing the policies and practices that serve as the status quo is necessary to overcome the barrier of the historical colonial lens of these organizations.

Leadership willingness

Leaders of animal services agencies are accountable to governance structures, such as Board of Directors, Indigenous governance structures like Chiefs and Councils, and municipal and provincial governments. These entities have a responsibility to ensure the financial sustainability of the organizations, and may prioritize organizational stability and longevity over enhancing service delivery. In addition, some of the entities that govern these actions can be grounded in colonial governance structures, with directive power held in the hands of a few. This system perpetuates decision-making that prioritizes, for example, the number of animals served over the quality of well-being of people and pets, which can be less measurable. Boards of Directors and government agencies will benefit from a shift in strategic priorities to recognize a One Welfare framework.

The structure and approach that leadership takes within an organization determines the effectiveness of how policies are implemented in people-facing roles. Mental well-being of the people working within an animal services organization is essential to systemic change. Leaders in animal services agencies

could be presenting as an authoritative, top-down hierarchical structure which can limit the organization's effectiveness at promoting well-being. Collaborative structures that empower staff and demonstrate the same transparency as is needed in service delivery would assist in removing this barrier.

Funding

Organizations providing services to address animal neglect are always pushed to their limits. They are often forced to make difficult decisions about who can be helped and to what degree. As a screener tool, many organizations have implemented policies that require a person to give up or surrender the animal they care for to ensure the animal has access to veterinary care or other essential services. This model, while safeguarding finances for the organization, has potential negative impacts as highlighted throughout this report. Implementing changes that help to support animals in their home environment would require agencies to creatively re-structure policies and fundraising strategies. Without restructuring the way resources are allocated, agencies will continue to see the same negative community impacts of policies designed to separate people and the animals they care for.



06

WHAT ARE THE BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS TO IMPLEMENT?

Through both the interviews and the literature review, we identified many best practices and recommendations that animal services organizations can easily implement. These recommendations range from smaller-scale, everyday practices to broader organizational policy changes. These recommendations are grounded in the lived experiences and recommendations from the interview participants, and are supported by established literature.

Many of these best practices and recommendations overlap with each other; the recommendations are interconnected and work in concert with each other to achieve the goal of implementing a trauma-informed and culturally safe service approach.

Implement a trauma-informed approach when assisting placed-at-risk people

SUMMARY

How to implement a trauma-informed approach when assisting placed-at-risk people:

- Understand triggers
- Use accessible, non-triggering language
- Promote transparency in processes
- Center a person's voice and choice, and ensure respect and sensitivity
- Meet a person where they are at in their lives
- Unlearn assumptions and actively challenge biases
- Utilize a strengths-based approach
- Utilize a non-judgmental approach
- Ensure cultural sensitivity, awareness, and safety, through a historical understanding of the communities we work with

These are the ways that organizations can incorporate trauma-informed practices into their service approach and delivery.

Understanding triggers

Another element of a trauma-informed approach is having an understanding of triggers. **A trigger is something that raises a memory of trauma or transports a person in their mind back to the original traumatic event.** A trigger can be anything—a smell, a phrase, a sound, an interaction, clothing design, or physical body posture—and thus can be present in any situation.

Triggers can be unique to an individual and the individual will often not communicate (or even be aware) that they are being triggered by an element of a situation. This means that the animal services worker must try to see any reaction through a trauma-informed lens, with understanding and compassion.

For example, people who have been placed-at-risk may have trauma related to past and recent experiences with authoritative peoples or agencies which resulted in a mistrust of authority. This might result in flashbacks or memories surfacing based on the uniform or way the staff person is standing, which in turn will shape their interactions within the animal services agency interaction.

Another example is telling a person that they “have to” do something, rather than taking the time to explain exactly why and how an action could improve their life and the life of the animal in their care.



For instance, instead of saying to a person, “You have to get your dog groomed” which is authoritative and could trigger feelings of helplessness, we can instead share the positive benefits of grooming the dog. This could be less fleas and ticks in the home, preventing pain, and improved health for the animal.

Accessible, non-triggering language

Using **accessible and non-triggering language** is an important component of a trauma-informed approach and is closely tied to having an understanding of triggers. This is because of three reasons: 1) a person who carries trauma may have certain words that trigger a trauma reaction, 2) accessible and understandable language helps to eliminate power imbalances[■] that often exist in service relationships, and 3) being triggered can often lead to negative reactions like defensiveness. Defensive behaviours can result in an unproductive and re-traumatizing experience for both the worker and the person accessing service. It is important to remember that people may not understand the terms that are used, so explaining information and processes in an accessible way is key.

For example, instead of telling a person we are going to ‘educate’ them on ‘proper’ pet care practices, instead, we can try saying that we want to share information with them. The term ‘educate’ can be triggering for some people because it can suggest that the way they, or their communities, do something is wrong and uninformed. For instance, the idea that a person should ‘educate’ another on ‘proper’ practices can trigger thoughts of residential schools for Indigenous peoples. By instead using accessible and non-triggering language, the outcome is still the same—information is shared to improve the welfare of the animal—but the way the information is received and whether that information is taken in is different.

A worker in a sector that utilizes trauma-informed practices shares an example below that demonstrates the importance of avoiding triggers:

“...when we’re working with [people] and with trauma-informed practice we’re working hard not to not to trigger them and have them relive their past over and over, but have them learn to deal with where they’re at now and move forward.” — **Trauma-informed worker who identified as Aboriginal**

Another way that we can shift our language in the animal services sector in particular is when using the word ‘surrender’ with people accessing animal services. ‘Surrender’ can be a scary and sometimes confusing term, so using words like ‘rehome’ or phrases like ‘transfer of guardianship’ are good alternative options. However, it is also important to note that because trigger words mean different things to different people, even these suggested terms have the potential to trigger a person. This is why it is essential to engage in conversation with a person to learn about them and their background, which can help us to avoid potential trigger words.

One participant shared the following with us, showing how their animal services organization is moving away from this often-triggering language:

“I don’t call them surrender forms, I call them transfer forms just to kind of get away from that stigma...our language is so important and they’re not necessarily surrendering the animal. They’re just transferring the animal into my care...I personally feel

- **Power imbalance:** A power imbalance means that one person in a relationship or interaction (this could be a personal, work, or service relationship, for example) holds more power over the other person in the relationship or interaction. This power can be rooted in many different kinds of privilege such as race, class, gender, ability, education level, etc.

like relinquishment is a very big scary term...I tend to pull things apart and say, you know, if you're not feeling like this is the right environment, we can help you find an environment that might be more suitable to your dog, or something like that...kind of pull it out a little bit and elaborate instead of trying to put one word or one stamp on it. Even transfer of guardianship [is a better term]." – **Animal services worker who identified as White**

Through our own review process of this report, we learned that even the word 'client' can feel unfitting for people accessing services and can provoke a negative reaction from people. This is why we have chosen to use 'people accessing animal services' and 'people' instead. We also learned that the word 'welfare' can be triggering, which is why we chose to use the term 'animal services' instead; other alternatives to 'animal welfare' include 'animal care' or 'animal well-being'. However, we must also understand that language is fluid, and it can and should change based on what we learn and hear from the people and communities with whom we work.

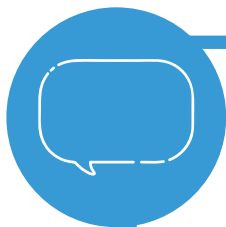
Transparency in processes

Another element of trauma-informed practices is ensuring transparency in our processes, which is connected to using accessible language. **Being transparent includes being honest and understanding about situations and practices, clearly explaining processes in a way that the person can understand, and plainly outlining the options that the person has in a given situation.** Transparency also involves avoiding making promises that we cannot keep. All of these things will help to foster trust in the relationship between ourselves and the person accessing services, and sharing as much information as possible will also help to reduce anxiety for the person.

Below are two quotes we heard from participants who work in sectors that utilize trauma-informed approaches. These quotes demonstrate how transparency is important for building trust, and for fostering and restoring relationships.

"I mean certainly in an Indigenous perspective...part of that restorative practice is being as transparent as possible in those initial dialogues." – **Trauma-informed worker who identified as First Nations**

"...create space for them, build that rapport for them, be transparent with them. Even if it's difficult information. You need to be transparent with them, keeping consistency...so then they know what's coming. They know what's next...and follow up." – **Trauma-informed worker who identified as Aboriginal**



In the example of a dog with matted hair in need of grooming, transparency would include troubleshooting the situation: 1) being curious about what is preventing the dog from getting grooming, 2) identifying a plan that works for the person without additional trauma, and 3) putting it in writing in clear language the person can understand, as confirmed by the animal services worker.

