

**Exploring Shelter Access Among Animal Guardians
Experiencing Homelessness in New York City:
NYC One Health Street Clinic Survey and Interview Results**

**Research conducted by My Dog is My Home
Authors: Dr. Eric Lindgren, Casey Riordan, Emma Newton**

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Introduction

The national organization Pets of the Homeless estimates that 5 to 10% of homeless individuals have companion animals.¹ With approximately 79,000 individuals experiencing homelessness in New York City as of 2018,² this translates to around 4,000 to 8,000 people living unhoused with a companion animal in the city.

New York City has one of the lowest rates of unsheltered individuals nationwide, with about 5% of homeless residents going without shelter on any given night.³ According to federal law, municipal shelters in New York City are required to accept emotional support and service animals,⁴ but MDIMH has witnessed homeless shelters in other municipalities struggle to accept even these animals that they are mandated to accommodate. Without existing evidence or data, it is unclear whether New York City's municipal shelter system is able to keep up with the demand for service and emotional support animal accommodations.

Furthermore, with the exception of the Urban Resource Institute's co-living spaces for survivors of domestic violence with pets, there are currently few, if any, homeless shelters in New York City that openly welcome animals who are not service animals or do not have emotional support documentation.⁵ It is therefore possible that a large proportion of the city's unhoused population are people who resist shelter without accommodations for their companion animals.

For animal guardians, and especially for those living in vulnerable situations without a home or traditional support system, companion animals are often their only source of love, companionship, and family.⁶ Asking someone to make the decision between having a roof over their head or remaining with their family member is a choice that most people will not -- and should not -- have to make. However, it is a daily reality for New Yorkers who attempt to access temporary housing services with companion animals.

¹ Pets of the Homeless.org website statistic: Accessed 7/18/2019.

<https://www.petsofthehomeless.org/help-pets/>

² NYC Homeless estimate taken from "Twenty CoC's with Highest Homeless Counts/Rates (2018)" in the National Alliance to End Homelessness State of Homelessness report:

<https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report/>

³ Unsheltered estimate from HUD 2017 homeless count of NYC homeless: 4000 unhoused/76501 counted=5.22% (This likely under-counts the unhoused at a higher rate than those in shelters)

⁴ Thrope, D. (2013). "HUD Clarifies Definition of Assistance Animals Under FHA and Section 504." *The Housing Bulletin*, 43: 134-136.

⁵ An exception is PALS, or "People and Animals Living Safely," an initiative by the Urban Resource Institute to offer animal accommodations to domestic violence victims. PALS offers 172 apartments in five residences, but these are only available to victims of domestic violence.

⁶ For examples of the social and psychological benefits of homeless pet ownership, see Irvine, L. (2013). *My Dog Always Eats First: Homeless People and Their Animals*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

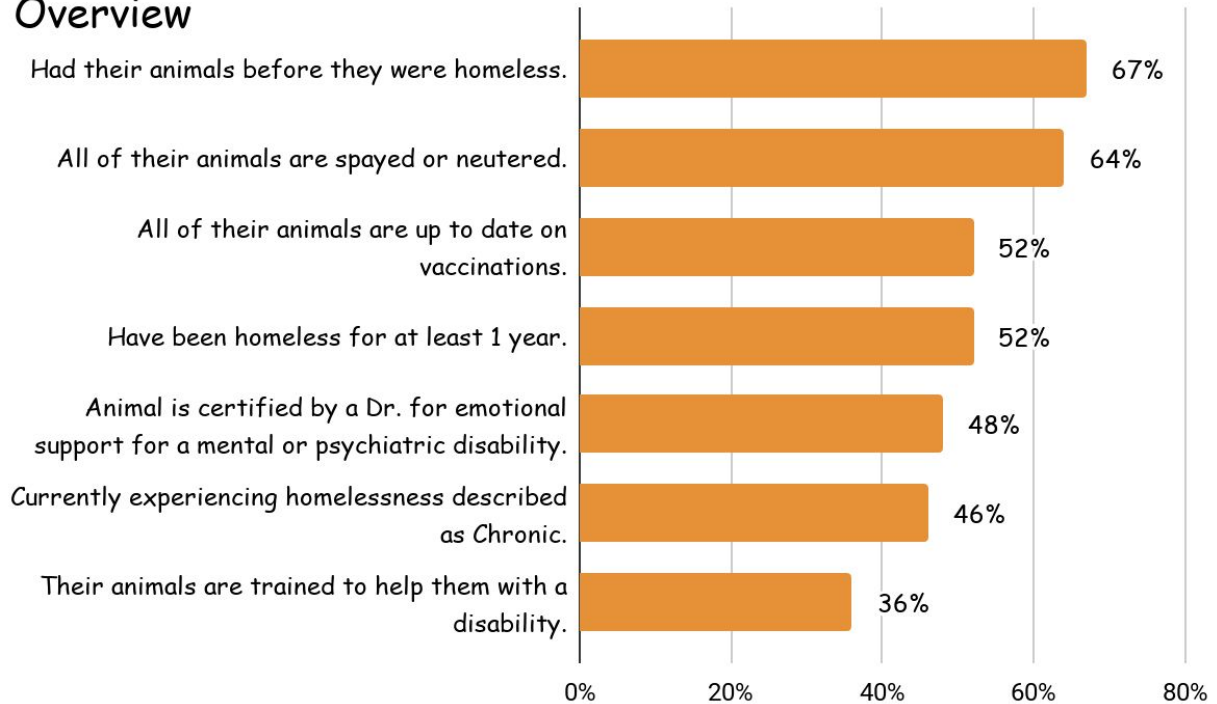
New York City policy-makers and officials have recently begun taking some steps to evaluate and address the need for low-barrier shelter facilities serving the needs of the city's diverse homeless population, including those with animal companions. For example, the New York City Department of Homeless Services recently released an [open-ended RFP](#) to fund new low-barrier "Safe Haven" shelters around the city that would accept companion animals, with the goal of getting as many unhoused adults as possible to accept a bed at night. City councilman Stephen Levin also announced two bills, [Intro. 1483](#) and [Intro.1484](#) that would increase shelter access for the city's interspecies homeless community and provide additional data on the specific needs and features of this population.

To learn more about New York City's community of homeless families with pets and to inform the city's research initiatives, [My Dog Is My Home](#) (MDIMH) collaborated with [The Street Dog Coalition](#), [Positive Tails](#), Planned Parenthood Project Street Beat, Animal Care Centers of NYC, and the ASPCA, Breaking Ground, Goddard Riverside Community Center, and a number of other providers and individuals to host New York City's inaugural One Health Street Clinic. On June 15, 2019, forty-two companion animals and their thirty-five homeless guardians attended the clinic and received free veterinary attention, human and animal supplies, and access to services such as dog grooming, animal training, and human sexual health testing and care. Throughout the event, MDIMH also conducted a survey and a series of in-depth interviews with animal guardians to learn more about the city's interspecies homeless community and their access to shelter services.

The findings presented throughout this report come from the research conducted at the One Health Street Clinic. To obtain a copy of the original dataset, or to learn more about the clinic and the work MDIMH is doing to advocate for interspecies families in times of homelessness, please contact MDIMH Director of Research, Dr. Eric Lindgren at eric@mydogismyhome.org.

Executive Summary

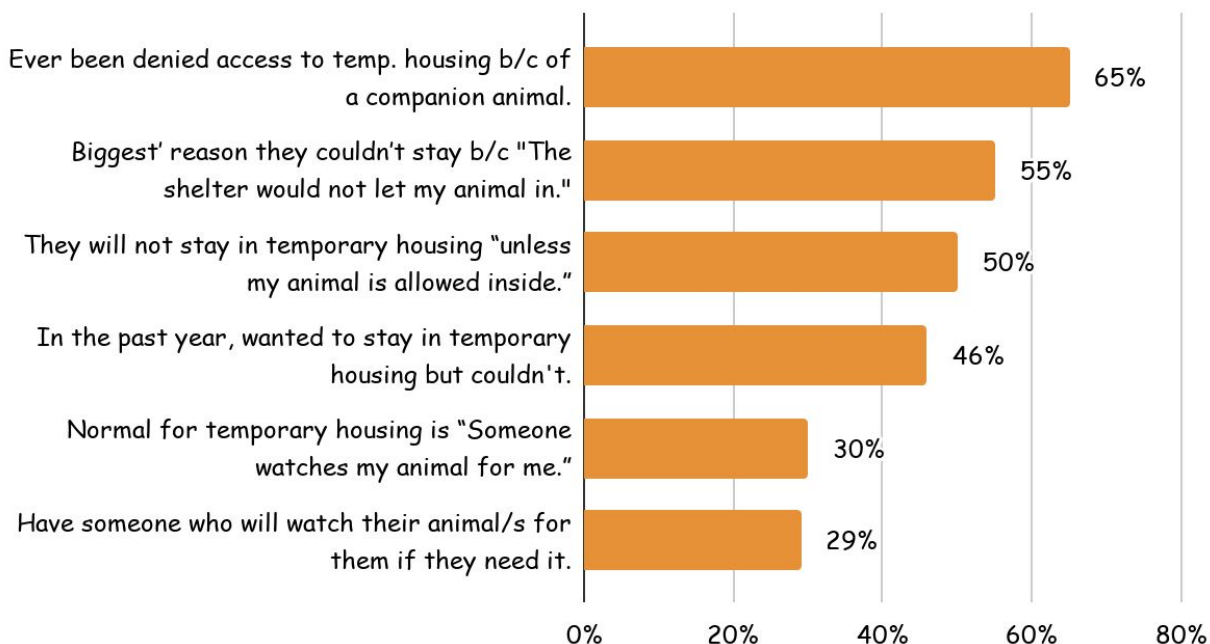
Overview



Overview

- 67% of respondents reported that they had their animals before they were homeless.
- 64% of respondents reported that all their animals are spayed or neutered.
- 52% of respondents reported that all their animals are up to date on vaccinations.
- 52% of respondents had been homeless for at least one year.
- 48% of respondents reported that their animal was certified by a doctor to provide them with emotional support for a mental or psychiatric disability.
- 46% of respondents were currently experiencing homelessness described as Chronic.
- 36% of respondents reported that their animals were trained to do a specific task to help them with a disability.

