

**Submission
No 94**

INQUIRY INTO VETERINARY WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Animal Welfare League NSW

Date Received: 17 July 2023



Submission to the Inquiry into the Veterinary Workforce Shortage in New South Wales

17 July 2023

1. Introduction

The Animal Welfare League New South Wales (AWL NSW) is a leading animal welfare organisation founded in 1958. AWL NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No.4 - Regional NSW **Inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales.**

AWL NSW rehomes more than 3,000 unwanted companion animals each year. We provide more than \$1.2 million of our own funds to help low-income households afford veterinary services such as vaccinations, desexing, microchipping and emergency surgeries. We operate our own veterinary clinic at the Kemps Creek Shelter. We also deliver microchipping and vaccination services across the State through our purpose-built Animal Care Truck.

AWL NSW has 21 branches across New South Wales that are experiencing firsthand the impact of veterinary workforce shortages. It has never been more difficult to source veterinarians to work in an animal shelter environment.. Our shelter veterinary practice is inundated with injured strays due to a growing reluctance of private veterinary practices to accept them.

The causes of the workforce shortages are complex. They are felt differently in different areas and could have something to do with the increasing corporatisation of the sector. They could also be driven by a lack of interest in veterinary science as a profession of choice as there are other professions (such as medicine) with similar educational attainment but far higher lifetime earning potential. Regardless of the causes of the problem, the impacts on animal welfare outcomes are profound.

2. Terms of Reference

This submission will focus on responding to the following terms of reference:

i) the role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations;

(j) the impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public seeking veterinary care for animals, pounds and shelters, the animal agribusiness industry, companion animal breeders and others;

(k) current barriers to accessing veterinary care for members of the public, particularly those with lower incomes or who live in regional, rural and remote locations.

3. Recommendations

In addressing the above Terms of Reference, we make the following recommendations for the Committee to consider:

Recommendation 1. The acceptance of injured strays by local veterinary practices should be further investigated. If the declining acceptance is due to workforce shortages that cannot be immediately addressed, then funding should be allocated to practices or animal welfare organisations that are willing to provide subsidised welfare veterinary work.

Recommendation 2. Veterinarians provide significant benefits to the economy. A shortage of veterinarians can create avoidable economic costs. Measures should be considered to increase the veterinary labour force to address the economic costs being transferred to pounds, shelters and animal welfare organisations.

Recommendation 3. In the face of rising veterinary fees and cost of living pressures, AWL NSW's veterinary cost supplementation for low-income households is having less of an impact. We would welcome contributions to both the Companion Animal Desexing Scheme (CADS) and Companion Animal Assistance Scheme (CAAS) programs by the NSW Government, to ensure that our programs remain cost effective as veterinary fees continue to increase.

Recommendation 4. The Committee consider a review of the Veterinary Practice Act 2003 to enable the AWL NSW Animal Care Truck to provide surgeries in areas that are suffering veterinarian shortages.

4. The Role Played by Veterinarians in Providing Care to Lost, Stray and Homeless Animals, Injured Wildlife and During Emergency Situations

Veterinarians play a critical role in helping vulnerable animals and being at the front line of emergency situations. AWL NSW has many examples of collaborating with local vets to achieve exceptional animal welfare outcomes during recent bushfire and flood emergencies. As a welfare organisation, the importance of collaboration with local vets cannot be overstated.

AWL NSW branches are finding it increasingly difficult to identify veterinary practices willing to provide discounted fees for animals. There are some vets who continue to work with welfare organisations but commercial pressures in particular areas are making it increasingly difficult to source welfare-oriented vets. This may be a consequence of veterinary workforce shortages as there is only certain number of animals a single vet can attend to in a day.

In recent years, the veterinary clinic at the AWL NSW shelter has been inundated with injured strays. This is causing material capacity constraints at our animal shelter more generally. Veterinary practices have previously accepted injured strays from their local area. This is no longer universally the case, which is the reason why many of these animals are being picked up by our Animal Ambulance across Sydney and treated at our Kemps Creek shelter. The problem has become so acute that AWL NSW has had to set geographical boundaries on the operation of the Animal Ambulance to manage the unprecedented demand in regard to injured strays.

In terms of natural disaster emergencies, we have found that vets have been willing to assist on the Animal Care Truck. In Tathra during the bushfires and Lismore during the floods, local vets could continue their work despite their practices being inundated by flood or fires.