Voice, choice, respect, and sensitivity

Ensuring that we center a person's **voice and choice**, and focus on respect and sensitivity, are essential best practices in utilizing a trauma-informed approach. This practice is closely tied to the above practices of understanding triggers and transparency.

Centering the person who is accessing services in conversations about the animal's welfare is a way to ensure that their voices are included in next steps. Next steps need to be grounded in the lived experience. Interviewees felt that they were not heard, or even consulted, before action was taken. Rather than telling a person what they have to do, or what you think they should do, offer to work together to find the best solutions and seek to understand what their ideal outcome is.

Further, it is critical that we ensure sensitivity when attending to difficult situations, such as domestic violence. Taking time to engage in conversations that are meaningful to the person will both help the animal services worker to understand the situation of the person accessing services, and help the person feel heard and included in decisions about what is best for their animal companion. This best practice has the benefit of not only making the person more open to taking necessary actions, but it importantly serves the best interest of the animal in ensuring their needs are more likely to be addressed.

The below quote is from a participant who was in an abusive relationship, who experienced a seizure of their animal after a situation of domestic violence against them and their animal, and who felt ignored by the animal services workers who responded to the incident:

"I think if you just see two people in a household, one of whom is sitting on the couch trying to keep [themselves] from crying, and you're going to remove a pet, I think it should make sense for you to double-check who is the actual caretaker for the pet...I think that's the bare minimum....They should talk to them and offer options...But they didn't ask who was the owner...They just assumed that [the abuser] was the owner. I think it would have been a matter of double checking if the other person is actually really involved with the dog or to perhaps rely on that person to offer other options.... I think that would have been a lot more appropriate response...and you know in my mind I lost the dog that I really really really loved because of [the abuser's] actions." — Participant with lived experience who identified as Latinx

Ensuring voice and choice on the part of the person accessing services is a cornerstone in avoiding re-traumatization. Returning to the participant who had her dog seized during a domestic violence call, the immediate trauma she experienced was compounded by the feeling that she was ignored and her needs in the situation were not even considered.

Even though calls similar to this one are inherently traumatic, additional trauma could be mitigated by engaging with the person, discussing options and next steps with transparency and sensitivity, and collaborating on a solution. This illustrates the importance of ensuring sensitivity, respect, and voice and how this can help to prevent further traumatization to a person and an animal.

In regard to practicing respect, another interview participant who works with trauma-informed approaches noted the following:

“The wording you’re using is so important. Even terms like Aboriginal versus Indigenous. Little things like that, acknowledging the territory you are on, acknowledging you people you are serving. Things like that when people come in [to a community].” – **Trauma-informed worker who identified as White**

Meeting a person where they are at

The practice of meeting a person where they are at is common in other sectors that utilize trauma-informed approaches. Meeting a person where they are at means understanding their values, needs, and emotions, and connecting with them in a way that is both effective and appropriate for them. This best practice also takes into account that some people may have substance or alcohol related challenges, they may be precariously housed, or have other structural vulnerabilities.

Given these circumstances, meeting a person where they are at on their life journey means that we are engaging with the person where they are, in that moment, without requiring or requesting that major life changes occur before offering help to them. Meeting people where they are at also means that we are not taking a ‘one size fits all’ approach when working with or assessing people—each situation is unique and we can adjust our response and solutions accordingly.


Below, a participant in a sector that uses trauma-informed practices demonstrates how they consider a person’s unique circumstances.

“And a lot of our clients, you know, they carry a lot of trauma, they also are often affected by FASD or other brain-based disabilities and then so really trying to meet each person where they’re at how they’re presenting. Yeah and just sort of supporting them in a way that makes sense to them.” – **Trauma-informed worker who identified as White**

Though animal services workers are not necessarily equipped to make a diagnosis like the one demonstrated in the above quotation, they can still employ an understanding that people may be coming into a service situation with disabilities and related barriers. Being aware of this is essential.

With this in mind, people accessing animal services should be made aware that they are able to request an advocate for other types of support when making decisions about their animals’ care, and animal services workers can have resources on hand to help people seek this kind of support. For example, the Canadian Mental Health Association has province-specific advocacy staff who help to provide supports and resources unique to a person’s needs. Another example is providing contact information for local Friendship Centres, which can provide culturally appropriate resources and supports for Indigenous peoples. Workers can also suggest language advocates/translators to people accessing services if the person has concerns about understanding their options.

These practices tie in to the best practice and importance of cross-sector collaboration, which we discuss further below.




In the example of the dog in need of grooming, the next step would be to find a way to support the person caring for the dog in finding a groomer. If funds are the problem, the worker may consider employing creativity in finding a solution. Perhaps the person has a skill or product they can offer the groomer (this also employs the ‘strength-based approach’ highlighted below); or perhaps the organization can provide the same support that would be provided if the animal had been surrendered.

Unlearning assumptions and actively challenging biases

Reflecting on and unlearning our own assumptions and actively **challenging our biases** is another important, though challenging, element that will help us to become more trauma-informed in our practices. One exercise that can be engaged with on a personal level is to reflect on our use of ‘they’ or ‘those’ statements, and ask ourselves:

- What assumptions are we making of people or communities?
- How can we challenge these assumptions by better understanding the context of them?



Consider the statement, “Those people always keep their dogs chained up outside.” Reflecting on this statement, we should ask questions that would allow us to challenge our assumptions and biases. For example, what life circumstances might be going on that would require the person to keep their animal outside? And, why do I find this practice to be upsetting?

It is important to take the time to unpack all of the perspectives involved in any animal case, and reflect on why we think a practice is wrong, what implicit biases are at play, as well as the reasons why a person might be doing something. Acknowledging our biases enables us to engage in a more open, respectful, and sensitive manner with people accessing animal services, and may create more opportunities to ensure the welfare of the animals involved.

Below, a participant whose work focuses on trauma-informed practices reflects on the importance of being aware of our own biases:

“The idea of being clued in to our own implicit biases and our own external biases, and what we’re bringing to the table, where we’re socially located, where our places of privilege are, and continuing to do that exploratory work to know what we’re bringing to the table, what we’re bringing to every interaction, to know where we stand and then to be cognizant of that and to work actively to ensure that we’re reducing those influences [is essential].” – **Trauma-informed worker who identified as White**

Strengths-based approach

Utilizing a strengths-based approach is another common practice in other sectors that center trauma-informed practices that is beneficial to use within the animal services sector. A strengths-based approach means that we are focusing on a person's positive attributes instead of the negatives.

For example, we can engage in a conversation with a person to understand their strengths as an animal guardian. Acknowledging things that people might do for their animals, such as visiting a pet food bank or fundraising or borrowing money to pay for veterinary care, are indicators of resourcefulness. Pointing this out to a person can promote a positive interaction where a worker and the person accessing services can work together to build on the individual's strengths to help them take care of their pet.

One participant who works with trauma-informed approaches gave an example of how they employ a strengths-based approach:

"...the idea is to foster trustworthiness, transparency, and empowerment, and prioritizing strength-based recognition, and...looking for the green lights versus only focusing on red flags." — Trauma-informed worker who identified as White

Focusing on strengths does not mean ignoring the challenges (or 'red flags') a person may have; a strengths-based approach clearly identifies such challenges. The key difference is that beginning with strengths, and building up strengths is one way to mitigate the challenges and increase resiliency. These efforts increase the well-being of animals in the person's care, either present or future.

Non-judgmental approach

Taking a non-judgmental approach in our service interactions is important throughout all of our recommendations. Fostering a non-judgmental approach involves putting our assumptions aside and genuinely listening to and empathizing with a person. This practice is essential in order to create a safe environment where a person can talk more openly, and a safe space is crucial to offering trauma-informed service.

The following quotations are both from participants who work in sectors with trauma-informed practices.