Access to Shelter



Access to Shelter

- 65% of respondents reported that they had been denied access to temporary housing because of a companion animal.
- 55% of respondents said the 'biggest' reason they couldn't stay in temporary housing was because "the shelter would not let my animal in."
- 50% of respondents reported that they will not stay in temporary housing "unless my animal is allowed inside."
- 46% of respondents reported that in the past year, there was a time when they wanted to stay in temporary housing but couldn't.
- 30% of respondents reported that what they normally do with their animal/s when they stay in temporary housing is "Someone watches my animal for me."
- Only 29% of respondents reported having someone who will watch their animal/s for them if they need it.

Feedback

- Attendees suggested that having access to additional animal-friendly shelter, or animal-friendly accommodations within existing shelters, would improve their lives.
- People with documented assistance animals said they wish it were easier for their animals to be accommodated into the shelter system.
- Other feedback included a need for increased access to free veterinary care clinics, pet-sitting facilities, and services such as dog grooming and training.

Methodology

We obtained IRB certification from the IPSL International Institutional Review Board on April 16, 2019. Printed surveys were distributed to each participant at the clinic and collected by MDIMH volunteers. We asked every participant to complete a written survey, and we approached participants at random to participate in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in private rooms by Casey Riordan, a NYU graduate student, and Nick Bond, a volunteer research assistant.

By the end of the event, we collected 28 completed surveys and 6 interviews. Our very small sample size only allows us to have a 95% confidence interval of about ± 18 percentage points. Despite this wide margin of error, we can still gain meaningful insight into responses from the questions asked in the survey, and the precise percentages we report represent our best estimate of the findings.

Interview Participants

Below is an overview of the six attendees who participated in in-depth interviews at the One Health street clinic. All human and animal names have been anonymized to protect our subjects' privacy.

Participant 1: Christina and her cat, Olive

Christina is a mid- to late-30s woman. She was raised in New York but spent several years in California, and she has experienced homelessness on and off for most of her life. She also suffers from debilitating anxiety, bipolar disorder, and self-described delusions. Olive, Christina's long-haired, grey-and-white adult cat, is her emotional support animal (ESA); while she answers questions in a quiet and timid manner, she frequently turns to Olive and smiles with what appears to be renewed strength and confidence throughout the interview. Olive and Christina have been living together for more than four years, and they currently reside at a large, female-only mental health shelter in Brooklyn.

Participant 2: Janine and her dog, Snax

Janine is in her early-30s and found herself homeless after experiencing more than a decade of domestic violence at the hands of her ex-husband in another state. Janine suffers from a mix of physical and psychological disabilities, and at the time of the interview, Janine had acquired Snax, her adult male Pitbull mix, less than a week beforehand with the intention of making him her "registered service animal." Janine and her domestic partner take turns sleeping at a private shelter while one of them remains with Snax in a small park in Brooklyn.

Participant 3: Monica and her dog, Betty

Monica, who is in her mid- to late-50s, is originally from the South but moved to New York to find work after going through a divorce. A friend gave her Betty, an adult female Maltese, as a way to “heal her heart” after being separated from her husband and daughter. Monica spent several years living with different friends until entering the shelter system two years ago. Because she was unable to bring Betty inside, her friend in a distant town agreed to foster Betty until Monica can get back on her feet. Monica currently lives in a female-only shelter with one roommate, and at the time of the interview, she was in between surgeries and unable to work.

Participant 4: Renee and her dog, Ella

Renee is a late-40s woman who has lived on the street and in the shelter system for her entire life. Her husband gave her Ella, an adult female French Bulldog, as a wedding gift five years ago. Renee suffers from depression and suicidal tendencies, and she claims that Ella is her source of solace when she feels at her worst. Renee and her husband live with Renee’s brother on a street corner in midtown, and they sleep on the subway at night.

Participant 5: Joe and his dog, Rosie

Joe is originally from South America but moved to the United States as an adult. He is in his mid-40s and lives with his wife and their dog, an adult terrier mix named Rosie. Joe rescued Rosie from a shelter years before he and his wife became homeless as a result of drug addiction, and they refused to surrender Rosie after losing their jobs and home. Joe and his wife currently live in a Manhattan-based family shelter, although he did not clarify how they were able to bring Rosie into the shelter with them.

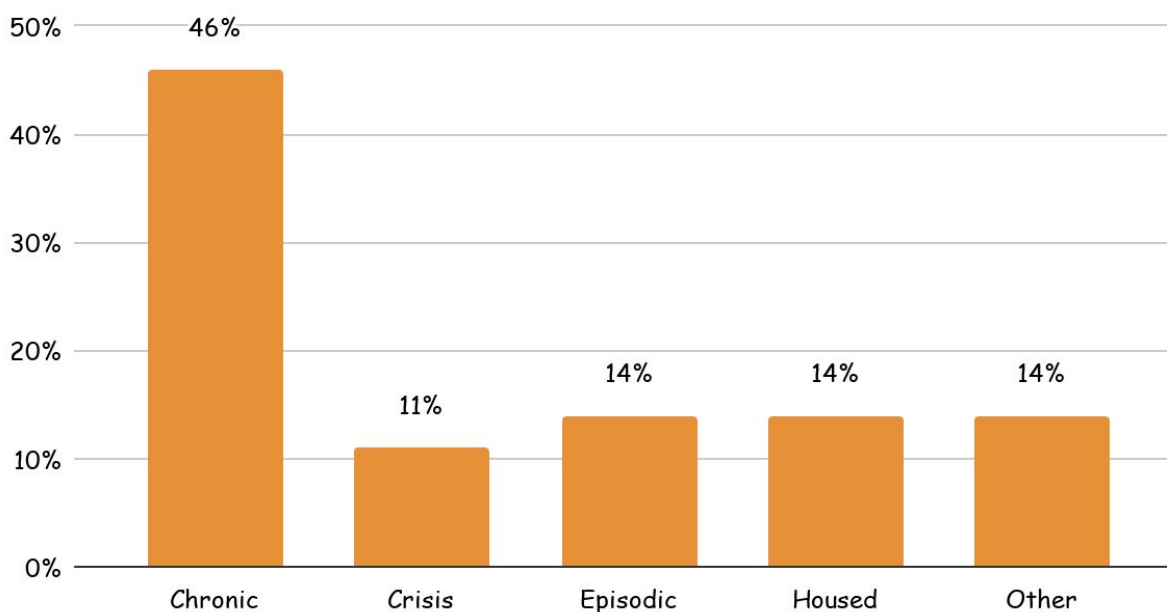
Participant 6: Lara and her dog, Snoopy

Lara is in her mid-20s and moved to New York from the Midwest. She describes herself as episodically homeless, and she spent much of her life in and out of the foster care and shelter system. She has been experiencing her current episode of homelessness for one month, prior to which she was living in an apartment and working at a paid internship. Approximately two months before the interview, while she was still housed, Lara obtained her adult male Pitbull mix, Snoopy. Because Lara cannot bring Snoopy into a shelter, she lives with him on the floor of a friend’s apartment in the city.

Complete Findings

Current Living Situation

Current Living Situation



Clinic attendees were asked to describe their current living situation. 46% of survey respondents said they were experiencing 'chronic' homelessness, meaning an episode of homelessness lasting longer than a year or four or more episodes of homelessness within three years.⁷ This was the most common response among participants, and it reflects previous studies indicating that chronically homeless individuals are more likely than others to have companion animals.⁸

11% of survey respondents experienced homelessness after going through a 'crisis,' such as a divorce or loss of a loved one. 14% described their living situation as 'episodic,' meaning they experience brief episodes of homelessness at a time and are always at risk of becoming homeless. 14% said their current situation was 'housed,' having entered into a housing program for formerly homeless individuals within the past two years. 14% described their current situation as 'other.'

