



Pet and Family Friendly Housing Considerations for B.C.

Table of Contents:

- 1- Background*
- 2- Testimonials*
- 3- Key Issues*
- 4- Mental Health and Women's Safety*
- 5- Poverty Reduction and Animal Shelters*
- 6- Concerns from Landlords*
- 7- Further Benefits of Policy Change*



Prepared by: **Pets OK BC**

Background

Pets OK BC is an advocacy organization that launched a campaign in February, 2017 to raise awareness of the issues related to “no pets” policies, which have become commonplace in British Columbia, and challenge the current language of housing legislation that enables landlords and stratas to impose unreasonable pet restrictions on tenants and homeowners. Specifically, our goal is to amend the Residential Tenancy Act, and associated acts, to void “no pets” clauses in rental agreements and strata rules. Over the past year, 15,000 British Columbians have signed our paper petition, and our organization has been featured in print and television an astounding 70 times by virtually every news outlet in the province.

Following the Ontario model, we seek a reasonable balance in policy that would end broadly discriminatory “no pets” policies in B.C. with a reasonable exemption policy, where pets may be restricted under several defined circumstances. These include where people with allergies are affected, where there is evidence of excessive damage to a property, where there is unresolvable disruption of the peace and enjoyment of neighbours, or where an animal is deemed a threat to the safety of other neighbours or their pets.

By adopting this model, housing policy will no longer punish responsible pet guardians for the reckless behaviour of others. Family pets are already well established as companions in our communities and our requested change in policy will not aggravate any issues between tenants and landlords, as they are already being alleviated by current steps to empower the Residential Tenancy Branch to deal more efficiently with disputes. This policy change to void “no pets” policies is championed by animal and tenancy advocacy groups, and supported by numerous landlords across B.C. and Canada.



Testimonials



“We are against ‘no pets’ policies. We often find that pet owners are the best tenants.”

“LandlordBC has misrepresented the views of Ontario Landlords. Scare tactics such as ‘landlords in Ontario are raising rents like crazy because tenants can bring in pets’ is absolutely not true. In fact, we only want a damage deposit for all tenants. In BC, landlords can charge a deposit, so what is the problem???? LandlordBC never contacted us and have no basis for their claims. Our landlords in pet-friendly Ontario have no problems with pets.”

Shayne Ramsay, CEO of BC Housing:

“Pets are family! Housing that's directly managed by BC Housing allows pets. Depending on type of housing, pet policies are up to the provider or they may even be required to accept pets. If pets can be accommodated, we want to make sure that's a possibility.”

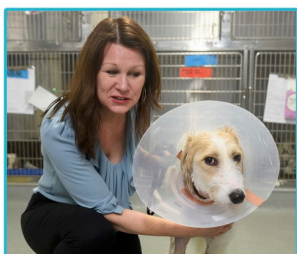


Dr. Jacquie Rand, Executive Director and Chief Scientist of the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF)

“Studies show pets do less damage to properties than children and also increase health outcomes for their guardians, saving Australia \$2-billion annually in reduced healthcare costs.”

Bill McDonald, Executive Director, Winnipeg Humane Society:

“Frankly I find it baffling that landlords are being so shortsighted and hard-headed on this issue. We have learned that in Ontario, only 1% of the 800,000 complaints received annually by their rental tribunal are pet related.”



Sue Hayman, MP, UK Labour Environment Minister:

“Labour is the party of animal welfare. From bringing in the ban on fox hunting to tightening the rules on the transport of live animals, Labour has always been consistent in our leadership on matters of animal welfare. Today we’re making proposals for real, long-term progress. Our vision is one where no animal is made to suffer unnecessary pain and we continue to drive up standards and practice in line with the most recent advances and understanding.”

