
INCLUDING DOMESTIC ANIMALS IN REDRAWING VICTORIA'S CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) ROADMAP



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Victoria's roadmap out of Stage 3 and 4 lockdowns must not ignore the welfare of our domestic animals as well as people. We have a responsibility to care for the animals we bring into our households and families – a responsibility to keep them fed, sheltered, safe and healthy.

Victoria's COVID-19 experience has put a strain on that responsibility. Other than veterinary services, pet support services including grooming, boarding, walking and training have been closed for the lockdowns. As a result, many animals have suffered health and wellbeing issues, and many pet parents have been worried and anxious about their loved furred and feathered family members.

The Victorian government's decision to allow onsite grooming services to reopen from 28 September 2020 is a most welcome recognition that these services are essential and not merely discretionary. But more can be done to safely reopen other support services for our domestic animals by accelerating their priority under Victoria's COVID-19 Reopening Roadmap.

The welfare of Victoria's pets cannot be put on hold until the end of October or later. After many weeks of lockdown, their health and wellbeing needs must be addressed now.

This paper outlines the case for reopening domestic animal support businesses for necessary health and welfare-related services as soon as possible. It includes real-life case studies to illustrate the difficulties that many animals have experienced through this pandemic crisis.

The Pet Industry Association of Australia recommends that the Victorian government:

- Allows mobile as well as onsite pet grooming, dog walking and training, and pet boarding businesses to reopen without the need for veterinary approval as part of the Second Step of the government's COVID-19 Reopening Roadmap.
- Consults with the pet services industry in the best interests of ensuring the health, wellbeing and welfare of Victoria's domestic animals as we continue to move through this pandemic.
- Amends the Victorian Essential Services Act 1958 to ensure that animal welfare is an express category of essential services in relation to declaring states of emergency and disaster.



DOMESTIC ANIMALS ARE FAMILY MEMBERS

Domestic animals – cats, dogs, birds and other animals – are more than just pets, they are truly companion animals. They are beloved and integral members of their families. A recent survey found that in Australia:

- In 2019 almost two-thirds of households had a pet and 90 per cent have had a pet for some time.
- There are almost 29 million pets in Australia today – more than the estimated human population of 25 million. Broken down, this is estimated at 5.1 million dogs, 3.8 million cats, 11.3 million fish, 5.6 million birds, 614,000 small mammals, 364,000 reptiles and 1.8 million other pets.
- 49 per cent of pet owners cited love, affection and companionship as the number one benefit to pet ownership.
- 63 per cent of Aussie dog owners refer to their pet as a member of the family, with 23 per cent regarding them as companions. Similarly, cats are also commonly seen as family members.
- 37 per cent of pet owners refer to themselves as their pet's 'parent'.
- 24 per cent of pet owners taught their pets tricks or enrolled them in obedience training.
- 64 per cent of pet owners talk to their pet regularly.
- 11 per cent of pet owners organise sitters and pick-up/drop-off for their pet.
- 12 per cent of pet owners take their pet to a central boarding facility if they can't look after their pet.

In short, pets are not just animals to a great many people. They are friends. They are companions. They are family.

This relationship is even more important in times of prolonged stress, such as we are enduring now with the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is no surprise that people have turned to animal companionship in response to "iso". Animal adoption rates have skyrocketed in 2020, so much so that the RSPCA and other animal shelters have been unable to meet demand. They have joined the millions of other pets, in Victoria and across Australia, that have become part of their human families.

Companion animals give their humans unconditional love and support in return for food, shelter and being cared for. For many households, a pet is a calming influence in times of stress and, for people living alone, a pet is not just a companion but a partner, someone to talk to and share affection with when there is no one else around.

Pets are particularly special and vital for the frail elderly, people with disabilities and others who have restricted mobility. At a time when person-to-person contact is being severely restricted, companion animals are the only constants of affection in those people's lives.

