

YOUTH & PETS INCLUSIVE HOUSING REPORT

A research-informed guide for homelessness service providers, housing organizations, policymakers, and funders to build pet-inclusive housing and service systems.



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Authors

Erin Flynn¹, Avery Ray¹, Sloane Hawes²,
Kimberly Bender¹, Laura Coddington¹

Affiliations

¹ University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work

² Companions and Animals for Reform and Equity

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About the Study

This report is based on a community-engaged qualitative study exploring how pets shape the experiences of youth navigating homelessness and how policies and practices influence access to housing and services.

Researchers conducted focus groups with 20 young adults (ages 18–25) who had experienced homelessness while caring for pets, alongside interviews with 20 service providers working across housing, mental health, municipal government, policy, and animal welfare systems.

Data were collected between 2024 and 2025 in urban and semi-urban communities in Colorado.

A youth advisory board informed study recruitment and dissemination activities.

Although the study was conducted in Colorado, many of the barriers and opportunities identified by participants are relevant to communities across the United States.



What this report is and is not

This report is

- ✓ A guide for reducing barriers to housing and services
- ✓ A roadmap for pet-inclusive practice
- ✓ A research-informed implementation resource
- ✓ A tool for organizational reflection and planning

This report is Not

- ✗ A recommendation that every organization immediately allow pets in every setting
- ✗ A dismissal of legitimate operational, safety, or resource concerns
- ✗ A one-size-fits-all solution
- ✗ A substitute for local decision-making

The goal is not to prescribe a single model.

The goal is to help communities build systems that better reflect the realities of young people's lives.

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Executive Summary

The Challenge

Imagine being offered a bed for the night—but only if you leave behind the one companion who has stayed with you through every eviction, every night outside, and every setback.

For many young people experiencing homelessness, this is not a hypothetical situation.

Across focus groups and interviews, youth described repeatedly encountering policies and practices that forced them to choose between accessing housing and remaining with their pets. Service providers echoed these concerns, describing the limitations of systems that often fail to recognize the importance of the human-animal bond between young people and their pets.

For many young people experiencing homelessness, pets are more than companions. They are family members, sources of emotional support, daily structure, safety, and motivation.

Yet housing and service systems are often not designed with youth and pets in mind.

As a result, many young people face an impossible choice: access housing and services, or remain with the animals they love.

This report draws on the experiences of youth and service providers to explore how pet-related policies and practices shape access to housing, healthcare, and supportive services. It offers practical guidance for organizations seeking to reduce barriers, improve service engagement, and build more inclusive systems of care.

Three key Findings

01

PETS ARE SOURCES OF STABILITY

For many youth, pets provide emotional support, companionship, routine, motivation, and a sense of purpose.

They are often among the most stable relationships in young people's lives.

02

PET RESTRICTIONS CREATE BARRIERS

Housing restrictions, shelter policies, transportation challenges, veterinary care gaps, and fragmented service systems can make it difficult—or impossible—for youth to access support while remaining with their pets.

03

PET-INCLUSIVE SYSTEMS IMPROVE ACCESS

Organizations can reduce harm and improve engagement through pet-inclusive policies, partnerships, training, and coordinated systems of care.



What organizations can do

- Ask about pets during intake
- Include pets in housing and safety planning
- Partner with veterinary and animal welfare systems
- Clarify pet policies before enrollment (ex. provide a written list of all policies)
- Train staff on pet-inclusive practices
- Advocate for more pet-inclusive housing options

Background

An estimated one in ten young adults (ages 18-25) and one in thirty adolescents (ages 13-17) experience homelessness each year in the United States. This places them at heightened risk for adverse physical and mental health outcomes, interrupted education and employment, and prolonged housing instability. At the same time, a growing body of research demonstrates that companion animals can play a vital role in the lives of young people experiencing homelessness. For many youth, pets provide consistent emotional support, companionship, safety, purpose, and a sense of family during periods of profound uncertainty. These relationships are associated with improved wellbeing, increased resilience, and stronger motivation to pursue future goals, making the human-animal bond an important yet often overlooked asset for healthy youth development.

