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PUBLIC HEALTH NEWSWIRE

U.S. systems and policies neglect importance of pets to families' lives

October 31, 2026 Melanie Padgett Powers

Americans are pet people. Go into any U.S. home and chances are you'll find a dog, cat or other critter — it's estimated that anywhere from 58% to 71% of U.S. households have at least one pet.

To most pet owners, their pets are not just animals that share their living space. They are family: 97% of U.S. pet owners say their pets are part of their family, according to the Pew Research Center. And 51% of pet owners go further and say their pets are as much a part of their family as a human family member.

And yet, a wide variety of systems, infrastructure and policies in the U.S. do not take these facts into consideration.

"Families are already organizing their lives, resources, responsibilities and decisions around both people and pets, while many of the systems they depend upon were not designed to recognize or respond to those



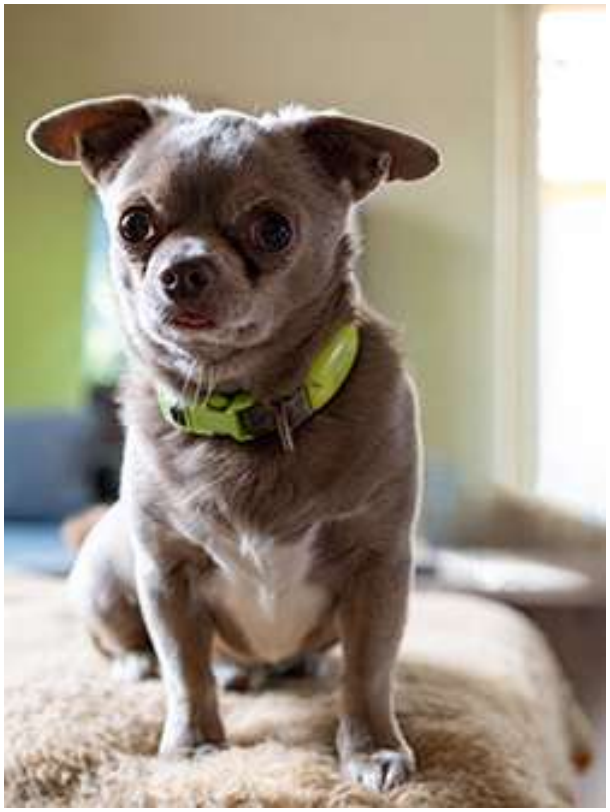
researchers on the human-animal bond — gathered for the one-day One Health Systems Summit, an APHA partner event held before APHA's 2026 Annual Meeting and Expo in San Antonio, Texas. The event was hosted by the University of Tennessee Center for Pet Family Well-Being.

The pre-conference workshop aimed to bring together public health professionals across health, housing, social services, animal welfare, education and policy to address the structural failures affecting families and pets. The event was intended to begin building a movement that integrates systems to better reflect 21st century U.S. families — which often include pets.

The One Health approach recognizes that the health of people, other living beings and the environment they share is interconnected. Blackwell's center has been developing a One Health Systems framework that sees families more completely and aligns systems that their health and well-being depend on. The framework has four sectors:

- Health and well-being
- Economic and community support

Hispanic family might face.



Hispanics are the largest minority in the U.S., making up 20% of the population. They also have the second highest pet ownership, Ramirez said.

Ramirez described a Latino family with two parents, two kids and a beloved chihuahua named Gizmo. Chihuahuas are prone to several health conditions, including dental disease, heart disease and eye problems. This requires specific care, early intervention and system management, she said.

One in three Latino families live in poverty. Gizmo’s owners work long hours in a San Antonio restaurant but earn less than $15 an hour.

Veterinary care, medications and special diets can be expensive. The family doesn’t have pet insurance, and unlike with human emergency rooms,

The family doesn’t live near a supermarket. They lack access to healthy affordable food and often have to rely on convenience stores and drug stores. When the vet put Gizmo on a special dog food diet, it was expensive and not carried in nearby stores.

Restructuring systems to integrate pets

As illustrated by Gizmo’s family, many rules and policies don’t integrate pets and don’t recognize the value of the human-animal bond, said Claire Schuch, associate director of research at the Center for Pet Family Well-Being. The burdens these systems put upon families with pets is not borne equally either, as low-income families often face greater financial decisions, she said.

“Systems were largely designed based around this 20th century definition of family that didn’t include pets. Yet, for most American households, pets are now family,” Schuch said. “When systems fail to recognize the bond, they don’t just fail the pet; they fail the human attached to it, which can mean housing instability, delayed veterinary care, mental health strain and workforce (challenges).”

responsibility of caregiving for that pet, and we should not make those judgments and (should) focus on the why and how we can actually change it."

Other questions to consider:

- What assumptions about family are embedded in the systems where you work?
- Where do families' needs fall between sectors even when committed people are trying to help?
- What would have to change for support of families to become dependable and sustainable?

A system that takes into account the entire family, pets included, goes beyond a "pet-friendly" system, the speakers stressed.

"A pet-friendly system adds the pet on to the family … and I think that really misunderstands the point where we're starting to get to now, where we recognize that the pet actually changes the family — the family becomes something else when the pet is introduced in the way that they live their


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