¹ Animal Medicines Australia, Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people, 2019



DOMESTIC ANIMALS NEED CARE JUST AS HUMANS DO

During the COVID-19 crisis, some have said that we must put people first and animals second. While that is understandable, it misses a crucial point.

Our pets are just as important to the health and wellbeing of many Australians as are other people. Their health and wellbeing needs protecting too, even more so because they can't think and act for themselves in the way we humans can.

This is not just a matter of access to veterinary care, which has not closed down through the COVID-19 lockdowns. It is a matter of keeping animals generally healthy, well-exercised, clean and well-groomed.

The popular image of grooming, for instance, is that it is for creating "*Instagram pets*" to reflect the egos, preferences and personalities of their owners. This is a false impression implying all animals that are groomed are pampered pets getting special but unnecessary treatment.

Of course, there are some pets like that. But the reality is that for most, grooming is a matter of maintaining good hygiene and health. Keeping a dog's coat in good trim, especially longer-haired breeds, helps prevent skin diseases and parasites. A groomer can spot trouble and advise owners whether their animal needs veterinary treatment.

Furthermore, DIY grooming can result in untrained but well-meaning owners injuring their own animals, especially at a time, like now, where professional grooming services have been unavailable; even when fixed services reopen, some will still find it difficult to access.

Similar issues applies to dog walking and pet boarding. These are not just a whim of affluent pet owners who would rather do other things. Walkers and boarders perform an invaluable service for pets who otherwise would suffer because of their household's circumstances. For example, a frail elderly person or couple living alone need help in exercising their animal when they are no

longer up to doing it themselves. And if they have to go to hospital, or into aged care permanently or on a respite basis, their animals need boarding in order to be looked after properly.

Additionally, dog training is important. As noted above, many animals have been adopted or obtained from breeders during this crisis as people rushed to find company. These dogs need training to both settle into their households and be manageable. This especially applies to young dogs which, because of lockdown, have not had the benefit of puppy schools and basic obedience training.

Not all pets need access to these services as a necessity, but many do. These services can be provided by trained professionals, and owners who care properly for their dogs generally do not need a vet to tell them these services are necessary.

While the current lockdown requirement is for a vet to certify an animal needs these services, it is a time-consuming and costly step. Some owners are deterred from taking that step either out of inconvenience, or the belief that it is nonessential and they don't want to bother a vet in accordance with the government's requirement that only essential veterinary services are provided during the lockdown.

The result is an unintended consequence of the lockdown regulations. Domestic animals are suffering, or at risk of illness and injury through no decision or fault of their own.



REOPENING PET SERVICES BUSINESSES AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE

In Victoria, pet services businesses in Greater Melbourne and regional Victoria have complied with the Victorian government's regulations for Stage 3 and 4 lockdowns. But in general, under the government's roadmap for exiting lockdown and moving towards a "Covid-normal" economy, reopening those businesses has mostly been put at the back of the queue.

While the accelerated reopening of onsite pet grooming services is needed and welcome, more pet support businesses can similarly be reopened in a COVIDSafe manner given these are all largely non-human contact services.

Each can be reopened responsibly without the need for a middle step of obtaining veterinary authority to perform the service.





REOPENING PET SERVICES BUSINESSES AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE

MOBILE PET GROOMING SERVICES

Not all clients can deliver their pets to an onsite grooming service. They may be frail elderly owners who don't have ready access to other family members, neighbours, carers or friends to pick up and drop off their animals. They may also be people with restricted mobility due to disability or injury. And they may be people who have no private transport to deliver their animal to an onsite service for care.

Mobile grooming services, including dog washes, can operate either in the client's house or flat, or from their van. They need minimal to no direct contact with their human clients, and can maintain social distancing under a COVIDSafe work plan.

DOG WALKING

Dog walkers help the same types of socially and mobility-disadvantaged clients as do mobile grooming services. But they also can provide an essential service to time-poor clients compelled to work from home, where other family or household members are unavailable to exercise the dog.

