

COMMENTARY

# Re-imagining Animal-Assisted Human Services (AAHS): Developing Canada's first voluntary National Standard of Canada (NSC) for AAHS

Joanne Moss

## Abstract

Animal-Assisted Human Services (AAHS) is a variety of interdisciplinary practices, including assistance/service animals and Animal-Assisted Interventions such as Animal-Assisted Activities, Animal-Assisted Learning, and Animal-Assisted Therapy. The Human-Animal Bond and Human-Animal Interactions (HAI) bridge the Natural Sciences, Humanities, Veterinary Medicine, and Applied Sciences.

Over the last century, AAHS has gradually evolved into a booming, lucrative marketplace characterized by for-profit and non-profit businesses within Canada's economy. Even so, there are no integrated national, provincial, or territorial frameworks for AAHS within Canada's healthcare, social, justice, and correctional services on which its human services and economy are built. By the same token, the lines remain blurred concerning the essential competencies and credentials required to work or volunteer within the industry or how or where to begin pursuing a career within this rapidly growing ecosystem. Consequently, AAHS is still in its infancy as a recognized sub-category within Canada's Human Services Industry.

Additionally, this broad, multifaceted industry encompasses silos, such as the horse and dog industries. While both industries provide AAHS, their self-contained environments inhibit opportunities to cross-pollinate their knowledge, experiential learning, and expertise in theory and practice. Therefore, uniting and converging related industries within this milieu would help to open doors to new possibilities, innovations, and relationships that would not be possible otherwise. The correlation with HAI makes these human services a distinct discipline in its own right.

For over two decades, The Canadian Foundation for Animal-Assisted Support Services (CF4AASS), an impartial national registered charity, has promoted the availability, credibility, and sustainability of excellence in AAHS. Co-designing this industry sector standard was a catalyst for integrating and engaging relevant stakeholders to cultivate mutually beneficial outcomes and building blocks toward a seamless national AAHS Centre of Excellence.

Subsequently, re-imagining AAHS was a call to action where opportunity and shared responsibilities intersect. Embracing an integrated approach to foster unity in diversity and the co-innovation of AAHS, its marketplace, and the environments in which it interconnects is rooted in CF4AASS's culture and support services.

Illustrating the industry sector's combined value, national footprint, and socio-ecological and socio-economic Systems (SES) impact would significantly enhance this promising sector's complementary and essential human services contributions throughout Canada.

With this in mind, I hope this commentary sheds light on why the development of a voluntary standard was long overdue and a proactive measure to benefit multiple stakeholders, a step forward to nurture and facilitate solidarity and innovation.

**Keywords:** advancement, connect, communicate, collaborate, coordinate, celebrate, consensus, value added, dialogue, discovery, development

Affiliation: Founder and CEO, The Canadian Foundation for Animal-Assisted Support Services (CF4AASS), 9 Camelot Drive, Suite 200, Nepean, Ontario, K2G 5W6, Canada

\*Corresponding Author: Joanne Moss. Email: [nationaldirector@cf4aass.org](mailto:nationaldirector@cf4aass.org)

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## Introduction

Due to gaps and related risks, the need for Canadian industry sector standards for AAHS was acknowledged more than two decades ago. On September 12, 2022, The Canadian Foundation for Animal-Assisted Support Services (CF4AASS, 2023) was pleased to announce the publication of Canada's first NSC for AAHS. The purpose of the NSC is to address issues such as the need to:

- increase transparency and accountability of the delivery of AAHS;
- establish essential requirements and best practices for AAHS administration, governance, and management, and
- promote a voluntary, third-party AAHS conformity assessment programme to preserve the credibility of Animal-Assisted Human Services Providers (AAHSPs) and Animal-Assisted Services Professionals (AASPs).

Standards development within this arena in Canada and internationally are considered voluntary because interested stakeholders recognize the need for standards where none currently exist. Demonstrating the need for the standard was the first step, followed by the submission of the Notice of Intent (NOI) to the Standards Council of Canada (SCC), which allowed SCC-accredited Standards Development Organizations (SDOs) to identify and resolve any potential duplication of standards and efforts within the specified timeline. Conversely, when a published NSC is referenced in part or whole within legal instruments such as legislation, the NSC will become mandatory.

