

Veterinary Social Work as a Catalyst for Change: A Transdisciplinary Approach to Education and Practice

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Abstract

Over time, the services veterinarians provide have evolved to reach more clients and animals through community outreach, shelter medicine, and street medicine, reflecting a One Health perspective. As these practices have expanded, the need for intentional collaboration with social supports has increased. This article argues for integrating social work principles into veterinary school curricula to enhance both client care and practitioner well-being. Specifically, it highlights the value of frameworks such as the person-in-environment perspective, strengths-based and person-centered approaches, trauma-informed communication, and mindfulness. This primarily conceptual paper draws on the author's experience developing and implementing veterinary social work services within a veterinary teaching hospital and describes how these frameworks can be applied in educational and clinical contexts. The paper also emphasizes community engagement through partnerships with local organizations and outreach programs and underscores the reciprocal benefits of these programs for universities and the communities they serve. Integrating social work concepts into veterinary training can strengthen communication, support diverse and disenfranchised populations, mitigate burnout and compassion fatigue, and promote holistic, sustainable veterinary practice.

Building on the evolving role of veterinarians and the growing need for social supports, this paper calls for a paradigm shift in veterinary education inspired by principles commonly found in social work literature. As a veterinary social worker at the Veterinary Health Center, the teaching hospital for Kansas State University's College of Veterinary Medicine, I offer a unique perspective shaped by hands-on experience with veterinary students. Over the past 4 years, I have observed both their strong desire to serve diverse populations and a notable gap in experience working with disenfranchised groups, such as individuals experiencing homelessness, those with mental illness, or those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This article is primarily a conceptual paper that proposes the integration of social work frameworks within veterinary education and includes examples from my work developing and implementing veterinary social work services in a veterinary teaching hospital.

Central to this work is meaningful community engagement. Many of the initiatives described in this paper, including community outreach clinics and street medicine efforts, are built on partnerships with local organizations, shelters, and community members. These partnerships are not one-directional service models; rather, they

are reciprocal relationships in which community stakeholders help shape priorities, identify barriers to care, and cocreate solutions alongside academic partners. This approach aligns with community-engaged scholarship by emphasizing shared benefits, bidirectional learning, and tangible outcomes for both the university and the communities it serves.

The remainder of this paper introduces key social work frameworks relevant to veterinary education, discusses their relevance to current challenges in the profession, and offers examples from a veterinary teaching hospital to illustrate how these ideas can be applied in practice.

Social Work Frameworks in Veterinary Education

I advocate for integrating social work frameworks into veterinary curricula to address the gap between students' desire to serve diverse population and their limited experience working with clients facing social, economic, or mental health challenges. Concepts such as the person-in-environment (PIE) perspective, strengths-based approaches, and person-centered methods can help students better understand and engage with clients. These core social work principles and their applications within veterinary education are

summarized in Table 1. Additionally, introducing coping strategies like mindfulness and meditation could combat burnout and compassion fatigue. According to the 2023 Merck Well-Being Study, 43.3% of veterinarians aged 18–34 reported “just getting by.” Equipping students with communication skills, stress-reduction techniques, and a broader understanding of client contexts can empower them to become intentional practitioners, improve patient outcomes, and safeguard their own well-being (Merck Animal Health, 2023). Recent literature also continues to document significant mental health challenges among

veterinary students, including high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout. A 2025 narrative review synthesizing 21 studies found that rigorous academic demands, clinical training, financial pressures, and client interactions contribute to elevated psychological distress among veterinary students (Islam et al., 2025).

Veterinary Social Work Background

To understand the role of social work in veterinary medicine, it is essential to examine its origins. The term “veterinary social work” was first coined in 2002 by Elizabeth Strand,

Table 1. Social Work Principles and Their Application in Veterinary Education

Social Work Concept	Brief Description	Application in Veterinary Education
Person-in-Environment (PIE)	Individuals are best understood within social, cultural, and environmental contexts.	Students consider finances, transportation, housing, and caregiving demands when creating treatment plans.
Strengths-Based Perspective	Focuses on client assets and coping abilities rather than deficits	Students recognize clients’ commitment to animals and problem-solving abilities when discussing care options.
Trauma-Informed Care	Recognizes the prevalence and impact of trauma and seeks to avoid re-traumatization	Guides communication during euthanasia, surrender, payment stress, and grief experiences
Person-Centered Approach	Emphasizes empathy, collaboration, and unconditional positive regard	Promotes shared decision-making and validates client experiences
Mindfulness and Self-Regulation	Encourages awareness of emotions and intentional coping	Supports student resilience, stress reduction, and burnout prevention
Spectrum of Care/Equity Lens	Offers a range of medically appropriate options rather than a single “gold standard”	Helps students align treatment plans with client resources and context

LCSW, PhD, at the University of Tennessee. While working on her dissertation examining the link between interpersonal violence and animal abuse (Strand, 2002), Strand recognized the significant emotional toll faced by veterinary students, staff, and faculty. With support from then-dean Michael Blackwell, she began offering social work support within the college. Recognizing the need, Strand understood that this area of social work should grow, and she eventually collaborated with the university's College of Social Work to formalize veterinary social work as a field (Poe & Strand, 2022).

Building on Strand's foundational work, the University of Tennessee developed a formal post-master's certification program to train veterinary social workers. This postgraduate, self-paced program emphasizes four key areas: animal-assisted interventions, grief and bereavement, intentional well-being, and the human-animal violence link. These focus areas demonstrate the diverse ways social work expertise can support veterinary professionals and their clients and bridge gaps in traditional veterinary education. Interprofessional education frameworks emphasize that students from different disciplines must learn with, from, and about one another in order to collaborate effectively and improve outcomes, a goal that closely aligns with calls to integrate social work principles into veterinary training (Thistlethwaite et al., 2014).