Given that walking is an outdoor activity, and as long as social distancing and face covering requirements are complied with, there is no reason why these businesses cannot reopen to provide an essential service for many pets and pet owners.

DOG TRAINING

With the surge of puppy and dog adoptions in response to the pandemic's social restrictions, many of those animals need to be trained to behave both in and outside the household.

As with walking, training is an activity that is conducted in the open. Provided social distancing and face covering requirements are met, training can be operated safely.

This would also help minimise the possibility of pets being surrendered by owners now, or when the crisis passes, because they have become too difficult to manage.

PET BOARDING

While traveling for business or pleasure is mostly on hold in Victoria, pet boarding services are still necessary. Family emergencies arise due to illness, personal crisis or bereavement. Particularly in the case of elderly pet owners without family support, they may need to board pets temporarily or on a longer-term basis while they go to hospital, respite care or into residential aged care.

Sadly, this can also include emergencies due to family members needing to escape from family violence crises, or to protect their pets from violence in the home.

These businesses also can operate with minimal person-to-person contact – both for clients and between staff members – under an approved COVIDSafe work plan.



RECOMMENDATIONS

REOPEN THESE PET SERVICES BUSINESSES FROM 28 SEPTEMBER 2020

The PIAA recommends to the Victorian government that mobile grooming services, dog walking and training services, and pet boarding be reopened for business from the proposed commencement of the Second Step of Victoria's COVID-19 Roadmap to Reopening. That would mean those businesses being able to reopen as of 28 September 2020.

Reopening could be under either the Restricted (not Heavily Restricted) or Open with a COVIDSafe Plan business categories of the Roadmap. Regardless, those businesses would operate in full compliance with mandatory requirements on social distancing and face coverings, with spatial restrictions on the number of people on premises, and with curfew times when these are in effect.

Besides meeting an essential community need with relatively little capital infrastructure, these mostly small business can quickly get up and running, reviving active jobs for thousands of self-employed Victorians and their employees in the service economy, reducing stresses on the overall Victorian economy and reducing the need for the support of JobKeeper and JobSeeker.

THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT INCLUDES THE PET SERVICES SECTOR IN ITS COVID-19 REOPENING CONSULTATIONS

The PIAA urges the Premier, Mr Andrews, the Minister for Jobs, Mr Pakula, and the Minister for Agriculture, Ms Symes, to include domestic pet services businesses in their ongoing Roadmap and economic recovery consultations.

This will ensure the health and welfare needs of domestic animals, as well as livestock, are fully respected in all future decisions about Victoria's State of Emergency and State of Disaster.

CLARIFY ANIMAL WELFARE AS A LEGISLATED CATEGORY OF ESSENTIAL SERVICE IN AN EMERGENCY

Under current legislation, there is no specific provision requiring governments to consider animal as well as human welfare in making declarations of states of emergency and disaster.

Section 3 of the Victorian Essential Services Act 1958 specifies only a few categories of essential services, basically public utilities, leaving all other services subject to a Ministerial proclamation. This means the maintenance of animal welfare services, both for livestock and domestic animals, is not guaranteed in an emergency crisis such as this pandemic.

One of the lessons learned from the management of the COVID-19 pandemic is that there can be uncertainty as to whether animal welfare and support services are essential or not. At the beginning of the first lockdown, there was even confusion as to whether veterinary services for domestic pets could operate, a situation that caused great distress for many pet owners.

The Essential Services Act itself is dated and in urgent need of reform to ensure it reflects contemporary service provision needs. Regardless, PIAA recommends that the Act at least be amended to provide expressly for animal welfare as an essential category of emergency service, to remove uncertainty and ambiguity that can lead to inadvertent distress and suffering for our animal companions and their owners.



CONCLUSION

During the COVID-19 pandemic many people are relying on animal companionship to help them get through a very tough time.

But just like their owners, pets need to be properly fed, exercised and cared for.

This isn't just about veterinary and feed services, but access to other supplies and services that ensure domestic animals can live happily and healthily, even in the midst of this pandemic.