Recommendation 1. The acceptance of injured strays by local veterinary practices should be investigated. If the declining acceptance is due to workforce shortages that cannot be immediately addressed, then funding should be allocated to veterinary practices and animal welfare organisations that are willing to provide the welfare veterinary work.

5. The Impact of the Current Veterinary Shortage On Animal Welfare, Including the Impact on The Economy, Members of the Public Seeking Veterinary Care for Animals, Pounds And Shelters, the Animal Agribusiness Industry, Companion Animal Breeders And Others

The impact of the current veterinary shortage on the animal welfare sector is significant. The economic impact is widespread. At the moment, Council pounds and shelters are struggling with capacity constraints. With increased rates of animal ownership, cost of living pressures and increasing cost of veterinary services this problem will potentially get significantly worse.

5.1 Measuring the Economic Impact of Veterinary Shortages

Measuring the welfare impact and effect on the economy of veterinary shortages is complex. The normal economic impact methodology cannot be used as the input output accounts produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics do not have an industry classification for veterinary services (only veterinary pharmaceuticals and manufacture).

When AWL NSW conducted an economic analysis of the potential benefits of the Animal Care Truck, it used information from the Office of Local Government Rehoming Review and information from experienced veterinarians. The analysis covered only cats and dogs and the benefits of desexing and vaccinations. It estimated the savings of an animal not going to a pound (or being released back to owners) versus other alternatives (released for rehoming, sold or euthanised).

The estimated saving of an animal being released back to owners (microchipped) is on average \$847. The average cost of parvo/cat flu low range vaccination is around \$313. There are also spin offs, where desexing an animal will also significantly reduce the number of companion animal long term surrenders (dogs on average 1 litter per year of 6 puppies and cats 2 litters per year totalling 8 kittens).

Typically, a single vet would perform approximately 2 desexing procedures a day. They would normally conduct 10 consults a day of which a third would relate to microchipping or vaccination.

A single vet would therefore perform 400 desexing procedures per annum and approximately 660 vaccinations and microchips per annum. The welfare opportunity costs of not having a single vet are estimated per annum as:

Estimated Economic Impact Per Vet Per Annum (Welfare Effects)

First Order (Saving to Pound)	\$559,020
Second Order (Parvo/Cat Flu)	\$206,580
Spin offs (Desexing)	4,000 fewer unwanted companion animals per year

Source: Figures derived from OLG Rehoming Review

This high-level analysis shows is that a single vet can provide \$765,600 in economy wide welfare savings in a single year. The same vet would also reduce the number of unwanted companion animals by 4,000 per year.

These figures are indicative (based on AWL NSW experience) and further analysis should be undertaken to measure the economic welfare costs of a veterinarian. But the figures illustrate that a single veterinarian can potentially produce significant economic welfare

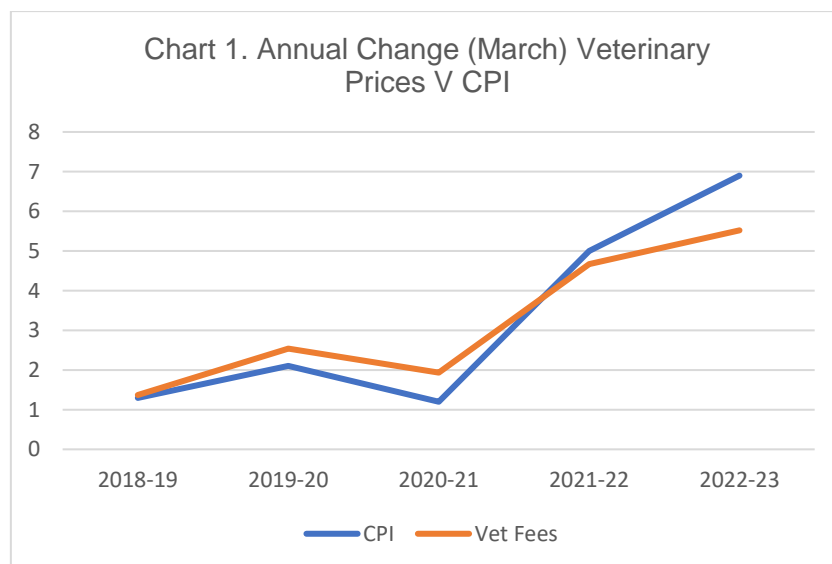
savings. Similarly, others (such as pounds, Councils and animal welfare organisations) are bearing the costs from a shortage in vets.