Some Key Issues

Discrimination, Exploitation and Equal Access

Affordable pet-friendly housing is rapidly disappearing, and often being replaced by more expensive buildings, with no pets policies. This is not just new builds, but when buildings are purchased, there is a push to rid tenants so rents can be raised beyond rent control amounts, and often the introduction of no “pets” policies is part of that process.

Claims of a lack of “housing stock” miss the mark in terms of addressing the issue. Even in the few places where pet-friendly housing stock is increasing, it is financially inaccessible to much of the middle-class. This issue must be seen as rotating through the current housing stock, as pet guardians seek affordable housing within the current market and upward mobility is limited in a majority of circumstances. Seeking new housing for pet guardians is perilous in a financially high-barrier market.

A lack of concerted effort to address this issue by former Housing Minister Rich Coleman led to the creation of the so-called “pet damage” deposit in 2004. This was intended to create additional protections for landlords, which was hoped to encourage landlords to allow pets, but it ultimately back-fired, reinforcing the stigma that “pet damage” is a common occurrence. This policy ultimately failed as the problem has only grown more dire over the last fifteen years.



In stark contrast to B.C., the U.S. and France legally recognize that having a companion animal is a basic civil right, with the U.S. implementing protective legislation to the Department of Housing & Urban Development’s assisted housing program. Several other countries, including the U.K. and Australia, have introduced legislation that support tenants having a default right to companion animals as well.

Mental Health

Pets have been shown to alleviate depression, anxiety, ptsd, loneliness and isolation while being a benefit to families, children, and seniors. Pets provide non-judgmental engagement and fulfilling responsibility to those in need of psychological and physiological support. Furthermore, they open pathways to community by engagement with other pet guardians through shared activities and interests.

In light of this, some physicians recommend that individuals struggling with mental health issues get an animal, but in a rental market where pet-friendly units are the exception, many are precluded from accessing this therapeutic option. Section 10(1) of the BC Human Rights Code prohibits discrimination in the context of tenancy for persons with mental disabilities. At present, the narrow exception for certified service and guide dogs creates an arbitrary, outdated distinction between physical and mental disorders, and permits discrimination that contravenes provincial human rights legislation.



Women's Safety



According to the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies, more than 40% of women experiencing domestic violence, with pets at home, significantly delay their escape to safety if it means leaving a pet behind—staying in abusive relationships up to seven times longer, according to the BC SPCA. When considered in the context of addiction, women seeking withdrawal management services face further barriers to treatment when having a pet in their care because of a lack of pet-friendly housing when trying to re-establish themselves in recovery

Poverty Reduction

Since we began our campaign, we have been inundated by stories of people who are experiencing homelessness or trapped in unsafe living conditions because there is nowhere for them to go with their companion animal. For the past year, it has been a daily occurrence. Two examples of this are as follows:

A senior woman who lives alone with her dog here in Victoria, was on the waitlist for BC Housing, and when they finally called and offered her housing, they said she couldn't bring her dog. She declined, and is now stuck in housing that costs half of her income. Another senior woman here in Victoria, a retired University professor at UVic, was forced to live in her car for two years with her two dogs, because she would not abandon them.

For seniors, their pets are often their lifeline, and safeguards them against the perils of loneliness, depression, and other mental health challenges. Considering the fact that pets improve their quality of life and help them live longer, fuller lives, this can be a traumatic episode in a vulnerable stage of their lives.



Animal Shelters

It is the charities, rescues, and shelters that are left to clean up the mess of Rich Coleman's failed pet policy. As families deal with the trauma of being forced to surrender their companion animals in order to find housing, these animal welfare organizations are regularly overwhelmed by the volume and frequency of animal surrenders, as housing has become the number one cause for surrenders. The BC SPCA alone recorded over 1,700 animal surrenders due to housing for the last two years in a row, or an average of five per day. Regularly overwhelmed with animals in their care, and almost exclusively dependent on donations from the public, a tremendous source of animal abandonment could be alleviated by this change in policy. We have overwhelming support from animal shelters, including the BC SPCA and the Animal Welfare Advisory Network. Animal surrenders due to housing are on the rise throughout the province, and lack of affordable pet-friendly housing is the number one cause of all animal surrenders. Of the animals surrendered in Ontario, only 6% are due to housing, compared to 20-25% in BC.