In 1996, the quest to re-imagine AAHS began by planting seeds concerning the need to co-design a Voluntary National Standard of Canada (NSC) or suite of NSCs by tapping into Canada's National Standards System/Network. Developing the standard united interested stakeholders to establish a seamless and cohesive framework to uphold public safety, quality, people's well-being and the animals' welfare within this emerging landscape. This initiative challenged the status quo back in the day mainly because of the magnitude of this vision, the intricacies in sharing the vision and the exponential barriers compromising innovation across Canada, such as uncertainties despite the status quo.

Although information about the bond between humans and animals is plentiful, the impact on Human Services Assistance Animals (HSAAs) is sparse, as is education and knowledge concerning transmittable disease or infection from vertebrate animals to humans and vice versa ('zoonotic diseases' or zoonoses). Such gaps must be addressed to ensure One Health for People, Pets, and Partners™.

Sections 4.1.5.9 to 4.1.5.25 (Responsibility and Accountability) of the NSC emphasize that service providers shall have written procedures to safeguard the safety and welfare of HSAAs. This Section outlines relevant requirements and best practices.

Further, mixed methods research informed the development of the NSC because combining the concentrations of each methodology leveraged the benefits of qualitative and quantitative analysis to inform, safeguard, and advance AAHS to uphold and increase public safety, quality, consumer satisfaction, the well-being of Canadians, and the welfare of HSAAs (HRSO, 2023c).

## A process primer

### TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS

The National Standard of Canada (NSC) was developed through a consensus process by a Technical Committee composed of twenty-two (22) Canadians representing various regions of Canada and relevant interest categories as follows.

### REGIONS OF CANADA REPRESENTED

- Atlantic 3 members
- Central 9 members
- Prairie Provinces 5 members
- Western 5 members

### INTEREST CATEGORIES REPRESENTED

- General Interest 6 members: Individuals with a personal and professional interest in Animal-Assisted Human Services (AAHS).
- Regulator 2 members: Individuals who work within Canada's public sector and have an interest in Human Service Assistance Animals (HSAAs).
- Producer 8 members: Individuals involved in the training, care, and placement of HSAAs.
- Beneficiary 6 members: AASPs involved in the delivery of AAHS.

### NURTURING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Historically and more recently, uniting and engaging interested stakeholders from various camps, disciplines, and sectors to explore and envision how to improve service delivery, in some cases, challenged the status quo and presuppositions. Over time, meaningful exchanges in favour of safeguarding quality, service delivery, and the need for a voluntary standardized system to maintain public safety, public confidence, consumer/client satisfaction, and the welfare of the HSAAs began to emerge. The CF4AASS website, Technical Committee Information Sessions and meetings, email conversations, and the 60-day public consultation all contributed to communicating with interested stakeholders to inform this national dialogue and some interactions with international organizations. Overall, the initiative was well received, resulting in a positive outcome.

Forming the Technical Committee (TC) and supporting its members throughout this learning curve was a substantial part of the journey, as was practicing consensus decision-making. Figure 1 in the introduction outlines the main steps taken to develop the NSC.

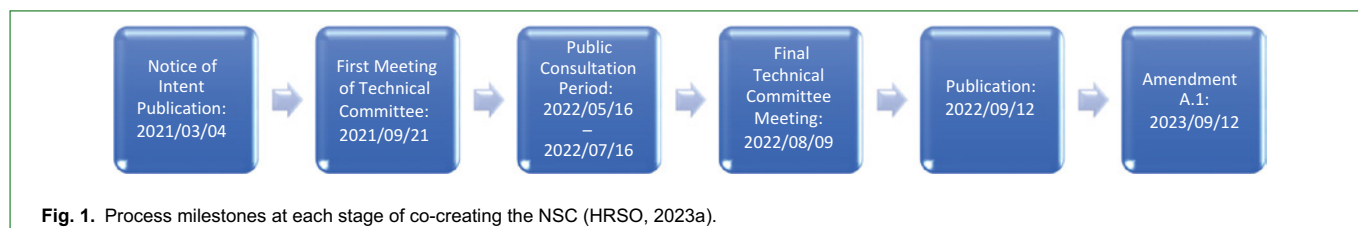


Fig. 1. Process milestones at each stage of co-creating the NSC (HRSO, 2023a).

