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RSPCA NSW recognises the critical role pets play in enhancing the well-being of older people, offering companionship and emotional support, promoting physical activity, providing a sense of purpose, a point of connection with their community and encouraging social inclusion, and an important pathway for referral to appropriate support services.

Our submission responds to the federal government's consultation paper on the Aged Care Act, advocating for integrating pet ownership within the aged care regulatory system and policies. We highlight the need to promote and prioritise pet companionship in both home environments and residential care settings for older people. We refer particularly to the reported benefits to older people and their beloved pets in maintaining and supporting (including financially) those relationships as people age.

Recommendations

- 1. Incorporate Pet Ownership Support:** Develop guidelines within the Aged Care Act to facilitate pet ownership for older people, ensuring aged care providers can support this need.
- 2. Fund Research and Programs:** Allocate resources to research the benefits of pet ownership in aged care and fund programs that support older people in maintaining their pets. Funding the essential services of animal welfare organisations like RSPCA NSW would enable them to expand their services, ensuring more older people can benefit from pet companionship without the stress of pet care responsibilities.
- 3. Create Pet-Friendly Policies:** Encourage pet-friendly environments in aged care facilities, including infrastructure modifications and staff training to manage pets.

Background and Rationale

The aged care framework needs to acknowledge the significance of pets in the lives of older Australians. Academic research consistently demonstrates the benefits of pet ownership for older people, including reduced loneliness, enhanced physical health, and improved mental well-being. For instance, studies indicate that interacting with pets can lower blood pressure, decrease loneliness, and extend life expectancy.

Our research demonstrates how concern about their animal companions' well-being and safety can hinder older people from accessing appropriate accommodation and health services. Older people consistently delay seeking medical care or moving into appropriate,

supported housing rather than being parted from their animals. However, the Aged Care Draft Bill and Consultation Paper show a policy gap where pet-owning older people's needs still need to be fully addressed, potentially impacting their ability to maintain this crucial source of support and companionship.

Analysis of the Aged Care Draft Bill and Consultation Paper

The Aged Care Draft Bill and the associated consultation paper outline a framework for reforming aged care services in Australia, with an emphasis on quality, safety, and person-centred care. Section 19 references pets as part of the definition of "high-quality care" - (vii) supporting the individual to remain connected to the natural environment and animals and pets *where the individual chooses to*. In addition, s20 (12) provides a right to maintain a connection with pets - *An individual has a right to opportunities and assistance, to stay connected (if the individual so chooses) with: (a) significant persons in the individual's life and pets, including through safe visitation by family members or friends where the individual lives and visits to family members or friends...*

RSPCA NSW welcomes these inclusions, however we suggest that the definition be incorporated and fed into the s22 statement of principles, so that there is an overt principle that recognises the connection and benefits of pet ownership. In addition, we would support the inclusion of a provision that permits the System Governor to approve funding (under Division 4) for in-home access to services, including provision of food, prophylactic veterinary supplies, medication and veterinary treatment for animals, and an inclusion for similar funding and provisions to be made for animals in out of home care facilities for the reasons outlined below.

Further consideration of pets and their importance may be considered in other parts of the Act and the implementation of the outcomes. For example, provision could be made to ensure existing pets are welcomed into supported accommodation when their owner moves and that companion animals are considered in future planning for social support, medical treatment, and accommodation for older people. The Act must recognise the extensive evidence supporting the benefits of pet ownership for older people. For instance, research shows that pets can significantly reduce stress, encourage physical activity, and foster social connections among older people.

