



Pets for Life

QUICK REFERENCE



About Pets for Life

A core program of the Humane Society of the United States (the HSUS), **Pets for Life (PFL) is driven by social justice and guided by the philosophy that a deep connection with pets transcends socio-economic, racial and geographic boundaries**, and no one should be denied the opportunity to experience the benefits, joy and comfort that come from the human-animal bond.

Systemic inequity and institutional barriers create immense challenges for millions of people every day in accessing pet resources and information. Since 2011, PFL has been a thought leader in bringing attention to and advocating for people who are routinely overlooked and, in many instances, looked down upon.

PFL takes a comprehensive, long-term approach to addressing the inequity in and lack of access to pet resources people experience in underserved communities through door-to-door community outreach and pet owner support services. Providing free veterinary care, supplies, services and information to pet owners, **the program builds trust and positive relationships within the communities that are served as opposed to staying on the periphery.**

To address the systemic challenges people and pets living in poverty face, PFL focuses on three distinct but intersecting areas:

DIRECT CARE

The PFL team provides free pet services and information to pet owners in the most underserved communities of Los Angeles and Philadelphia on a daily basis. These established core markets are also where PFL refines best practices and serve as training grounds for local organizations to learn how to implement PFL in their own communities - dramatically increasing collective impact.

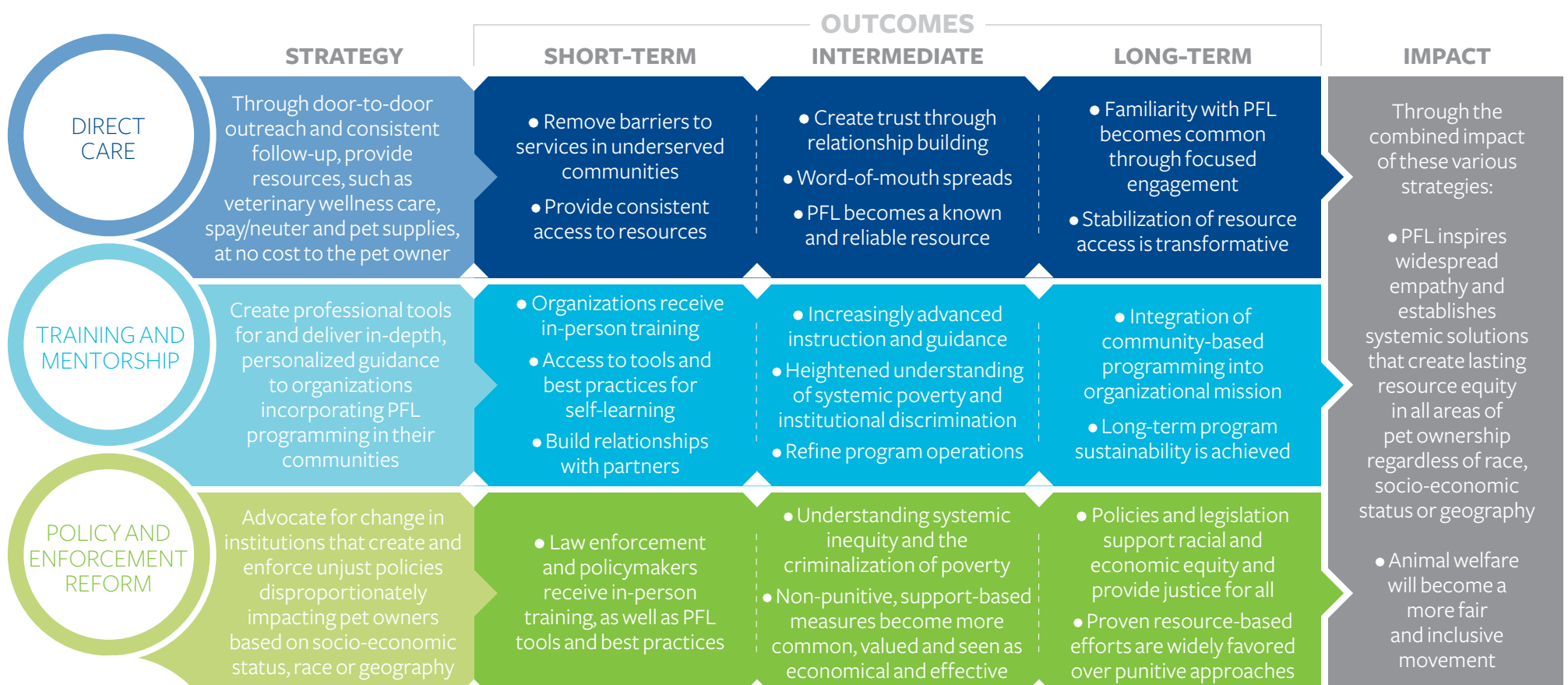
TRAINING AND MENTORSHIP

A dedicated PFL mentorship team delivers in-depth guidance and support to local organizations around the country and to the veterinary community, ensuring they have the necessary tools and knowledge to take ownership over their own community outreach program. PFL emphasizes understanding the impact of systemic poverty on pet ownership, effective outreach strategies and long-term program sustainability.

POLICY AND ENFORCEMENT REFORM

Acting as a catalyst for systemic solutions, PFL advances the national conversation among animal control, law enforcement and policymakers on shifting from punitive approaches to more inclusive, support-based community engagement models. Driven by social justice, PFL addresses institutional barriers that perpetuate the inequity that far too many people experience.

PFL Theory of Change





Addressing Structural Inequity

Systemic poverty and structural inequity create obstacles to affordable veterinary and pet wellness services similar to the challenges and barriers people experience in accessing healthy food, education, jobs, health care and housing. At its core, PFL challenges the institutions that create and perpetuate divisiveness, unjust policies and an overt imbalance in resource accessibility. The program cultivates equal opportunities for all pet owners - regardless of race, ethnicity, income level or geography.

Offering services is an important part of the solution and certainly an immediate need, but bringing about transformational change requires tackling the larger systems that keep inequity in the present. PFL embraces the human in humane, extends compassion and respect to all audiences of pet owners and works to gain greater recognition within the animal welfare movement of how these systems of oppression impact pet ownership for millions of people in underserved communities on a daily basis.