"[It] just goes back to let's create understanding... Let's make sure we're not taking that judgment lens into [a] relationship." — Trauma-informed worker who identified as Aboriginal

"So when you're coming in [to a situation] very black and white and...you're just going to read this piece of paper and you're going to make judgments on what this [person] is going through. I think what can happen is [instead] with the trauma-informed lens, you're really looking at the whole impact...so it prevents judgment because you're just more open-minded." — Trauma-informed worker who identified as White

Cultural sensitivity, awareness, and safety through a historical understanding of the communities we work with

Providing trauma-informed services in addressing animal neglect includes ensuring cultural sensitivity, awareness, safety, and understanding. With this best practice in mind, developing and maintaining a cultural and historical understanding of the communities with whom we work is crucial in any service delivery context, including the animal services sector. **Many animal services organizations work with multiple communities, including Indigenous communities with unique histories.** One interview participant noted that they believe that any volunteers or workers from animal services organizations working with Indigenous communities should have an understanding of the history and specific ongoing barriers that the people and community is experiencing, and should first be required to participate in cultural sensitivity training. This truly underscores the importance of this best practice.

Before an animal services organization begins engaging with Indigenous communities, Chiefs, Councils and workers providing health services should all be included and involved (by their choice) in the training and learning that occurs. An example of this could be collaborating with an Elder who can speak with the organization about traditional and present-day relationships with animals, and consulting of the development of policies.

While this best practice is a crucial part of a trauma-informed approach, it is also necessary in taking a culturally safe approach to service delivery. In the section below, we discuss a number of ways that organizations can better understand the history and culture of the communities we serve from a lens of cultural sensitivity, awareness, safety, and understanding.

PUT IT INTO ACTION!

IDEAS FOR INTERNAL POLICY CHANGES:

Based on our learnings from the interview process, we propose that organizations incorporate trauma training into their organizational policies in order to promote the importance of trauma-informed practices. This would include incorporating principles of trauma-informed approaches and how they relate to animal services as a mandatory part of training, both at the beginning of employment and throughout as a way to share new knowledge and reflect on workers' use of trauma-informed practices.



Update the practices and processes of addressing animal neglect to ensure cultural awareness, sensitivity, and safety

SUMMARY

How to update the practices and processes of animal neglect to ensure cultural awareness, sensitivity, and safety:

- Focus on relationship building
- Have a community liaison that works with Indigenous communities
- Have a cultural and historical understanding of the communities we work with

To start, it is important to understand what cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity mean. **Cultural awareness** involves *recognizing and understanding that everyone holds different values which are shaped by their diverse cultural backgrounds*. **Cultural sensitivity** involves *being aware of the existence of cultural differences and similarities between people, without assigning them a value—positive or negative, better or worse, right or wrong*. A **culturally safe** environment is *“respectful, safe and allows meaningful communication and service...without challenge, ignorance or denial of an individual’s identity*. To be culturally safe requires positive anti-racism stances, tools and approaches and the continuous practice of cultural humility” (Turpel-Lafond, 2020, p. 11). It is important to note that *cultural safety moves beyond cultural sensitivity towards analyzing power imbalances, institutional discrimination, colonization and colonial relationships* (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2008, as cited in Baba, 2013). In a service context, cultural safety also involves *reflecting on our own culture and how this impacts the service we are providing* (Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada, n.d., as cited in Baba, 2013).

A critical part of planning the delivery of animal services is recognizing the lack of access to veterinary services by remote Indigenous communities and the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in placed-at-risk populations. This report aims to ensure that the recommendations and training are culturally appropriate, safe, and sensitive to both the impact of Canada’s colonial history and the fulsome consultation imperative to all solutions.

Relationship building

Relationship building is essential to ensuring cultural awareness, sensitivity, and safety in our practices. An example that we can consider here is: instead of only going into communities for clinics or in response to calls, make a point of engaging with the community (with their permission) in order to get to know community members and their pets and to foster a trusting relationship. This practice points to the importance of not only responding to crisis calls, but also getting to know the community and allowing them to get to know our organizations as well. This is incredibly important for organizations working with Indigenous communities, because there is often, rightfully, a lack of trust of services coming into their communities.

The importance of building relationships with communities and acknowledging that this takes time and commitment is demonstrated in the following quotes from interview participants who work with trauma-informed practices:

“...I think all agencies really need to understand that it takes time to build a relationship” — **Trauma-informed worker who identified as White**

“...with the trauma, the generational trauma...the symptoms of the trauma, our violence, our drugs and alcohol addiction, neglect...you know that all of that stuff rolls up into... generational trauma [and] symptoms of it. So we keep space, we make sure we always have a good working relationship. We take time to build rapport.” — **Trauma-informed worker who identified as Aboriginal**

► **Subtheme: Community liaison for Indigenous communities**

Having a community liaison who works with Indigenous communities and fosters relationships with the community is closely aligned with relationship building. One interview participant expressed the following sentiment on this practice: “I would 100% truly believe that a [community] liaison is so incredibly important because it is the key.”

Cultural and historical understanding of communities

Having a cultural and historical understanding of the communities with whom we work is a crucial best practice. There are a few initial ways that organizations can implement this practice:

- Engage in readings and discussions about the history and current barriers of the communities we work with.
 - ◆ Ask ourselves: What do we know about the history and current challenges of the communities we work with? Where do we get our knowledge from? Can we challenge ourselves to learn more?
- Become knowledgeable about particular historical events (e.g., a forest fire or flood, closing of a major employer in the community) which may have had trauma-related impacts.
- Invite a knowledge keeper such as an Elder to speak to the organization about the community, their needs and goals, and their barriers and challenges, and collaborate on how the organization and the community can work together to address these.
- Understand the protocols that a person and an organization should follow in approaching a community and/or community member to work together.
- Speak with other organizations to understand the challenges and successes they have had in working with similar communities.
- Have a strong understanding of the demographics of the communities, for example, understanding income groups, age groups, education levels, and access to infrastructure—this is important because these factors may contribute to trauma or be effects of trauma.

- Engage with people in our own communities who may be able to help our organizations develop knowledge and understanding.

Participants who work in trauma-informed fields shared the following about the training requirements and practices within their organization that help to ensure cultural understanding.

“...there’s training that happens at the beginning of employment through an agency called Indigenous Perspective Society and...they do an intensive couple week long course for staff to have that kind of sensitivity and awareness training as well as Indigenous education.” – Trauma-informed worker who identified as White

Researcher: *“...do you have any thoughts on which kind of approaches or policies that the organization has in place right now seem to be working particularly well?”*

Participant: *“So the ones that work really well [are] involving family and Elders in decision-making in ensuring that decisions are culturally based.” – Trauma-informed worker who identified as White*

Below is a quote illustrating that organizations are thinking about cultural sensitivity and awareness, and are recognizing that they need help to truly integrate this into their organizations:

“We’re looking into cultural awareness and sensitivity training really closely right now. We have been looking at different programs we want people to participate in before they are joining us on community visits...We really need the right people [on the team].” – Animal services worker who identified as White

Taking steps to build a cultural and historical understanding of the community is a strong positive step in this direction.

PUT IT INTO ACTION!

IDEAS FOR INTERNAL POLICY CHANGES:

Cultural sensitivity training policy

As noted above, many organizations are currently engaged in efforts to increase equity, diversity, and inclusion within their agencies in areas like policy, hiring practices, and service delivery. In relation to embracing a trauma-informed and culturally safe approach, we offer the following specific recommendations for training centered on increasing the cultural sensitivity of the organization.





PUT IT INTO ACTION!

IDEAS FOR INTERNAL POLICY CHANGES:

Mandatory staff and leadership training on cultural safety, awareness, and sensitivity

Implementing a structured training to develop cultural awareness, sensitivity, and safety is directly related to the best practices discussed above. This training can take varying forms, from a series of workshops to a half-day event paired with activities. Training should come from culturally appropriate resources to ensure that learnings are rooted in lived experiences. Some examples of this can be participating in workshops through diversity, equity, and inclusion organizations, engaging in online training programs such as the University of Alberta's Indigenous Canada course, and having a 'guest speaker' (e.g., a community member or Elder) present on topics regarding cultural safety to the organization.

It is essential that both leadership and staff participate in this type of training, as this will set a consistent expectation for cultural knowledge. Having the training be mandatory is also critical, as this ensures that every member of the organization has engaged in the same training, and so has begun to develop cultural competency. This also enables staff and leadership to support each other in efforts to build both their own cultural awareness and sensitivity and the capacity of the organization as a whole. Such efforts directly contribute to the process of implementing trauma-informed approaches.

