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# The everyday work of One Welfare in animal sheltering and protection

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In animal sheltering and protection, One Welfare initiatives include supporting people who have difficulty providing for their animals because of limitations in their physical or mental health, income or housing. However, little research has focused on the actual work that such initiatives involve for animal shelter staff and animal protection officers. We used institutional ethnography to explore how such work activities occur in frontline practices and to better understand how this work is coordinated. Methods included ethnographic observation of animal protection officers and animal shelter staff, document analysis, plus focus groups and interviews with staff, officers and managers. In cases where an animal's care was deficient but did not meet the standard for legal intervention, officers provided people with supplies for their animals, referred them to low-cost or free veterinary care, and provided emergency animal boarding. This work was time-consuming and was sometimes done repeatedly without lasting effect. It was often constrained by animal owners' limited housing, cognitive decline, mental health and other factors. Hence, improving the animal's welfare in these ways was often difficult and uncertain. Although officers and animal shelter staff are increasingly expected to provide and record supports given to vulnerable owners, standard procedures and criteria for intervention have not yet evolved; hence the work is largely left to the judgement and ingenuity of personnel. In addition, the necessary collaboration between animal welfare workers and human social services staff (e.g. social workers, supportive-housing staff) is made difficult by the different expectations and different institutional processes governing such activities. Further work is needed to assess how meeting the needs of both animals and people could be strengthened in challenging situations. This might include sharing best practices among officers and further ethnographic analysis of animal protection services, how they interact with other services, and how One Welfare initiatives actually affect animal care. Institutional ethnography provides a way to study the organisational processes that shape and constrain care for animals, and its explicit focus on actual work processes provides insights that may be missed by other approaches.

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## Introduction

The terms One Health and One Welfare have recently become part of the discourse of North American animal sheltering and protection. Although definitions of One Health vary (Evans and Leighton, 2014; Lerner and Berg, 2015), broadly, One Health focuses on “the connections among human, animal, and ecosystem health” (Riegelman and Kirkwood, 2018 p. 1). One Health is typically used to focus on infectious diseases that can be transmitted among species (Riegelman and Kirkwood, 2018); however, others argue that One Health should be considered an inclusive paradigm for managing health at the interface between humans, animals and ecosystems (Evans and Leighton, 2014). Indeed, Lerner and Berg (2015) propose using the “One Health Umbrella” to help contextualise One Health and the disciplines it can involve, including ecology, health economics, public health, molecular biology and microbiology.

One Welfare complements One Health by recognising the “interconnections between animal welfare, human well-being and the environment” (García Pinillos et al., 2016) including societal and mental health (Bourque, 2017), and is sometimes invoked in interdisciplinary collaboration where the well-being of people and animals are involved (Colonus and Earley, 2013; García Pinillos et al., 2016). One Welfare expands beyond physical health to involve ethics, economics, and politics, and like One Health, encourages an interdisciplinary frame when examining human, animal, environmental and societal welfare (Colonus and Earley, 2013). In the case of pet ownership and animal sheltering and protection, One Welfare is invoked for positive interventions such as community veterinary outreach that helps people care for their animals and thus maintains the human-animal bond (Jordan and Lem 2014; Yang et al., 2020), and also in negative situations such as animal hoarding where both human and animal well-being is jeopardised (Fawcett et al., 2018).

Researchers apply One Health and One Welfare to study pet ownership and animal sheltering. For example, Hawes et al. (2020) recommended using One Health and One Welfare to ground recent shifts in animal sheltering and protection from punitive to supportive measures to help maintain the human-animal bond. Access to veterinary care was identified as a critical One Health problem in animal sheltering (Horecka and Neal, 2022) and researchers have reported quantitative metrics on the use of community veterinary services applying the concept One Welfare (Ly et al., 2021), One Health (Hawes et al., 2021) or through initiatives like Pets for Life (PFL, 2021) of the Humane Society of the United States (Decker-Sparks et al., 2018). Rock and Blue (2020) connected One Health to social inequity and thus expanded the concept to pet ownership and housing security. Jordan and Lem (2014) reported that a community veterinary and social services initiative that utilised a “One Health, One Welfare” model promoted empathy in veterinary students, and Panning et al. (2016) suggested that this model could improve the health of vulnerable human and animal populations. One Health is also used to describe activities that promote collaboration between disciplines and organisations, including animal shelters, veterinary clinics, community organisations and social service agencies (LaVallee et al., 2017; Baker et al., 2018). Thus, One Health and One Welfare seem to be used (often somewhat interchangeably) to emphasise the importance of human-animal bonds, and research often reports metrics on service utilisation.

In addition to research, One Health/One Welfare is an important driver of initiatives aimed at helping vulnerable people care for their animals so that animals can remain with them and avoid being removed to a shelter. Such services include free or low-cost veterinary care and sterilisation, pet food banks, provision of supplies, and emergency animal boarding. Information about these services is reported in organisational reports and

webpages (e.g. BC SPCA, 2020; PFL, 2021; Community Veterinary Outreach, 2022; Human-Animal Support Services, 2022) and the news sections (not peer-reviewed) of journals (e.g. Kahler, 2015; Nolen, 2015; Andrews, 2019). Publicity aimed to build donations for these services often includes quantitative metrics about, for instance, the total number of cats and dogs sterilised or the amount of free pet food distributed annually, sometimes with accompanying success stories about people and animals who have received help.