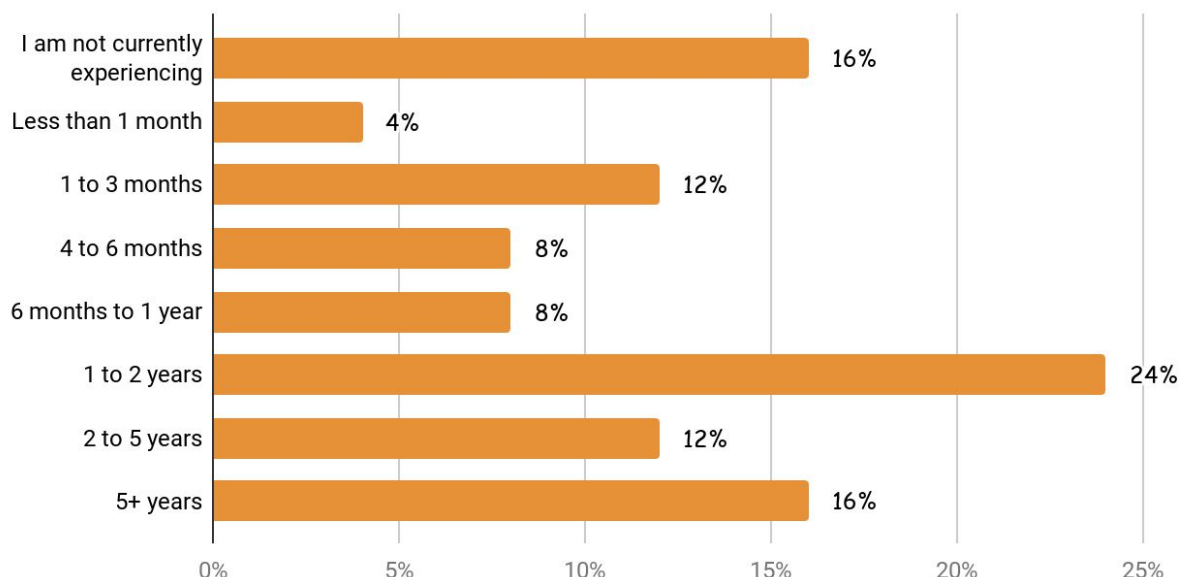
⁷ Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2015). Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing: Defining "Chronically Homeless" (Federal Register). 8(233): 75792. <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/Defining-Chronically-Homeless-Final-Rule.pdf>

⁸ Kim, C.E., and Newton, E.K. (2014). "My Dog Is My Home: Increasing Awareness of Inter-Species Homelessness in Theory and Practice" in T. Ryan (Ed.), *Animals in Social Work* (pp. 48-63). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Length of Homelessness

Among the interview participants, Lara was the only person who had experienced her current episode of homelessness for one month or less. Joe, Christina, Janine, and Monica had experienced homelessness for more than two years, living either with family and friends or at various shelters around the city. Renee could not recall a time that she was not homeless, as she grew up on the street with her parents and in and out of the shelter system throughout her adult life.

Length of Homelessness



When asked about the length of their current episode of homelessness, 89% of survey respondents had been homeless for over a month. 60% had been homeless for six months or more. 52% had been homeless for at least one year. One in four people, or 28%, said that their current episode has lasted longer than two years.

A 1996 NSHAPC study of homeless populations found that most homeless episodes lasted a few weeks to a month, with the overwhelming majority lasting less than a year.⁹ On the other hand, a more recent study in Knoxville, Tennessee, revealed that chronically homeless individuals were more likely than most other categories of homeless individuals to keep pets.¹⁰ These survey findings similarly suggest that interspecies homeless families face longer stretches of homelessness, possibly aggravated by having companion animals and being unable to access shelter or housing services.

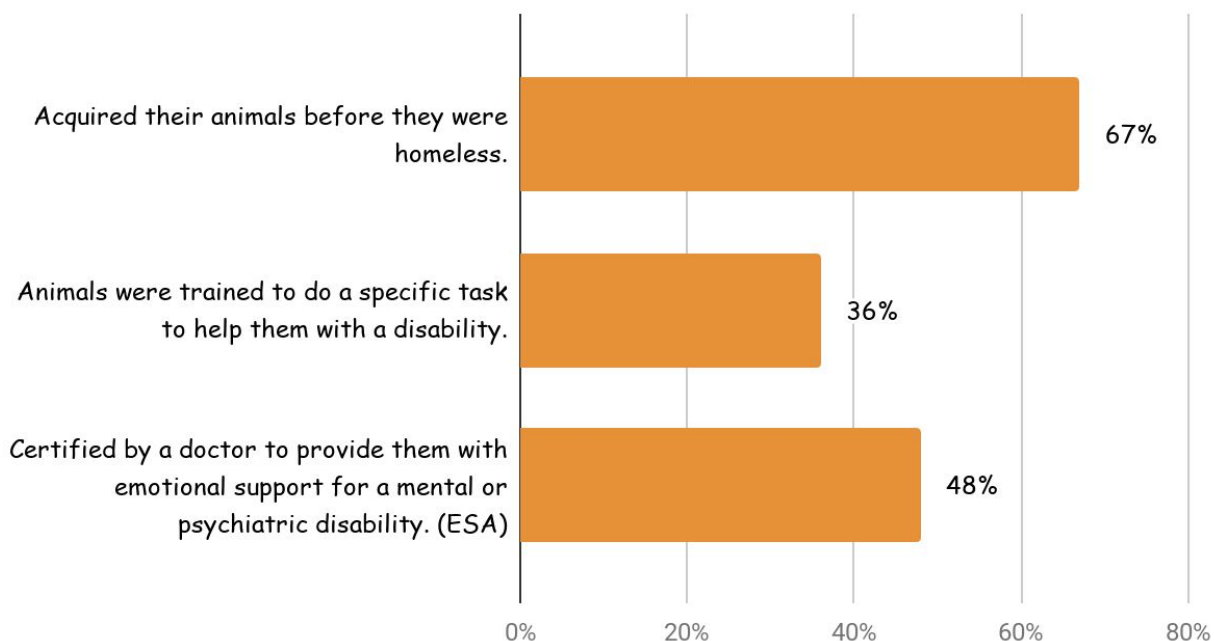
⁹ The 1996 National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients: A Comparison of Faith-Based and Secular Non-Profit Programs http://webarchive.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410496_1996_NSHAPC.pdf

¹⁰ Cronley, C., Strand, E.B., Patterson, D.A., and Gwaltney, S. (2015). "Homeless people who are animal caretakers: a comparative study." *Psychological Reports*, 105(2): 481-499.

Pet Ownership

Although it may be challenging to obtain adequate veterinary care in the absence of financial resources,¹¹ the majority of attendees had taken steps to give their animal appropriate veterinary attention. 64% of survey respondents reported that all their animals are spayed or neutered, and 52% of respondents reported that all their animals are up to date on vaccinations.

Ownership and Service



Two thirds of survey respondents reported that they acquired their animals before they were homeless. In addition, many of the animals provided some type of service or support whether official documented or self-determined. 36% of respondents reported that their animals were trained to do a specific task to help them with a disability. 48% said that their animal was verified by a doctor to provide them with emotional support for a mental or psychiatric disability.

Nearly every interview participant claimed that they suffer from a psychiatric or physical disability, most commonly anxiety and depression, and four interview participants said their pets help them cope with their diagnosed medical condition.

¹¹ For example, Howe & Easterbrook (2018) briefly described the financial challenges associated with pet ownership, noting that veterinary care is costly. See Howe, L. & Easterbrook, M.J. (2018). "The perceived and benefits of pet ownership for homeless people in the UK: practical costs, psychological benefits and vulnerability." *Journal of Poverty*, 22(6):486-499.

Monica said that her dog, Betty, “[is] very much comforting to me. I suffer from anxiety, and she’s, you know, she’s always there with me [sic].” Likewise, Renee’s dog Ella is available to her when she experiences an episode of depression: “Let’s put it this way. I vent to her. I tell her a lot. She knows all my problems, don’t you Ella? [Laughs] All the problems and all the headaches, you know? She knows them.”

At the time of the interviews, only Christina and Joe had successfully received approval to bring their animals into shelter. Olive is Christina’s ESA, who helps with her anxiety, bipolar disorder, and self-described delusions. However, she admitted that she struggled to coordinate the paperwork and requirements for the approval: “That was hard. I didn’t know what to do about all of the documentations [sic]. I didn’t know what to do, where to go. It was really hard. It was all really hard. The psychiatrist really helped me.”

For Monica and Lara, whose animals are not approved to enter their shelters, the mere idea of figuring out how to bring them inside is daunting. They were both unsure about whether they qualify to have an assistance animal. Based on her conversation with another interspecies homeless family, Lara explained that for her, it is not worth the effort to convince her shelter that her dog supports her with a disability:

Lara: Yeah she said you have to have paperwork proving your disability, your clinical diagnosis, the reason you need the dog, the training, I’m sure, so it’s, it’s a very difficult process, and she’s the only one I’d ever saw who had a service dog.

Nick: And you said she’s the only one you’ve seen in the shelter with an animal?

Lara: Right. I was shocked! I was like, what! So she broke it down for me, and it’s not the most enjoyable experience.

