Toolkit Introduction

“Everyone can be great because everyone can serve.”
—Martin Luther King, Jr.
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This toolkit is a collaborative product and compilation of diverse experiences. The assortment of tones, perspectives, and voices found in these pages reflect the diversity of the authors, as informed by the many people and pets they have encountered.

The following toolkit is a resource produced through a collaborative effort between PetSmart Charities® and The Humane Society of the United States. This step-by-step manual guides animal care service providers and other social welfare advocates through the development and implementation of a pioneering community outreach program. The toolkit goal is to reach companion animals and their families in under-served communities, using a comprehensive, grassroots approach to sharing pet wellness information, resources, and services. Within this toolkit, much focus has been given to the conditions of under-served people who struggle to care for their pets. It is important for animal welfare and wellness providers to understand the culture of poverty experienced by the human caregivers of millions of pets. Pets are companions, and because humans make decisions for them, reaching out to their owners in an effective and genuine manner must be part of the solution to reducing overpopulation and animal suffering.

What makes a community under-served? For the most part, the term refers to a neighborhood or area that does not have access to, or does not receive information about available services and resources. This disconnect is often the result of barriers between the community and mainstream service providers. These barriers may be socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural, geographic, racial, or a combination of these, and they may be pervasive. Frequently, barriers exist due to a lack of understanding between the service provider and those most in need of service. Overcoming the divisive barriers that prevent understanding is critical to helping an untold number of animals in under-served communities.

To further help identify what “under-served” means for the sake of this toolkit, we focus exclusively on residents living at or below the poverty level (~$23,550 for a family of four).

Poverty Guidelines [2012 HHS]
Poverty Thresholds [Census Bureau]

Living within a poverty-stricken community presents daily obstacles for residents trying to access basic services such as education, healthy food, and other family resources. In our community assessments that you’ll learn about in Chapter 4, our results repeatedly demonstrate that the lowest income households within a given area are isolated from critical services and resources. These include veterinary practices, animal welfare organizations, and even the most basic conveniences many people take for granted, such as grocery or pet supply stores. The type of poverty discussed and referred to in this toolkit is a condition of “systemic” rather than “conditional poverty.” “Conditional poverty” is circumstantial, a term that applies to people who are struggling because of a specific condition that led or leads to a loss of income (being laid-off from work or falling on hard times), but who still have access to services.
and knowledge of how to advocate for themselves and their family. The systemically poor, on the other hand, have experienced poverty for generations and are constantly surrounded by it—most have never experienced anything else. “Systemic poverty” affects individuals and entire communities in ways that often go unseen or are misunderstood. Poverty has mental, emotional, physical, and societal consequences that influence the decisions people make for themselves and their pets. We encourage you to study and learn about poverty and truly understand what it means for your community and your work. See the “Reading List” on page 176 to get you started.

In the United States, one in six households meets the definition of poverty. In these households, pet ownership is just as common—if not more common—as it is in more prosperous households. This means that millions of pets live in poverty with their human families. People in these households love their pets just as much as more affluent citizens, but experience barriers to making the healthiest decisions for their pets that others do not. We believe it is our responsibility to remove these barriers. This toolkit is designed to provide a step-by-step approach to doing so. Providing services to communities that have not been reached represents a vast opportunity to significantly improve companion animal welfare in the U.S.

In this toolkit, we discuss the importance of developing a better understanding of the companion animal world in the community, outside of the shelter walls. Companion animal wellness goes hand-in-hand with the wellness of animals’ human caregivers, and although wellness is often directly related to income, proof of income cannot be the only indicator in our willingness to provide assistance. Poverty is surrounded by—and creates—many other barriers, such as lack of engagement, negative messaging, distrust and low self-esteem. We must overcome these barriers to reach our goals and we cannot achieve them by simply asking for and requiring proof of income. Animal welfare issues do not exist in a vacuum—they are part of a complex social structure. Restricting our decisions about who we provide services to based only on income shows a lack of understanding and can limit our reach and impact.

We include both written and video components intended to guide advocates through each phase of preparing, executing, and tracking outreach efforts to under-served communities. The result will be increased spay/neuter rates, a factor that is paramount to reducing overpopulation, better wellness for pets, and less euthanasia of healthy companion animals. Although the text and video portions are presented in manageable chapters, the toolkit is meant to be used in full, and each section should be implemented as time and resources allow.
You'll also see and hear from others in the industry who have experienced positive results and rewards after following the toolkit’s techniques and fully embracing its comprehensive approach.

About PetSmart Charities®

PetSmart Charities, Inc. is a non-profit animal welfare organization that saves the lives of homeless pets. More than 400,000 dogs and cats find homes each year through our adoption program in all PetSmart stores and our sponsored adoption events.

PetSmart Charities grants more money to directly help pets in need than any other animal welfare group in North America, with a focus on funding spay/neuter services that help communities solve pet overpopulation. PetSmart Charities is a 501(c)(3) organization, separate from PetSmart, Inc.

To learn more about how PetSmart Charities is working toward its vision of a lifelong, loving home for every pet, call 1-800-423-PETS (7387) or visit: petsmartcharities.org.

PetSmart Charities
About The Humane Society of the United States

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is the nation’s largest and most effective animal protection organization—backed by 11 million Americans, or one in every 28. Established in 1954, The HSUS seeks a humane and sustainable world for all animals—a world that will also benefit people. The HSUS is America’s mainstream force against cruelty, abuse, and neglect, as well as the most trusted voice extolling the human-animal bond.

The HSUS works to reduce suffering and to create meaningful social change for animals by advocating for sensible public policies, investigating cruelty, working to enforce existing laws, sharing information with the public about animal issues, joining with corporations on behalf of animal-friendly policies, and conducting hands-on programs—such as Pets for Life (PFL)—that make ours a more humane world.

The Humane Society of the United States