To date, however, studies of One Health and One Welfare initiatives have not examined the *actual work* that these approaches generate for animal protection officers and other frontline staff, or analysed how multi-agency collaboration actually happens. For instance, how are pet food banks organised and who is responsible for this work? How and when are referrals to social service agencies made? In this paper, our aim is to use institutional ethnography to describe the actual work practices involved in such initiatives and describe how this work organises what happens to animals.

**Institutional ethnography.** Institutional ethnography is an approach to enquiry that aims to discover what people are actually doing in the everyday world and to explicate (i.e. describe in detail) how these actions are organised by institutional processes (Smith, 1987, 1990, 2005). Institutional ethnography’s ontology is grounded in examining *the social*: people’s “actual, material, observable, ongoing social processes” coordinated with others (Smith, 2005 p. 52, 227) and can be broadly applied to institutional settings. The approach directs attention to discovering those occasions when the institutional intentions (such as those embedded in One Health/One Welfare) and what happens in people’s everyday work (in this case the work of animal protection officers) do not quite match up. In IE, such tensions are called “disjunctures” and these help organise the direction of enquiry (Smith, 2005 p. 38). With this focus on discovering disjunctures, the research questions addressed in IE are often broadly topical rather than grounded in theory.

The analytical project of an IE is to map and track people’s work to discover how institutionalised concepts materialise in practice. The goal is to discover ways to tweak organisational routines, protocols, policies and laws to better serve the interests of the subjects of institutional practices. In this case, those subjects are the people and their pets who live in precarious circumstances, and also the frontline workers who are tasked with improving the health and welfare of people and their pets. Although this work is institutionally organised, it does not always achieve its intended aims. In this paper, we describe frontline work that is hidden in the conventional institutional metrics used to design and evaluate One Health/One Welfare (henceforth referred to as One Welfare) initiatives. From interviews and observations of animal protection officers specifically, we provide a window into the matrix of intersecting animal welfare and social service policies that direct what happens in this sector of animal welfare work.

## Methods

**Research participants.** This research is part of a larger project for which the British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BC SPCA) was the central research partner. BC SPCA staff (including administrators and managers, animal protection officers and frontline animal shelter staff), as well as animals involved with sheltering and protection, were considered the research participants. The University of British Columbia (UBC) Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) as well as the

BC SPCA approved all research procedures. The UBC BREC assessed all research practices and the risks were considered minimal and were thus not subjected to additional review. The primary author is a volunteer with the BC SPCA and hence knew some of the research participants and was familiar with organisational policies. Before the project began the primary author met with frontline shelter staff, officers and some administrators to introduce the study and answer questions.

We used the ethnographic methods of participant and naturalistic observation, interviews and document analysis (Campbell and Gregor, 2002; DeVault and McCoy, 2006) for 8 months in 2019. The purpose was to examine what people actually do in their everyday work and to track how those practices are organised (Smith, 2005). IE studies often focus on frontline staff because they connect clients to institutional discourses and texts. In this study, frontline staff (especially animal protection officers) similarly connected clients (animals) to institutional texts by fitting animals into existing institutional categories, processes and protocols (DeVault and McCoy, 2006 p. 27). For instance, staff categorised animals according to their property, health, and adoptability status, recorded daily feeding, socialising and medicating using standardised forms and entered updates about animals to the digital shelter database. In this paper although we include data from administrators, managers and shelter staff, we focus on the work of animal protection officers (henceforth called officers).

**Observations, interviews and document analysis.** After officers provided written consent to participate in the research, the primary author observed what they did as they investigated calls received by call centre operators from members of the public concerned about animals. Observations occurred most frequently during ride-alongs (i.e. accompanying officers as a passenger in the vehicle). The primary author recorded written fieldnotes in the vehicle before and after visiting locations connected to investigations. When observations involved members of the public, they were fully informed about the presence of the researcher and the consent process went as follows. First, officers approached the person or knocked on their door and explained why they were visiting and that they had a researcher (i.e. the primary author) with them to observe and learn about their work. At this point, members of the public were given the opportunity to verbally deny permission for the presence of the researcher. After members of the public gave verbal permission for the officer and primary author to approach or enter, observations began. Verbal consent is permitted by the Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) when written consent may be interpreted as untrustworthy by participants (TCPS2, article 3.12, 2018 p. 47). Further, the observations in this research were considered to be “minimal risk” by the TCPS because they do not allow for participant identification in dissemination of results, are not staged by the researcher, are not covert, and are non-intrusive (TCPS2, article 10.3, 2018 p. 139).

The primary author conducted interviews informally during and after observations and focused on the work officers were doing, asking them to explain the different steps they were taking and how they used physical and digital texts. Texts play a critical role in institutions, and therefore within IE research, because they are central features of how institutions organise what people do. Texts are “material forms mediating human communication”; they include documents such as newsletters or pamphlets, forms, computer screens, as well as images, videos and music (Smith and Turner, 2014 p. 5), together with laws such as municipal and provincial animal protection laws. Much of the officers’ work was tied to texts, and thus we collected blank copies of physical texts

they mentioned as well as protocols, procedures, notices, guidelines and laws. The primary author also had regular access to the digital shelter database (DeVault and McCoy, 2006 p. 29). During interviews the primary author often asked follow-up questions about officers’ work processes, the data they collected, how they used texts in their work, how they entered information into the database, and how they coordinated their work with other staff, officers and volunteers by, for example, telephoning, texting, emailing and updating the shared database.

