COVID-19 Guidelines for Co-Sheltering Environments

What is the Co-Sheltering Collaborative?
The Co-Sheltering Collaborative is a national community of homeless service providers, animal welfare organizations, and government agencies working together to create equitable and low-barrier housing for people experiencing homelessness with companion animals.

This document has been developed by the Co-Sheltering Collaborative to provide guidance for co-sheltering environments during the COVID-19 crisis. These practices have yet to be formally evaluated and are recommended based on Collaborative members’ collective experience and expertise in veterinary public health and homeless services. Information and knowledge is changing rapidly, so recommendations may be updated.

Why is it Important to Keep People and Companion Animals Together?
For people experiencing homelessness, the ability to be housed with family members can be an important source of stability. Many people consider their companion animals to be a part of their family. However, due to a general "no pets allowed" rule within social services, people experiencing homelessness are often asked to decide between their companion animals or shelter. We don't believe this is an ultimatum anyone should have to face.

People experiencing homeless may be at higher risk for exposure to COVID-19 due to the lack of options for self-isolation and social distancing. It is therefore essential at this time that all social services be made available to people experiencing homelessness with companion animals. Especially during this time of uncertainty and fear related to COVID-19, we believe that positive outcomes for people and animals are better achieved by keeping these families intact.

What is COVID-19 and How is it Transmitted?
COVID-19 is a disease that can cause mild to severe flu-like symptoms in people. The CDC, WHO, and World Organization for Animal Health agree that the disease is currently spread to humans through person-to-person contact. There is currently no evidence of companion animals becoming ill or spreading COVID-19 to people or to other animals.\(^1\)\(^2\)\(^3\) Based on current evidence, the practice of co-sheltering does not pose any increased risk to shelter staff or residents, but precautions and healthy habits should still be encouraged.

COVID-19 is transmitted through droplets such as saliva or mucus in a cough or sneeze. Transmission via touching a contaminated surface or object (i.e., a fomite) and then touching the mouth, nose, or eyes is also possible, but appears to be a secondary route. As always, careful handwashing, social distancing, and other infection control practices can greatly reduce the chance of spreading any disease.\(^4\)

Pets in Co-Sheltering Environments
In preparation for “shelter in place” actions which may be taken by municipalities, organizations should develop a plan to store basic animal care supplies for companion animals so that they are readily accessible when needed. These items may include food, bowls, bedding, cat litter, toys, and flea medication. Please be mindful that flea medication dosage varies with species and size of animal. It is recommended that all companion animals are wearing proper identification, and microchipped (with current registration) whenever possible. For a more comprehensive list of items recommended for animals in case of emergency, please review recommendations by the Red Cross, HSUS, or Ready.gov.\(^5\)\(^6\)\(^7\)

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Organizations should also develop contingency plans in the event that clients are unable to provide care for an animal companion for any reason, such as a medical emergency. Internal policies should permit the organization to make decisions for animal care if an owner is absent or unable to consent to a care plan. Internal policies should also include updating emergency contacts and compiling necessary documentation to include vaccination records, veterinary provider’s name and contact information, basic behavioral information, feeding and medication schedule, and any other relevant information that could help another person or organization care for the animal. External partnerships can help provide assistance with acquiring pet care supplies as well as off-site services such as boarding or veterinary care.

If clients are not experiencing symptoms of illness consistent with COVID-19, interactions with pets may continue as usual including walking, feeding, and playing. All clients should continue to practice good hygiene during those interactions (e.g., wash hands before and after interacting with animals, as well as before and after handling pet food; regularly clean food and water bowls, bedding materials and toys, and ensure that companion animals are kept well-groomed.) Co-sheltering environments should encourage all staff and clients to practice current recommendations of social distancing of at least 6 feet and take extra precautions to limit or discourage contact with others’ animals at this time.

Symptomatic Residents Being Sheltered with Their Pets

For clients experiencing symptoms of illness, it is important for them to continue to maintain good hygiene and wash their hands before and after touching their companion animals, and wear a facemask whenever possible. It is recommended that people restrict hugging or kissing pets and do not share food. If possible, it is recommended that clients appoint another individual to care for their animal while experiencing symptoms.