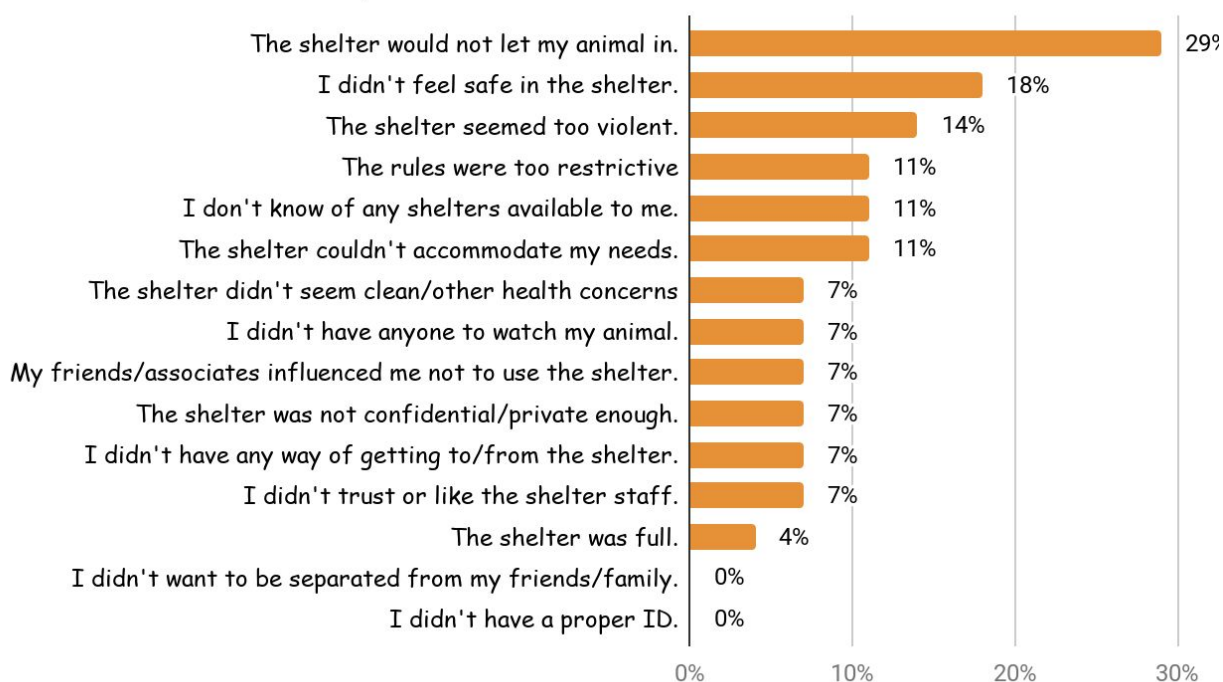
Janine and Renee both said they are currently in the process of getting their animals “certified” as an assistance animal. From Janine’s point of view, the shelter is making it difficult to finalize her documents: “[They] said that it’s a process, a special accommodation. Um, the thing with that is [pause] one person tells me DHS [Department of Homeless Services] approves it, and DHS tells me the director of, the program director, is supposed to approve the special accommodation. But I spoke to him yesterday and he said that DHS has to approve it. So they’re giving me a runaround [sic].” According to Janine, this experience suggests to her that the shelter does not care about her needs.

Although not every participant’s pet was classified as a service animal or ESA, some interviewees claimed to benefit from the general comfort of having a companion by their side. One person wrote a note in their survey that there “needs to be more shelters catering to people with pets. Animals give them a reason to get up every day. [Pets are] crucial to [a] homeless person’s mental and physical health and well-being.” Lara was particularly passionate about communicating the importance of companion animals during her interview: “All dogs serve a purpose. All dogs provide a service. Just different services. Some provide eyesight. Some provide emotional support. And some just provide companionship. And that’s it.”

Barriers to Obtaining Shelter

Generally, people experiencing homelessness with companion animals face serious obstacles to finding temporary (and ultimately permanent) housing. 65% of survey respondents reported that they had been denied access to temporary housing because of a companion animal. 50% of respondents reported that they will not stay in temporary housing “unless my animal is allowed inside.”

46% wanted to stay in shelter but couldn't because:



Survey respondents were asked if there was a time in the past year that they wanted to stay in a temporary housing facility but were unable to do so; 46% said yes. Of those, 29% respondents said they were unable to stay because "The shelter would not let my animal in," reflecting findings from the interviews. 18% said, "I didn't feel safe in the shelter." 14% said, "The shelter seemed too violent." 11% said, "The rules were too restrictive" 11% said, "I don't know of any shelters available to me." 11% said, "The shelter couldn't accommodate my needs." 7% said, "The shelter didn't seem clean/other health concerns with the facility." 7% said, "I didn't have anyone to watch my animal." 7% said, "My friends/associates influenced me not to use the shelter." 7% said, "The shelter was not confidential/private enough." 7% said, "I didn't have any way of getting to/from the shelter." 7% said, "I didn't trust or like the shelter staff." 4% said, "The shelter was full." 0% of respondents said it was because "I didn't want to be separated from my friends/family.", or because "I didn't have a proper ID."

Finding a shelter that allows access to animals was also one of the key challenges described by interview participants. With the exception of Joe, who was unable to explain how he was able to get Rosie into his shelter, every other person had been denied access to a shelter at least once because of their animal.

Both Lara and Monica were encouraged to either surrender their dogs or somehow find a foster home if they wanted to enter the shelter system. This was particularly traumatic for Monica, who felt that her dog Betty was being equated with a mere object as opposed to a member of her family. Consider the following conversation:

Monica: I mean, when I first went to go to the shelter, and they told me I couldn't bring Betty in, I left, I wouldn't. It took me time, you know, to actually admit to myself that I had to separate myself from her [sic].

Casey: What exactly did they say to you?

Monica: They told me I couldn't bring her. They just said it like that. Just like they told me I couldn't bring my stuff. I said, what am I supposed to do with my stuff? They said throw it away.

Casey: What about the dog?

Monica: They said get rid of her. Get rid of her.

Before entering his current shelter, Joe and his wife spent nine months on the street because they were unable to find a way to get Rosie into the shelter with them. Renee has not been as lucky: she has had Ella for five years, and in that time, she has yet to find a shelter that will allow her to bring the dog inside. Renee reports making a sustained effort, but continues to get turned away until she can get Ella approved as an ESA.

Obstacles with ESAs

Having either a documented service or emotional support animal (ESA) is currently one of the only ways to get an animal inside a public shelter or temporary housing facility.¹² However, unlike service animals, ESAs do not need to be trained to perform a specific task to support a disability. As a result, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not recognize ESAs as equivalent to service animals.¹³ Service animals' access to both public and private settings is protected by law, and the threshold for "proof" that the animal provides support is much lower than for ESAs; ESAs are also protected but in a more narrow set of circumstances and with a higher "proof" threshold. Laws relevant to ESAs are the Fair Housing Act and the Air Carrier Access Act.¹⁴⁻¹⁵

¹² Thrope, D. (2013). "HUD Clarifies Definition of Assistance Animals Under FHA and Section 504." *Housing Law Bulletin*, 43: 134-136. Retrieved from <http://www.nhlp.org/files/2014supplement/Chapter03/FN%201242%20%20HUD%20Clarifies%20Definition%20of%20Assistance%20Animals%20in%20FHA%20&%20Section%20504%20-%20Housing%20Law%20Bulletin.pdf>

¹³ Service Dog Certifications (2018, June 5). "ADA Service Dog Laws (2018)." Retrieved July 20, 2019 via: <https://www.servicedogcertifications.org/ada-service-dog-laws/>.

¹⁴ 42 U.S.C. §3610 et seq.

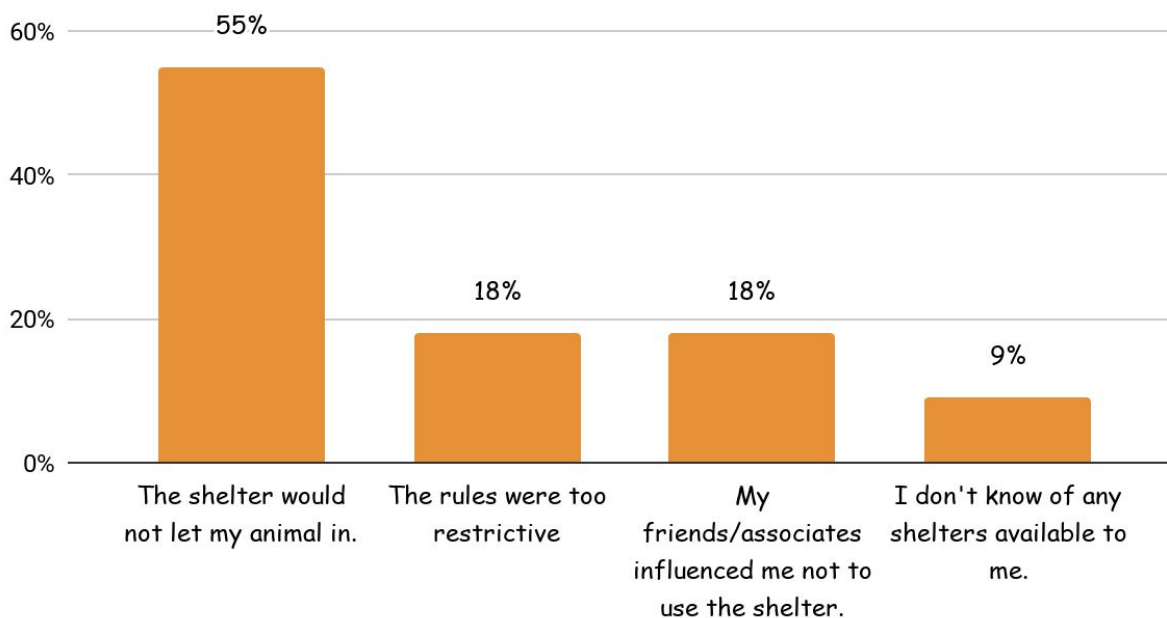
Although the vast majority of public shelters are required by law to make exceptions to their no-pet rules for ESAs, some participants expressed challenges finding a shelter that would make these accommodations. For example, Christina recalled that a security guard attempted to prevent her from bringing her ESA inside, even when Olive was approved by the shelter director. Likewise, a survey respondent wrote us a comment that she was recently unable to access a female-only shelter with her ESA animal because the facility was not pet-friendly.