Cultivating unity in diversity among multiple stakeholders, disciplines, and sectors to safeguard public confidence, public safety, quality, the well-being of Canadians' and the health and welfare of Human Services Assistance Animals (HSAAs) yielded an outcome that could only be realized together (World Health Organization, 2020).

Moreover, one pivotal aspect of AAHS was notably consumer and human rights and responsibilities. At the core of every prominent sector are those they serve. The Eight International Charter of Consumer Rights and Responsibilities + One (Consumers Council of Canada, 2023) articulates these attributes as follows:

1. Basic Needs
2. Safety
3. Information
4. Choice
5. Representation
6. Redress
7. Consumer education
8. Healthy environment
9. Plus privacy (Consumer Council of Canada).

## Assessing readiness for change

Assessing readiness for change was an organic process over the last two decades, which encompassed extensive networking with interested stakeholders, advocacy efforts with and for the recipients (end-users) of AAHS, uniting, engaging, and collaborating with consumers, families, and service providers, for more than two decades.

Exploration of the sector's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, e.g. reviewing, initiating, or contributing to research, hosting and responding to surveys, and hosting or attending special events, reinforced the long-standing need to co-design NSCs for Canada's evolving AAHS industry sector. Moreover, the NSC and any additional standards are not meant to exist in a vacuum but as a solid foundation needed to construct and sustain progress.

## Building a seamless, skilled and sustainable sector to better serve Canadians

"In Canada, about 20 percent of jobs are regulated to protect the health and safety of Canadians by ensuring that professionals and tradespeople meet the required standards of practice and competency. (The Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, n.d.)." It is also noteworthy that addressing gaps in the National Occupational Classifications (NOCs) would be instrumental in making recommendations to develop NOCs where none currently exist.

Depending on a business's scope of practice, only credentialed and licensed professionals can deliver certain human services. Some service providers opt to work with multi-disciplinary teams that include certified professionals to expand their work's reach or meet the emergent needs in their respective communities. In either case, emphasis on transparency and not offering services beyond the extent of an Animal-Assisted Human Services Provider's (AASHP's) or Animal-Assisted Services Professional's (AASP's) vocation and corresponding credentials is essential best practice. Consequently, honesty in brand advertising is an paramount to protecting the interests of all concerned.

## Consensus decision making

Building consensus does not suggest unanimity but inquiry-based dialogues among the standard's Technical Committee (TC) that

nurtured, acknowledged, and considered the voices and views of all members of the TC.

Compiling relevant normative and informative documents further guided the TC, as did feedback from interested stakeholders during the 60-day public consultation, resulting in an objective and impartial National Standard of Canada (NSC). Published NSCs are more than just technical documents; they are designed to benefit many stakeholders for their intended purposes and to inform choices.

Contrary to popular belief, standards do not accredit businesses. Instead, the NSC promotes a voluntary, third-party AAHS conformity assessment to determine whether an AAHS business's Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) meet or exceed the NSC. As such, evidence to this effect and third-party programme accreditation would augment service providers' credibility, giving them a distinct advantage within the rapidly growing AAHS marketplace.

Overall, the principles and application of consensus decision making greatly accentuated the visibility, value, versatility, and viability of future advancement and harmonization of norms and best practices to take Canada's AAHS sector to a new level.

## How service providers standards differ from National Standards of Canada (NSC)

AAHS business enterprise standards are private and, therefore, apply to those who create them and their members, if applicable, not the industry sector at large. Private standards may or may not be publicly available. A business's Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are typically associated with and subject to brand performance, scope of work, internal practices, policies, evaluation, and marketing.

The NSC, in comparison, involved multi-stakeholder collaboration and consensus decision making. The NSC publication is available to the public at no cost and was published in English and French. Moreover, the NSC was subject to a 60-day public consultation and did not act as a barrier to trade due to its neutrality.