**Focus groups.** In early 2021 we conducted four virtual focus groups on Zoom video communications software (Zoom Video Communications Inc., San Jose, California) with BC SPCA personnel. Members of the BC SPCA Animal Welfare Research Subcommittee assisted with participant recruitment by sending a letter of invitation via email to all officers, frontline shelter staff and administrators involved with animal management. Participants contacted the primary author to express willingness to participate. Focus groups lasted 40 to 67 min. Two were with shelter staff ( $n = 2$  and  $4$ ), one with officers ( $n = 5$ ) and one with administrators ( $n = 11$ ). We purposefully included individuals with very different experiences of the organisation to highlight connections between everyday work processes and to identify the role of texts in coordinating work processes across the organisation. The aim of these focus groups was to present key findings from a literature review connected to the larger study, and also ask participants to describe whether and how their experiences were represented in the academic discourses (Dalmer, 2018). These focus groups also provided a space for participants to discuss their shared experiences and specific work experiences that they categorised within the literature review topics. Example focus group questions included: “Which aspects of these findings align/contrast with your everyday work?” and “Considering the work you do everyday and the literature review findings, are there any topics that seem to be missing from the literature?”

**Data analysis.** As described by McCoy (2006, p. 117), IE analysis involves first understanding what individuals are doing and experiencing in their daily work, and then analysing how these activities and experiences are organised by institutional processes and ruling relations. Bringing the institution into view in this way can point to specific institutional processes that need to be observed further and possibly reviewed and modified (Campbell and Gregor, 2002 p. 101). Data analysis in IE occurs during and after data collection in a highly iterative way through various analytical techniques. First, we followed analytical guidance by McCoy (2006, p. 111-115) to identify institutional processes that people discussed and linked their actions to decisions and work processes elsewhere in the institution. For example, we identified cases where people used texts in their work (e.g. filling in charts, using checklists, entering information into the database) and then talked with them about how the information was used to track information about animals and coordinate their work with other staff.

We also followed Rankin’s insights about conducting analysis in IE (2017a) and key analytical techniques of writing accounts and indexing (2017b). Shortly after beginning data collection, we began noting instances that seemed to cause tension, for example if the outcome of a situation was not in the interests of the animals or people involved. In such cases short accounts were written about what happened, with references to the texts involved. We also listened to and indexed audio-recorded interviews and written fieldnotes to record actual events and how people described their work (Rankin, 2017b). To index, we transcribed audio-recorded data (in full or partially, depending

on the relevance to tensions we were following) and inserted marginal comments in the transcribed document. Handwritten fieldnotes from observations were indexed using colour-coded tape. Indexing is different from coding techniques commonly used in qualitative research that aim to develop themes via interpretations of what people do or say; indexing focuses on empirical descriptions of the work processes (Rankin, 2017a). For instance, much of the work officers did involved “providing alternative measures” as described in the Results. This work included sub-indices of, for example, “supplying a donation” and “requesting financial and veterinary assistance”. We referred to indexed data frequently during analysis in order to stay grounded in what actually happened and to provide examples.

Finally, we used the preliminary written accounts to write full ethnographic accounts detailing the social organisation of officers’ efforts to enact One Welfare initiatives. To protect participant confidentiality in accounts, all names are pseudonyms, the pronoun “they” is used, and we altered certain data (e.g. locations, number of animals involved in cases) in a way that maintains the approximate features of events without compromising confidentiality.

## Results

**Ethnographic account.** The account below is based on the primary author’s fieldnote observations of the work that an animal protection officer did with a person and their cat living in a supportive-housing building. Supportive housing is subsidised and is available for low income, disabled, elderly and other individuals in need of support. Some supportive housing is categorised as single-room occupancy (SROs) which are buildings made up of small individual rooms with shared washrooms and kitchens (BC Housing, 2021). The account describes what officers do when investigating calls about people and animals living in this type of housing.

*I joined Officer Morgan on a ride-along to respond to a call about an elderly tenant with an elderly cat in supportive housing. As we approached the building, Morgan explained that they know the building manager; they were here last week for a similar concern with a different tenant. When we arrived, Morgan rang the doorbell and explained to the manager that we were there to respond to a call about a cat. The manager opened the door and greeted us, sharing their concern about the cat that had seemed lethargic when they checked on the tenant earlier that week. We went to the tenant’s room and found the door slightly ajar. Morgan knocked and asked if we could come in. The tenant agreed and as we pushed the door open, we saw a cat lying just inside, next to some cat kibble and a glass of water. The tenant was sitting in a chair smoking a cigarette; there were ash trays with piles of cigarettes scattered around the small room; one of the stove burners was on high, and the windows were closed. On a warm summer day, it was very warm and difficult to breathe. Morgan first pointed to the stove and asked if the tenant was cooking, to which the tenant replied, “No, why?” “Your stove is on!” said Morgan. “Oh!” the tenant replied but remained seated, “I guess I just forgot it. Can you turn it off?” Morgan turned the stove off and asked the tenant how their cat was doing, petting the sleeping cat. The tenant looked at the cat and replied, “I’ve had him since he was a kitten. I remember he was the smallest of the litter and that’s why I picked him”. Morgan asked the tenant how the cat has been eating and drinking and if they have taken the cat to the veterinarian lately, to which the tenant responded no, it is difficult without a carrier to transport the cat. Morgan said, “No problem, I think I have a carrier in*