Even grooming and walking services are essential for many companion animals.

If a pet owner is frail and elderly, and can no longer properly groom and exercise their beloved dog, they need help in caring for that companion animal, just as much as they need help with caring for themselves.

But in a crisis like this COVID-19 pandemic, these services have been unintentionally under-valued when governments make decisions about what businesses can remain fully or partly open, and which cannot. That needs to change, and it can be changed efficiently and safely.

Beckie Newcombe, owner of Beck's Boarding Retreat Establishment in Melbourne, says her facility has seen pets of domestic violence victims on numerous occasions throughout this pandemic year. She has summed up the needs of our companion animals in this troubled time very well.

"Pets are innocent victims in this pandemic, and we as humans have a duty of care to ensure pet owners have access to essential animal welfare services for the benefit of both the owner and their pet," Ms Newcombe said.

We must do all we can to honour this duty of care. The recommendations in this paper are consistent with this obligation to our beloved domestic companions.

**Pet Industry Association of Australia
15 September 2020**

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Supporting pets' welfare

The impact of Stage 4 COVID-19 restrictions for pets

Case Study: Boarding

Two year old Staffy George* and owner (anonymous)

George's owner (a middle-aged female), has tragically been the victim of ongoing domestic and physical violence. George has received accommodation relief on two separate occasions since the start of the pandemic in March, however, currently under Victoria's Stage 4 restrictions with essential sectors including pet boarding deemed non-essential, George's owner isn't getting the help and support she needs.

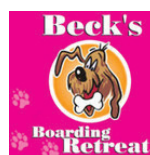
"Previously being able to have her dog cared for in emergency boarding meant she was comfortable to leave her home when escaping violent or stressful situations," explains Beckie Newcombe, owner of Becks Boarding Retreat Establishment in Melbourne, Victoria.

"Our facility has seen pets of domestic violence victims on numerous occasions throughout the year," says Ms Newcombe. *"Pets are innocent victims in this pandemic, and we as humans, have a duty of care to ensure pet owners have access to essential animal welfare services for the benefit of both the owner and their pet."*



Photographer: Peter Ristevski.

Above: Beckie Newcombe with dog Deja at Beck's Boarding Retreat which is operating at reduced capacity.



TWO STAFF EMPLOYEES

SIX CASUALS WERE LET GO AT THE START OF COVID-19

*Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Supporting pets' welfare

The impact of Stage 4 COVID-19 restrictions for pets

Case Study: Training

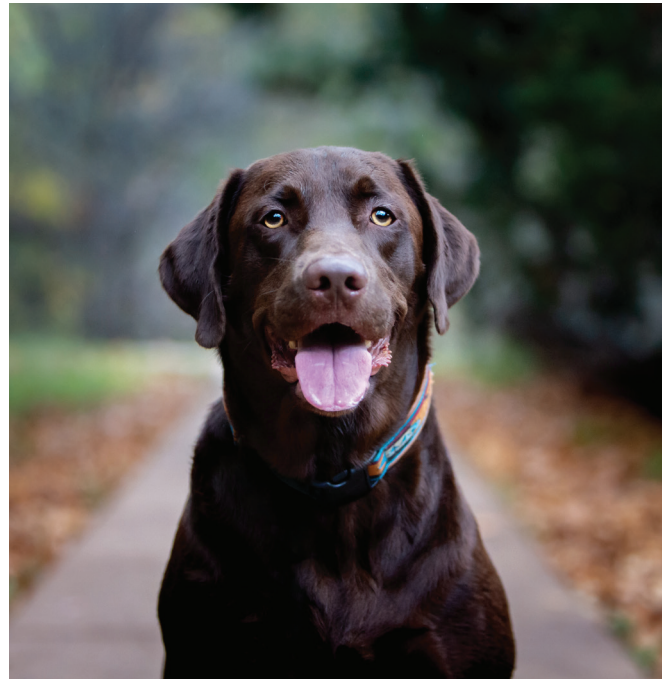
10 month Labrador Max (rescue dog) and owner Catherine

With hundreds of businesses suspending their puppy/dog training services with the introduction of Stage 4 restrictions, there are literally thousands of clients in need of assistance with the care and training of their pets.