The published NSC does not duplicate or replace existing private company standards/SOPs. Instead, co-designing the NSC was an incentive to unite interested stakeholders from different disciplines, sectors, and communities to address and fill gaps by establishing impartial and essential requirements and best practice statements, thereby setting descriptive, doable, and measurable national benchmarks while providing a means for organizations and potential future third-party evaluators to measure success by comparing SOP to the requirements and best practice statements noted in the NSC.

One FAQ was, "Given the diverse applications of these services, how can one standard benefit all AAHS organizations"? Section 4 (Technical Requirements) reflects the characteristics that apply to most businesses regardless of the size, specifications, scope of work, or type of business (for-profit or non-profit). For example, if a small organization is volunteer-driven, employment labour laws would not be applicable. Still, there may be some excellent sources of information for volunteerism best practices these organizations would benefit from.

A User Guide was created as a complementary resource to help stakeholders navigate, understand, and benefit from for their intended purposes. For example, service providers can use the NSC by comparing their SOPs to the Section 4 (Technical Requirements) requirements to determine whether they meet or exceed the NSC requirements or highlight the need for improvement in a given area.

Likewise, the public sector may use the NSC to inform existing or demonstrate the need for new public policy to address mutual objectives. Published NSCs can also be referenced in legislation/regulations, making a standard mandatory in part or whole, providing a cost-efficient and value-added option for addressing public sector systemic issues.

## Words matter!

A recent study, *“Defining Terms Used for Animals Working in Support Roles for People with Support Needs”* (MPDI, 2022), was published on 4 August 2022. The authors highlighted “working definitions” for the following terms: “assistance animal,” “companion animal,” “educational/school support animal,” “emotional support animal,” “facility animal,” “service animal,” “skilled companion animal,” “therapy animal,” and “visiting/visitation animal.” Due to the industry sector’s continuous expansion, divergent scopes of work, branding, and marketplace advertising, businesses’ working terms will likely continue to vary. This study further explains, “Although animals are increasingly being employed for a growing number of roles to support people, the terms used to describe those animals (e.g., ‘therapy animal’ and ‘emotional support animal’) can be confusing.” How true, but this is one example of how a high-level vocabulary can be beneficial when referring to the different types of AAHS within a specific context. For example, Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA) are informal, recreational, and motivational activities that incorporate HSAAAs. AAA is delivered in community settings such as hospitals, nursing and retirement homes, educational institutions, and airports. Handlers should be skilled in the populations, species, and settings they work within.

As a result the highlighted working definitions are not and will not be exhaustive. Nevertheless they all have one thing in common – all the animals are Human Services Assistance Animals (HSAAs). In contrast, the term Emotional Support Animal (ESA) refers to a companion animal (pet) that may provide comfort and emotional support to its owners. Although the animal is not explicitly task-trained for a disability or evaluated for community engagement. Subsequently, ESAs are not recognized as HSAAAs within the NSC.

## “Shall” vs “Should”

In this NSC, “shall” indicates that the requirement is mandatory and is supported by normative references, whereas “should” indicates that the requirement is recommended or a best practice statement. Subsequently, the published NSC incorporates two distinct sections that list the normative and informative references that informed the development of the NSC.

Moreover, the vocabulary referenced in the NSC reflects consolidated high-level industry sector terms and definitions, which clarifies and promotes a common language in Canada instead of using terminologies that apply to specific businesses, their respective brands, and scopes of practice.

## Differences between working terms and the term HSAA

Canada’s national standard uses the term “Human Services Assistance Animal” (HSAA) because it includes all animals involved in Human Services regardless of species or how they are employed. It’s simple and concise, which brings us to another point. NSCs are not developed to micro-manage businesses, e.g., how businesses refer to their HSAAAs for branding purposes, because NSC requirements are descriptive, not prescriptive. HSAA was coined to provide a high-level, consistent means to identify the animals involved in Canada’s AAHS industry sector to alleviate ongoing misperceptions.

## A glimpse of Canada’s NSC terms and definitions

**Animal-Assisted Human Services (AAHS):** A variety of interdisciplinary practices (such as breeding, training, and placement of Assistance/Service Animals) and Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI), including Animal-Assisted

Activities (AAA), Animal-Assisted Learning (AAL), and Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT), that support humans while safeguarding the welfare of HSAAAs. AAHS are delivered by an AAHSP/AAASP.