Indigenous community history

Mandatory training should include specific learnings about the history of the Indigenous communities that an organization serves. Some organizations may serve primarily Indigenous communities, while others may serve a more diverse community. Regardless of the precise makeup of the community served, an understanding and awareness of the history of the Indigenous peoples in the agency's service area is key to culturally safe practices. Appropriate sources from whom we can learn this history include collaboration with knowledge keepers, Elders, and/or members of a community. Information about the territorial lands, whether a residential school was located in or near the community, and information about the specific history of forced relocation will help to provide context for staff members. Having an understanding of the colonial history, as well as the strengths and resilience of the Indigenous community also supports building respectful and collaborative relationships. Again, making this training mandatory illustrates the organizational importance placed on engaging with the community with sensitivity, awareness, and respect.

One Welfare: Build an outreach-first and prevention-based community engagement model

SUMMARY

How to build an outreach-first and prevention-based community engagement model:

- Practice community engagement/collaboration
- Formalize networks to provide more resources
- Have knowledge of available resources from community/social services

There are a number of ways that we can begin to build in outreach-first and prevention-based models into our organizations. Currently, animal services organizations use the 'surrender first' model as the primary approach to address situations of a lack of resources and/or perceived neglect and abuse. In cases where the cost of veterinary care is out of reach for animal guardians, it can appear problematic to an animal services organization to consistently fund the full cost of veterinary services and return the animal to its guardian. Developing a compassionate, case-by-case decision-making model can allow for considerations regarding structural inequity and resource scarcity.

To prevent the frequency of these types of cases, outreach and prevention-based programs can be utilized to help individuals develop knowledge and skills in caring for their pets. Through these programs, animal services workers and communities can work together to address community needs. For example, this might involve restructuring staff time and resources to prioritize:

- offering animal care workshops for the community;
- providing documents on animal needs and care in accessible language and asking the person if they would like to talk through them;
- providing access to pet food and cat litter where needed;
- making training and behaviour experts available in cases where it would resolve community concerns;
- providing grooming services if there are no local practitioners;



- engaging with a veterinarian to provide a regular clinic if the nearest vet is inaccessible to people in the community;
- providing access to resources as requested such as hay, dog houses, cat traps for spay/neuter, fencing materials, collars, and name tags;
- providing foster-based services for periods where people have to separate from their pets; and
- assisting with transportation and veterinary costs, rather than an organization requiring taking ownership of an animal for that animal to access care.

A One Welfare model aims to improve learning, promote community engagement, and strengthen communities by addressing all of their needs. Creating partnerships with the community's other social services builds on the overall health of the community. For example, embracing a One Welfare model may include open discussion forums the community to identify their priorities and needs, and partnering with human service agencies to ensure that the needs of both person and animal are addressed.

Focusing on these models allows us to understand the needs of a community and address barriers before getting to a point of 'crisis'. As one of the interview participants noted, only providing services when someone is in crisis mode is not a favourable practice. Below are some best practices that can help an organization engage with outreach first and prevention-based approaches.

Practice community engagement/collaboration

A focus on community engagement and collaboration is crucial in building the relationship between animal services and communities. This can feel time-consuming, especially when agencies feel understaffed and under-resourced. However, effort in this area can actually alleviate some of the time pressure and improve service delivery, which results in being able to provide better support for the well-being of animals and people in the community.

An example of this practice is building relationships through regular visits and conversations with community members. Being a positive presence in the communities with whom we work, rather than exclusively having an enforcement or authoritative presence, results in better outcomes for animals. Practicing community engagement at this level allows organizations to have a deeper understanding of what the community needs to care for their animals, such as spay and neuter, vaccines, or microchipping clinics and funds for scanners. Being present in and engaging with the community will also enable community members to be aware of an organization and the services they can provide, and to feel more comfortable proactively contacting the organization in the future; for example, if their pet needs veterinary assistance or pet food.

One participant who works in the animal services field gave an example of a community engagement activity that their organization holds, which is a community-wide 'dog fun day' at a local park open to all dog guardians. The organization sets up information and vendor booths where people can mingle, meet other pet guardians, and learn more about the services that the organization offers. The participant describes the event:

“...it’s a free event. So anybody can come, they don’t have to worry about fees and we purposely did it that way...and we keep our vendor booths down really low too so that that’s not a barrier.” — **Animal services worker who identified as White**

Below is another quote from an interview participant who works in the animal services field, which demonstrates the importance of community engagement well.

“...we are reaching out to the guardians before and really taking a community safety approach. If we’re talking about best practices to that degree, we really notice people are more receptive to it if we’re talking about...safety and health within the community. Because dogs at large usually mean that the children are in the situation where they can get knocked over, and dogs form packs, and [there is] aggressive behaviour by male dogs. Basically explaining that situation, and then showing or explaining possible outcomes in a negative way [about] what could happen if [there are] more dogs at large, and what it means for the community on that level. That really seemed to trigger a lot of understanding.” — **Animal services worker who identified as White**

This participant was specifically speaking about community engagement as a way to improve community safety as well as offering a shared learning opportunity, while keeping the well-being of both animals and humans at the forefront.

Formalizing networks to provide more resources

The practice of formalizing our networks in order to better provide resources to people accessing animal services goes hand-in-hand with the practice of community engagement. Agency staff likely have informal connections within the community, such as staff at other human or animal services agencies who can provide information or facilitate connections to relevant resources.

As an example of how we can engage with this practice, organizations can ask staff to write down current informal networks and connections. These can be assessed to see if there are opportunities for partnerships and collaboration, including standard processes so that those community connections are not lost with changes in staff. With this, we can also work to forge reciprocal relationships with other social services in a community to understand what services are available for people.

Knowledge of available resources from community/social services

Another best practice that is connected to formalizing our networks is having knowledge of available resources from community/social services. These two practices are aligned because if we forge and formalize networks—for example, with a social service in the community—we can have readily available knowledge of resources that we can pass on to people.

One way this can be done is by compiling a list of resources and community services, with phone numbers, addresses, and email addresses, and having printouts on hand to provide to a person. While this may seem simple, interview participants indicated that it was very helpful for them when a vet clinic or rescue organization told them about resources they could use, such as programs that help with the cost of veterinary care.

In keeping with the ideas of accessibility and cultural awareness fundamental to a trauma-informed approach, resources should include culturally relevant social and community services. This practice is related to understanding the demographics and needs of the communities with whom we work; it includes ensuring that the materials are offered in languages of the community and offering connections to culturally specific supports. For example, if an agency's community has a high proportion of Mandarin or Spanish speaking members, the agency should ensure that materials are available in Mandarin or Spanish. A partnership with a local organization in the community can help agencies to identify community needs.

Funding is often a barrier in the animal services sector, especially for smaller organizations. These recommendations can serve as a starting point for organizations to creatively think about ways to seek new funding sources, including seeing how other organizations raise and allocate funds and potentially partnering with different organizations to expand our resources.



PUT IT INTO ACTION!

IDEAS FOR INTERNAL POLICY CHANGES:

Community engagement policy

A priority identified by many interview participants was the need for more formal guidance and oversight for engagement between animal services organizations and communities in cases involving the surrender or seizure of animals. This particularly included organizations engaging with Indigenous communities by providing animal removal services.

Animal services organizations can develop their own internal policy with best practices and standards for community engagement, particularly related to animal removal, to help guide service delivery in a way that is respectful of and receptive to community needs. This type of policy, where relevant, should be developed in partnership with Indigenous communities and governance structures. It can outline clear practices and processes for engagement and consultation for the services that will be delivered to specific areas.

Address staff experiences of compassion fatigue and burnout

SUMMARY

How to address staff experiences of compassion fatigue and burnout:

- Recognize compassion fatigue and burnout in staff
- Prepare staff for high-stress situations
- Exemplify and normalize mental wellness policies and practices at the leadership level
- Promote debriefing and other healing activities
- Hold counselling and mental wellness activities during work hours

As we now know, the nature of the work in the animal services sector often involves seeing and hearing about animal (and sometimes human) neglect and trauma. Continuously experiencing this often results in burnout and compassion fatigue for animal services workers. When there is a lack of a trauma-informed approach and proper supports for workers, worker experiences of compassion fatigue and burnout can contribute to the re-traumatization of people accessing services.

Recognize compassion fatigue and burnout in staff

It is extremely important for workers in animal services organizations to learn the practice of recognizing compassion fatigue and burnout in both themselves and in their colleagues. Addressing these and acknowledging the potential trauma of staff is an essential part of a comprehensive trauma-informed approach.