Despite these benefits, housing and homelessness response systems frequently require young people to choose between accessing essential services and remaining with their companion animals. Pet restrictions in emergency shelters and housing programs, breed and weight limitations, pet fees, inconsistent implementation of "pet-friendly" policies, and limited coordination between human and animal service systems can unintentionally exclude youth with pets from housing opportunities. As a result, some young people delay seeking services, decline available housing, or remain unsheltered to avoid relinquishing an animal they consider family. These barriers are not simply the product of individual organizational decisions; rather, they reflect broader structural features of housing systems that often fail to recognize the human-animal bond as an important determinant of health, service engagement, and long-term housing stability.

To better understand these challenges and identify practical solutions, the research team at the University of Denver conducted a qualitative, multi-stakeholder study with young people who had experienced homelessness alongside housing and service providers across Colorado. By integrating lived expertise with provider perspectives, the study examined how policies, organizational practices, and system-level conditions shape access to housing for youth with pets. This white paper translates those findings into actionable recommendations for policymakers, housing providers, philanthropy, and community organizations. Rather than viewing pet-inclusive housing as a niche accommodation, the findings suggest it is a practical systems strategy for improving housing access, strengthening service engagement, advancing health equity, and creating more responsive housing systems that enable young people and their pets to thrive.

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Findings



Why Staying Together Matters

Many housing and service systems operate on an implicit assumption that separating youth from pets is a reasonable trade-off when services are available.

Youth described the situation differently.

Participants frequently compared their pets to family members and described separation as emotionally devastating.

Providers echoed these observations. Many reported that youth consistently prioritized the wellbeing of animals, even when doing so required significant personal sacrifice.

Understanding this reality is critical.

When services require separation, many youth do not experience the choice as housing versus a pet.

They experience it as housing OR family.

This distinction helps explain why some youth decline services, remain unsheltered, or disengage from systems that require relinquishing animals.





Youth Voice

“I would rather go starving than have my cat starve.”

“If I didn’t have my dog, I probably wouldn’t even be here anymore.”

“I’m not going if my pet can’t go.”

These statements are not simply expressions of affection.

They reflect how deeply youth–pet relationships shape decisions about housing, safety, healthcare, and service engagement.

Throughout this study, youth repeatedly described pets as family members, sources of emotional support, and reasons to keep moving forward despite extraordinary challenges.

For organizations seeking to improve outcomes, understanding these relationships is an essential starting point.



Why Pets Matter

Public conversations about pets often focus on companionship. The experiences shared by youth in this study point to something much broader.

For many participants, pets functioned as essential sources of emotional support, stability, safety, identity, and motivation during periods of housing instability.

Young people described animals as trusted companions who remained present through experiences of family conflict, displacement, trauma, and homelessness. Pets offered comfort during periods of loneliness, reduced feelings of isolation, and provided a sense of consistency when other aspects of life felt uncertain.

For some youth, caring for a pet created daily routines that helped structure life amid instability. Feeding, exercising, and caring for an animal provided responsibilities that encouraged forward momentum and purpose.



The findings point to a simple but important reality:

Keeping youth and pets together improves access to housing and services

When systems fail to accommodate youth-pet relationships, they create preventable barriers to housing, healthcare, and wellbeing.

When systems recognize and support those relationships, youth are more likely to engage with services, maintain stability, and pursue pathways toward housing.

Understanding Where Systems Break Down

The Five Barriers Framework

Most organizations want young people to access housing, healthcare, and supportive services.

Yet many youth with pets continue to face barriers that make achieving those goals difficult.

The challenge is not simply individual decision-making. It is system design.

This research identified five central barriers that constitute the most common points where housing and service systems become difficult to navigate for youth with pets.

Understanding these barriers helps organizations identify opportunities for change.

Barrier 1

Housing and Shelter Restrictions

Pet bans, breed restrictions, weight limits, pet fees, and limited pet-inclusive housing options can significantly restrict access to services. When youth perceive that entering housing means losing their pets, many choose to remain outside or disengage from services altogether.

Key Question

How many youth are unable to access our services because of pet-related restrictions?

Barrier 2

Veterinary Care and Basic Care Gaps

Many youth struggle to access affordable veterinary care, pet food, supplies, emergency services, and behavioral support. These barriers can create significant stress and increase the risk of housing instability, relinquishment, or untreated health concerns.

Key Question

Do youth in our community have reliable access to veterinary and pet-support resources?

Barrier 3

Transportation Challenges

Transportation emerged in this study as one of the most overlooked barriers.

