



ANIMAL-HUMAN POLICY CENTER  
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

## Understanding Barriers to Accessing Veterinary Care in Colorado

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### Overview of the Survey Effort

- Two surveys of Colorado pet owners sought to understand the extent and type of barriers to accessing veterinary care and the resources that would help pet owners in obtaining this care. This survey effort was initiated through a collaborative effort between the Colorado Governor's Office and the [Animal-Human Policy Center](#) at Colorado State University. The surveys were designed by a task force of stakeholders from industry, academia, government, and non-profit organizations. Read the full report of results for the surveys [here](#).
- The results reported are from two unique samples of Colorado pet owners. The first sample is made up of 919 Colorado pet owners, approximately representative of the Colorado public in terms of age, gender, and income, recruited through the online panel provider Qualtrics. The second sample is made up of 290 pet owners, reached through in-person surveys throughout the state, and collected at pet food pantries and shelters for low-cost services to hear from those who might be experiencing the greatest barriers to care.

### Understanding the Extent of Access to Veterinary Care in Colorado: *Findings from the surveys on the scope of the problem*

- ***The cost of veterinary care keeps some pet owners from ever seeking veterinary care.*** Approximately 8% of pet owners surveyed in the Qualtrics representative survey and 14% of respondents from the in-person survey have never obtained veterinary care. The most common reason why pet owners had never taken their pet to a veterinarian was that it was "too expensive." Pet owners in the Eastern Plains were the least likely to have obtained veterinary care.
- ***Many pet owners have been unable to access veterinary care when they have tried.*** Approximately 28% of pet owners from the Qualtrics representative survey had experienced a time in the past two years where they tried to access veterinary care but couldn't. 51% of respondents from the in-person survey had this experience. Qualtrics respondents reported the most common reasons for not being able to obtain veterinary care were that there were "no available appointments at my nearby clinic", "the clinic was not open at a time I could come in", and "I could not afford it." Pet owners from the in-person survey reported their most common barriers were "I could not afford it" followed by "there were no available appointments at my nearby clinic." The most common type of care pet owners from both surveys were trying to get was emergency care.
- ***For pet owners in need, the cost of veterinary care is the most common reason they have had to give away a pet.*** Approximately 27% of pet owners from the Qualtrics representative survey and 28% of respondents from the in-person survey reported having to give away one of their pets before to another person or animal shelter. Pet owners from the in-person survey reported the "costs of veterinary care" as the most common answer for why they had to give their pet away.
- ***Pet owners feel comfortable using telemedicine to minimize barriers to veterinary care.*** 73% of pet owners would see a veterinarian through a telemedicine appointment and, of those pet owners, 74% would feel comfortable seeing a veterinarian for the first time via a virtual telemedicine visit.



## Potential Policy/Program Solution #1: Grants, Vouchers, and Aligncare to Support Families and their Pets in Receiving Care

### Background:

- Grants or vouchers that go directly to community members or to clinics to reduce the costs of veterinary care are one potential way to increase access to veterinary care. For example, many clinics have “angel funds” or small donations from staff and other clients that they apply to reduce the costs of veterinary care in instances where pet owners can’t afford it. As another example, in Rhode Island, a program was founded in 2013 that provides the economic incentive of \$125 vouchers to income-qualified pet owners, which they can use to receive veterinary services.
- Additionally, systems in communities to increase access to veterinary care for underserved populations of people and pets by providing support to families and veterinary care for their animals have been proposed. An example is AlignCare, which connects pet families in need with veterinary service providers, community groups, and social service agencies. In AlignCare communities, veterinarians can sign up to be an AlignCare Veterinary Service Provider (VSP), so AlignCare families can choose a clinic to provide their pet with the services they need. For profit VSPs are asked to discount services by 20% for Aligncare families. Aligncare then covers 60% of the costs and the family provides 20% co-pay at the time services are rendered. Veterinary Social Workers provide pet families with emotional support and coaching to help manage non-medical, pet-related issues.

### Findings from the Qualtrics Representative Survey on this Potential Policy/Program:

- **71%** of pet owners reported that ***a program for income-qualified pet owners that pays 80% of the costs of veterinary visits, and pet owners pay only 20%*** would be “very” or “extremely helpful.”
- **69%** of pet owners reported that ***a program that provides income-qualified pet owners with vouchers to receive a discount on veterinary services at a nearby clinic*** would be “very” or “extremely helpful.”
- **69%** of pet owners reported that ***funds that you can apply for to cover a portion of the costs of your veterinary visit*** would be “very” or “extremely helpful.”

### Findings from the In-Person Survey on this Potential Policy/Program:

- **91%** of pet owners reported that ***a program that provides income-qualified pet owners with vouchers to receive a discount on veterinary services at a nearby clinic*** would be “very” or “extremely helpful.”
- **90%** of pet owners reported that ***funds that you can apply for to cover a portion of the costs of your veterinary visit*** would be “very” or “extremely helpful.”
- **89%** of pet owners reported that ***a program for income-qualified pet owners that pays 80% of the costs of veterinary visits, and pet owners pay only 20%*** would be “very” or “extremely helpful.”