A few initial signs of compassion fatigue are:

- Emotional and physical exhaustion
- Diminished ability to empathize or feel compassion for others
- Feeling disconnected or numb towards work-related tasks

Burnout, which is closely connected to compassion fatigue, can be identified by:

- Emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by consistent, high stress
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling unable to cope
- Feeling emotionally drained

We can begin to work on recognizing compassion fatigue and burnout in ourselves and others by first acknowledging and understanding the inevitability of compassion fatigue and burnout in the animal services field. **The key is in how we address them.**

Prepare staff for high-stress situations

An importance practice is to provide staff with examples of high-stress situations, along with guidance on how to handle these situations. This should be integrated in training both when a person is hired and throughout employment based on employee feedback and experiences.

One interview participant who works in the animal services field shared their thoughts on workplace stressors, aptly demonstrating the importance of providing guidance and support for high-stress situations that workers may face:

(Speaking about a co-worker) “[their] biggest stress right now is dealing with the public even though [they] come from a customer service role, like a strong service role. In [their] training [they’ve] probably seen a lot of situations where it might be scary for [them] because we do get clients who get aggressive. Like why can’t you help me...why aren’t you like doing things for me to help me out? I can see why [they] would be intimidated by trying to handle those situations...we’ve had like the whole [animal services training] thing with it like be a good customer service representative, but still don’t think that it really prepares you for dealing with the sorts of situations we often find ourselves in.” — Animal services worker who identified as Mixed race

Although this quotation was previously noted, it is essential to again discuss this experience in the context of proper staff training for high-stress situations. This worker acknowledged that the training their colleague was provided was not sufficient for the kinds of situations that frontline workers face. Working through examples of such situations while developing skills to handle them can minimize stress and decrease compassion fatigue and burnout.

Leadership exemplifying/normalizing policies & practices

Another best practice that was identified is **the modelling and normalizing of mental health policies and practices by organization leadership**. This practice sets a clear example for the organization’s staff that mental health is taken seriously and that wellness is valued. For example, if an organization has a policy that staff are allowed 5 wellness days off a year, a manager or leader should take those days off and let their staff know that they are doing so.

In response to asking if they thought it would be helpful for leadership to normalize mental health care, one of the participants shared these thoughts:

Researcher: “... and you think it would be more helpful then for leadership to set an example for that and make it more explicit... [for example] please talk to us if you’re in need of a mental health day and we can figure something out or to just set an example by taking one themselves...normalizing it a bit?”

Participant: “Yeah. Definitely. I think [...] just like having it be more normalized...it’s strange because...[it’s] all emotionally very draining. So it’s compassion fatigue and burnout and stuff. And I feel like the culture is just, [we’re] not very able to take those days. Even though they have had specific

meetings when things got to a point where several staff members said ‘we need to talk about [mental well-being].’ They definitely did have that conversation, and they attempted to be supportive. But I just think a lot of the times with employers and organizations...if you don’t say anything it won’t be dealt with.” — **Animal services worker who identified as White**

This quotation illustrates the importance of having leadership model and normalize mental health practices and policies, along with recognizing of compassion fatigue and burnout. Providing space and opportunity to have these conversations before compassion fatigue gets overwhelming or workers are burnt out is an essential component of this suggested practice.

Promote debriefing and other healing activities

Another practice that can be very helpful in addressing compassion fatigue and burnout is debriefing with coworkers or with oneself. Debriefing can be valuable in several ways. Many people find it cathartic to speak about their emotions instead of keeping them inside, especially with someone who can empathize with their experience. Debriefing with oneself, if this is preferred, can look like taking some quiet time outside or journaling to collect our thoughts and unpack what we are feeling. Debriefing also does not need to happen one-on-one; for example, a circle may be preferred for Indigenous workers. Debriefing can help us refocus on the positive aspects of the event or day, which also reduces stress and may reduce the associated trauma. However, debriefing should not be mandatory, as some people may not be comfortable with this practice and may prefer to engage in other healing activities. When an organization offers workers time to practice these types of mental wellness activities, workers should be able to choose and practice in whichever activity is best suited to them.

When asked about the practice of debriefing, one participant who works in the animal services field said the following:

Researcher: *“is there anything that goes on after...like a debriefing or an opportunity to talk if somebody...is kind of feeling upset by what they saw?”*

Participant: *“...that’s definitely something that I’d like to have implemented.”* — **Animal services worker who identified as White**

Debriefing can also be done on a more scheduled basis, in individual and/or team meetings, or alone (e.g., meditation/quiet time). This allows for coworkers to check in on each other, and gives the opportunity for conversations to arise that may be difficult to bring up in regular meetings. For leadership, debriefing can also look like developing ‘wellness plans’ with employees; leadership and staff can evaluate these plans on a scheduled basis to gain insights on how employees are being supported and what else is needed to better support them.

Counselling and mental wellness activities during work hours

The final recommendation is the practice of having staff engage in workshops, counselling, and mental wellness activities during paid work hours. Not only does this practice illustrate to the staff that their well-being is important, but it also builds strength, knowledge, compassion, resiliency, and empathy within the organization. These are all critical pieces in a comprehensive trauma-informed approach

and will help to ensure that staff are taking care of themselves—something that directly benefits the animals and the humans they are working with.

The following quotations from participants who work in the animal services sector demonstrate that workers feel the need for mental health supports during work hours:

“We’re ... a care service industry and there’s high burnout and high compassion fatigue and...I think that it’s really important to have those kind of mental health services on site for people or at least like, you know have someone...that is hired by [workplace]...and I think it should be paid like if they are on site...you should be getting paid for that hour...I don’t really know how it would work but I do think that that’s super important for this industry” – **Animal services worker who identified as White**

Researcher: *“...so you’re thinking that the...counselling is something that’s really helpful.”*

Participant: *“I think so, but I could see how like some people would not...I wouldn’t want to go on my own time. I’ll tell you that. I don’t do anything on my own time.... They don’t pay me much.”* – **Animal services worker who identified as White**

One participant shared an example of how workers are supported by their organization in terms of mental wellness. This participant worked in a different sector that practices trauma-informed care:

“...if [a worker] goes three months without a sick day, they can take a wellness day” – **Trauma-informed worker who identified as White**

Another participant who works in trauma-informed field shared that their organization also engages in outdoor team activities as a means to promote wellness:

“...often we’ll go out as a team to go hiking together, kayaking. We went ziplining...We’ve gone snow shoeing together. Because we know exercise is a super important part of wellness so we’ll go out and walk together, we used to take half of Friday once a month and go and do something together.” – **Trauma-informed worker who identified as White**

Again, the idea of relationships comes up in the context of mental well-being, team activities, and building strength within the agency. These policies and their consistent implementation will clearly illustrate to staff that their wellness is valued.



PUT IT INTO ACTION!

IDEAS FOR INTERNAL POLICY CHANGES:

Improved mental health policy

Given the feedback provided by animal services agency staff, we propose that organizations consider the following suggestions in updating their organizational mental health policies.

Mandatory mental health training

Related to the best practice of leadership normalizing the prioritization of mental health, we recommend that organizational policy includes mandatory mental health training for both staff and leadership. Training should include a component or workshop on compassion fatigue and burnout, which would incorporate definitions of these two terms, how to recognize them in oneself and others, and techniques to address symptoms and manage causes. These techniques should include culturally inclusive practices; for example, training should include Indigenous perspectives and ways of healing as well as other cultural practices to support mental health. This may be learning on the land as a component of Indigenous practice, or fasting as part of a Muslim tradition. The key is understanding the cultural diversity of the workplace, accounting for diverse mental wellness and healing practices, and encouraging workers to embrace the practice that resonates with them. The training for leadership should also include trauma-informed practices, as well as a specific component on how organizational structure and policies have the potential to support or detract from positive mental health.

Wellness days

In conjunction with the best practice of encouraging positive mental health during work hours, an internal policy recommendation is to establish 'wellness' days in addition to existing sick days. These would be a set number of days that staff could use throughout the year as needed to support mental health and combat compassion fatigue and burnout. An included element of this policy is the encouragement to use wellness days (rather than 'banking' them for future use or considering their use problematic). Leadership should model policy adherence by demonstrating the use of wellness days themselves. Wellness days are for personal use, and workers should be able to use these days in whichever ways they see fit. These should be distinct from agency-organized mental health initiatives.