Even when services exist, youth may struggle to reach them with limited transportation options that allow pets.

A resource is only accessible if young people can realistically get there.

Key Question

Can youth with pets safely and consistently reach available services?

Barrier 4

Emotional Support Animal Accommodations

Assistance animal accommodation processes preserve youth-pet relationships that are integral to the health and well-being of some youth.

However, documentation costs, unclear procedures, inconsistent implementation, and limited access to healthcare providers often make these pathways difficult to navigate.

Key Question

Are assistance animal accommodation processes clear, affordable, and accessible?

Barrier 5

Fragmented Systems and Stigma

Housing systems, healthcare providers, animal welfare organizations, transportation services, and social service agencies often operate independently.

Youth and frontline providers are frequently left to coordinate these systems themselves.

At the same time, stigma toward people experiencing homelessness with pets can influence public opinion, policy decisions, and service delivery.

Key Question

Where are youth being forced to navigate disconnected systems on their own?

POLICY, PRACTICE, & FUNDING IMPLICATIONS

Housing instability among youth with pets is not simply an organizational challenge.

It is also a policy challenge.

Many barriers identified in this study require coordinated action from funders, policymakers, housing authorities, and community leaders.

Start Where You Are

Organizations do not need to become fully integrated systems overnight.

Every policy clarified, partnership established, staff member trained, and barrier removed makes it easier for youth to access support without sacrificing relationships that matter deeply to them.

Pet-inclusive systems are built one decision at a time.

Recommendation 1

Expand Pet-Inclusive Housing Opportunities

Youth described a lack of pet-inclusive housing options across the housing continuum (e.g., emergency shelters, permanent supportive housing, affordable housing)

Action Items:

- Pet-inclusive shelter models
- Pet-inclusive affordable housing
- Flexible housing policies
- Reduced pet-related fees and restrictions

Recommendation 2

Invest in Cross-Sector Collaboration

Housing, healthcare, transportation, social services, and animal welfare systems should not operate in isolation.

Action Items:

- Establish shared referral networks
- Coordinate service planning
- Create collaborative funding opportunities
- Integrate service delivery models

Recommendation 3

Increase Access to Veterinary and Material Supports of Basic Needs

Providing youth with access to services and supplies for their pets supports both youth wellbeing and animal wellbeing.

Action Items:

- Provide referrals or direct access to veterinary care, emergency services, pet food, temporary boarding, and behavioral support
- Provide written and verbal communication of what youth can expect from others who assist their pets (e.g., when and how they can access their pet during temporary boarding)

Recommendation 4

Strengthen Workforce Capacity

Providers need practical tools and training.

Action Items:

- Human–animal bond awareness
- Pet-inclusive service planning
- Fair housing and assistance animal accommodations
- Resource navigation
- Cross-sector collaboration

Recommendation 5

Address Stigma Through Public Education

Public misconceptions continue to shape policy decisions and service environments.

Action Items:

- Highlight youth experiences
- Share evidence-informed practices
- Reduce stigma
- Promote successful pet-inclusive models

Quick Wins

Low-Cost Changes Most Organizations Can Implement

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| ✓ Add pet questions to intake forms | ✓ Build local referral relationships |
| ✓ Maintain pet-resource lists | ✓ Include pets in housing planning |
| ✓ Clarify pet policies (e.g., provide written documentation) | ✓ Track pet-related barriers |
| ✓ Train staff on pet-inclusive practices | ✓ Create emergency planning protocols |

A roadmap for Organizational Change

The Pet-Inclusive Systems Continuum

Organizations vary widely in how they support youth with pets.

Some operate within systems that unintentionally exclude pets altogether. Others have begun building partnerships, accommodations, and policies that recognize the importance of youth–pet relationships.

Rather than viewing pet inclusion as an all-or-nothing decision, participants described a continuum of approaches that organizations can move along over time.

Every organization can take the next step.



The Four Levels of Pet-Inclusive Organizational Practice

Level 1

Traditional Systems

Guiding Question: “Do we allow pets?”

In traditional systems, pets are often viewed as barriers to service delivery. Policies focus primarily on exclusion, and youth are expected to solve pet-related challenges independently.

