

BC'S HOUSING CRISIS

A CRISIS FOR PETS, TOO

“...THE ABILITY TO KEEP PETS IS AN ESSENTIAL EXTENSION AND EXPRESSION OF THE MEANING OF HOME...”

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It likely comes as no surprise that BC is considered a desirable place to live. Between July 2020 and June 2021, more Canadians moved here than any other province¹, and in 2022, we saw among the highest flows of new immigrants to Canada². BC has one of the lowest rental vacancy rates in the country: just 1.3 % last year³. At the same time, our rents remain the most expensive in Canada on average⁴.

What do dwindling supply and soaring demand mean for BC's pet owners? Pets are clearly important to us: more than half (54 %) of households have pets, with close to half (48 %) of these having more than one pet⁵. However, this does not automatically translate into BC being a pet-friendly place to live. Current provincial legislation allows property owners, managers, and strata corporations to ban pets, and limit the number, size, and kind of pets people can keep. The results of a poll⁶ conducted for the BC SPCA last year reveal that one-third of British Columbians have had difficulty finding pet-friendly housing. Among them, women, households with children, people under 35, and lower-income households report the greatest difficulty.

Research has shown that, when looking for a place to rent, pet owners compromise on factors such as budget and location more than pet-friendliness⁷. The BC SPCA 2022 poll confirms this, with participants reporting that being able to keep their pets has meant they have stayed in a place longer than they wanted to (34 %); settled for a place that is smaller, more run-down, or lacking amenities (28 %); accepted a longer commute to work (25 %); and stayed in a neighbourhood where they did not feel safe (14 %). Again, these compromises are disproportionately made by women, people under 35, and lower-income households.

In spite of this, many BC pet owners are still forced to give up their pets. For at least the past nine years, housing issues have remained the most common reason that healthy adult and senior animals have been surrendered to BC SPCA shelters across the province—and the situation is only intensifying. Most people see their pets as family members and relinquishing a pet to a shelter is often a difficult and emotional decision made only after

exhausting other options^{8,9}. Contrary to popular narratives, most people surrendering pets report being strongly attached to their animal¹⁰. Afterwards, they can experience significant but unrecognized grief, complicated by the judgment they feel from others for their decision¹¹.

As the veterinary community well knows, a wealth of research shows the benefits of pets to physical and mental well-being, childhood development, and healthy aging. Among other positive impacts, pets help to alleviate stress, improve mood and fight depression, address social isolation and reduce loneliness, improve physical fitness and encourage activity, and facilitate healing and resiliency¹². The majority of pet-owning British Columbians agree that their pets have positively affected their physical (77 %) and mental (88 %) health and helped them connect with other people (69 %) and nature (68 %), as well as feel less lonely (87 %)¹³. Women, people under 35, lower-income households, and rural residents are more likely to agree with these benefits. *Thus, those reporting the greatest reliance on their pets for support seem to be the ones most at risk of having to give them up to secure a place to live.*

The veterinary community is uniquely impacted by this issue. Safe and affordable housing is considered an important social determinant of health¹⁴. Social determinants of health impact both human and animal health^{15,16}. Paying a larger proportion of one's income on rent decreases resources available for other necessities such as food, transportation, and health care for both people and pets¹⁷. Research conducted with housing-insecure individuals in the US found that cost was a barrier to obtaining preventive care (87 %), sick care (96 %), and emergency care (93 %) for their animals¹⁸.

Ultimately, this is a One Health concern, and it's experienced by folks working in the veterinary sector, too. Emails regularly appear in the BC SPCA's advocacy inbox from clients and professionals alike who are seeking our help finding pet-friendly homes, especially in the Lower Mainland. Preventing surrender to animal shelters and keeping pets in the homes of the people who love them serves to benefit both human and animal well-being. For many, the ability to keep pets is an essential extension and expression of the meaning of home—and renters are no exception¹⁹.

To save space, the end notes and references for this article are made available on the Chapter's website at www.canadianveterinarians.net/sbcv/west-coast-veterinarian-magazine. **WCV**