*my truck!” We left the room and went to the truck, picked out a cat carrier and some cat food. Once we were back in the room, Morgan gave the carrier and food to the tenant and told them to take their cat to the free veterinary clinic happening in a few days in the area. Morgan then asked if the tenant would like a reminder and they responded, “Sure! I’ll take the cat there because I have this carrier!” Morgan, somewhat jokingly said, “Hey! That’s the carrier I just brought you!” The tenant looked confused. Before we left, Morgan asked if the tenant had someone to help them bring the cat to the clinic; the tenant replied yes. As we left the building, we thanked the manager and drove to the next call. Morgan explained that the work we did focuses on “providing alternative measures” to support people so they can keep their animals.*

*A few weeks later, I joined Morgan for another ride-along. We returned to the same building to respond to a different call. Morgan saw the manager and asked how the cat from the previous week was doing. The manager looked down and shared that the tenant did not take the cat to the veterinary clinic and the cat died. Morgan was disappointed, and later explained to me that the manager probably “wanted us to do more for the cat”.*

This account of an animal protection officer’s work activities (talking with people about their animals, providing support in the form of food and carriers, referring people to free veterinary clinics, talking with building managers, making multiple visits about similar concerns) is likely familiar to frontline shelter staff, officers and others involved in One Welfare work. The account generates questions about the work that officers do if an animal is not in distress as defined by the law, but where the owner requires support to improve the animal’s well-being. It describes the work Morgan does to keep the cat with the owner while also attending to the cat’s physical health. It also generates questions about how officers make decisions about animals owned by people experiencing cognitive decline who live in supportive housing. It provides clues about the interactions of officers with people in supportive housing and with providers of other social services such as housing, food and health care. The account thus illustrates the complex and demanding situations where improving the welfare of the animals can be tenuous and difficult to ensure.

In order to investigate these questions we describe the work involved in providing what animal sheltering and protection organisation texts call “alternative measures”. We then explore how tensions can arise for animals, as they did in the account above, when the provision of such measures does not resolve the original problem. We explicate the complexity of improving animal welfare through alternative measures. We then describe how misunderstandings arise as tensions in everyday work between animal welfare workers, SRO tenants and human social services staff such as the supportive-housing manager. We conclude with a discussion and recommendations.

**Providing alternative measures for people and animals.** “Providing alternative measures” is a phrase applied by administrators, officers, and other staff of the BC SPCA to work activities that aim to support One Welfare and to keep people and animals together. Indeed, staff would often use this phrase interchangeably with One Welfare or “keeping people and animals together” when describing their work. Such measures involve strategies and decisions made to improve an animal’s living conditions that are not covered by the provincial *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PCA) Act*. The PCA Act establishes standards

and processes that organise what officers are empowered to do for an animal who meets the criteria for distress. Alternative measures refer to remedial work intended to avoid activating the legal processes and sanctions of the *PCA Act*. Work performed by officers (and sometimes other frontline shelter staff and volunteers) includes giving pet supplies to people in need, referring people to free or low-cost veterinary clinics (including the BC SPCA's own free clinic) and offering so-called compassionate or emergency boarding of animals when owners fall ill, flee from violence, lose housing temporarily or face other difficulties.

In the virtual focus groups, officers reported that they have traditionally tried to provide alternative measures whenever possible but that this informal work is now being incorporated into the official work processes of the BC SPCA and there are forms to be completed which are used to generate metrics. Thus their work is being directed toward the ideas circulating in the discourse of One Welfare. For example, the recently created "Alternative Measures Programme Animal Protection Officer Request" form is one of the texts that is institutionalising the use of alternative approaches. When officers encounter a situation that invokes their understandings of One Welfare, they fill in the form with information about the animals' owner, whether the owner has been investigated before, whether they believe the owner can resolve the issues with the support provided, and the type of assistance (e.g. financial, veterinary procedure) required. The form was created so that support through alternative measures can be recorded and tracked within the institution, reflecting one of the goals of the BC SPCA 2019–2023 Strategic Plan which states:

*"People facing barriers to providing good physical and behavioural care for their animals are supported, thereby improving animal welfare, and reducing the need for them to give up their animal".*

The ethnographic account shows how Officer Morgan worked to achieve this goal by deciding that the cat, although not in distress as legally defined, should receive a check-up from a veterinarian and then provided a carrier so that the owner could transport the cat to the clinic. Morgan's work involves assessing the animal, considering options (e.g. animal removal, issuing an order, providing practical resources) and then deciding what to do. Morgan's decision to provide an alternative measure aligns with the BC SPCA's Strategic Plan to keep the person and their animal together, thereby reducing any need for animal removal. Thus the institutional goal of providing alternative measures enters officer work alongside the *PCA Act* and directs the actions officers take.