Monica also shared the following anecdote from a shelter acquaintance with an ESA, which brings up another misconception among clients accessing services: “I asked her how she got the dog in, and she had certification for the dog, and it was the only way she could get him in. And even then, a lot of shelters denied her. Like she stayed in, uh, a transitional shelter before going to a permanent shelter for over a year, just because no other shelters would let her in.” Many people, including shelter and program staff, confuse the processes required for ESAs and service animals. Technically, service animals and ESAs do not need certification or registration. However, people with disabilities who request a “reasonable accommodation” to a no-pets-allowed housing or shelter rule for their ESAs are often required to submit a letter from a health professional stating that their animal is required to help them have full use of the dwelling. This misconception deters many would-be ESA guardians such as Lara and Monica, who claim to have anxiety disorders but who both commented about the difficulty of emotional support “certification.”

The optimal solution would be for shelters to welcome all animals, ESAs or otherwise. However, in the absence of such housing, these comments suggest that it would be helpful to educate pet-owners more explicitly about the difference between service animals and emotional support animals, who is qualified for each status, the process and approvals involved with each, and finally the required accommodations made for both categories of assistance animals. Ultimately, this may also make it easier for people to bring their ESAs inside, as they can, in theory, spend less time figuring out how to obtain a “certification” that does not legally exist.

¹⁵ Title 14 CFR Part 382

'Biggest' reason they couldn't stay in temporary housing

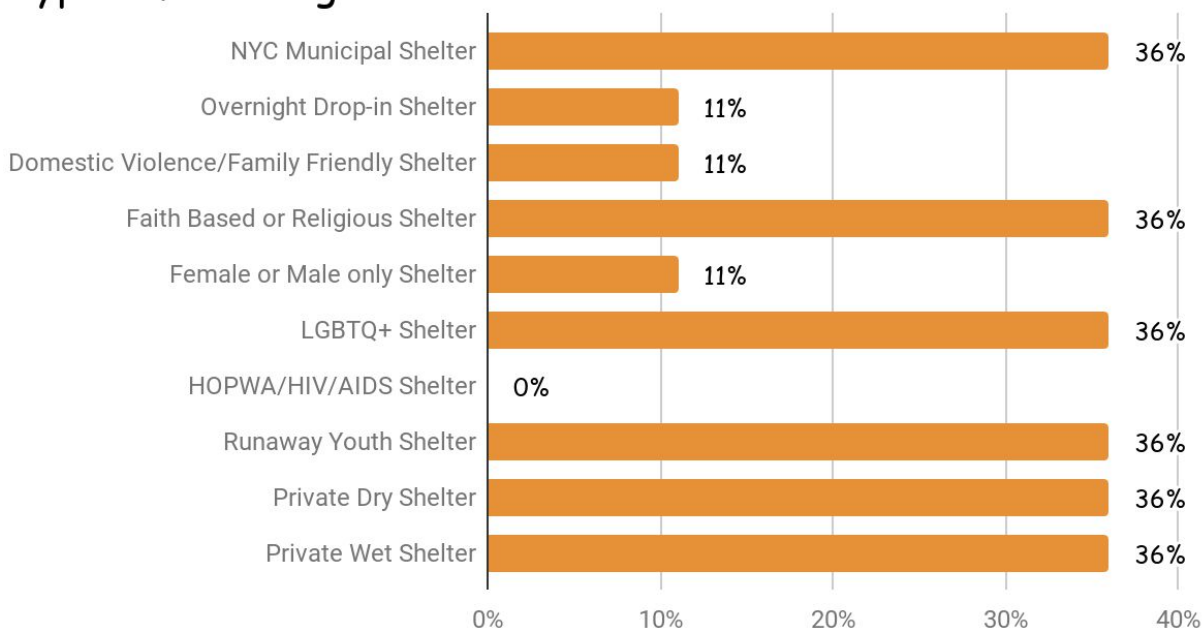


For survey respondents and interview participants, gaining access for their companion animal was the most cited as the key reason that they couldn't stay in temporary shelter in the past year. Specifically, 55% of survey respondents said this was the 'biggest' reason they couldn't stay in temporary housing. On the other hand, 18% said it was because "The rules were too restrictive." 18% said it was because "My friends/associates influenced me not to use the shelter." Finally, 9% of respondents said it was because "I don't know of any shelters available to me."

Housing Services Used

Attendees were asked about what types of shelters they had used in the past. 36% of survey respondents reported using NYC municipal shelters, faith-based or religious shelters, LGBTQ+ shelters, runaway youth shelters, private dry shelters, and private wet shelters in the past. 11% of respondents said they had used overnight drop-in shelters, domestic violence/family friendly shelters, and gender-specific shelters in the past. No one reported using a HOPWA/HIV/AIDS shelter.

Types of Housing Services Used



Interview participants offered mixed responses about the locations they currently reside or have resided in the past. Christina and Renee spent their childhoods on the streets and in the shelter system. Christina recalled living in faith-based homeless facilities throughout Brooklyn as a child, although she currently lives happily with her ESA in a mental health support shelter for females in Brooklyn. As for Renee, while she spent several years living in an “SRO” (single room occupancy), she left the shelter when she married her husband and frequently struggles to find family-friendly shelters that will allow her and her husband to stay together. As a result, at the time of the interview, she spent her days on the streets of Manhattan with her husband, dog, and brother so they wouldn’t have to separate and sleeping in various subway cars at night to protect herself against the weather.

As she indicated in the following statement, Lara also became acquainted with the shelter system early on in life: *“I have been homeless pretty much on and off my entire adult life since I was 15 and I was in foster care. I came to New York to hopefully find a steady job, but I haven’t been able to find something that works for me. So I’ve just been kind of surviving, in and out of homelessness.”* Before obtaining Snoopy, Lara used both SROs and open-plan public shelters for homeless single adults throughout the city, as she is unqualified to stay in specialty family or mental health facilities. Renee and Lara were the only two participants who were not currently living in a shelter at the time of the interview. However, unlike Renee, Lara said she lives on the floor of a friend’s apartment.

Joe currently lives in a family-friendly shelter with his wife and their dog Rosie. He recalled living in previous family-friendly shelters that made it difficult for him to bring his dog inside. However,

he has been living at his current shelter for two years and has no intention of moving in the future.

On the other hand, Janine described her current shelter as privately-owned and funded by the DHS. Although Janine is a domestic violence victim, she claimed that she was barred from staying in domestic violence shelters because her abuse occurred in a different state. While she goes through the process of getting her dog certified as a service dog, Janine currently takes turns with her domestic partner to sleep in a public park with Snax: *“I am in the shelter, I will stay with [Snax] during the day, and, um, like around 9:30 go sign the bed roster, me and my husband, I’ll go first, sign the bed roster, go upstairs to our unit, um, take a shower and whatever, and just stay there for a few minutes, then come downstairs, and then I’ll watch him and my husband will sign the bed roster, and he’ll go upstairs and do whatever he gotta do, then he’ll come back outside. Like last night I stayed with Snax until 1 in the morning and my husband stayed the whole night outside with him.”*

Monica lost her home in Florida after her divorce and spent her time shifting between houses before finally entering the shelter system. Monica’s shelter is a female-only facility for working women. She has a single roommate and considers herself fortunate: *“Right now I’m lucky, I only have one roommate. But we share a room. I’ve been in shelters where there are at least 16 people to one room.”* Monica is able to stay in this shelter because her dog, Betty, lives with a friend outside of New York City.

Boarding Animals

Many homeless guardians struggle to find accommodations for their pets when staying in temporary housing. Only 30% of survey respondents reported that “Someone watches my animal for me” when they stay in temporary housing. Meanwhile, 5% said that they normally “sneak my animal inside.” No one reported utilizing any crisis foster care or boarding resources available through nonprofits such as the Animal Care Centers of NYC, ASPCA, and Animal Haven.

These findings are also evident in the in-depth interviews. A key challenge cited by interview participants was finding a location to board their animals while they used shelter facilities. For example, while she was staying in a shelter and navigating the process of getting Olive ESA certified, Christina paid a local child to watch her cat. Soon after, the child gave Olive away to a neighbor in exchange for money, and Christina struggled to get him back:

Christina: They thought he was a female cat. And I said no, he’s a male cat. And I said no, that’s my cat, I have evidence and I can prove it. I’m calling the police.

Casey: Was all of this because, when you first went into the shelter, they told you that you couldn’t have him?

Christina: No, that day, I went to go get Olive so we could live together in the shelter, and suddenly the guy next to the grocery store said that's not my cat and I told him off. I told him, give me my cat back.

Fortunately, Christina was able to get Olive back and into the shelter with her. However, the experience was highly distressing for her.