Typical Characteristics

- Pets prohibited in housing or shelter settings
- Few referral options
- Limited staff training
- No formal partnerships
- Minimal organizational planning around pet-related needs

Common Outcomes

- Shelter refusal
- Service avoidance
- Housing instability
- Increased risk of pet relinquishment

Level 2

Pet-Tolerant Systems

Guiding Question: “Can we make exceptions?”

Pet-tolerant organizations recognize that pets matter but rely primarily on informal accommodations or case-by-case exceptions. Support often depends on individual staff members advocating for a client and their pet rather than organizational systems.

Typical Characteristics

- Case-by-case accommodations
- Informal referral networks
- Staff-driven advocacy
- Inconsistent implementation
- Reliance on personal relationships

Common Outcomes

- Some successful placements
- Uneven access
- Staff burden
- Inconsistent experiences for youth

Level 3

Pet-Inclusive Systems

Guiding Question: “How can we support youth and pets together?”

Pet-inclusive organizations intentionally account for pets in planning, policy development, and service delivery. Pets are recognized as part of the household rather than obstacles to housing.

Typical Characteristics

- Clear pet policies
- Pet-inclusive intake procedures
- Staff training
- Veterinary referral pathways
- Emergency care planning
- Housing plans that include pets

Common Outcomes

- Increased trust
- Greater service engagement
- Improved continuity of care
- Reduced barriers

Level 4

Integrated Systems

Guiding Question: “How do systems work together?”

Integrated systems move beyond organizational accommodations and create coordinated networks of support. Housing providers, healthcare organizations, transportation systems, animal welfare agencies, and community partners work together to address barriers collectively.

Typical Characteristics

- Cross-sector partnerships
- Shared referral pathways
- Coordinated service planning
- Integrated veterinary support
- Transportation solutions
- Joint advocacy efforts

Common Outcomes

- Stronger housing outcomes
- Reduced fragmentation
- Increased efficiency
- Better outcomes for youth and animals

Key Message



Pet-inclusive practice is not a single program.

It is an approach to system design.

The question is not whether organizations can solve every challenge.

The question is how organizations can remove the barriers that prevent youth from accessing support in the first place.

A Youth-Centered, Pet-Inclusive Systems Model

Building on an Established Multilevel Framework

Pet-inclusive change requires action at multiple levels.

Kerman and colleagues¹ Multilevel Intervention Framework identifies opportunities for change across three interconnected areas:

Policy: expanding pet-inclusive housing, reducing financial barriers, supporting Housing First approaches, and improving access to veterinary care.

Public: reducing stigma and increasing understanding of homelessness and pet ownership.

Service: using strengths-based practice, connecting people with pet-inclusive resources, recognizing the harms associated with pet loss, strengthening provider knowledge, and advancing advocacy.

The experiences shared by youth and providers in this study strongly support those recommendations.

This existing framework shows where change is needed. **A youth-centered expansion of this framework makes sure change is tailored to the specific needs and interests of this group** – as identified by young people. This section outlines ways to promote pet-inclusive change for youth at a policy, public, and service level.

This study's findings also show that adopting a policy or creating a resource is not enough on its own.

For these recommendations to work effectively in youth-serving systems, **communities must also address the conditions that shape implementation.** Participants emphasized five priorities:

1. A developmental understanding of youth-pet relationships;
2. Trauma-informed, non-coercive service delivery;
3. Provider training and organizational capacity;
4. Formal coordination across sectors; and
5. Transportation that allows youth and pets to reach available services.

Youth with lived experience should also have a meaningful role in designing, implementing, and evaluating these changes. Together, these findings offer a youth-centered extension of the Multilevel Intervention Framework. They clarify not only what systems should change, but also what must be in place for those changes to succeed.

Making Pet-Inclusive Change Work for Youth

A Youth-Centered Extension of the Multilevel Intervention Framework

POLICY LEVEL

Core Priorities

- Expand pet-inclusive emergency shelter and housing options.
- Increase pet-inclusive rental housing.
- Support Housing First approaches.
- Improve access to veterinary care.
- Reduce pet fees, deposits, and other housing-related financial barriers.

What Youth-Serving Systems Need

FORMAL CROSS-SECTOR COORDINATION

Housing providers, youth services, veterinary care, animal welfare organizations, and transportation systems need formal partnerships and clear referral pathways.

LEADERSHIP ALIGNMENT

Pet-inclusive practices should be supported by organizational leaders and governing boards so that they do not depend solely on individual staff members finding informal workarounds.