Getting Proximate & Strategic

While the direct care work of PFL is extremely important and will always be central to the program, just as important is sharing all that has been learned from the community, what people living in poverty have to teach the animal welfare and veterinary fields. One of the biggest lessons is that there is a difference between just offering services and creating equity in access. Attorney, author and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, Bryan Stevenson, said it very effectively – “The opposite of poverty is not wealth, the opposite of poverty is justice.”

A philosophical shift must happen. Service providers and policymakers have to get up close and personal. Big problems cannot be tackled from a distance. While it may feel uncomfortable and takes time and real investment, being proximate to the people being served is essential to developing an approach that truly mirrors the voice of the community. The opposite is true as well – distance can allow for one-sided policymaking and programming and can result in a lack of empathy.



Rethinking Community Engagement

National conversations on how community engagement and partnering are more effective and economical approaches than punishment in addressing systemic and deep-rooted issues of inequity have direct application to animal welfare. There are many ways companion animal work can be more fair and inclusive and where focusing on pet owner support programming yields results beneficial to people, animals and the entire community.

The animal welfare movement has been discussing and treating the issue of animal cruelty and neglect the same way for decades, and it is time to reconsider the accuracy of this perspective. While institutional and large-scale cruelty situations do exist, what has traditionally been labeled animal cruelty in individual situations is almost always an issue of access to services or need for financial assistance. The distinction is important in order to move the field away from criminalizing pet owners who are faced with socio-economic and geographic challenges to a place where compassion and support are offered.

Changing the Narrative

The narratives created by animal welfare experts can set the tone for what others believe and do. For instance, posting a story on social media about a skinny dog can galvanize a donor base. But how does the story change when that thin dog is coming into the shelter only because his owner was being evicted, the dog got loose and she had not been able to get him dewormed? We must ask questions and learn in order to tell accurate and nuanced stories, or at a minimum not make assumptions that vilify a person. It is all too easy for our messaging to fall into the trap of creating extremely narrow definitions of who is capable of compassion or what compassion *must* look like.

Exercising cultural humility - the practice of looking inward and examining implicit bias - is an essential ingredient to valuing other viewpoints and creating an honest narrative. A fundamental part of being equitable is for all types of service agencies to listen to community members, learn from their knowledge, provide opportunities for sharing and then integrate this feedback into the way we conduct our work and the stories we tell.



Visit PFLequity.org to download the complete PFL Outreach Toolkit, and watch for the updated version coming Summer 2019.