**Animal-Assisted Human Service Provider (AAHSP):** Individuals, as well as for-profit or not-for-profit, public or private organizations, engaged in the business of AAHS delivery.

**Animal-Assisted Services Professional (AASP):** A person that may require a specific designation, certification, or competency level to work with people and animals to deliver AAHS within their specified scope of practice, such as volunteers, educators, facilitators, animal trainers, therapists, counsellors, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and speech-language pathologists.

## Human Services Assistance Animal (HSAA)

A domesticated, healthy, suitable, appropriately socialized, often trained, and evaluated animal and positively motivated partner in the delivery of AAHS.

Examples of HSAAAs are as follows:

- Domesticated mammals include alpacas, cats, dogs, donkeys, ferrets, goats, guinea pigs, horses, llamas, pigs, rats, rabbits and sheep.
- Domesticated birds such as canaries and chickens.
- Domesticated fish such as goldfish and guppies.

This list was inspired by ISAAT’s species list (ISAAT, 2018) within a Canadian frame of reference.

## Marketplace competition

The word competition tends to have a negative connotation. However, a fair, open, and competitive market builds a more robust socio-economic economy and national benchmarks, which can also increase productivity, quality, and more choices. A vibrant open marketplace supported by the government may also bolster the affordability and accessibility of goods and services, benefiting consumers, businesses, and other relevant stakeholders.

Dialogues before and during the development of the NSC included competition within this complex socio-economic marketplace. As of 2017, over 140 countries have enacted and implemented competition legal and institutional frameworks (United Nations, n.d.). Canada’s Competition Act is a federal law of general application that applies to businesses and organizations at all levels, not just in regulated markets.

For this reason, it would be in the best interest of AAHSPs and AASPs to be familiar with market-related best practices. The Act and Canada’s Competition Bureau provide a wealth of information on this matter.

Mention of this topic is by no means legal advice, but to highlight the importance of AAHS businesses regardless of the type of business they operate, e.g. registered charity, non-profit, for-profit, membership-based, or sole proprietorships, being familiar with the Act and the do’s and don’ts concerning marketplace collaboration among competitors, and marketplace best practices.

Finally, reimagining that healthy competition in Canada could be a catalyst to elevate the value, availability, quality, and mutual benefits of the priceless gift of the human-animal bond, and the overall recognition of this burgeoning sector may be a defining moment to take this sector to the next level - an esteemed sector second to none.

## The NSC User Guide

A User Guide was created as a companion document, an educational and high-level practical guide to help stakeholders

navigate Canada's AAHS industry sector through a more cohesive and mutually beneficial lens and framework.

The Users' of this NSC are responsible for judging its suitability for their intended purpose. This Guide, in addition to the NSC, reiterates the added value of utilizing the NSC internally or through third-party assessment to determine compliance. The Guide goes on to echo the benefits of using the NSC.

For example, AAHSPs and AASPs may use the NSC to:

- compare and improve its current practices to manage risk and quality,
- monitor compliance with written procedures,
- determine whether the service provider meets or exceeds the NSC's requirements and
- voluntarily acquire third-party programme accreditation to enhance credibility in the marketplace.

## Voluntary third-party programme accreditation, competencies, and qualifications

To prevent or guard against the appearance of a conflict of interest, third-party programme accreditation uses independent, objective, neutral auditors or assessors to enrich credibility. Evaluations would assess whether an organization's (business) programme's SOPs meet or exceed the NSC requirements.

## Competencies and qualifications

Some professions require specific licensing, such as healthcare professions. Verifying a professional's credentials, education, licenses, and experience ensures that they meet the standards of practice required within the discipline and bodies that oversee their field. To provide further context, please consider the three following explanations.

- First-party means that a person claims (self-attests) to be competent and qualified to provide their services.
- Second-party certification is when an employer, instructor, etc., declares that the person/member is competent and has the necessary skills and qualifications to do their job, whether paid or through volunteerism.
- Peer review evaluations are conducted by people with similar qualifications working in the same area. This approach provides a self-regulatory framework for members of relevant organizations, credentialing bodies, or practitioners within a given profession.