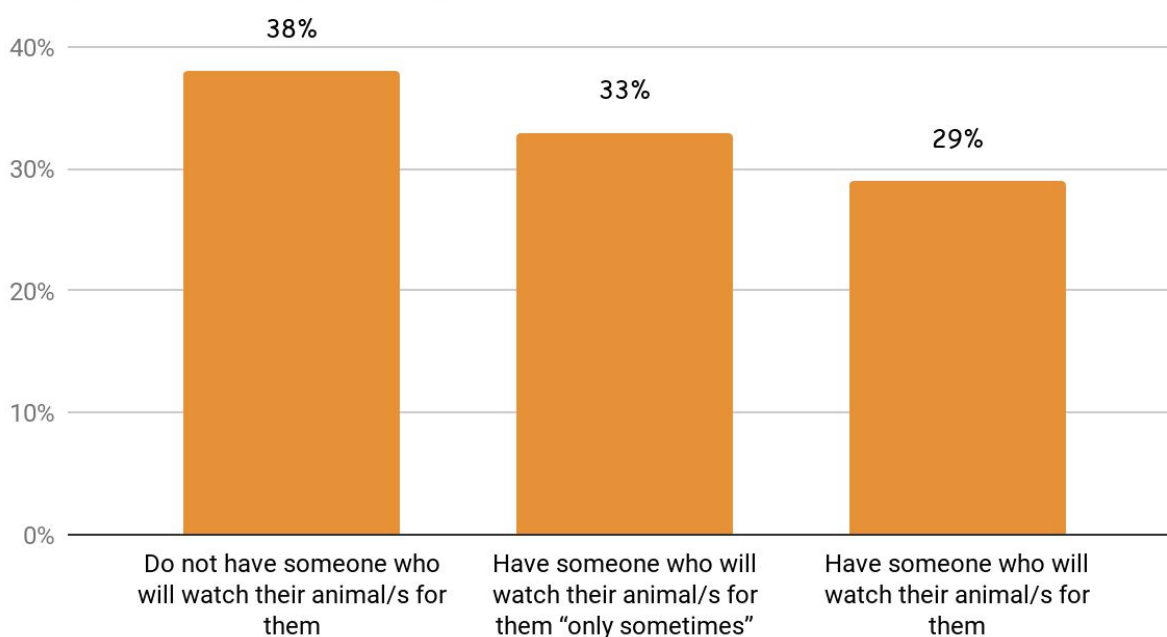
When they realized they could not bring their pets into a shelter, Monica, Lara, and Renee had an opportunity to keep their dogs with a friend. All three women adopted different strategies for boarding their pets with friends. Monica immediately approached her friend after being turned away from shelter, and the friend agreed to foster Betty until Monica can get back on her feet. Renee only asks her friend to watch Ella periodically when she and her husband decide they want to stay overnight in a shelter. Otherwise, Ella lives permanently with her on the street. Lara's friend, who was willing to take in her dog Snoopy, also said Lara could sleep on his floor. This option was a final resort for Lara, who struggled to come to terms with the logic behind foster care and animal boarding for the homeless: *"People don't understand how foster works. Nobody is going to take care of your dog for months, for free, and then give them back to you. Like, that's a lot of time, energy, money, and effort, for what? Nothing? Fostering is so you can find a permanent home for a dog. Train a dog, you work with them, you rehabilitate them, and then you find them a forever home. It's not like a babysitting kind of thing."*

For those interview participants who were forced to seek boarding solutions for their pets, it was challenging to cope with the emotional stress of being separated from their animal. For example, Monica turned visibly upset when she discussed the challenges of keeping Betty with her friend: *"We're pretty far right now. I have to go by public transport. I have to travel at least three hours to see her. Just to let her know I'm still her mom. And now I'm having a hard time. I'm not working, and I went into the wellness program to get surgery. And [the shelter] won't give me metro cards, so I'm having a hard time getting back and forth to see her. It's uncomfortable. It's terrible."*

For many interspecies families, in the absence of animal-friendly shelters, having access to a safe, centrally located place to board their animals would greatly benefit the lives of people who need to temporarily separate from their pet but who suffer greatly from extended periods of separation. Offering specialized foster homes and increased boarding facilities in different locations throughout the city may also help these families have peace of mind while they attempt to get back on their feet.

Pet-sitting Opportunities

Someone to watch animal for them?



Not everyone is willing to separate from their animals for long periods, but many people would benefit from having a temporary caretaker or pet-sitter watch their animals while they run errands or access different types of services. However, 38% of survey respondents reported not having someone who will watch their animals for them if they need it. 33% said they have someone who will watch their animal/s for them "only sometimes" if they need it. 29% reported always having someone who will watch their animal/s for them if they need it.

Several interview participants indicated that their spouses or romantic partners were vital to helping them navigate life on the street with a companion animal. Renee and Janine said their partners often look after their companion animals, offering them a break to obtain healthcare, sleep inside a shelter, or use other social services. Janine's partner takes turns with her to stay outside with their dog Snax while the other person sleeps inside the shelter. Likewise, Renee describes her teamwork with her husband in the following exchange:

Casey: What about accessing things like healthcare? And services?

Renee: I get all that.

Casey: You can access services with Ella?

Renee: Uh-huh. All of it.

Casey: What do you do with Ella when you get healthcare and other services?

Renee: Ella stays with my husband.

Casey: So you're saying that your husband watches her when you need to get medical care or another service?

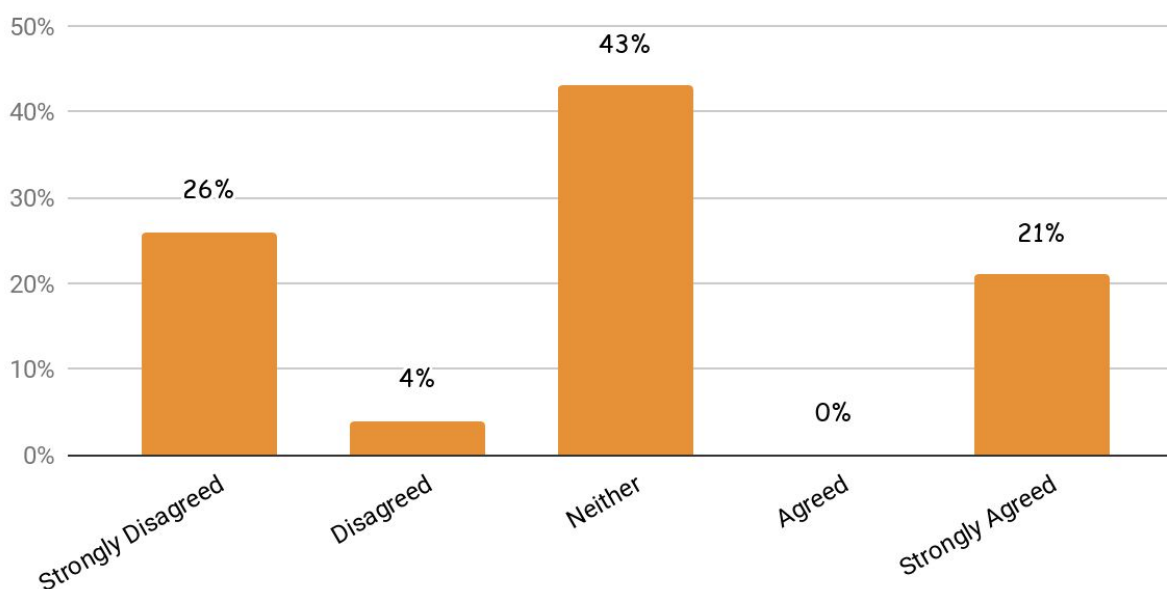
Renee: Uh-huh. And I do the same for him. When he needs to go somewhere I watch Ella and keep her with me.

As described earlier in this report, other interview participants claimed to have a reliable friend who was always willing to watch their animals in times of need. Although she had access to such a friend, Lara also mentioned that it would be helpful to offer free or affordable pet-sitting facilities for guardians who need to go on job interviews, run errands, or simply have a few hours to themselves. However, in the absence of such facilities, having at least one person to rely on made it much easier for participants to go about their daily lives and visit facilities where their pets were not allowed inside.

Feedback

The question remains: What can be done to improve the lives of interspecies homeless families living in New York City? Throughout the One Health Street Clinic, attendees were reassured that providing feedback about New York City's shelter system, their temporary housing preferences, and their suggestions about opportunities to improve their lives and community would support policy-makers and advocates as we attempt to create change.

"NYC's temporary housing services meet my needs"



When asked to mark their level of agreement with the statement: “New York City’s temporary housing services sufficiently meet my needs,” survey respondents displayed a mix of opinions. 26% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, and 4% disagreed. While no one agreed, 21% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement. Finally, 43% neither agreed nor disagreed.

What kind of temporary or permanent housing situation is acceptable if:		
you are not allowed to take your companion animal with you?		you are allowed to take your companion animal with you?
7%	Emergency Shelter	21%
18%	Transitional/Supportive Housing	32%
14%	Independently Obtained Housing	36%
11%	Other	14%

Survey respondents were also asked whether they would accept different types of temporary and permanent housing if they could take their animal and if they could not. Generally, all forms of housing alternatives were rated as more acceptable if people were allowed to bring companion animals inside. Only 7% would find emergency shelter acceptable if they were not allowed animals, compared to 21% if they were allowed. 18% would accept transitional or supportive housing without their animals, compared to 32% if animals were welcomed. 14% would stay in independently obtained housing that does not allow animals, compared to 36% who would stay in independently obtained housing that allows animals. 11% would accept some other form of temporary or permanent housing if they could not bring their companions, compared to 14% if they could bring their animals.