Concerns from Landlords

Allergies

The allergy argument is a red herring: the BC Supreme Court upheld that landlords are under no obligation to accommodate tenants' allergies. Unsurprisingly nonetheless landlords now argue that they have "no pets" policies because future tenants may have allergies. This excuse has no credibility. However, Pets OK BC supports Ontario's middle path approach in dealing with the allergies issue, by ensuring tenants are not adversely affected in their home.



Property Rights

The landlords who have been burned by irresponsible tenants who neglected their animals certainly have reason to be upset, however having strict 'no pets' policies isn't doing anyone favours, including themselves. Pet-friendly housing actually has higher resale value (Lin, Allen and Carter, 2013). For rentals, the most notable difference between tenants with pets and those without, is that tenants with pets stay in their rentals 250% longer (Companion Animal Renters Study, 2004), which drastically reduces turnover and related costs.

Damage

Over half of Canadian households have pets – 37.7% cat(s), 29.1% dog(s) (CFHS, 2012) – a majority of Canadians would not put themselves at financial risk if damage was such a concern. A responsible tenant is less likely to cause damage with or without a pet, just like an irresponsible tenant is invariably going to be more likely to cause damage. The actual difference between tenants with and without pets, amounts to an average of \$39 US (Companion Animal Renter Study, 2004). Damage can be caused by so many different sources that singling out pets as a cause for concern is alarmist behaviour.

Noise

The Quiet Enjoyment provision is inherently important to our policy proposal. We are just as concerned about noise disturbances by our neighbours as anyone. Landlords have a duty to ensure that tenants' rights to Quiet Enjoyment are protected, whether it be caused by a barking dog, screaming children, domestic violence incidents, loud music, parties, or the countless other possible sources of disturbances. Singling out companion animals as a potential liability is grossly unfair and unwarranted. As mentioned, a mere 1% of complaints reported to Ontario's tenancy board are pet-related.



Further Benefits of Policy Change:

Ontario model - middle path, two-pronged approach

Passed more than 28 years ago, Ontario is an excellent precedent to learn from. With a more principled policy and empowered Residential Tenancy Branch, the result is a more inclusive, humane and family-oriented society. In Ontario, security deposits are not allowed to be put toward damages, so landlords in BC already have far more empowerment to mitigate risks.

Healthcare Savings

Numerous studies have indicated savings in the billions of dollars in healthcare costs, from both increased physical activity and alleviation of mental ailments. According to research by George Mason University in Virginia, with 132.8 million pet owners in the United States, reduced doctor visits alone amounts to an annual savings of \$11.37 billion in US healthcare costs. The result is significant positive impacts on cardiovascular disease, hypertension, infection control, allergies (especially amongst children), stress-related problems, blood pressure, and psychological issues.

Extend to Stratas

Unreasonable pet restrictions within Stratas are often intrusive, overreaching and illogical. Many homeowners not only want their personal liberties protected, but find their choice to rent to tenants with pets violated by unreasonable pet restrictions passed by their stratas.

Safer, more vibrant and inclusive communities

People with dogs spend more time being social outdoors improving their psychological and physiological health. When more people are out walking in our communities they take a greater interest in the space around them and want to participate in seeing it maintained and enhanced. Their presence also increases safety in neighbourhoods, as people are more aware of what is happening around them and watch out for one-another.



Win-win opportunity to correct past mistakes

We have mobilized a large contingent of the citizenry, across the entire socio-economic and political landscape. Where past governments would not even speak on the issue, we seek the support of a broad contingent of MLAs from all parties to work together to improve the pet-friendly housing situation for all parties and stakeholders.