



November 17, 2022

Dr. Moira McPherson
President & Vice Chancellor
Lakehead University
955 Oliver Road
Thunder Bay, ON
P7B 5E1

Email: president@lakeheadu.ca

Dear President McPherson,

Re: Addressing the urgent need for veterinary services in northern and rural Ontario

I am writing on behalf of The Humane Society of Kitchener Waterloo & Stratford Perth (HSKWSP) to express our strong support for the joint proposal by the University of Guelph and Lakehead University to address the urgent need for veterinary services in northern and rural Ontario through the proposed *Collaborative Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) in Rural and Northern Community Practice Program*. We believe that this proposed solution is one of many crucial steps required to address the critical shortage of veterinary services that HSKWSP sees daily on a daily basis.

Veterinary workforce shortages have been a growing challenge in Ontario for several years, but increased rates of pet ownership during COVID-19 have exacerbated the crisis. With additional stressors including economic factors, inflation and limited affordable housing, our community members are having an increasingly hard time caring for their pets.

Our organization operates an animal centre in Kitchener, as well as an animal centre in Stratford. We are seeing some regional issues come to light, but our main concern is one shared amongst many shelters across Ontario: the growing lack of access to veterinary care, let alone affordable veterinary care, is now reaching a critical level – and people and their pets are suffering.

Particularly in more rural Perth County, we are hearing about pets unable to receive medical care when circumstances are urgent. Just this summer a gentleman was posting on an online community board, trying to find an emergency vet that was open and had the capacity to see his cat who he suspected had a broken leg. He had already called emergency clinics in Cambridge, London and Guelph, and as of 9pm at the time of posting, all were booked for the night. He was now asking desperately where else he could drive to (from North Perth) to find a vet who would see his cat. His story is not unique.

As we move out of the pandemic, our shelters are experiencing increasingly high call volumes for support that directly relate to access to veterinary care:

- Many clinics in Waterloo Region and Perth County have stopped accepting new patients, or even new pets from existing patients.
- Some clinics have decreased their hours, resulting in longer appointment wait times. Others have decreased appointment availability because of staffing shortages.
- For residents living in communities with few or one veterinary clinic, some do not have transportation to access care in other communities if their local vet cannot accommodate them, and there is no public transportation options.
- There are zero emergency clinics in Perth County, resulting in residents having to drive to Cambridge or London
 - We have heard from people that even their own vet has not been able to accommodate emergency requests during business hours
 - At times, even if people can get to an emergency clinic, they are no longer taking patients that day/evening, resulting in the resident needing to drive farther – Mississauga, Hamilton, Guelph etc.
 - Where the clinics are at capacity for the day/evening, animals are left to suffer in various states until medical care can be accessed.
- There is no low-cost veterinary clinic in Perth County and only one low-cost veterinary clinic in Kitchener, and they stopped taking patients this summer.
 - As a result, clients on income assistance have no other options for affordable vet care and animal's medical needs are not tended to.
- Even when low-cost clinics were accepting patients, we were receiving calls from pet owners stating that their animal was in need of urgent euthanasia but they could not access a euthanasia appointment for over three weeks.
 - As a result, the Humane Society was intaking animals for humane euthanasia to prevent further undue suffering. The impacts on staff though can be felt through compassion fatigue and burnout.
- From an operations standpoint:
 - DVM job advertisements are 3 times higher than 2017 (OVMA) and large veterinary groups are offering extremely high wages and signing bonuses, leaving smaller clinics with dwindling staff and pet owners without a vet.
 - For non-profits, it is even more challenging. We tried to hire for a maternity leave contract for our Veterinary Director and was unsuccessful after almost a year of trying.
 - For Stratford centre animals, in the face of a sick or injured animal coming into care after hours, we have no local vet that can be accessed for emergency care. We have to drive pets 40+ minutes to Cambridge. There have also been times where they could not provide overnight care due to their staffing and capacity that day.

In addition, we are also seeing other trends:

- Pet owners are choosing between feeding their pets versus themselves, let alone being able to afford vet care.
- More families in higher income brackets are financially vulnerable, which results in them not being able to afford care for a pet. We receive a large volume of calls for medical surrenders where owners are not able to afford care for their pet and they have no other option but to surrender to a shelter.

- If an individual cannot access medical care in a suitable time frame, they can face repercussions under the Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act, also forcing them to surrender a pet while facing charges.

As you can see, the challenges faced in our communities are in critical and urgent need of attention. We absolutely support this proposal to increase the number of DVM graduates in Ontario, for the first time in a generation, and hope that even more spots will become available in the future. In our eyes, it is far overdue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K Delutis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kathrin Delutis
Chief Executive Officer