In many cases, alternative measures achieve positive outcomes for the organisation and officers. Supporting a person to keep their animal reduces demands on shelters and saves time and financial resources for officers as they do not need to organise the removal of the animal – a process that includes talking to frontline shelter staff to find an available kennel in a shelter, finding a veterinarian to examine the animal, possibly applying for a warrant and recruiting other officers to assist. Additionally, such forms of assistance, including subsidised or free sterilisation, emergency boarding and free veterinary care, are broadly categorised into metrics that show the work being done for animals and their owners in the community (e.g. BC SPCA 2021, 2022).

Providing alternative measures can also benefit the animals and their owners. In the virtual focus groups, Officer Drew gave an example:

*"A lot of times we get animals and you know, you're going to get told to just bring them straight to a vet clinic for*

*euthanasia – a lot of time for aggression purposes or what have you. But for someone who is homeless or of low income it's not for a lack of care that an animal is going without something, and their animal can still likely have a very good life with them. It's also maybe an animal that wouldn't be successful in our shelters. So it's not only saving us a lot of money it's also saving that animal's life and keeping it where it is happy".*

Drew's comment is similar to Morgan's work with the tenant and the cat. The work involves assessing an animal's situation and deciding which actions to take, either to apply the *PCA Act* or provide the owner with resources to care for their animal. The animal's physical and behavioural health in the shelter, and whether the animal would be adoptable in the shelter, were concerns for officers. Officers are also aware of the challenges faced by shelters in working with animals with problem behaviours and consider these challenges when making decisions about animals in the field. Drew's comment above also shows that Drew is empathetic toward both people and animals in these situations, acknowledging that being homeless or of low income does not result in a lack of care for an animal.

Another alternative measure is offering compassionate or emergency boarding of animals. Officers (as well as frontline shelter staff) offer this option to individuals facing difficulties such as illness, violence, or temporary lack of housing. Frontline shelter staff provide free boarding (kennel space, daily care, feeding, walking, basic veterinary care) for these animals. This is a different category of animal in the shelter. Whereas animals being sheltered have been categorised as legally surrendered, animals being boarded remain the property of the owner. Frontline shelter staff perform the same medical intake process for these animals to monitor and respond to infectious diseases but the animals are not available for adoption. Therefore shelter staff must designate the status of these animals with signs clipped onto kennels and explain to visitors that they are not available for adoption. Staff sometimes take additional precautions (housing animals in more secure and less front-facing shelter areas) if the animals' owners require additional protection, for example if they are fleeing violence or are in protective custody themselves. Emergency boarding is usually offered for 2 weeks but can be extended on a case-by-case basis.

Officers' work of providing alternative measures also involved discretion and judgement when dealing with situations identified as cruelty by a member of the public. Officer Morgan explained how they navigated this work:

*"Technically, some calls could be a cruelty (i.e. distress), but we figure it out and do a compassionate boarding so we don't have to go in and seize the animal. Someone puts it in as a cruelty [call], but we go in there as alternative measures".*

In this case, the public's expectations of the BC SPCA (and the organisation's reliance on charitable donations) also enter into an officer's decision-making and the actual work involved to "figure it out". Morgan elaborated that a decision to provide compassionate boarding involves first gaining consent from owners to board their animal in the shelter, telephoning frontline shelter staff to find an available kennel, removing the animal from their current location and transporting it to the shelter. Frontline shelter staff as well as volunteers are also involved as they provide intake examinations and daily care for the animals in the shelter. Finally, officers stay in contact with the owner and frontline shelter staff to provide updates about when, and sometimes if, the animal can be returned to the owner. This engages the officers in a type of social work that focuses as much on the person and their

circumstances as it does on the animal living temporarily in the shelter.

In their work to keep people and their animals together officers also need to prepare for the day's calls. They regularly stock their trucks with supplies including dog, cat and rat food, treats, bowls and dishes, collars, harnesses and leashes, animal carriers, beds, blankets, towels, toys, dog waste bags, cat litter and personal protective equipment. Most of these supplies are donated by the public but some are purchased by the BC SPCA. During ride-alongs, officers were observed investigating concerns received about animals (looking for evidence of distress as defined in the law) but a core part of the work was talking to people about their animals and offering them supplies and referrals to clinics. For example, when following up with an SRO tenant who had recently had their cat spayed at a free clinic, Officer Morgan brought the tenant cat-toys and food. In another situation, Officer Casey dropped off a cat harness and leash to people living without housing. Further, officers have developed knowledge about other animal rescue organisations (e.g. for elderly animals, breed-specific rescues) and they learn about the various social services (e.g. food banks, child protection services, mental health agencies) that they may contact in some situations. Officers explained that they learned about these community resources by word of mouth and on the job including talking with other officers during training and gaining work experience over time. This form of learning attests to the heretofore informality of this component of officers' work.

In summary, providing alternative measures has been a part of officer work that is now being more formally linked to the institutional goal of keeping people and animals together while also contributing to economic savings by averting seizure and sheltering. Activating alternative measures is work that requires officers to assess animals and their circumstances and then use discretion to decide on a course of action, especially when the legal criteria for distress are not met or in circumstances where different solutions could improve animal welfare.