Recommendation 2. Veterinarians provide significant benefits to the economy. A shortage of veterinarians can create avoidable economic costs. Measures should be considered to increase the veterinary labour force to address the economic costs being transferred to pounds, shelters and animal welfare organisations.

5.2 Impact of Veterinary Shortage on Fees

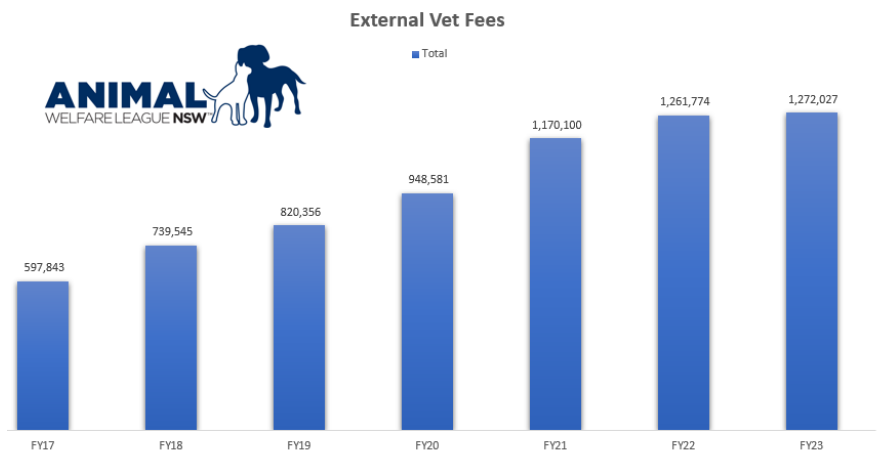
AWL NSW spends more than \$1,200,000 of its own funds to supplement desexing costs and emergency animal surgeries for low-income households. Our records show that veterinary fees have increased over recent years. We are also finding it increasingly difficult to source veterinarians willing to do discounted animal welfare work in certain areas.

Chart 1 (below) shows that in the last two years veterinary fees did rise at historically high levels but at a lower rate than the overall consumer price index (CPI). Veterinary fees rose at a larger rate than CPI from 2018-19 through to 2020-21.



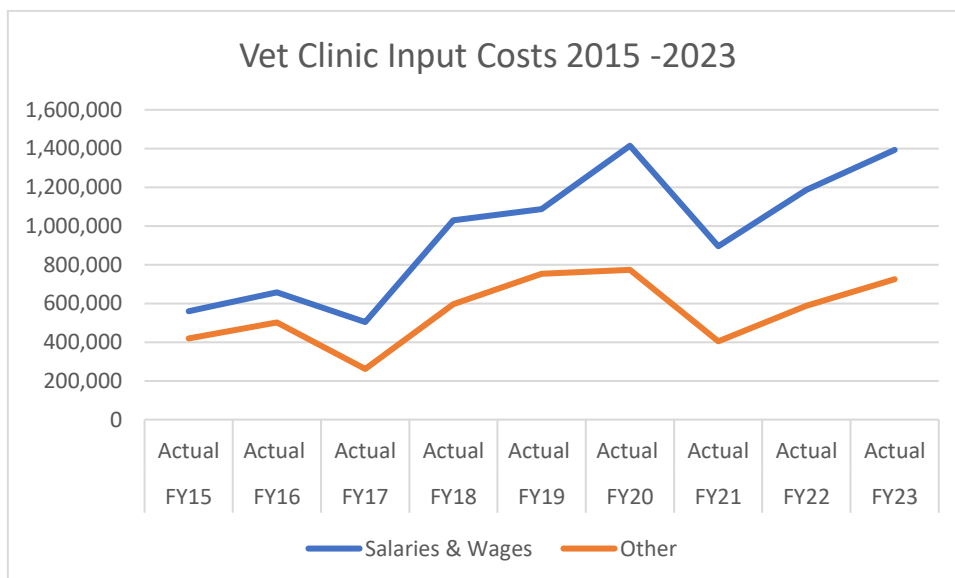
6401.0 Consumer Price Index, Australia March Qtr 2023

The following graph shows the increases in external veterinary costs for AWL NSW's CADS and CAAS programs (work undertaken by external vets). While there are demand influences on the costs (ie the number of applications made to the program) a significant portion of program cost increases has been due to rises in veterinary fees.