Although there is no current documentation of risk of spread between animals and humans, bathing animals with pet shampoo or a mild dishwashing detergent can remove any viral particles that end up on pet fur. Bathing is generally also good standard practice for maintaining pets’ healthy skin and coat upon entry to the shelter, and as needed.

Residents experiencing symptoms who remain on site should be kept physically separate from other residents as much as possible and provided with opportunities to reduce exposure risk of others, including access to a hand washing station, hand sanitizer and face masks. If animals are typically housed with the resident, accommodations should ensure that there is enough space to accommodate a crate for animal confinement.

Working with Animal Welfare and Veterinary Partners for Primary and Emergency Care

Relationships between animal welfare organizations and human social service organizations are essential to linking people in need to programs that can reduce or remove barriers to animal care during any time of crisis. These services may include off-site boarding, temporary foster care, transportation, financial support for routine or emergency veterinary care, pet food banks, educational resources, or behavior and training support. It is recommended that you work on building long-term relationships with these organizations and groups to ensure that you will be able to continue to identify and meet the needs of this population moving forward.

If your organization operates in a location that has “shelter in place” rules in effect, check with your municipality about whether or not veterinary practices qualify as essential services. Veterinary facilities may not be open depending on how they are classified in the order. Due to limited hours and operating capacity of veterinary clinics at this time, it is essential to call ahead and establish a plan with your animal welfare and veterinary partners to ensure that pets will be able to receive the minimum care required for entry to the shelter or off-site boarding facilities if needed, and that there is also a plan in place to address companion animals requiring care for illness or injury. Think broadly and creatively while developing plans due to the additional challenges that may present during a time of crisis. For example, consider developing a relationship with a mobile veterinary provider to bring services to clients on site, or consider infrastructure for telemedicine. Veterinarians may be able to communicate with residents via phone and plan next steps for the pet’s care.
Grant Funding Opportunities
Grant funding may provide the ability to help cover costs associated with housing and caring for pets when local partnerships are not available or do not fully meet this need. Please reach out to your local and state agencies for other opportunities that may be available, in addition to the organizations listed below.

From PetSmartCharities.org:
“PetSmart Charities is evaluating conditions resulting from COVID-19 (coronavirus), and the best ways we can support our partners, pet parents and the pets they love. If you are an organization that is working within the official COVID-19 response efforts, email emergencyrelief@petsmartcharities.org to inquire about possible grant assistance.”

From GreaterGood.org:
“Currently, we are working diligently in partnership with local, state, and federal partners to address the needs arising from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We understand your concerns and are empathetic as this is now a national issue. Our GreaterGood.org team is in communication with all of our major corporate donors for pet food & veterinary supplies to gauge availability of product and potential distribution capacity. To better serve you and others, we ask that you please follow this link https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/72a89f573cb04d8793607b428d00e82d and complete the form attached so that we can effectively gather need-to-know information. Our disaster team is constantly assessing and triaging to award areas with the greatest need, and then coordinating with appropriate entities to devise an equitable plan of action. As plans solidify, we will notify organizations if and where products are available in their area.”

From PetcoFoundation.org:
“We are committed to supporting our shelter partners’ most critical needs through this disaster. Municipal and large organizations with animal control shelter functions can learn more about COVID-19 disaster funding in the Petco Foundation partner portal.” For details, please visit https://www.petcofoundation.org/relief/

From Banfield.com:
“At the Banfield Foundation, we believe all pets deserve access to veterinary care, shelter and disaster relief. During these uncertain times, we remain committed to supporting pets and the people who love them by providing grant funds to those who need it most. In response to COVID-19, we are pausing our current grant programs in order to determine how to best direct funds to those organizations working to keep pets and people together during this crisis. Please stay tuned for more information. Questions?” Contact info@banfieldfoundation.org

From PetfinderFoundation.com
“COVID-19 Operation Grants are available to adoption organizations that have been negatively impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Grant funds can be used to purchase cleaning supplies, food, vaccines, or anything else you may need in order to continue caring for your adoptable pets.” Grants range from $500 - $1000. Please visit https://petfinderfoundation.com/for-shelters/apply-for-a-grant/ for details and to apply.