New pet owner Catherine adopted rescue dog Max earlier this month. Catherine explains that Max was surrendered by his first family because of behavioural issues and seems to have had only basic training to date. *"As this is our first dog as a family we're in need of training more than Max. We're extremely concerned that when we get back to Stage 3 restrictions there will be a long waiting list due to the backlog. We are applying common sense but coping with barking and trying to socialise him with our cat adds to the entire family's stress during lockdown."*

Ian Bradnock, Director of Ian the Dog Trainer in Melbourne explains how the business has had to reschedule 246 training jobs from August through to October 26 due to Stage 4 restrictions. *"We should be considered essential under animal care services. We help puppy and dog owners manage the welfare and care of their pets, ensuring that their pets are not abandoned because they have become unmanageable or a danger within the domestic household / community."*

"Social distancing is not a problem at all, we in fact do not need to be in close proximity to the pet owner, just the pet. We use our own leads (these are 1.8m in length), we have surgical masks, hand sanitiser and the Trainer is hands on with the puppy or dog only."



FOUR STAFF EMPLOYEES

Supporting pets' welfare

The impact of Stage 4 COVID-19 restrictions for pets

Case Study: Socialisation, exercise, training

10 year old Poodle Cross Oshie and owner Karen Patching

Pet owner Karen Patching explains before Stage 4 restrictions Oshie would be involved in regular social outings in the park and doggy play groups twice a week in her local community.

"Oshie has a history of aggression and resource guarding and along with some one-on-one training, these social outings coupled with training and exercise has helped these behaviour issues remarkably. Since ceasing social outings he has become more and more depressed – becoming withdrawn and inactive, and not enjoying the things that would usually make him happy."

Jonathan Whitelaw, Founder and Managing Director of Woofers World in Ormond which specialises in pet care services, such as dog training and walking say the likelihood these behavioural issues will escalate without returning to their normal routine is very possible.

"Just like their owners, pets need to be properly fed, exercised and cared for. It could take months if not years to get pets like Oshie to the point they were before lockdown, and the risk of his aggression and resource guarding returning is becoming an increasing threat as each week goes by."



Above: Poodle Cross Oshie is in need of essential training due to his history of anxiety and resource guarding.



12 STAFF EMPLOYEES

Supporting pets' welfare

The impact of Stage 4 COVID-19 restrictions for pets

Case Study: Grooming (mobile)

14 year old Miniature Poodle Daisy and owner (anonymous)

Daisy who is partially blind also suffers from ongoing medical skin issues. Daisy's owner (a 96 year old living alone), is unable to wash her beloved pet without assistance due to her disabilities. With no family members to assist her, she relies on local groomer Alisa Dawson, who runs mobile service Wagging Washes to help with her weekly bathing and application of essential medical grade lotion prescribed by local vet and dermatologist.

"Daisy's ongoing skin issues require immediate care in which a lawful exemption thankfully applied for this particular client," says Ms Dawson. "However, I've been receiving calls from hundreds of stressed clients whose dogs are in need of essential grooming in which letting it go can lead to serious health issues including ear, eye and urinary tract infections."

"This is putting immense pressure on the vet industry to provide essential pet care and tend to grooming DIY mishaps, most of which are under qualified as grooming is a specialised skill you learn over time," she says.

"I see no reason why mobile groomers should not be allowed to work under Stage 4 lockdown as it is easy to follow social distancing requirements, and I have minimal face-to-face contact with clients."



Above: Miniature Poodle Daisy suffers skin issues requiring ongoing essential grooming from mobile service Wagging Washes.

WAGGING
WASHES

N/A STAFF EMPLOYEES

*Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.