## Potential Policy/Program Solution #2: Expanding the Use of Telemedicine

### Background:

- To address veterinary workforce and access to care challenges, and increase the number of pets that veterinary professionals can care for, some have proposed expanding the use of telemedicine through providing education and resources to veterinary professionals and/or policy focused on increasing the types of procedures/tasks performed using telehealth. For example, in May 2023, Senate Bill 1053 was signed into law in Arizona which allows veterinarians licensed in Arizona to establish a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) through telemedicine. The survey therefore asked about pet owners' perceptions of telemedicine.

### Findings from the Qualtrics Representative Survey on this Potential Policy/Program:

- ***The majority of pet owners feel comfortable with telemedicine.*** Approximately 73% of pet owners felt comfortable seeing a veterinarian through a telemedicine appointment.
- ***Many pet owners would feel comfortable establishing a VCPR through telemedicine.*** 74% of those who feel comfortable with telemedicine would also feel comfortable seeing a veterinarian for the first time via a virtual telemedicine visit.
- ***Telemedicine would motivate the majority of pet owners to contact a veterinarian.*** 64% of pet owners reported that it would somewhat or greatly increase their likelihood of contacting a veterinarian.
- ***Knowing the types of services that can be done through telemedicine would make 72% of pet owners feel more comfortable with it.*** The majority (54%) of pet owners would also like to know the cost of a telemedicine appointment versus an in-person appointment, and over a third (40%) of pet owners would like a guide on what is needed and how to use the technology for a telemedicine appointment.
- **56%** of pet owners reported that ***the availability of telemedicine options, where you can meet with a veterinarian on a phone/video rather than going to a clinic in person*** would be “very” or “extremely helpful.”

### Findings from the In-Person Survey on this Potential Policy/Program:

- **75%** of pet owners reported that ***the availability of telemedicine options, where you can meet with a veterinarian on a phone/video rather than going to a clinic in person*** would be “very” or “extremely helpful.”



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## Potential Policy/Program Solution #3: Mid-level Practitioner

### Background:

- To address veterinary workforce and access to care challenges, some have proposed the introduction of a mid-level practitioner, or veterinary professional associate (VPA) into the profession. There has been an effort to develop a Masters of Veterinary Clinical Care (MSB-VCC) degree program to train such veterinary professional associates. Graduates of a program like this would be trained in clinical case management and would work under the supervision of a veterinarian, who determines the level of appropriate delegation. We asked respondents about their comfortability having a VPA provide veterinary care for their pet instead of a veterinarian.

### Findings from the Qualtrics Representative Survey on this Potential Policy/Program:

- **Respondents were most supportive of a VPA providing preventative care**, such as treatment of non-urgent cases (50%), vaccine administration (47%), and performing annual exams (41%). Around half of respondents (47%) were supportive of a VPA providing dental care (e.g., cleaning teeth). Respondents were least supportive of VPAs performing neuters and spays and performing dental surgery (e.g., removing teeth).
- **To feel comfortable having a VPA provide veterinary services, pet owners want to know that the professional is licensed.** They would also like to know the hands-on technical training of a vet professional that is not a veterinarian, and the cost difference in getting treatment from these professionals instead of a veterinarian.



## Potential Policy/Program Solution #4: Clarifying roles of RVTs and advancing the VTS pathway.

### **Background:**

- To address access to care and workforce challenges, some have suggested a need for clarifying the roles of certified/registered veterinary technicians (CVTs/RVTs) and advancing career pathways for RVTs, such as through the Veterinary Technician Specialist (VTS) designation. VTSs are credentialed veterinary technicians who have completed extra training in a specialty through a technician specialty academy and have passed a certifying exam. In general, VTS candidates must have worked as a credentialed veterinary technician for a minimum of three to five years. We asked respondents about their comfortability having CVTs/RVTs, or VTSs provide veterinary care for their pet instead of a veterinarian.

### **Findings from the Qualtrics Representative Survey on this Potential Policy/Program:**

- **Respondents were most supportive of a CVT/RVT providing preventative care**, such as vaccine administration (58%), treatment of non-urgent cases (52%), and performing annual exams (49%). Slightly less than half of respondents (46%) were supportive of a CVT/RVT providing dental care (e.g., cleaning teeth). Respondents were least supportive of CVTs/RVTs performing neuters and spays and performing dental surgery (e.g., removing teeth).
- **Respondents were most supportive of a VTS providing preventative care and dental care.** For preventative care, respondents were most supportive of VTSs performing vaccine administration (51%) and treating non-urgent cases (50%), and performing annual exams (49%). Half of respondents (50%) were supportive of a VTS providing dental care (e.g., cleaning teeth). Respondents were least supportive of a VTS performing neuters and spays and performing dental surgery (e.g., removing teeth).
- **To feel comfortable having a CVT/RVT or VTS provide veterinary services, pet owners want to know that the professional is licensed.** They would also like to know the hands-on technical training of a vet professional that is not a veterinarian, and the cost difference in getting treatment from these professionals instead of a veterinarian.