Evidence on Benefits of Pets for Older People

- 1. Physical Health Benefits:** Pets encourage more physical activity in older people, which can lead to reduced blood pressure, lower cholesterol levels, and decreased triglyceride levels, contributing to better overall cardiovascular health and reduced doctor visits (Headey, B., Na, F., & Zheng, R. (2008). Pet dogs benefit owners' health: A 'natural experiment' in China. **Social Indicators Research**, 87(3), 481-493).
- 2. Mental Health Benefits:** Interaction with pets has been shown to lower cortisol levels, a stress-related hormone, and increase serotonin levels, a feel-good chemical in the brain. This can improve overall mental health, reducing loneliness and depression (McConnell, A. R., Brown, C. M., Shoda, T. M., Stayton, L. E., & Martin, C. E. (2011).

Friends with benefits: On the positive consequences of pet ownership. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(6), 1239-1252).

- 3. Social Benefits:** Pets can act as social catalysts, encouraging interactions among people, which is particularly beneficial for older people who may experience social isolation. Pets provide companionship, reducing loneliness and social anxiety (Wood, L., Martin, K., Christian, H., Nathan, A., Lauritsen, C., Houghton, S., Kawachi, I., & McCune, S. (2015). The pet factor - Companion animals as a conduit for getting to know people, friendship formation and social support. *PLOS ONE*, 10(4), e0122085).

Case Studies and Program Insights

The RSPCA NSW Aged Care Social Return on Investment (SROI) Report 2023 can be accessed [here](#) as an attachment to this submission.

The RSPCA NSW Aged Care SROI Report 2023 unequivocally demonstrates the importance of pets in enhancing the well-being and health of older people. By providing a detailed analysis of the emotional, social, and physical benefits pets offer to older people and the support required to overcome care challenges, the report underscores the need for programs like the [RSPCA NSW Aged Care Program](#). Such initiatives ensure the welfare of older people and their pets and contribute significantly to societal health and well-being.

The Report demonstrates what academic research has proven:

Pets Provide Emotional Support and Companionship: For many older people, pets are not just animals but family members who offer unconditional love and support. The report highlights that pets play a critical role in alleviating loneliness and social isolation among older people, conditions linked to significant health risks like depression and cardiovascular disease. Pets help older people maintain a sense of purpose and joy in their daily lives by offering companionship and someone to nurture and care for. An older person's animal often gives them a reason to stay alive.

Pets Provide Physical Health Benefits: Engaging with pets encourages older people to stay active and engage in physical activity, whether through walking a dog or simply caring for a pet at home. This activity improves their physical health by maintaining mobility, reducing the risk of chronic diseases, and promoting mental health by decreasing stress and anxiety levels.

Challenges in Pet Care

Despite the benefits, the report acknowledges the challenges older people face in pet care, such as physical limitations that make it difficult to perform routine tasks like walking a dog or cleaning. There's also the concern of what happens to their pets should they become incapacitated or pass away.

To address these challenges, the RSPCA NSW Aged Care Program provides crucial support to older people, enabling them to care for their pets despite physical and financial constraints. The program offers veterinary care, emergency boarding, and in-home support, ensuring the health and welfare of both the older people and their pets.

In addition, RSPCA NSW has created the Home Ever After Program, a trusted, tailor-made future care plan for their beloved pet, should something happen to them. Having a plan in place provides excellent peace of mind and secures the future well-being of their pet.

Impact and Outcomes

The report's findings are clear: the RSPCA NSW Aged Care Program significantly improves older people's and their pets' lives. The program generates \$5.77 in social value for every dollar invested, reflecting the positive impact on older people's mental health, physical well-being, and social inclusion. The program helps older people maintain cherished relationships with their pets and reduces the burden on animal shelters and healthcare systems.

The report includes heartfelt testimonials from older people involved in the program, highlighting pets' critical role in their lives. Many express that their pets are their primary source of companionship and support, reinforcing the program's importance in keeping these companions together.

Conclusion

RSPCA NSW's submission underscores pets' critical role in enhancing older people's well-being. By integrating support for pet ownership into the aged care framework, we can make a significant step towards a more compassionate, holistic approach to aged care. We urge the federal government to consider these recommendations to improve the lives of older people and their cherished pets.