The situations that the alternative measures target can be enormously complex. For example, the earlier ethnographic account details an elderly person with some physical limitations and cognitive decline living in an SRO where, it seems, the building manager is a conduit to the BC SPCA. In the account, Morgan, whose official role and responsibilities included only the elderly cat (not the owner), identified that the cat should see a veterinarian and provided equipment (cat carrier) and clinic information to facilitate that outcome. However, the owner needed more resources for the veterinary visit to happen, and despite Morgan's efforts, the clinic visit was not realised. Despite Morgan's intervention, the cat died and the officer, building manager and owner were disappointed. Such outcomes are a source of tension for officers. Thus, while alternative measures provide considerable latitude for action, the desired outcome may be uncertain and hard to secure. Although the alternative measures strategy allows Morgan to side-step the legal constraints of the *PCA Act*, now there are other, very different constraints that make this form of animal protection work difficult.

**The complexity of improving animal welfare through alternative measures.** The difficulties officers face with animal owners in supportive housing or other precarious situations are more complex when officers make repeated visits to follow-up with animals and humans. On ride-alongs, the primary author and officers sometimes visited supportive housing and other properties for the same issue, or a similar issue with different tenants. In the virtual focus groups, Officer Drew gave an example of repeatedly providing alternative measures but over time saw that

their actions actually misaligned with their intention to improve the living conditions of animals:

*"I have someone out in the country that I've been dealing with for close to three years now. Every year I show up it's the exact same concerns. And we've offered alternative measure after alternative measure after alternative measure. We brought bales of straw for the doghouse, door flaps, dog food, dog bowls, enrichment; you name it, we've brought it. We were bordering on getting a warrant last week to remove their new dog because they replaced their dog that died with a new dog in the exact same situation. I was telling a new administrator about the case and they asked me, "What kind of alternative measures can you offer?" And I said, "At this point the only thing I can offer is physical labour!" [Laughs]. That's where we're at. Me walking their dog, moving their doghouse. That's all we have left. We've now proven beyond a doubt that we have tried everything. We have tried to help them. But they're not doing the leg work as well. So even if it backfires and the alternative measures don't work at least now we've solidified the case. And if we need to go for a warrant, we have tried everything, absolutely everything".*

Drew's description of the work they have done to provide alternative measures in this case illuminates several points. With the increasing emphasis on alternative measures, Drew is held to new accountabilities by the administrator; providing alternative measures has become an institutional goal that officers are directed to demonstrate they have tried. Drew understands that providing alternative measures is now required. There are work processes that must be followed when the owner is in a socially precarious situation. This new layer of assessing the owners' circumstances makes the work even more complex than the already nuanced and complex job of enforcing animal protection law. The discretion and strategies that the officers apply are being transformed from ad hoc, informal activities to being more securely tied to institutionalised processes.

Moreover, documenting the provision (and failure, in this case) of alternative measures is seen as building what would be categorised as a solid case if the situation does not improve for the animal. This is familiar work that officers undertake to establish that the processes necessary for legal proceedings have been followed. The processes involve giving warnings and giving the owner chances to comply. In cases where alternative measures are implemented, such processes are harder to enact. In the situation that Drew describes—regularly offering supportive measures—the result is short-lived improvements. However, now a new dog has been brought into the unchanged conditions that are seen as a risk to the animal's welfare. Thus, Drew understands that although their efforts have not improved the animal's situation their work could be used to build a case for animal removal.

In the virtual focus groups with administrators, participants agreed that providing alternative measures and keeping people and animals together is an important institutional goal but they were also concerned that this goal causes problems for animals in situations where there is marked vulnerability for both owner and animal. When discussing alternative measures, one administrator said:

*"There needs to be more research on the animal and their experience – their welfare—especially now with this big push to keep families together, help people keep their animals. [This] is great, but I don't think there is enough research on ... what is the animal's experience? I do see some people trying to help the person, but then they are faced with barriers and obstacles in their life that maybe at this point in*

*their life they can't care for the animal. So it's a better option to rehome or do something else".*

Here the administrator acknowledges a core challenge of providing alternative measures: officers must assess situations and decide which actions to take, whether they activate their authority under the *PCA Act* or whether they invoke the increasingly institutionalised systems for alternative measures. New tensions seem to arise and officers are expected to use their judgement and discretion for animals in situations where their physical or mental health needs may not be met.

### Everyday work with SRO tenants and human social services staff.

*From account: Morgan was disappointed, and later explained to me that the manager probably "wanted us to do more for the cat".*

Providing alternative measures requires officers to coordinate their work with frontline staff in human social service agencies, for example supportive-housing staff and social workers, in what has been called multi-agency collaboration. This work is also part of the BC SPCA 2019–2023 Strategic Plan which states:

*"Collaborate with law enforcement, prosecution and social service agencies to grow their interest in considering vulnerable animals, and partner to reduce animal distress in the community".*

On numerous occasions the primary author observed the actual, time-consuming work being done by officers who were attempting to collaborate and partner with human social services, especially (in the situations observed) in supportive housing. The work of responding to calls that involved SRO housing requires officers to explain the nature of the complaint to the tenants who own the animals. Much of the officers' work was built on the skill of listening empathetically to tenant's responses. Officers enthusiastically greeted the tenants' animals, complimenting and petting them, while asking owners if the animal could have a treat. They then asked questions about how tenants cared for, fed, played with and walked animals while also answering questions tenants had about their animals related to the animals' physical and behavioural needs.

