

Animal Welfare as Public Health and Safety

A Reader on Leadership, Policy Design, and Community Animal Management in Indigenous Communities

Increased ACCESS

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Introduction

This Reader brings together a set of essays, articles, and public-facing analyses published by Increased ACCESS during 2025. They examine a single, persistent problem from multiple angles: Canada has never built a coherent, nationwide animal health or animal safety system, because animal welfare has, at best, been treated as a charitable concern rather than a public health responsibility. The consequences of that design failure fall most heavily on rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. Rather than summarize each piece separately, this Reader presents a condensed and integrated narrative. It is intended for policymakers, public health professionals, philanthropic leaders, veterinarians, Indigenous governance leaders, and others working at the intersection of health, safety, and systems change.

Why This Reader Exists

Across Canada, community animal management is routinely framed as an animal welfare issue. In practice, it functions as a determinant of human health and safety. Where communities lack access to veterinary care, animal control infrastructure, kennels, and prevention programs, the consequences are predictable: elevated dog bite risk, trauma exposure for children, populations of under-socialized, uncontained dogs in communities where sterilization coverage remains low, and recurring crisis responses including culls. For many children, walking to school or playing outdoors carries a level of risk that would be unacceptable in most Canadian municipalities. In urban centres, these risks were largely addressed over a century ago through municipal taxation, infrastructure, and public services. In Indigenous communities, they were not. This is not a cultural failure. It is a federal policy outcome.

The Historical Design Problem

The roots of today's inequities trace directly to nineteenth-century federal policy design. As settler towns developed municipal animal control systems funded through local taxation, First Nations were governed under the Indian Act, which prevented communities from raising comparable revenue, restricted economic autonomy, and centralized financial control under federal authority. Although the Indian Act referenced animal management roles such as pound keepers, it provided no funding, infrastructure, or enforcement support. Over time, Canada built systems for itself and withheld them from First Nations. This asymmetry hardened across generations. The result is a country where animal control and veterinary access are assumed to be universal, while entire regions were structurally excluded from those systems by design.

Animal Management as a Social Determinant of Health

In Indigenous communities, poorly supported dog populations are not abstract animal welfare concerns. They are child injury risks. They are sources of chronic fear. They are trauma exposures. They are contributors to human wildlife conflict. They are preventable. Evidence consistently shows that children aged five to nine in Indigenous communities experience disproportionately high dog bite risk. Most bites go unreported. Many health systems do not record bites by species. The absence of data should not be mistaken for the absence of harm.

Why Charity Was Never Enough

Canada delegated most animal welfare functions to charities and volunteer organizations. This worked tolerably well in urban centres with dense donor bases and existing infrastructure. It does not work as a substitute for public systems. Large SPCAs and humane societies were never designed as public health agencies. They have no legislative mandate to provide equitable, province-wide access to animal health services. Their funding follows donors, visibility, and population density. Small nonprofits, Indigenous-led initiatives, and community groups are left to manage the highest-risk environments with the fewest resources. This is not a failure of goodwill. It is a mismatch between responsibility and structure.

Leadership Is the Missing Variable

Despite these systemic gaps, Indigenous communities are leading. Nations are writing animal bylaws, building infrastructure, hosting mobile veterinary clinics, engaging Elders and Knowledge Keepers, and developing prevention strategies rooted in local law and teachings. At the national level, the Assembly of First Nations has passed resolutions calling for a National Strategy on Animal Care and Control in First Nations. What is missing is not leadership at the community level. What is missing is alignment at the systems level. Communities are doing what they can within constrained systems. Those systems were never designed to support them. Canada has no mechanism to coordinate animal health across ministries, jurisdictions, and sectors. Responsibilities are fragmented. Accountability is diffuse. Equity is optional. This is not a system. It is a patchwork.

What Structural Change Could Look Like

A structural response does not require reinvention. It requires alignment. A public health approach to community animal management would include:

- Recognition of animal management as a determinant of human health and safety
- Minimum standards for access to veterinary care and animal control infrastructure
- Indigenous-led governance and decision-making
- Sustainable, predictable funding rather than episodic philanthropy
- Expansion of a non-profit veterinary sector, much of it mobile
- Policy tools such as student loan forgiveness to support veterinary professionals serving underserved regions
- Outcomes-based financing models that allow governments to fund what works

Red Collar Day and Naming the Losses

In many communities, the absence of alternatives has led to traumatic outcomes including dog culls. Red Collar Day was created to mark those losses without blame, and to name the systems that made them inevitable. It is a day of remembrance and shared responsibility. It insists that grief should not be the price of policy failure.

The Role of Increased ACCESS and Indigenous SPCA

Increased ACCESS is an Indigenous-led nonprofit working with Nations to address community animal management as a public health issue. Indigenous SPCA is a project of Increased ACCESS focused on supporting community-led animal management systems grounded in self-determination, safety, and local governance. The organization supports Indigenous-led planning, infrastructure development, mobile veterinary access, policy engagement, and the development of a Community Animal Management Outcomes Fund in partnership with economists at the University of Winnipeg. The aim is not to build parallel charity systems. It is to help move essential services out of the realm of charity and into public responsibility.

Looking Forward

If 2025 marked a shift in how these issues are discussed, 2026 must be the year systems begin to change. Communities are already leading. Evidence is accumulating. Public health frameworks support action. The remaining question is whether Canada is prepared to build structures capable of following that leadership. Animal welfare, when understood properly, is

not about animals alone. It is about health. Safety. Equity. And the systems we choose to build.