Interdisciplinary Versus Transdisciplinary Approaches

In an interdisciplinary context, veterinary social work focuses on collaboration; social workers and veterinarians work together while maintaining their distinct roles. Social workers may draw on trauma-informed communication strategies to assist veterinary teams in navigating challenging conversations with clients. They may also provide mental health support to veterinary professionals, addressing the emotional toll of their work and building resilience within the team. These collaborative efforts enrich the veterinary profession by enhancing client interactions and promoting overall well-being among veterinary staff.

While interdisciplinary collaboration enriches client interactions, transdisciplinary integration transforms the very foundation of veterinary education. In a transdisciplinary context, veterinary social work goes beyond collaboration to become a driving force for a new, integrated

framework within veterinary medicine. Social work principles are embedded directly into the veterinary curriculum, transcending traditional disciplinary boundaries. The result is not merely the addition of social work concepts but the development of a new paradigm wherein mental health and communication skills traditionally associated with social work become fundamental to veterinary practice. This integration fosters the development of veterinarians as intentional, empathetic practitioners equipped to address both the animal and human dimensions of care. The key distinctions between interdisciplinary collaboration and transdisciplinary integration are outlined in Table 2.

By embracing both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, veterinary social work can profoundly enrich veterinary medicine. This dual approach supports the professional development of veterinary staff while enhancing the quality of care provided to both clients and patients, firmly establishing the essential role of veterinary social work in the field.

In recent years, the social work field has gained an understanding of the importance of the human-animal bond and how this relationship can provide insights into other aspects of a client's situation. Although social workers are incorporating companion animals into their assessments and interventions—often without formal training—there is a need for structured education on the topic. In the veterinary and anthrozoological literature, the human-animal bond is widely acknowledged as a powerful and meaningful relationship that influences client attitudes and behaviors in clinical contexts (Serpell, 2017). Similarly, incorporating social work principles into veterinary education can equip veterinary professionals with the tools they need to better understand and manage the human side of veterinary care. The integration of companion animals into social work practice underscores the necessity of interdisciplinary collaboration, mirroring the benefits of a collaborative approach in veterinary medicine (Risley-Curtiss, 2010).

Furthermore, recognizing the bond that humans share with their animals, whether large or small, also brings attention to the risk of compassion fatigue among veterinarians. How can we prevent compassion fatigue and burnout while preserving this bond? Drs. Figley and Roop explain compassion fatigue as a result of caregiving relationships that involve empathy, emotions, and a strong desire to alleviate suffering. This is

Table 2. Comparison of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Approaches in Veterinary Education

Feature	Interdisciplinary approach	Transdisciplinary approach
Core Definition	Multiple disciplines collaborate while retaining distinct professional roles.	Knowledge and skills are integrated into a new shared framework that transcends disciplinary boundaries.
Primary Focus	Working together across professions	Creating something new together through shared frameworks
Nature of Roles	Separate identities and expertise maintained	Blended roles and shared ownership of ideas and outcomes
Examples in Veterinary Settings	Social worker assists during difficult client conversations; referral to social or mental health services	PIE and social determinants of health are embedded in routine case discussions; mindfulness and communication taught as core clinical skills.
Educational implication	Occasional collaboration between veterinary and social work learners or faculty	Social work concepts are integrated into veterinary curricula as foundational knowledge.

directly relevant to veterinarians, who form such relationships not only with animals but also with their owners. By acknowledging the emotional toll this can take, Figley and Roop highlight the need for veterinarians to have tools and strategies to manage compassion fatigue (Figley & Roop, 2006). The authors further discuss the shift from anecdotal to scientific research on the human–animal bond, advocating for interdisciplinary, collaborative research. This reinforces the need for veterinary education to incorporate interdisciplinary approaches, such as those found in social work, to address compassion fatigue and enhance veterinarians’ ability to support both animals and their human counterparts.

Conclusion and Future Directions

As a community practitioner, veterinary social worker, and advocate for those in veterinary medicine, I have witnessed firsthand how integrating social work principles into veterinary education can profoundly impact students and their approach to care. Future directions include formally integrating social work content into veterinary curricula and evaluating its impact on student well-being, preparedness for working with diverse communities, and client outcomes. Intentional collaboration between veterinary and social work educators will be essential to sustaining this work.

One powerful example of this impact is encouraging students to use mindfulness exercises

to better assess their needs. Through guided mindfulness practices, students have learned to create space for their feelings, reflect on their biases, and approach client and patient interactions with greater openness. This practice has not only supported their personal well-being but also enhanced their ability to provide person-centered care.

Additionally, introducing the PIE framework has further enriched students' understanding of clients' broader contexts. One student reported that by using PIE, they were able to more fully grasp a client's situation, including the client's barriers to accessing care. They then applied the spectrum of care framework—a veterinary-specific concept—to develop a treatment plan tailored to the client's circumstances.

These experiences illustrate how integrating social work practices such as mindfulness, PIE, and trauma-informed care into veterinary education equips students with the tools they need to navigate the complexities of their profession. By bridging these disciplines, we create a foundation for resilience, compassionate care, and intentional practice. Importantly, this work is grounded in community engagement, recognizing that sustainable change occurs when veterinary institutions collaborate with community partners, share decision-making, and respond to locally identified needs. Through collaborative and preventative measures, we can ensure the sustainability of veterinary medicine while empowering future practitioners to thrive and maintain the vital human-animal bond.

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