Renee illustrated the above findings when she stated: *“I mean I wish I could find temporary housing. But nowhere will take Ella. I won’t go nowhere unless they take Ella.”*

The in-depth interviews offered an opportunity for participants to give more detailed feedback about the facilities, services, and other opportunities that would benefit New York City’s interspecies homeless community. People suggested three general improvements: temporary housing, veterinary services, and other supportive resources.

Temporary housing

By far, the most popular suggestion was to increase the availability of animal-friendly shelter services. For example, when asked if there are any type of services that would benefit her community, Renee answered *“Uh, not really. Just so I can bring Ella into the shelters with me.”*

That would be great. So like housing, for, you know, pet-friendly housing. That's all we need. Buildings like that for people like us who need our pets."

Monica similarly acknowledged that it would be helpful for the city to provide more pet-friendly shelters, although she recognized that there are some tenants who may not want to reside with pets due to allergies or phobias. As a result, she suggested that the city reserve specific buildings dedicated to interspecies shelter seekers: *"I mean, they could at least have a couple shelters that are geared toward people with pets...Kind of like they have family shelters. A shelter for families that can't have animals. I know that's probably asking for a lot. But I don't know, there are so many empty buildings in this city, and so many wasted things that they could be putting to better use."* Extending Monica's suggestion, perhaps shelters would consider sectioning off several floors, or a portion of each facility, for people with animals.

Furthermore, families with ESAs suggested that the city should make it easier for them to use the existing shelter system. One survey respondent wrote a comment about the lengthy and challenging experience of gaining admission to shelters with her ESA: *"The shelter I was then placed at ALL demanded I show proof of the "Emotional Support Animal licence, because others had had one. I explained to them ESAs do not have licenses or registrations like Service Animals do; and yes, NYC requires all dogs to be. But all other ESAs are allowed to just be. I of my own free will and also with lawyer and social worker backing proved this and won, but it added work and stress to the whole situation."* By removing this barrier for people with ESAs, the city can improve the mental well-being of a group of people who already suffer from psychiatric impairments.

Veterinary Services

In addition to housing, some respondents expressed the need for increased medical services for pets. In Lara's words, "I think there should be an animal clinic. Specifically for homeless people. Where you'd have to prove you're homeless and have no resources. No income. That would be a minimum requirement. That you have to prove that, however that may be."

Likewise, one survey respondent commented that there should be *"free clinic[s] for animals,"* and another respondent wrote that our One Health Street Clinic was helpful *"for people like me who don't have other places to take my dog for help."*

Other Resources

Finally, some people suggested other, miscellaneous resources that would benefit them and their community. Janine, for example, said she would appreciate more help with her ESA and shelter paperwork. She believes *"it is unacceptable that I have to wait so long for something as simple as paperwork to be processed. All I'm asking for is to get actual answers to my questions, and for my paperwork to be processed in a timely manner, because until then I'm stuck here living in a shelter that doesn't care about me and doesn't care about any of my needs."*

Some participants mentioned that having access to more supplies and services would benefit them and their pets. One survey respondent said *“there should be more homeless prevention programs for people,”* and another wrote: *“More health clinics for animals. Such as [behavior] training. Specific to people experiencing homelessness (and/or similar) corner for these folks to go with their animals.”* Likewise, Lara said a clinic with *“the medical care, the supplies, the food, and also just a place to go so that we can stay together”* would improve the quality of her life.

There is a common misconception that people who are homeless often struggle to feed their animals, but it is worth noting that this study indicates that finding food for one’s pet is in fact not a concern for homeless guardians. Renee said that, although she worries about being able to feed Ella, she has never experienced a situation where she was unable to find her dog food. In fact, Lara mentioned that she often receives too much food for her dog, and she believes it would benefit other members of her community if she could donate the food to a free clinic for interspecies homeless families. These findings reflect previous studies that likewise suggest pets of the homeless are often as or more healthy and well-fed than housed animals.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

Demographics

Almost 86% of survey respondents had a dog, and nearly 18% had a cat. One person reported having both. Likewise, Christina was the only interview participant with a cat, while all other people had a dog.

In terms of age, the average age of survey respondents was 37.2 years old, and the median age was 35. The oldest person to fill out a survey was 56, and the youngest person to respond was 24.

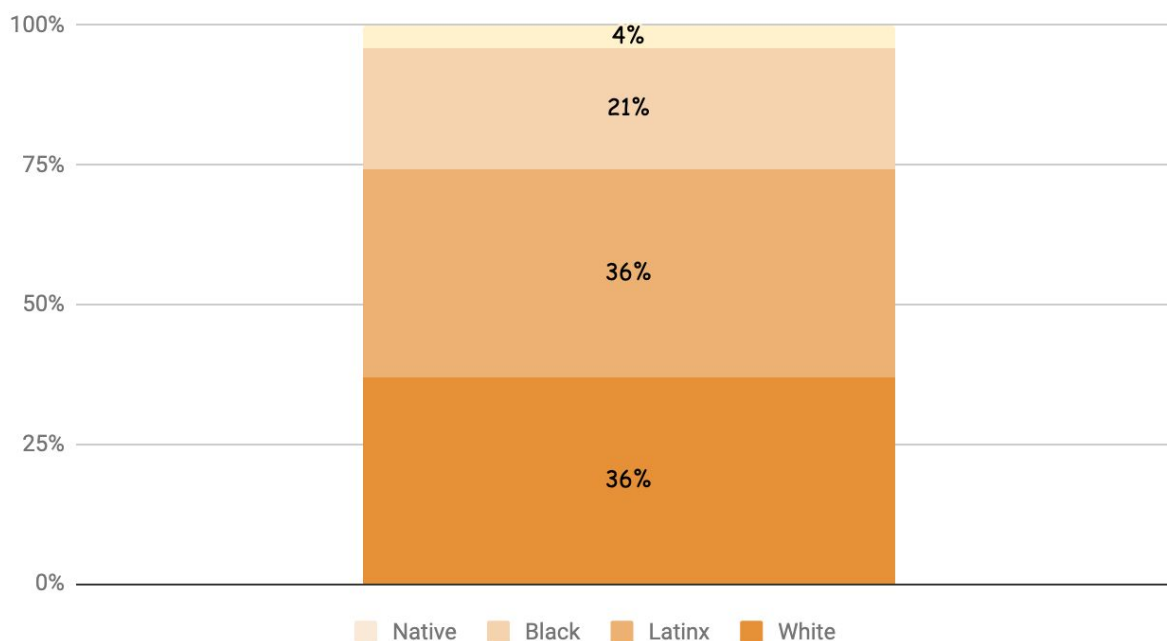
72% of survey respondents identified as female, 16% identified as male, and 12% identified as non-binary. Likewise, the majority of interview participants were also female, with the exception of Joe, who identified as a male.

24% of survey respondents identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. While sexual orientation was not specified in the in-depth interviews, five out of six interviewees mentioned a current or previous heterosexual relationship.

¹⁶ Lem, M. (2016). “Street-Involved Youth and Their Animal Companions—Stigma and Survival.” In C. Blazin & L.R. Kogan (Eds.), *Men and Their Dogs: A New Understanding of Man’s Best Friend* (pp. 73-96). Cham: Springer Nature.

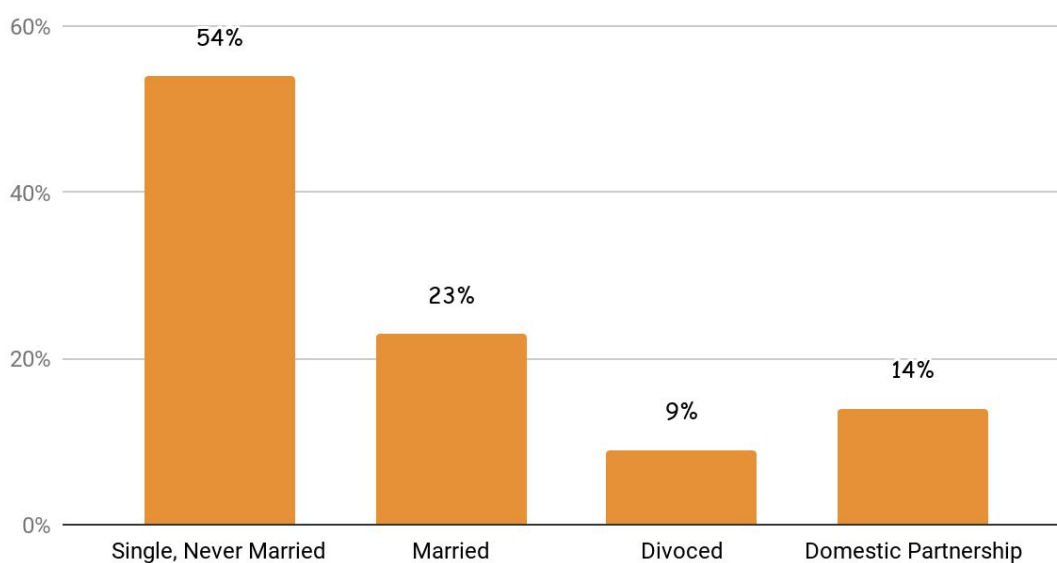
¹⁷ Rhoades, H., Winetrobe, H., & Rice, E. (2014). “Pet Ownership Among Homeless Youth: Associations with Mental Health, Service Utilization and Housing Status.” *Child Psychology & Human Development*, 46:237-244.