Source: AWL NSW

As we run our own veterinary practice, we have a reasonable understanding of some of the pressures of fee escalation. The cost of pharmaceuticals and other medical inputs have induced significant cost pressures on the practice (probably, more so than increased veterinary salaries). Veterinarian salaries have also increased at a faster rate due to competition in the labour market. The chart below illustrates movements in AWL NSW in house clinic costs where the significant majority of “other” expenses represents consumables, medicine and equipment.



Source: AWL NSW

6. Current Barriers to Accessing Veterinary Care for Members of the Public, Particularly Those with Lower Incomes or Who Live In Regional, Rural And Remote Locations

There are numerous barriers to accessing veterinary care for low-income households or those that live in rural and remote areas. AWL NSW provides \$1 million per annum from its own funds to supplement the cost of desexing and veterinary services for low-income households. Due to the rising vet fees this allocation is not going as far as it used to and demand for our programs is outstripping the support available.

To help service rural and remote regional areas, AWL NSW invested in a world first Animal Care Truck. However, meeting the true operational design of that truck has been met with regulatory hurdles (and opposition from vet practices in a minority of locations).

6.1 Low Income Support

Last year, more than 2,500 (and in some recent years as many as 4,500) clients per year receive assistance from AWL NSW. The largest amount of support is provided through the Companion Animal Desexing Scheme (CADS) where vet desexing fees are supplemented by an AWL NSW contribution. As the costs of desexing are increasing low-income households are confronted with higher out of pocket expenses to desex animals. AWL NSW also has a Companion Animal Assistance Scheme (CAAS) that provides funding for emergency veterinary procedures.

Other animal welfare organisations have received government funding to assist with desexing. AWL NSW receives no such funding for its program and raises the bulk of its funds through branch activities. This has been AWL NSW's longest standing program and its most successful.

Recommendation 3. In the face of rising veterinary fees and cost of living pressures, AWL NSW's veterinary cost supplementation for low-income households is having less impact. We would welcome contributions to both the CADS and CAAS programs by the NSW Government, to ensure that our programs remain as effective as veterinary fees continue to increase.

6.2 AWL NSW Animal Care Truck

Three years ago, AWL NSW designed and built the only mobile veterinary truck capable of providing a full range of veterinary services. This truck has been used in bushfires and flood emergency responses and is presently visiting regional and remote areas providing microchipping and vaccination services (supported by the New South Wales Government).

This Animal Care Truck has the potential to do so much more but is constrained by regulations. It could provide a more comprehensive range of services to help address the immediate needs of regional communities with limited veterinary services. However, licensing requirements will not allow the vehicle to be used to perform surgeries as it is not a

fixed structure. In some instances, we have been able to perform desexing procedures on pound premises as they are fixed structures and have the required certifications. However, this is the exception rather than the rule and requires an inordinate amount of paperwork.

Licensing is required to do surgeries and licences are granted through the Veterinary Practitioners Board. The Board has been actively trying to support us in our endeavours but they are constrained by legislation.

It is not intended that the Animal Care Truck replace veterinary practices. We have noticed that good relations with local veterinary practices lead to higher uptake of Animal Care Truck services. Local veterinarians are also important to provide follow up care in the event that the truck has done surgery work and left the area.

The truck could be particularly effective in areas that have a veterinary practice, but that practice is suffering a veterinary shortage. It could be used as an emergency measure for areas without a local practice but the issue of access to follow up care would still need to be addressed.

Recommendation 4. The Committee consider a review of the Veterinary Practice Act 2003 to enable the AWL NSW Animal Care Truck to provide surgeries in areas that are suffering veterinarian shortages.

7. Conclusion

AWL NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Veterinary Workforce Shortages Inquiry. This is a pressing matter that is having material impacts on animal welfare outcomes throughout the State. The recommendations made within this submission address specific measures that may assist animal welfare organisations and those most vulnerable in the community to adjust to the consequences of the existing vet shortages.

If required, we would be pleased to answer any questions that the Committee may have.

Stephen Albin
CEO
Animal Welfare League NSW
17 July 2023