Sector-specific counselling/support

Recognizing that animal services workers are exposed to unique stressors and situations, the final internal policy recommendation related to mental health is to

establish access to sector-specific counselling. This could be a formalized relationship with a local counselling office or therapist group who has specific experience in supporting the kinds of challenges that animal services staff encounter, or an in-house mental health specialist. This counsellor should employ a culturally sensitive lens and understand the different ways of healing that are practiced throughout cultures. Counselling should not be mandatory, as some workers may not wish to engage in this practice. While this does represent an additional operational cost, the goal of this policy recommendation is to facilitate timely access to appropriate counselling to mitigate compassion fatigue and burnout, which decrease staff productivity and effectiveness. Other forms of healing should also be encouraged and encompassed in internal mental health policy. If time is allotted for workers to engage in counselling and support, workers should be able to use this time in whichever way they choose, and any policy regarding this should support culturally appropriate healing and mental wellness activities.



07

ACTION STEPS FOR ANIMAL SERVICES ORGANIZATIONS

We understand that this report has laid out many recommendations, and it is normal to feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to move forward in implementing these best practices. This section is meant for animal services workers, including leaders, to use as a tool for mobilizing change within themselves and in their organization.

We can start by reflecting on the report as a whole, and asking questions such as:

- What sections were difficult for me to read?
- Did any sections stand out to me?
- Is my organization already implementing any of these practices or policies?
- Did I have any 'lightbulb' moments?

We can also reflect on specific sections of the report, and work through these incrementally. For example, we can reflect on the sections about mental wellness, and ask questions such as:

- What do wellness practices currently look like for me and my organization?
- Do I take advantage of my organization's mental wellness resources, if any are available? If not, why?
- If I am in a leadership role, do I facilitate conversations around mental wellness with staff?

At the outset of this report, we offered the following reflections for readers to use as a guide while reviewing our findings and recommendations:

- Who else needs to read this report in my workplace?

- Can the report be broken down into sections and delegated amongst leaders in my organization?
- What communities or groups can we collaborate with in developing trauma-informed and culturally safe practices in our organization?
- Can a meeting with leadership in my organization be set up to discuss the learnings from the report and the corresponding action steps?

Now that you have finished reading the report, we invite you to reflect on these questions once more and think about any additional information you can use to answer these questions. In moving forward, it is helpful to understand which smaller-scale changes can be implemented right away, and which changes may take more time. We can gain a better understanding of this by asking questions like the ones above.

Reflecting on these types of questions can help to point us in the direction of where we should begin. Once we have considered these questions, we can begin to look at the changes that are needed with a project management lens. The changes can then be considered in stages and the creation of a timeline and action plan can follow. To assist in this planning process, we have included a summary of the best practices outlined in the report as a 'checklist' for organizations to work through at their own pace (see Appendix B).



08

PUBLIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The feedback we heard from participants regarding public policy recommendations for the animal services sector was focused on **the need for oversight to guide community engagement.**

Formal oversight of community engagement

Internal organizational policies guiding community engagement can be foundational, drawing on the consultative and collaborative work of agencies within their communities. In the absence of consistent internal policies for all organizations in the sector, there is an opportunity at the provincial level for government to provide a framework of best practices and standards for the sector. There is currently no provincial or federal legislative framework that oversees consultation activities within the animal services sector. To address the gap of a formal legislative framework, there is an opportunity to propose regulatory text that creates a responsibility for animal services organizations to consult and engage with Indigenous communities when planning and providing services.

This framework, created in collaboration with Indigenous communities and local agencies, would include standards for consultation and engagement. These standards could involve more in-depth consultation rather than solely informing communities about new procedures. Preferably, proposed legislation could be introduced and championed by Indigenous communities and/or advocacy groups with the support of animal services organizations. The goal behind legislating the consultative process is to ensure that the structural vulnerability of Indigenous peoples (i.e., exclusion from decision-making processes, relative lack of representation in government bodies) is addressed at the community level. The framework could then be implemented at a local/regional level by animal services organizations.

In addition, the research demonstrated that the creation and implementation of an independent oversight body or board for the animal services sector could be a suitable way to oversee the sector and guide community engagement. Independent oversight bodies already exist to protect public

interest for sectors such as policing and child welfare. An example of this is B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth (RCYBC). Here, the Representative's role involves advocating on behalf of children and youth to improve youth and children's understanding of and access to designated services. It also engages in monitoring, reviewing, auditing, and public reporting on services for children and youth, and conducting independent reviews and investigations.

A similar independent oversight body could be developed for the animal services sector to take on a similar role, which could involve:

- evaluating existing animal services to ensure that they are responsible and accountable;
- making recommendations to and working with government service providers and partners to strengthen animal services, including embracing trauma-informed practices;
- engaging in research to learn how animal services can be improved;
- monitoring how animal services are implementing the recommendations from the oversight evaluations;
- conducting regular reviews of specific animal services;
- publicly reporting on the monitoring and evaluation practices; and
- performing audits to address areas of concern within the animal services sector.

An independent oversight body for the animal services sector could ensure that they focus on the practices of engagement, collaboration, and partnerships with Indigenous communities as is done in the RCYBC model.

The RCYBC also has a First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Relations team whose responsibility is to ensure that Indigenous values and perspectives are reflected throughout all of the organization's work. Similarly, an independent oversight body for the animal services sector could aim to develop a similar team to provide expertise, advice, and consultation to the organization, and to work in collaboration with Indigenous communities and leadership to ensure that animal services practices, including community engagement activities, are culturally sensitive and respectful.

09

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we relied on technology to find interview participants and conduct interviews. This meant that the participant pool was limited to those who saw the project information online and had access to email, Wi-Fi, and phone to participate in the interview. This can be seen as a limitation to the research reach and therefore an opportunity for future research to address. Eliminating accessibility as a barrier to participation in future research would increase the diversity of perspectives represented, as people with lived experience who may not have easy access to technology could participate.

In addition, future research projects could focus on gathering information solely from people with lived experience and seek out a range of experiences with animal services, both positive and negative, in order to further explore and solidify best practices for the animal services sector.

There is also an opportunity to expand this research by taking a community-based research approach, which focuses on community participation. A possible direction could be to engage with Indigenous communities to understand the role that Chiefs and Councils currently play in animal services and management, to collectively identify existing strengths as well as needed resources, and to develop meaningful solutions for the community. A research project of this nature would be grounded in Indigenous research methodologies and would partner with Indigenous communities. The research project would be driven by community priorities, and community involvement throughout the research process—beginning from the project proposal to putting the research outcomes into action. This would allow for respectful and comprehensive collaboration, including respecting the protocols of a community, and an understanding of the specific needs of a community with appropriate corresponding outcomes.

Finally, although we discussed some best practices in developing outreach-first and prevention-based animal services, we did not go into depth about this specific subject area because this type of work already largely exists within the animal services sector. Examples of organizations that champion this model include the Humane Society of the United States, who created the Pets for Life program, and American Pets Alive, who created the Human Animal Support Services resource centre. Future research could analyze the best practices within the outreach and prevention programs that already operate in the animal services sector in order to develop recommendations for other organizations specifically in regard to these models.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The findings from this research project will be used to create free, online training courses for the animal services sector. The courses will have modules discussing trauma-informed practices, compassion fatigue, and burnout in a way that is relevant to the animal services sector. They will also include modules relevant to both leadership and staff roles within the sector. The online training courses will be reviewed by academic, animal services, Indigenous, and program design consultants to ensure that the training is culturally safe, appropriate, and accessible to the sector. **With collaboration from the sector, we can all work together to prevent animal neglect from a trauma-informed, culturally safe lens.**



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Appendix A: Interview Question Guide

Preliminary/Demographic Questions

Trauma-Informed Experts:

- How old are you? You can give me an approximate decade if you'd prefer.
- What is the primary race/ethnicity with which you identify?
- What is the gender with which you identify?
- How would you identify the area that your agency is located in? (rural/remote or urban)
 - ◆ Follow-up: do you service clients that are in rural/remote areas?
- What is your position within your agency?

Animal Services Workers:

- What is the gender with which you identify?
- What is the primary race/ethnicity with which you identify?
- How old are you? You can even me an approximate decade if you'd prefer.
- How would you identify the area that your agency is located in? (rural/remote or urban)
 - ◆ Follow-up: do you service clients that are in rural/remote areas?

What is your position within your agency?