ACCESSIBLE TRANSPORTATION

Youth must be able to travel safely with their pets to housing, healthcare, veterinary services, and other resources. A service is not truly accessible when youth cannot realistically reach it.

PUBLIC LEVEL

Core Priorities

- Reduce stigma related to homelessness and pet ownership.
- Increase public understanding through education.

What Youth-Serving Systems Need

MORE ACCURATE PUBLIC NARRATIVES

Education should directly challenge assumptions that young people experiencing homelessness are irresponsible or incapable of caring for animals.

ATTENTION TO STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Public messaging should explain how housing rules, financial barriers, transportation restrictions, and fragmented systems can force youth to choose between services and their pets.

YOUTH-CENTERED STORYTELLING

Narrative change should humanize young people and reflect their lived experiences rather than relying only on general information or statistics.

SERVICE LEVEL

Core Priorities

- Use strengths-based practice.
- Connect youth with pet-inclusive community resources.
- Recognize the risks and harms associated with pet separation or loss.
- Support advocacy.
- Increase provider knowledge.
- Assist with assistance animal accommodation documentation when appropriate.

What Youth-Serving Systems Need

A DEVELOPMENTAL ORIENTATION

Recognize that pets may support young people's emotional regulation, identity, relational stability, and developmental wellbeing.

TRAUMA-INFORMED, NON-COERCIVE PRACTICE

Support informed decision-making without making access to housing or services contingent on relinquishing a companion animal.

EXPANDED PROVIDER TRAINING TO ADDRESS:

- the human-animal bond and youth development;
- fair housing and assistance-animal requirements;
- trauma-informed and non-coercive engagement;
- cross-sector resource navigation;
- practical implementation strategies; and
- leadership and organizational capacity.

MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Young people with lived experience should help shape policies, services, public education, and evaluation.

From Framework to Practice

The multilevel framework shows where change is needed.

The four actions below translate those priorities into an approach organizations can use in everyday practice:

RECOGNIZE the developmental and relational importance of youth–pet bonds.

SUPPORT youth without creating coercive choices between services and their animals.

COORDINATE across housing, human services, transportation, veterinary care, and animal welfare systems.

ADVOCATE for policy, funding, and public narratives that remove structural barriers.

These actions are mutually reinforcing. Recognition without practical support leaves barriers in place. Support without coordination depends too heavily on individual staff. Coordination without advocacy cannot resolve restrictive policies or resource gaps. Sustainable change requires all four.

Recognize

Understand the Significance of Youth–Pet Relationships

For many young people, pets are family members, sources of emotional support, and anchors of stability.

Recognition is the foundation of effective service delivery.

Without it, organizations may unintentionally create barriers that reduce trust and engagement.

What Recognition Looks Like

- ✓ Asking about pets during intake
- ✓ Recognizing that staying together matters
- ✓ Treating pets as part of the household
- ✓ Avoiding assumptions about pet ownership
- ✓ Understanding the emotional significance of youth–pet relationships

Reflection Question

How do our policies communicate what we believe about youth–pet relationships?

Support

Reduce Harmful Trade-Offs

Youth repeatedly described situations in which they were forced to choose between accessing services and remaining with their pets.

Supportive organizations work to reduce these trade-offs whenever possible.

What Support Looks Like

- ✓ Non-coercive conversations
- ✓ Pet-inclusive housing planning
- ✓ Veterinary referrals
- ✓ Emergency pet-care options
- ✓ Resource navigation
- ✓ Collaborative problem-solving

Reflection Question

Where are youth being asked to choose between support and the important relationship they have with their pets?

Coordinate

Build Partnerships Across Systems

No organization can meet every need alone.

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of collaboration among housing providers, healthcare systems, animal welfare organizations, transportation partners, and community-based organizations.

What Coordination Looks Like

- ✓ Veterinary partnerships
- ✓ Animal welfare collaborations
- ✓ Shared resource directories
- ✓ Referral networks
- ✓ Pet-food partnerships
- ✓ Transportation partnerships

Reflection Question

Who is missing from our current network of partners?

Advocate

Address Structural Barriers

Many challenges described in this study cannot be solved through individual case management alone. Organizations also play an important role in advancing policy and systems change.