Establishing relationships with many members of the SRO community was a key work process during these visits. During visits to SROs officers were often approached by tenants and other individuals not involved with the call, but who, upon seeing officers (or their trucks with the BC SPCA logo) talked to them about problems they saw with animals in the community. Given that officers made frequent visits to supportive-housing buildings, they developed relationships with managers by listening to their questions and talking to them about their work as officers, explaining and often clarifying the BC SPCA's legal mandate: to help animals in distress.

Establishing relationships with members of the SRO community, however, could be challenging. For example, after visiting a supportive-housing building with Officer Casey, Casey explained that they had visited the same building several times in the last few weeks for similar calls:

*"There is a misunderstanding about what we, the SPCA, can and cannot do. They [supportive-housing staff] call us and want us to be the "bad guy" and threaten to take people's animals away. But we cannot do this if the animals are not in distress".*

In the SRO contexts, officers and frontline animal shelter staff often spoke of misunderstandings, miscommunications or a lack

of communication. These problems were sometimes amplified when their work involved contact with human social service workers. On one occasion, for example, frontline animal shelter staff received approximately forty rats of different ages that a person relinquished from a single supportive-housing room. The shelter staff had to quickly find shelter and foster-housing for the rats. As well, it stretched the staff's resources to provide physical examinations, clean, feed and water the animals daily and make euthanasia decisions for some of the ill rats. When this happened, shelter staff told me they were frustrated about the large influx of animals, some in poor condition. They were critical of the supportive-housing staff. They could not understand why the supportive-housing staff did not communicate with them sooner about the situation. In another example during the virtual focus groups with shelter staff, staff member Robin expressed their frustration with a social worker who was working with a person who had a few unsterilised cats. Over time, the cats produced several litters of kittens. The social worker wanted the BC SPCA's help to convince the person to relinquish some of their cats. Robin explained:

*"When I saw photos", [sigh] clearly this had become an animal hoarding situation, but the social worker did not think it was. We took in some of the cats, fixed [sterilised] the cats and had to euthanase some of them. We were able to help in the end but I had to be really honest with the social worker. I don't think they knew what animal hoarding was".*

These misunderstandings and miscommunications can result in poor outcomes for animals living in deprived situations or with people who hoard animals where the animals' physical and mental health are likely poor. The misunderstandings are also frustrating for frontline shelter staff and officers interacting with frontline staff in human social services. The data thus illustrate the complexity of achieving the institutional aims of multi-agency collaboration in everyday work.

### Discussion

Within animal protection work, the provision of alternative measures is promoted as a way to keep people and animals together (Panning et al., 2016; LaVallee et al., 2017) under the concepts of One Health and One Welfare but the actual work that officers do to achieve this goal is complex and poorly understood. We collected ethnographic data and described the demanding and nuanced work of officers trying to provide alternative measures in a context involving human poverty and disability. Our use of IE is a novel approach to understanding how animal sheltering and protection frontline staff do the work of these initiatives. While this paper does not fully explicate the tensions identified in the data, our preliminary analysis suggests that the growing discourse on the benefits of keeping people and animals together may result in unforeseen issues for owners, animals and animal sheltering and protection staff that are not yet well understood. This paper captures and analyses some of the actual work involved with this relatively new approach and points to specific work processes that could be used as entry points into further investigation.

Very little research has been done on the physical and mental health of animals living with people who have minimal or no housing. Our research found animals in varying welfare states and found that officers dealt with situations on a case-by-case basis. Previous research reports somewhat inconsistent results. Williams and Hogg (2016), in assessing the physical health and behaviour of one hundred dogs, found comparable health outcomes for dogs owned by people who had a home and those who did not. Scanlon et al. (2021) assessed twenty-one dogs owned by

people with minimal or no housing and found nine dogs were overweight and thirteen had behavioural problems (usually anxiety when left alone). French et al. (2021) reported 38% of cats and dogs owned by people facing housing vulnerability were overweight or obese, but they note that this prevalence is similar to that seen in private veterinary practices. The limited literature thus suggests that no broad generalisations can be made about the health and welfare of animals cared for by people with precarious housing. Hence, it is our view that officers dealing with such situations should continue to assess them case-by case.

Our research observations show officers trying to assess the physical and mental health of animals living with owners in precarious housing. We described how this work is guided by both the *PCA Act* and the increasingly institutionalised mandate of animal sheltering and protection organisations to provide alternative measures so that animals do not need to be brought into a shelter. The officers' decision-making included considering the animal's current situation, what their life would be like in the shelter, and what forms of support might improve the animal's physical and mental health. Further, they used their own individual judgement and learned about and shared resources informally. However, this work did not always achieve improved outcomes for animals and people and thus we make two recommendations: first, future research should assess the success of different forms of intervention in the wide range of circumstances that officers encounter; second, organisations might consider creating opportunities for officers to share best practices about the use of alternative measures.

