

Policies and Practices on Pets in Alberta’s Long-Term Care Facilities for Older Adults

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Background and Rationale

Pet ownership is increasingly common among older adults, with companion animals viewed as members of their family networks (1, 2). Yet systemic barriers, particularly in housing and long-term care, often force older adults to part with their companion animals when entering institutional care (3).

Although some long-term care facilities permit pets or visiting animals, practices vary and little research exists on how such decisions are made (4, 5). Moreover, Canadian age-friendly and health policy frameworks rarely consider the role of animals in later life, overlooking their potential to foster connection, reduce loneliness, and improve quality of life (6).

Objective

This study adds to the literature by focusing on companionship between pets and older adults. Using a **life course perspective** (7), and informed by **social justice values**, it examines **mutual, interspecies relationships**. We examine how social, political, and environmental factors impact the role of pets in the lives of older adults.

Findings and Discussion

Our preliminary analysis of four semi-structured interviews identified four key themes:

Balancing Health and Safety in Care

Participants noted that pet policies protect residents, staff, and animals through infection prevention and control measures, emphasizing protocols like vaccine records and weight requirements to support safe integration of pets in long-term care.

“Yes, because the way the our sector works, is our like, we have regulatory frameworks and standards that kind of determine certain criteria. Some of those are infection prevention controls.”

Navigating the Policy Landscape

Participants stressed the need to understand the regulatory framework for pet policies in long-term care, noting that compliance with provincial and national standards is essential for safety and well-being.

“Oh you said you've got a pet policy, than you're going to do this to comply with national regulations or provincial legislation, so as long as we're following our policy work applied with the regulatory framework.”

Fostering Wellness and Joy in Residents

Participants noted that pets support residents' mental health by easing loneliness and anxiety and providing familiarity for those with prior pet experiences.

“I love seeing when our residents there's anything that brings them joy and comfort and and appease them, if they're anxious or they're feeling some emotions, and just be able to calm them down and just have a good moment. And a good time is so important in long term care. We can never do enough of that.”

The Complexities of Pet Inclusion

Participants identified challenges to implementing pet policies, including costs, staffing, resource allocation, and reduced independence for older adults—factors crucial to consider for effective integration of pets in long-term care.

“We open up a lot of unintended consequences and expectation, or misunderstood expectation. You know, are we to clean up after the pet and so forth? It's just been problematic in that way...what happens when that resident can't manage the care of that pet, and because a lot of times we have individuals here that aren't. It's tough.”

Conclusion

This study offers preliminary insights into the challenges and benefits of including pets in long-term care. Findings suggest that pets support residents’ mental health and social connection, while policy implementation and logistical barriers remain. Addressing these issues can enhance well-being and guide strategies such as increased funding for pet programs, fostering a more enriching environment for residents and staff.

Methods

This study draws on semi-structured interviews with management and administrative staff in Alberta long-term care facilities to examine policies, practices, and attitudes toward animal presence. By exploring decision-making processes—from formal regulations to informal accommodations—we aimed to understand the opportunities and barriers to fostering interspecies relationships in institutional care.

Data Collection:

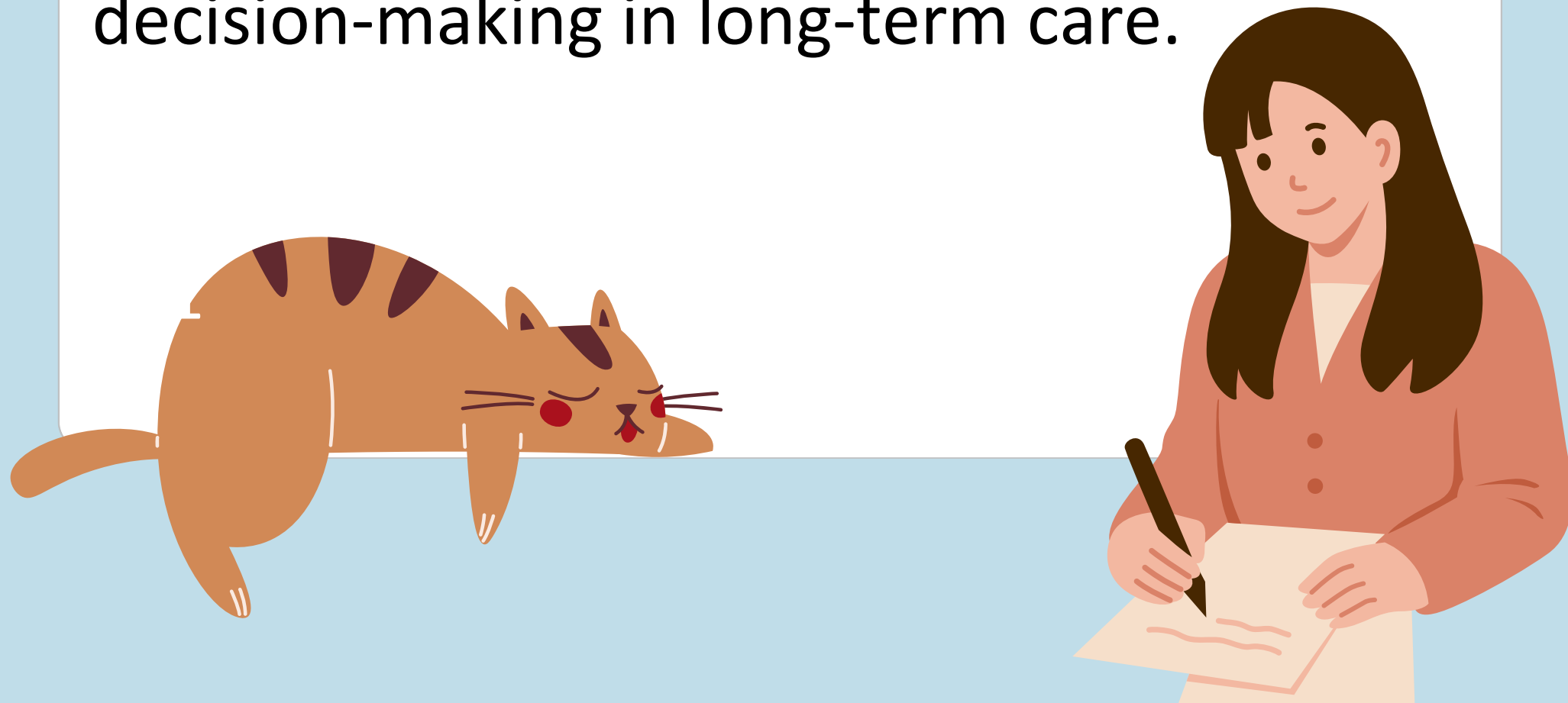
Participants were recruited by email. To capture diverse perspectives, recruitment included urban, suburban, and rural areas.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Age 18 or older
- Fluent in English
- Resident of Alberta
- Currently employed in an administrative, managerial, or leadership role in a long-term care facility

Data Analysis:

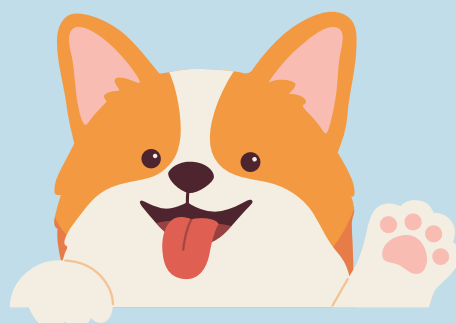
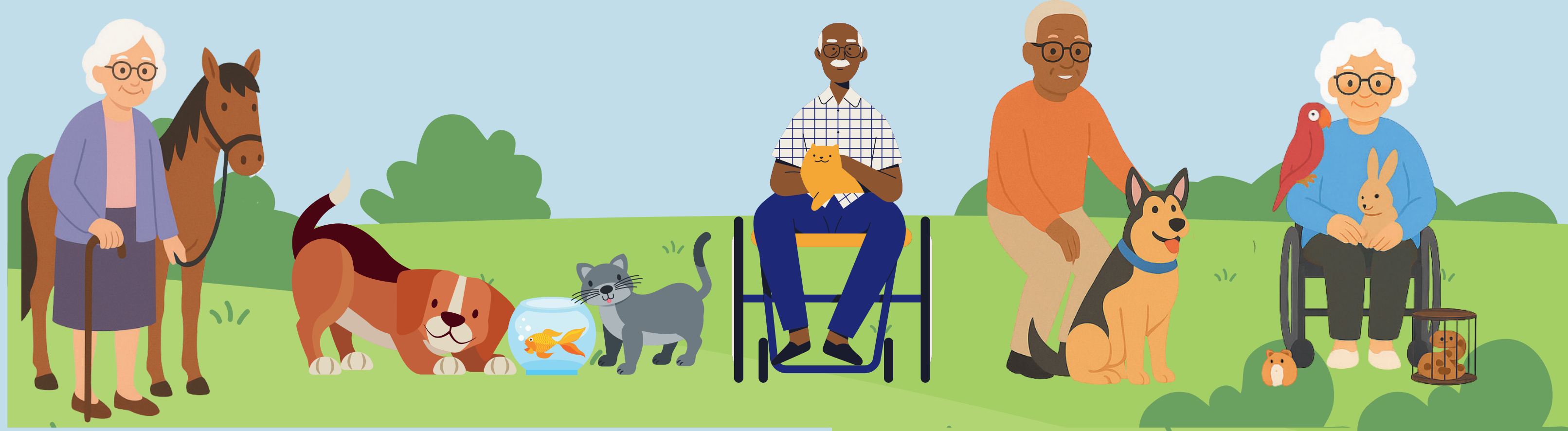
With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (8, 9), within a case study approach and social constructivist framework. This iterative process provided insight into the organizational dimensions of pet-related decision-making in long-term care.



This study received ethical approval from the Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board (REB25-1174) at the University of Calgary.

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