Race/Ethnicity



In terms of ethnicity, 36% of respondents identified as white. 36% identified as Latinx. 21% identified as black. 4% identified as American Indian/Alaskan native. These findings are also reflected in the in-depth interviews, as all interviewees identified as either Latinx, white, or a combination of both.

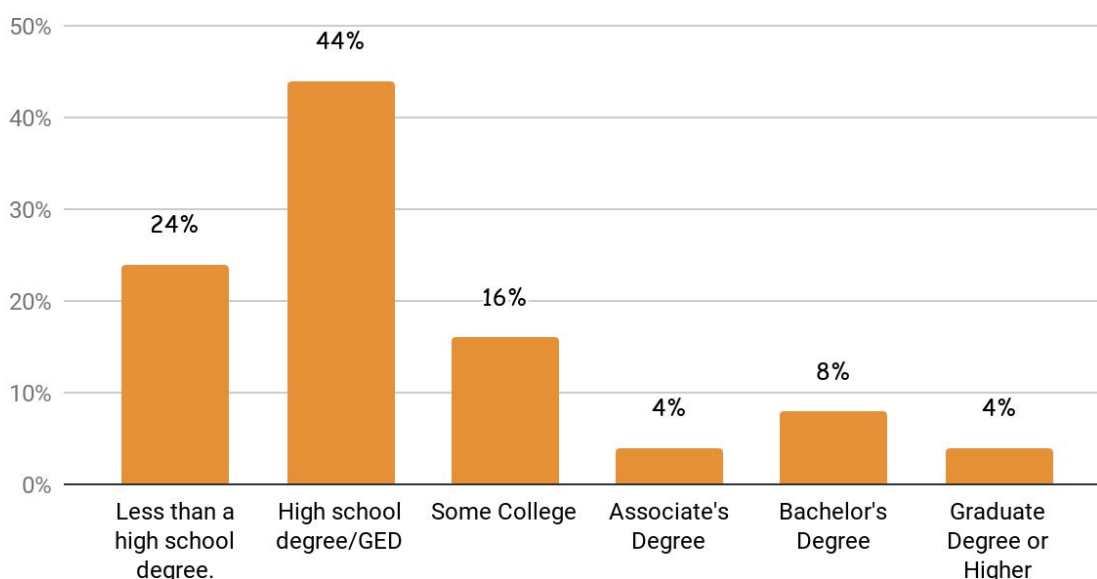
Marital Status



54% of survey respondents reported being single, never married. 23% were married, 9% were divorced, and 14% were in a Domestic Partnership. As for the interviews, there were equally as many single people as married people (two single, two married). One participant described herself as divorced, and one described herself as living with a domestic partner.

Survey respondents were asked to rate their physical and mental health on a scale of 1 to 10. Respondents reported an average of 6.23 for physical health, with a median of 6. Respondents reported an average of 6.55 for mental health, with a median of 6.5.

Education



24% of respondents reported completing less than a high school degree, while 44% had their high school degree/GED. 16% completed some college, 4% earned an associate's degree, and 8% had a bachelor's degree. Finally, 4% of respondents reported completing a graduate degree or higher. Education was not discussed in the in-depth interviews.

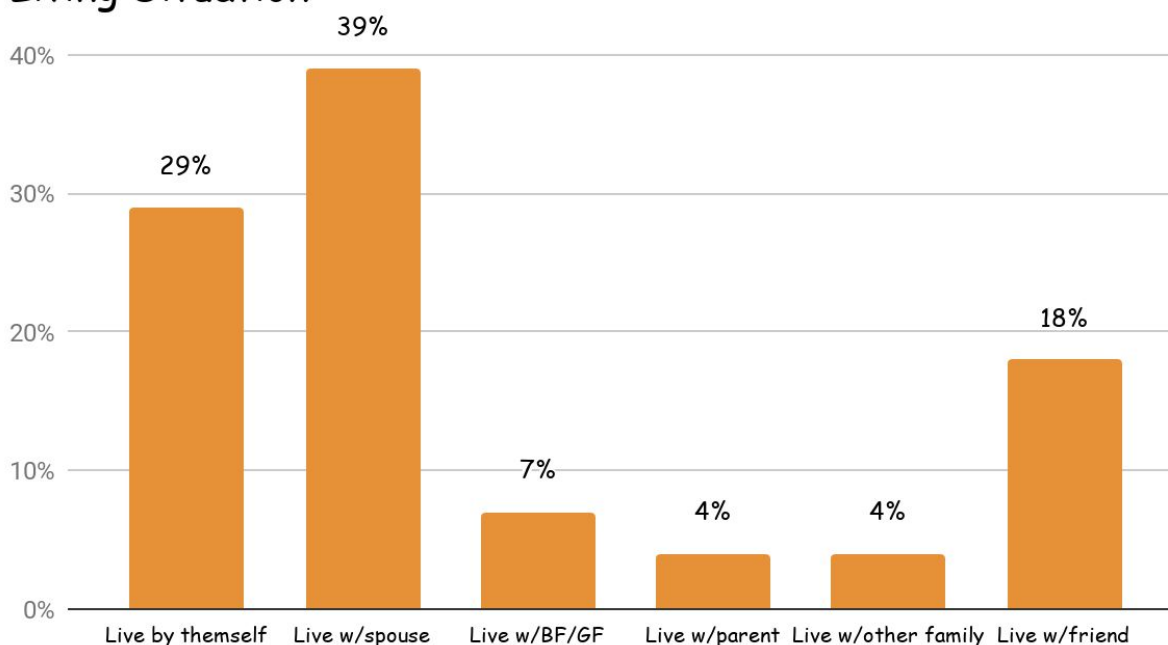
The overwhelming majority of respondents did not have work, and most received some form of welfare or assistance. 80% of respondents reported that they did not have a full or part time job. 15% said they had some type of income, including freelancing, contracting, and/or SSI income. Only 4% reported that they had a full or part time job.

Similarly, not one interview participant said that they currently held a full- or part-time job. Joe and Janine lost their jobs when they lost their homes. Lara, Christina, and Monica previously held jobs, but due to their physical and mental health conditions, they were unable to hold a steady position. For example, Lara spent more than a year working as a fashion intern but could not keep up with the demands of the job due to her anxiety disorder. Christina likewise said that she relies on her social security payments. She described her inability to work as follows: “You

know when I was younger, before my diagnosis, I used to work. But because of my disability, you know, my bipolar, I can't work. When I was younger I used to work, you know, as like a cashier, you know, competitive edge, you know. I would sell watches. I had real jobs like that."

Moving forward, Monica said she intends to find a job so she can pay child support to her husband, leave the shelter system, and bring Betty into an apartment with her. While she was recovering from knee surgery and unable to work at the time of the interview, she explained her plan for getting back on her feet: *"I had surgery in May. A surgery on my knee. And it's almost healed. But I'm going to have a second surgery. So. And then probably about October I'll go back to work. And then hopefully get myself a place so I can bring Betty with me."*

Living Situation



When asked whom they currently reside with, 29% of respondents reported that they lived by themselves. 39% lived with a spouse, and 7% lived with a boyfriend or girlfriend. 4% lived with a parent, and 4% lived with other family. Finally, 18% of respondents said they live with a friend.

Interview participants also said they either resided on their own, with a spouse or partner, or with a friend. Similar to previous interspecies homelessness literature, interview participants in this study frequently described their pets as a member of their family. For example, people explicitly referred to their animals as their "son," their "baby," and their "child." Joe made the following statement regarding Rosie: *"When we lose our home, we didn't give [Rosie] up. We kept her with us, because she is our family and family don't give each other up."* When asked what her plans are for keeping herself and Snax warm in the winter, Janine replied: *"I'm actually looking into different resources right now. So that, I can keep him. He's a rescue dog. He chose me. I'm not getting rid of him. I can't. Because, he's my son, like I said."*

Monica summarized her feelings in the following exchange:

Casey: How do you think New York City is addressing the issues of people experiencing homelessness with animals?

Monica: I mean, I don't know that they're really [pause] I know that they're trying to make it more acceptable with the service dogs and stuff, and I see a lot of, you know, places like the ASPCA who are trying to help people with their pets, but I don't know for sure though, like, the city itself is trying to do that. They have a lot of things they're worrying about, and I don't think they're really that concerned with people's pets. And that's because the city sees them as pets. And you know, people don't see them as pets. They're family. The people that have the pets, they're not pets. But when you're in a shelter, the animal is automatically your pet. And that's not the case. These pets are your child.

About My Dog Is My Home

My Dog Is My Home is a national organization dedicated to preserving the human-animal bond in circumstances of homelessness. 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.

My Dog Is My Home's mission is to increase access to shelter and housing for people experiencing homelessness with companion animals. We envision equitable access to home for all people and all families. By securing their ability to maintain their most important relationships and find adequate shelter, we ensure every family's right to build a home.

By using a capacity building approach, we promote the creation of systematic, macro-level responses to homelessness and animal companionship. Our activities normally fall within one of the following categories: research, technical assistance and consultation, and training and education.

For more information about My Dog Is My Home or to donate please visit:
www.mydogismyhome.org.