Studies of animals in low-income communities or homeless populations often call for a One Welfare approach that seeks to promote the well-being of both people and animals (Spencer et al., 2017; Scanlon et al., 2021; Kerman et al., 2020; Rauktis et al., 2021), but most of these papers are aspirational and do not interrogate the actual work processes and institutional norms that make such work feasible or difficult. Similarly, research on animal hoarding frequently encourages multi-agency approaches to deal with the problem (Reinisch, 2008; Lockwood, 2018; Elliott et al., 2019; Strong et al., 2019) but often without exploring how this cooperation could be achieved in practice. Holmberg (2014) provided details about urban animal hoarding and how officers, shelter workers and police reported and recorded information based on visual, olfactory and auditory impressions. In this paper, we provided ethnographic data to detail the everyday work involved in such collaborations, however, we think a fuller exploration is needed.

Indeed, collaboration between animal and human social services is bound to be complex. Frontline staff in human social services must follow their own matrix of institutional processes and regulatory texts (e.g. Public Health and Safety Rules, Fire Codes, Residential Tenancy Agreements) while supporting people who may be elderly, of low income, disabled, or have mental or physical health problems. Moreover, the interests of the animals can be in competition with the interests of their human owners who also need support. Future IE research could begin from the standpoint (i.e. the physical and institutional location) of supportive-housing managers, social workers or other frontline staff in human social services to understand the processes and ruling relations that they must follow and how the welfare of animals may enter into their work. Such research could investigate potential conflicts and areas for cooperation that arise from the different ruling relations that organise animal protection and human social services. Research could also examine the work of animal protection officers when they collaborate with human social services and identify challenges they face and resources that could support them (e.g. Janz et al., 2014).

Literature about people living with animals in precarious housing typically attempts to understand how people experience these situations, often by categorising the benefits and drawbacks of animal ownership (see reviews by Kerman et al., 2019 and Cleary et al., 2020). Some research quantifies individuals' experiences through existing scales about animal attachment, for example the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (e.g. Singer et al., 1995; Yang et al., 2020; Rauktis et al., 2021), the Commitment to Pets scale (Rauktis et al., 2021) and others (Taylor et al., 2004). Other research has used standardised scales to quantify how animals influence human depression, substance use and loneliness among vulnerable people (e.g. Rhoades et al., 2015; Lem et al., 2016). Yet other work has applied sociological theories to understand how having an animal influences how precariously housed people construct their identity (Irvine et al., 2012; Irvine, 2013).

Largely missing from this literature, however, are actual empirical observations on the daily activities and challenges of vulnerable people and their animals and the supports they use and need. For instance, when Officer Morgan left the elderly tenant and the cat, an important unknown was the obstacles that prevented the tenant from using the support provided. When officers refer people to low-cost and free veterinary clinics, what actual, material challenges—forgetfulness, health, public transit—may impede their ability to access such services? Future research on such questions could benefit from the IE approach, perhaps including participatory IE that, following ethical guidelines, involves participants in the research process (Nichols et al., 2017). This approach could focus on the people living in supportive-housing in order to observe the work they undertake to access services for their animals and how they do or do not make use of the alternative measures that are provided.

Doing such research, however, requires a number of ethical considerations. National research guidelines provide specific information about doing research with individuals who may be considered to be in vulnerable or marginalised situations due to age, income or health (TCPS2, 2018). Indeed, individuals who live in supportive housing or without permanent housing may be vulnerable because of complex reasons, including financial hardship, health problems, or substance use (Cleary et al., 2020). Therefore in addition to following national guidelines, we suggest future research to consult texts discussing the ethical issues involved (e.g. fair recruitment practices, assessment of the research risk-benefit ratio) in participatory research (Khanlou and Peter, 2005) to ensure that participants are aware of research practices and are not harmed.

## Conclusion

Animal sheltering and protection organisations have made One Welfare a priority. The research literature also encourages collaboration between animal and human social service agencies to support people and animals living in challenging situations. Very little research, however, has investigated the actual work that frontline staff and officers do to achieve such priorities. This paper described, ethnographically, examples of how such work is currently happening, the tensions that arise, and how alternative measures do not always resolve problems for animals and people.

Officer work aimed at keeping people and animals together is challenging because officers must assess animals in a wide variety of situations and decide among very different options such as taking legal action, removing animals or providing alternative measures. The work also requires officers to interact with frontline human social services staff who are presumably being organised by different institutional processes focused on supporting people. Indeed, officers were sometimes frustrated by what they



considered miscommunications with human social services staff. Future work could explore how the work of animal and human social services staff intersects and examine the ruling relations and regulatory texts that organise the different types of service work. Future work could also observe the actual work that the people living in supportive housing do when they are provided with alternative measures to better understand the effects of these measures.

### Data availability

The datasets generated during the current study are not publicly available in order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants.

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## Competing interests

None related to this research, but the organisation studied here (BC SPCA) is an important financial supporter of the UBC Animal Welfare Programme.

## Ethical approval

The University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) #H19-00009 as well as the British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BC SPCA) approved this study. Research was performed in accordance with BREB and BC SPCA principles, research rules and guidelines. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

## Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained for all research participants as described in the Methods.

## Additional information

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