People with Lived Experience:

- How old are you? You can give me an approximate decade if you'd prefer.
- What is the primary race/ethnicity with which you identify?
- What is the gender with which you identify?
- How would you identify the area that you currently live in? (rural/remote or urban)
 - ◆ Follow-up: what is your proximity to veterinary care?
- What is your current employment status?
- Are you currently accessing any type of social services? (e.g., accessing social housing, foodbanks, etc.)

Interview Questions (Trauma-Informed Experts)

- Could you describe to me what it is like to be a [job description]?
- Could you talk a bit about what it's like to work at [agency]?

- What approaches does your agency take in working with clients (any values or approaches it is grounded in)?
 - ◆ Follow-up: What kinds of policies or procedures are in place in regard to working with clients?
 - ◆ Follow-up: What are your thoughts on which approaches, policies, principles seem to be working well?
- What services are available to the clients at your agency?
- What has your experience been like in providing trauma-informed services?
 - ◆ Probe: What sorts of difficulties have you experienced? Or do you have any positive experiences you'd like to share?
 - ◆ Probe: How do you foster trust, transparency, safety, collaboration, choice?
- What do you feel is most important when providing services with a trauma-informed approach? What do you feel clients need the most?
- What about the service experience do you feel could be improved?
 - ◆ Probe: Is there an opportunity to give feedback about their service delivery experience?
- In what ways are you being supported in your role, if any? What do you wish you were provided with that might help better support you?
 - ◆ Probe: Do you have any employment assistance programs available?
- Have you heard of the term 'compassion fatigue'?
 - ◆ [If yes]: Do you feel that this is something you have experienced with your work?
 - ◆ [If no]: Explain and probe to see if participant has experienced this.
- How about the term 'burnout', is that something you have heard of before?
 - ◆ [If yes]: Do you feel that this is something you have experienced with your work?
 - ◆ [If no]: Explain and probe to see if participant has experienced this.
- How adequate are the services provided to yourself and other workers in processing and coping with the sometimes-difficult things you might see or experience in your role?
- What do you think the biggest barriers are for yourself and your agency when working with clients?
- If you were to provide consultation or advice to another agency who was aiming to implement a trauma-informed service approach, what would you tell them (as a first step/'baby step')?
- Is there anything else that you feel is important for me to know about yourself, or the work that you do at your agency?
- Before we finish up, do you have any questions for me related to the study or interview?

Interview Questions (Animal Services Workers)

- Could you talk to me a bit about your process of becoming a [job description]

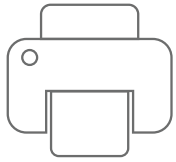
- Could you talk to me a bit about your experience as a [job description]?
- Could you talk a bit about what it's like to work at [agency]?
- What services are available to the clients at your agency?
- What is your role in regard to the process of the surrender or seizure of animals?
 - ◆ Probe: What is the process of interacting with clients in these instances? (e.g., non-judgmental approach, learning opportunity, etc.). Is there training of staff or volunteers around this?
 - ◆ Probe: What are your thoughts on which approaches or policies seem to be working well, specifically in regard to the process of the surrender or seizure of animals?
- What do you think the biggest barriers are for yourself and your agency when assisting clients with their pets who have health and welfare-related needs?
 - ◆ Probe: What do you think could be improved in regard to assisting clients with their pets who have health and welfare-related needs?
- How are you being supported in your role? What do you wish you were provided with that might help better support you?
- Have you heard of the term 'compassion fatigue'?
 - ◆ [If yes]: Do you feel that this is something you have experienced with your work?
 - ◆ [If no]: Explain concept and probe to see if participant has experienced this.
- How about the term 'burnout', is that something you have heard of before?
 - ◆ [If yes]: Do you feel that this is something you have experienced with your work?
 - ◆ [If no]: Explain concept and probe to see if participant has experienced this.
- Do you have any employment assistance programs available to you?
- How adequate are the supports/services provided to yourself and other workers in processing and coping with the sometimes-difficult things you might see or experience in your role?
- Is there anything else that you feel is important for me to know about yourself, or the work that you do at your agency?
- Before we finish up, do you have any questions for me related to the study or interview?

Interview Questions (People with Lived Experience)

- Could you talk to me a bit about your experience being a pet owner?
- Could you talk about what it means to you and what it is like to be a pet owner?
- Could you tell me about how you came to interact with [agency]? And what, in your experience, is it like to be a client of [agency]?
- Now, could you talk to me about your experience with having to surrender/seize your pet?

- Thank you very much for sharing that. Now, what challenges did you face in the process of seizure/surrender? Were there any positives you'd like to share?
- What about your experience could have been improved? Do you have any suggestions for the service agencies that could improve the experience for others who may be faced with similar situations?
- If the experience were your ideal situation, what would that look like?
- And if the experience was your ideal situation, how would that have changed your experience?
- Is there anything else that you feel is important for me to know about yourself, or your experience?
- Before we finish up, do you have any questions for me related to the study or interview?

Appendix B: Best Practices Checklist



It is recommended to print out this section and write out beside each practice the date to be completed by, and the person/group responsible for each item

To implement facets of trauma-informed practices, organizations can:

- Have an understanding of triggers
- Utilize accessible, non-triggering language
- Center transparency in processes
- Focus on voice, choice, respect, and sensitivity
- Unlearn assumptions and actively challenge biases
- Practice non-judgment
- Meet people where they are at in their lives
- Practice cultural sensitivity, awareness, and safety, through a historical understanding of the communities we work with
- Incorporate trauma-informed learnings into internal training policy

To update the practices and processes of addressing animal neglect to ensure cultural awareness, sensitivity, and safety, organizations can:

- Have a cultural and historical understanding of the communities we work with
- Have a community liaison for Indigenous communities
- Build and maintain respectful and trusting relationships
- Develop internal policy regarding cultural sensitivity training
 - Incorporate mandatory staff and leadership training on cultural safety, awareness, and sensitivity
 - Incorporate learnings about the history of the Indigenous communities the organization works with into training materials

To implement facets of outreach-first and prevention-based models, organizations can:

- Engage in community engagement/collaboration
- Formalize networks to provide more resources
- Focus on relationship building with and in communities
- Develop an internal policy about community engagement practices

To address compassion fatigue & burnout in staff, organizations can:

- Understand the connection between compassion fatigue/burnout and re-traumatization, and learn the signs/signals of burnout and compassion fatigue in staff and self
- Implement staff training for high-stress situations with tangible examples
- Promote and normalize wellness policies and practices
- Practice debriefing with coworkers
- Have staff engage in optional counselling and mental wellness activities during work hours
- Improve or develop an internal mental health policy
 - Incorporate mandatory mental health training
 - Include wellness days in addition to sick days
 - Make available or suggest sector-specific counselling

Appendix C: Mental Health Resource List

Canada-Wide Support:

Phone & Text:

- Hope for Wellness Help Line
 - ◆ Call 1-855-242-3310 (toll-free) or connect to the online Hope for Wellness chat.
 - ◆ Available to all Indigenous peoples across Canada who need immediate crisis intervention. Experienced and culturally sensitive help line counsellors can help if you want to talk or are distressed.
 - ◆ Telephone and online counselling are available in English and French. On request, telephone counselling is also available in Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut.
- Youthspace.ca (NEED2 Suicide Prevention, Education and Support)
 - ◆ Youth Text (6pm-12am PT): (778) 783-0177
 - ◆ Youth Chat (6pm-12am PT): www.youthspace.ca
- Crisis Services Canada
 - ◆ Toll Free (24/7): 1 (833) 456-4566
 - ◆ Text support (4pm-12am ET daily): 45645
- Canada Suicide Prevention Service
 - ◆ 1-833-456-4566 (24/7) or text 45645 (4 pm to 12 am ET).
- Canadian Crisis Hotline
 - ◆ 1 (888) 353-2273

Apps & Online Services:

- Better Help www.betterhelp.com
 - ◆ Online access to professional counsellors
 - ◆ On the web, and available for iPhone and Android users
- The LifeLine App www.thelifelinecanada.ca
 - ◆ Direct access to phone, online chat, text, and email crisis support
 - ◆ E-counselling, self-management tools, access to crisis centres across Canada
 - ◆ Available for iPhone and Android users
- Big White Wall Canada
 - ◆ www.bigwhitewall.ca

- ◆ Online, anonymous peer support community accessible anytime, anywhere

BC Specific Support:

Immediate Support:

- 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433): for individuals who are or know someone who is having thoughts of suicide. The service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and in up to 140 languages. Operated in partnership with Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention Centre of BC.
- 310-Mental Health (310-6789 - no need to dial an area code): for individuals who would like emotional support, information and resources specific to mental health in British Columbia. The service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and is toll-free anywhere in British Columbia (no need to dial an area code).
- Seniors Distress Line: seniors in British Columbia can call 604-872-1234 for telephone support from a trained volunteer at the Crisis Centre on topics specific to older adults. Topics may include suicide, retirement, stress, relocation, loss of a loved one, physical or mental health issues, emotional support, or help working through a problem. The Seniors Distress Line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and in up to 140 languages.
- KUU-US Crisis Line Society
 - ◆ The KUU-US Crisis Line Society provides a First Nations and Indigenous specific crisis line available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, toll-free from anywhere in British Columbia.
 - ◆ KUU-US Crisis Line can be reached toll-free at 1-800-588-8717. Alternatively, individuals can call direct into the Youth Line at 250-723-2040 or the Adult Line at 250-723-4050.
 - ◆ KUU-US services are for First Nations, by First Nations, and all crisis response personnel are certified and trained in Indigenous cultural safety bringing an understanding of First Nations history and trauma from the residential school to their roles. Topics the KUU-US Crisis Line can support individuals with include, but are not limited to, mental health issues and crisis related to residential school, child welfare, addiction, health concerns, divorce and separation, suicide ideation and survivorship, grief and loss, crime, abuse, peer pressure and financial distress.
- Trans Lifeline: 1-877-330-6366
 - ◆ www.translifeline.org
 - ◆ Trans Lifeline is a non-profit dedicated to the well-being of transgender people. We run a hotline staffed by transgender people for transgender people. Trans Lifeline volunteers are ready to respond to whatever support needs members of our community might have. This is a FREE helpline run by volunteers and supported by the community.
- Vancouver Coastal Regional Distress Line (Vancouver, Richmond, North Shore, Sea to Sky): 604-872-3311
- Sunshine Coast/Howe Sound/Bella Coola Distress Line: 1-866-661-3311
- Map of Crisis Lines: provides an interactive map to search for the direct number to local crisis line services in British Columbia. While 1-800-SUICIDE is available across the province and is designed to transfer callers to

the local crisis line service closest to the community of the caller, in some instances, individuals may prefer to contact the crisis line in their community direct.

Interior Health Phone Services:

- Interior Crisis Line: 1-888-353-2273

Island Health Phone Services:

- Vancouver Island Crisis Line, available 24/7: 1-888-494-3888.
- Access telephone numbers:
- Campbell River: 250-850-2620
- Comox Valley: 250-331-8524
- Cowichan Valley: 250-709-3040
- Nanaimo: 250-739-5710
- Oceanside: 250-951-9550
- Port Alberni: 250-731-1311
- Port Hardy: 250-902-6051
- Port MacNeill: 250-956-4461
- Southern Gulf Islands: 250-538-4711
- Victoria: 250-519-3485
- Westcoast: 250-726-1282

Non-Emergency Assistance:

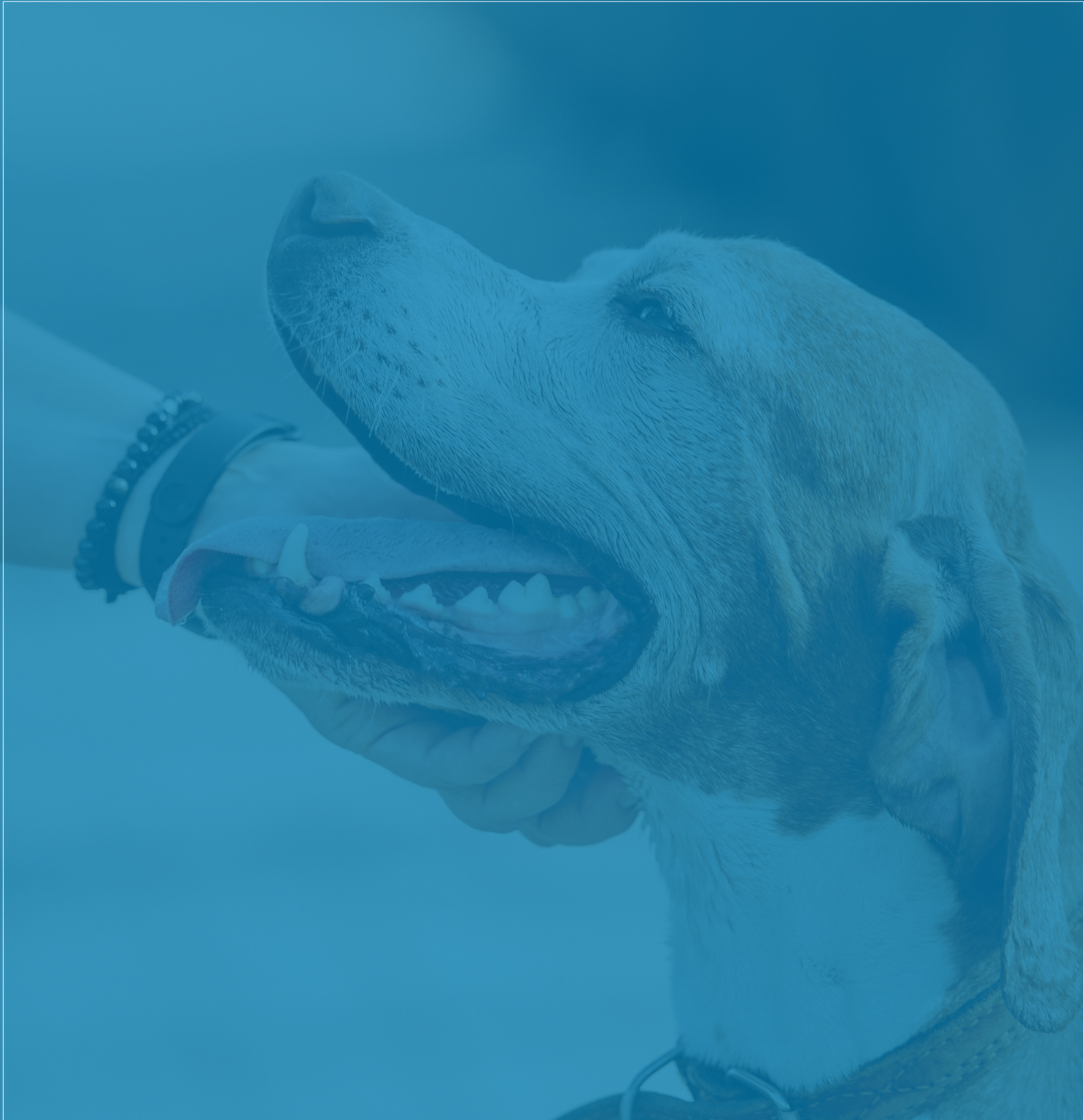
- Alcohol & Drug Information and Referral Service at 1-800-663-1441 (toll-free in B.C.) or 604-660-9382 (in the Lower Mainland) to find resources and support.
- HealthLink BC: Call 8-1-1 (toll-free) if you need non-emergency health information or advice. Available 24 hours a day.
- Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre: Call: 1-800-665-1822 toll-free from anywhere in B.C., or 604-875-2084 in the Lower Mainland, for peer support, assistance in navigating the mental health system and accessing resources, and information and education about mental health and substance use challenges. Available Monday to Friday from 9:30am to 5pm Pacific Time.
- BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information: For help and support via email at bcpartners@heretohelp.bc.ca. Let them know where you're writing from so they can provide community specific information. A volunteer will email you back within 3 business days.

Online Chat Services:

- Crisis Centre Online Chat: Get support, information and resources for adults in B.C. and Yukon. Online chat is available from noon to 1am Pacific Time.

In-Person Services:

- For a listing of support groups in British Columbia please call 310-6789 (no area code needed) 24 hours a day.
- You can search for in-person services and resources available across B.C. using the online directory, or visit your health authority website to find services and resources in your area.
- First Nations Health Authority: Mental Wellness and Substance Use
- Fraser Health: Mental Health and Substance Use
- Interior Health: Mental Health and Substance Use
- Island Health: Mental Health and Substance Use
- Northern Health: About Mental Health & Addiction Services
- Provincial Health Services Authority: BC Mental Health & Substance Use Services
- Vancouver Coastal Health: Mental Health and Substance Use



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