## Conclusion

### CO-STEWARDSHIP – SHARING ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND RELATIONSHIPS

Even though AAHS is still in its infancy, the NSC was one of our most significant endeavours to engage interested stakeholders to confirm and offer solutions to remove barriers to refining unity in diversity, meeting the needs of consumers and the recipients of AAHS, safeguarding the welfare of HSAAs, and innovation.

Co-stewardship and its connection to One Health underscores the mutual benefits of cooperative collaboration and expanding the extent of research opportunities, including, but not limited to, the socio-economic and socio-ecological impact within the integrated environments in which Canadian businesses operate and interact (One Health Commission, 2023).

Responsible co-stewardship, irrespective of how big or small an organization is, which species they work with, or their respective scope of practice, all have two things in common: all businesses offer human services, work with and are stewards of HSAAs. Consequently, CF4AASS envisions co-designing a

dynamic Canadian AAHS One Health and Welfare Centre of Excellence.

## Closing remarks

### LIVING IN THE PRESENT IS A GIFT

Learning from the past and nurturing hope for the future is integral to fostering progress. However, there is much to be said for making the most of the present, a discipline and state of being that does not always come easy or naturally for everyone.

According to Vint Virga, D.V.M., a veterinarian in clinical practice specializing in behavioural medicine and the author of *The Soul of All Living Creatures* (Virga, 2013), animals can teach us about being human and what truly matters in the present. Paying forward the gift of being present is innately at the core of AAHS, a gift that transcends all else. Regardless of whether we are directly or indirectly involved in AAHS, the gifts of presence, such as listening, hearing, and encouraging, require giving a piece of ourselves, which is something money can't buy.

Though our paths may never cross, I would like to take this opportunity to thank and commend everyone for doing their part to keep on giving the gift that keeps on giving: the precious bond between humans and animals. May all your presents nurture the recipients as well as the givers.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On behalf of The Canadian Foundation for Animal-Assisted Support Services (CF4AASS), it is with an attitude of gratitude and heartfelt appreciation that I acknowledge our exclusive generous and valued donor, The Horsemanship for Life Project, our proficient and dedicated Standards Development Organization (SDO) Human Research Standards Organization (HRSO), innovative Technical Committee, and interested stakeholders such as those who responded to the 60-day public consultation. Thank you for caring, sharing, and supporting this historic initiative.

About Us: CF4AASS envisions One Health for People, Pets, & Partners™ Health in this context includes the physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being of people of all ages and the health and welfare of pets and other animals involved in delivering Animal-Assisted Human Services (AAHS). CF4AASS is an impartial national registered charity promoting the availability, credibility, and sustainability of excellence in Animal-Assisted Human Services (AAHS). The charity's programmes and activities encompass stakeholder engagement, special events, advocacy, outreach and education, research and development, and voluntary co-creation of AAHS Industry Sector Standards. We aim to cultivate unity in diversity among multiple stakeholders, disciplines, and sectors to enhance public confidence, public safety, quality, the well-being of Canadians' and the health and welfare of Human Services Assistance Animals (HSAAs).

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

### ETHICS STATEMENT

To become an NSC, the standard was submitted to the Standards Council of Canada (SCC) to confirm that it met the following criteria: the standard was developed by consensus of a balanced committee of stakeholders, underwent public scrutiny, was published in both official languages, is consistent with or incorporated existing international and pertinent foreign standards, and does not act as a barrier for trade.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

As the author of this commentary, project manager for the development of the NSC, and standards development Technical

Committee (TC) Facilitator, I did my best to accurately summarize and share our standards development journey. Moreover, my sincerest wish is that this commentary will reach others interested in advancing AAHS in Canada and globally to improve quality of life and promote AAHS through a One Health and Welfare lens for the greater good.

## FUNDING STATEMENT

On behalf of the CF4AASS, it is with an attitude of gratitude and heartfelt appreciation that I acknowledge our exclusive, generous, and valued donor, The Horsemanship for Life Project.

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