What Advocacy Looks Like

- ✓ Tracking unmet needs
- ✓ Documenting housing barriers
- ✓ Educating policymakers
- ✓ Engaging funders
- ✓ Supporting pet-inclusive housing initiatives
- ✓ Challenging stigma

Reflection Question

What barriers require structural solutions rather than individual workarounds?

Conclusion

Throughout this study, youth and providers described a simple reality: for many young people experiencing homelessness, pets are not obstacles to stability.

They are part of what makes stability possible.

Yet too often, housing and service systems ask youth to choose between accessing support and preserving relationships that sustain them.

Communities can make a different choice.

By designing services that recognize youth and pets together, organizations can reduce barriers, strengthen engagement, and create more humane pathways toward housing and wellbeing.

Keeping youth and pets together is not simply an animal welfare issue.

It is a housing issue.

A public health issue.

A youth wellbeing issue.

Most importantly, it is an opportunity to build systems that work better for the young people they are intended to serve.

Appendix A

What Organizations Can Do Tomorrow

Practical Actions for Immediate Impact

Organizations often assume that becoming more pet-inclusive requires major policy reform or substantial new funding.

Participants suggested otherwise.

Many meaningful improvements can begin immediately.





Step 1: Ask About Pets

Many organizations routinely ask about family members, employment, healthcare, and housing history.

Pets should be part of that conversation.

Actions

- ☐ Include pets in intake forms
- ☐ Ask about pet-related barriers
- ☐ Discuss emergency planning
- ☐ Identify immediate needs



Step 2: Make Policies Visible

Uncertainty creates barriers.

Youth need clear information about what is and is not possible.

Actions

- ☐ Review existing pet policies
- ☐ Communicate policies before enrollment
- ☐ Eliminate contradictory messaging
- ☐ Train staff on policy interpretation



Step 3: Build a Resource Network

Most organizations already have community partners.

The goal is expanding those networks to include pet-related resources.

Actions

- ☐ Identify veterinary providers
- ☐ Create referral lists
- ☐ Connect with animal welfare organizations
- ☐ Locate pet food and supply resources
- ☐ Explore temporary care options



Step 4: Include Pets in Planning

Housing plans, safety plans, and service plans should account for the realities of youth who care for animals.

Actions

- ☐ Discuss pet-related goals
- ☐ Identify housing barriers early
- ☐ Plan for emergencies
- ☐ Explore accommodation pathways

Appendix B

Pet-Inclusive Organizational Self- Assessment

How to Use This Tool

For each statement, rate your organization:

0 = Not Yet in Place, 1 = Partially in Place, 2 = Fully in Place

Organizational Culture

Statement	0	1	2
Staff understand the importance of youth-pet relationships	☐	☐	☐
Pets are viewed as part of the household rather than barriers	☐	☐	☐
Staff use non-judgmental language regarding pet ownership	☐	☐	☐

Subtotal: _____ / 6

Intake and Service Planning

Statement	0	1	2
Intake processes ask about pets	☐	☐	☐
Housing plans include pets when relevant	☐	☐	☐
Safety plans account for pets	☐	☐	☐

Subtotal: _____ / 6

Resources and Referrals

Statement	0	1	2
Staff maintain veterinary referral information	☐	☐	☐
Staff know where youth can access pet food and supplies	☐	☐	☐
Emergency pet-care options have been identified	☐	☐	☐

Subtotal: _____ / 6

Policies and Procedures

Statement	0	1	2
Pet policies are clearly documented	☐	☐	☐
Pet policies are communicated before enrollment	☐	☐	☐
Staff understand assistance animal accommodation processes	☐	☐	☐

Subtotal: _____ / 6

Partnerships and Systems

Statement	0	1	2
Partnerships exist with animal welfare organizations	☐	☐	☐
Partnerships exist with veterinary providers	☐	☐	☐
Pet-related barriers are discussed by leadership	☐	☐	☐

Subtotal: _____ / 6

Scoring Guide

0-10 Points

Beginning the Journey

Pet-related barriers may be limiting access to housing and services. Focus on awareness, intake practices, and relationship building.

11-20 Points

Building Capacity

Important foundations are in place. The next step is developing consistent systems and partnerships.

21-30

Pet-Inclusive Organization

Your organization has developed meaningful structures to support youth and pets together. Focus on evaluation, advocacy, and systems leadership.