

SafetyNet PetAssist: an innovative collaboration improving access to care

Simone Maher¹,

¹PetSure Australia, simonem@petsure.com.au

Keywords: Animal Welfare; Accessible Veterinary Care; Telehealth.

1. SafetyNet PetAssist: origin and framework

1.1

SafetyNet PetAssist is an innovative framework that improves accessibility of veterinary care to disadvantaged pet custodians and is currently operating on the Central Coast and Newcastle areas of NSW.

The concept was initially conceived by PetSure following the example set by affiliated businesses in other locations around the world. Shared value is a core driver in these businesses – that is, creating solutions to complex social problems that bring benefit to both the business and wider community¹. SafetyNet PetAssist is built on the understanding that equitable access to healthcare for pets is not a veterinary issue, but a community one.

The SafetyNet PetAssist framework was codesigned by PetSure, VetChat and VetPartners and is currently funded by PetSure and VetPartners. The key aims of the program are to:

1. Help maintain the human animal bond (enhancing mental and physical wellbeing of vulnerable people and decreasing shelter intake numbers)
2. Improve animal welfare (ensuring pets get the care they need in a timely manner and reducing euthanasia)
3. Have a positive impact on the mental wellbeing of veterinary teams (reducing numbers of difficult financial conversations and providing an avenue for compassionate treatment when finances are limited)

1.2

SafetyNet PetAssist was designed with consideration of the barriers people face when accessing veterinary care, which include financial, geographical, physical, social and cultural factors². The location of the initial launch was selected with consideration of community need (based on demographics data from the ABS³ and Centrelink⁴) and number of potential participating veterinary clinics.

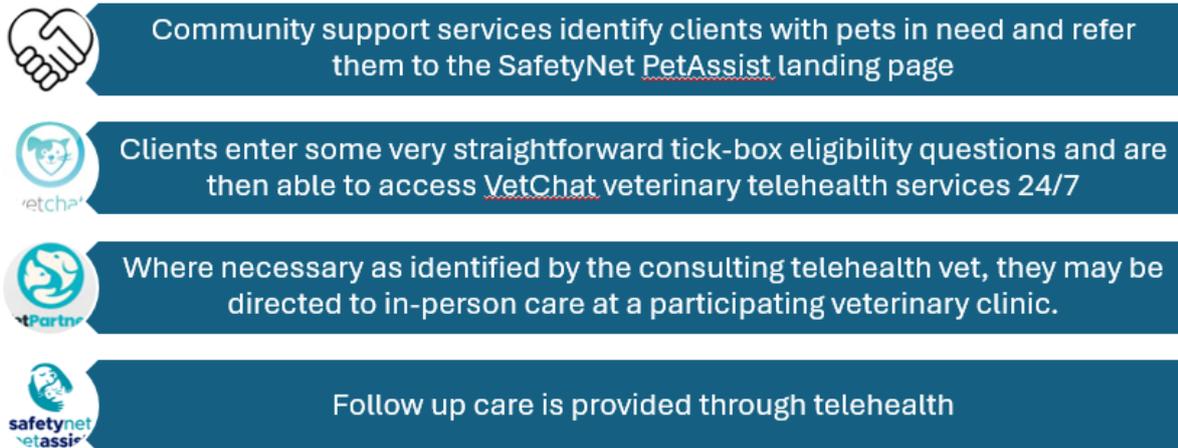


Fig. 1. SafetyNet PetAssist framework.

Service provision is focused on urgent and essential care which was identified as a significant gap in currently available support. Whilst there are some programs available to enable pet guardians to access preventative care like desexing and vaccination, there are far fewer avenues of support for people of limited financial means or other vulnerabilities who have an acutely unwell or injured pet; the welfare implications (both human and animal) of this are significant.

Community support service partners are the main source of referral to the program, although people are also made aware through word of mouth, a local awareness campaign and veterinary clinics (participating or other). The scope of services excludes orthopaedics and chronic conditions due to funding limitations. In the current iteration, services within scope are free or have a small fee (for OOH appointment) which may be waived at the vet's discretion. Eligibility is determined through a short online questionnaire and requirements include receiving government financial assistance (eg disability pension) and declaration of financial hardship.

Telehealth (provided by veterinarians with a minimum of 5 years' experience) serves as a low-risk entry point to veterinary care for pet carers who may have social, emotional or cultural reservations about interacting with veterinary teams; or mobility limitations. It also allows for the framing of expectations before clients are referred for in-person care at a participating veterinary clinic (when needed). 24/7 availability of telehealth provides reassurance for vulnerable clients and reduces the time impact of the program on participating clinics.

2. Future state

The vision for SafetyNet PetAssist is a national network of community, veterinary and other partners to help make access to veterinary care more equitable; with projects such as these, the common limiting factor is funding. A social return on investment study is being delivered by research partners The University of Sydney and Black Dog Institute with the intention

that findings will help build the coalition of collaborators that are needed to deliver systemic change.

In the current format, contextualised and incremental approaches to care are encouraged. Whilst providing care in situations where otherwise none may be available, future iterations should consider whether agency of pet custodians is appropriately considered; there may be refinements that can be made that allow for improved acknowledgement of this.

References

1. Porter ME, Kramer MR. Creating shared value. *Harvard business review* 2011; 89:62–77.
2. Pasteur K, Diana A, Yacilla JK et al. Access to veterinary care: evaluating working definitions, barriers, and implications for animal welfare. *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* 2024, 11:1335410
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Search census data. 2021. [Search Census data | Australian Bureau of Statistics](#). Accessed May 2025.
4. Australian Government Department of Social Services. DSS Benefit payment and recipient demographics. 2024. [DSS Benefit and Payment Recipient Demographics - quarterly data - Dataset - data.gov.au](#) Accessed June 2024.