Pets of the Homeless
● Sleeping Crate Program: Collapsible crates are ordered online by Pets of The Homeless and shipped to shelters that submit a request to info@petsofthehomeless.org. Please see their website for required information.
● Pet Food Donation Sites: Please see their website to locate pet food donation sites.
● Emergency Veterinary Care: Please see their website to connect with a case manager for requests for assistance. Business cards can be provided so social workers have this information readily available to them.
● Pets of the Homeless will work with shelter managers and pet owners to coordinate for veterinary care as needed (vaccinations or more extensive care as needed, on a case by case basis) in order to immediately access shelter, whether or not the shelter is interested in receiving crates.

From Department of Housing and Urban Development - Emergency Solutions Grant Program:
“Individuals experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of exposure to a variety of infectious diseases including influenza and coronavirus. Taking effective sanitation measures can reduce the spread of infectious disease for people who are unsheltered or living in emergency shelters. ESG Program recipients may use ESG Street Outreach and Emergency Shelter funds for essential supplies and services to reduce the spread of infectious disease in their programs.” Please visit https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/esi/ for details.
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Animal Care, Animal Welfare and Veterinary Resources
American Red Cross: [Pet Disaster Preparedness](https://www.redcross.org/disaster-preparedness)
American Veterinary Medical Association: [What Veterinarians Need to Know](https://www.avma.org)
American Veterinary Medical Association: [Veterinary practices are “essential businesses”](https://www.avma.org)
Best Friends Animal Society: [Best Friends Vet Access](https://bfa.org/vet-access) (remote veterinary service)
   - Download mobile app using code BFHELPS (free for a limited time)
Best Friends Animal Society: [Lifesaving Library](https://bfa.org/lifesaving-library) (various resources)
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [CDC Healthy Pets, Healthy People](https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets)
Cornell Cooperative Extension - New York Extension Disaster Education Network: [COVID-19 and Service Dogs](https://www.extension.cornell.edu/x7715c.html)
Cornell Cooperative Extension - New York Extension Disaster Education Network: [COVID-19 and Dogs](https://www.extension.cornell.edu/x7715c.html)
Idexx: [Leading Veterinary Diagnostic Company Sees No COVID-19 Cases in Pets](https://www.idexx.com/)
Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Program at the University of Florida: [UPDATED: Important COVID-19 information for animal shelters](https://www.sheltermedicine.org)
   - (various resources)
National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians: [Compendium of Veterinary Standard Precautions for Zoonotic Disease Prevention in Veterinary Personnel](https://www.nasphv.org)
Ready.gov: [Pets and Animals](https://www.ready.gov/pets-and-animals)
The Humane Society of the United States: [Pet Disaster Preparedness](https://www.humanesociety.org)
The Humane Society of the United States: [Compassion in a time of crisis](https://www.humanesociety.org)
World Small Animal Veterinary Association: [COVID-19 – Advice and Resources](https://www.wsva.org)

Facilities, Cleaning and Personal Safety Resources
American Red Cross: [Coronavirus Safety](https://www.redcross.org/coronavirus-safety)
American Red Cross: [Steps to Help Protect Against Coronavirus COVID-19](https://www.redcross.org/coronavirus-safety)
American Red Cross: [Steps to Help Cope with Evolving Coronavirus Situation](https://www.redcross.org/coronavirus-safety)
American Red Cross: [What You Should Do If Caring For Someone With Coronavirus](https://www.redcross.org/coronavirus-safety)
Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Program at the University of Florida: [UPDATED: Important COVID-19 information for animal shelters](https://www.sheltermedicine.org)
   - (various resources)

Homelessness Resources
National Alliance to End Homelessness: [Coronavirus and Homelessness](https://www.naeoh.org)
National Alliance to End Homelessness: [COVID-19: What State and Local Leaders Can Do for Homeless Populations](https://www.naeoh.org)
National Low Income Housing Coalition: [Coronavirus and Housing/Homelessness](https://www.nlihc.org)
   - (various federal, state and city specific resources)
National Health Care for the Homeless Council: [Covid-19 Resources](https://www.homeless.org)
   - (various resources)
The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: [Disease Risks and Homelessness](https://www.hud.gov)
The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness: [Planning and Preparing for COVID-19 (Coronavirus)](https://www.usich.gov)
   - (various resources)

For more information about the Co-Sheltering Collaborative, please visit [www.co-shelteringcollaborative.org](https://www.co-shelteringcollaborative.org).