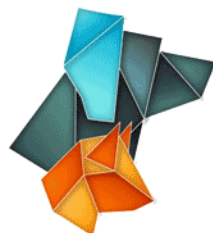


# Supporting the Human-Animal Bond



ALBERTA HELPING  
ANIMALS SOCIETY

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By Sarah Munn and Kathy Naum

**T**HE VETERINARY COMMUNITY is filled with professionals that provide compassionate pro bono services, donate numerous volunteer hours and go above and beyond the call of duty for their patients and clients, sometimes in less than ideal circumstances. The Alberta Helping Animals Society (AHAS) has made this their mission and relies on the strength of the profession to fulfill its mandate to provide no-cost ambulatory care (house call) services to vulnerable people who are unable to access regular veterinary care. AHAS is a non-profit society, incorporated in Alberta and registered as a charity with the Canadian Revenue Agency. AHAS also partners with other veterinary practices to provide additional services that are not possible with a mobile unit alone, including dental care, x-rays and lab analyses.

AHAS was the vision of Connie Varnhagen, RVT. Already armed with a PhD in psychology, Connie entered the veterinary profession later in life, citing her desire to help animals and people as the reason for adding a second career choice to an already respectable resumé. When she was growing up, Connie would see homeless people with pets on the street and it broke her heart. She saw there was a strong need for services to support the human-animal bond between vulnerable people and the companion animals they rely on for support. Connie's empathy for the clients she serves is without judgment. As Connie says, we should remember that “we're all only one step away from needing this service ourselves.”

Volunteers from AHAS see clients and patients in their homes in Edmonton and the surrounding communities. Clients are often unable to travel to a clinic to receive veterinary care, so AHAS goes to them, running a mobile clinic in the back of a van. It contains many of the things you would normally find at a regular practice, including a variety of medications required for primary care.

AHAS' emphasis is on wellness, namely in-home physical examinations, vaccinations, deworming, and nutrition as well as behaviour counselling. Volunteers also perform chronic illness diagnosis and treatment, help with grooming, and spay/neuter surgery, with some dentistry at partner facilities.

Since opening in 2015, AHAS has served approximately 1,500 clients and 3,200 patients. Some clients and patients are one-time only, but many are regulars. About two-thirds of AHAS' patients are cats, and the remainder one-third are dogs.

Clients must be under the poverty line, on AISH or on Alberta Works to qualify to receive services from AHAS.

In June, Sarah Munn and Kathy Naum from the ABVMA had the opportunity to go along on the ride with Connie to visit two AHAS clients, Amber and Cheryl. We picked up Dr. Natacha Russell, who used her lunch break to volunteer.

Our first stop was at Amber's house, a regular client, where she has six cats. Connie greets Amber and introduces us, then she and Natacha bring in their equipment and supplies. Connie and Natacha are an efficient team as they quickly set about examining the cats (who are not thrilled with the idea) and giving them vaccines. The examinations take place on the kitchen table, which Connie tells us is common at the in-home visits.

Medical records are efficiently entered via a tablet and saved on a cloud-based server as the examination is completed. Clients are also given a written record in a booklet so they can also keep track of the treatments their pets have received. We are in and out of Amber's in half an hour, and six patients are better protected as a result of the visit. Everything that goes into a client's residence is brought back out, and no medical supplies are left behind.

As we're driving to the second in-home visit, Connie takes a call from the AHAS office. A regular client, struggling with a chronically ill pet, has made the difficult decision to euthanize their dog. She asks what time she needs to be there and arranges to meet the client at a partnering clinic later that day for the procedure. It is not uncommon for Connie to have to reorganize her schedule to accommodate clients and patients needing assistance.

Our last stop is at Cheryl's. She has a seven-year-old cat and a new tiny kitten. Again, the examinations are efficient as well as compassionate.

Both clients clearly have a rapport with Connie and trust and appreciate the AHAS volunteers to provide care for the animals they love so much. As Amber says, "We can't tell you how much it means to us to have them [AHAS volunteers]. It's a godsend."

On the way to drop Natacha back off at her practice, she tells us she has been volunteering with AHAS for about two years, after hearing about the organization from a colleague. Natacha says she learns from this important work and it has helped her grow as a veterinarian.

So what's next for AHAS? While AHAS does have aspirations to broaden services to other urban centres in Alberta, for now their focus will remain in Edmonton. Renovations are underway to open a permanent veterinary practice entity in Calder, sharing the space with the Edmonton Community Veterinary Clinic. The clinic is expected to open this fall.

AHAS currently has 15 veterinarian volunteers, and always needs more — both veterinarians and technologists. If you are interested in volunteering, visit, [www.ahas.ca](http://www.ahas.ca), or their Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/AlbertaHelpingAnimalsSociety/](https://www.facebook.com/AlbertaHelpingAnimalsSociety/).

