Distributed by UW News Service, March 24, 2025

Link to original story: <https://onwisconsin.uwalumni.com/for-the-love-of-a-pet/>

**For the Love of a Pet**

**A UW veterinary clinic provides affordable care for owners experiencing hardship**

Written by Meghan Lepisto | Photos by Bryce Richter

One thing you notice about [WisCARES](https://wiscares.wisc.edu/) is the kindness. It’s a place where happiness abounds, even among some of life’s most unhappy circumstances.

In a sparkling-clean silver cage, a black kitty rears up like a tiny lion, front paws in the air, jostling a shiny pink ball that a student just selected for her. A few feet away, a wiggly gray puppy tosses an oversized toy and smooshes it until it squeaks.

Through a door and down the hall, the owners of these and other animals wait patiently in exam rooms. As they pass the time, many concerns — not limited to their pet’s health — might weigh on their minds. At this veterinary clinic, those facing tough challenges seek care for their treasured companions.

Wisconsin Companion Animal Resources, Education, and Social Services, or WisCARES for short, provides veterinary medical care, housing support and advocacy, and other social services to Dane County pet owners experiencing homelessness, housing instability, or financial hardship.

“WisCARES serves people who would not be able to seek care for their pets,” says Lyn Empey DVM’98, a veterinarian with the clinic. “Seeing how much [WisCARES clients] love their pets and would do for their pets, then being able to provide services for them and seeing them be so incredibly grateful — there’s nothing better than that.”

The program is led by the UW School of Veterinary Medicine, with support from the Schools of Social Work and Pharmacy. Its mission has four parts. The clinic works to keep pets with their families and empowers people to care for the animals through free or low-cost veterinary medicine. The team helps clients gain access to housing, social support services, and human health care. Student training is constant, preparing well-rounded veterinarians and other health professionals. And because the same societal challenges occur nationwide, WisCARES shares what it learns and models what is possible.

The team says a “one health” approach — connecting the dots between people, animals, and their environment — guides its work. It’s veterinary medicine with the utmost compassion for people, too.

**Pets and Poverty**

Based in south Madison, WisCARES is taking a local approach to a problem that is national in scope.

Within Dane County, one-third of households can’t afford basic needs. That number grows to 41 percent nationally.

About two-thirds of U.S. households have a pet, a segment that varies only slightly based on socioeconomic status.

In a recent national poll, the Humane Society found that 43 percent of pet owners couldn’t pay for their pets’ needs at some point due to financial reasons. Moreover, the organization estimates that 20 million pets in the U.S. live in poverty with their families, and 70 percent of those animals have never seen a vet.

“There is a huge group of people who simply cannot afford to go to a regular veterinary clinic,” says Empey.

Ruthanne Chun ’87, DVM’91, a veterinary oncologist and the program’s director, knows what you might be thinking.

“*If you don’t have the money to take care of an animal, you shouldn’t have it.*We hear that a lot,” she says. “Well, if I don’t have $10,000 to put my animal through a chemotherapy protocol, should I not have that animal? That’s crazy, right? So, where’s the cutoff when you make that kind of a statement?”

WisCARES encourages a more compassionate approach that acknowledges the causes of poverty, the downstream impacts of financial hardship, and the immense benefits that pets and people gain from life together.

“Any client who comes in, that human–animal bond, that connection, is so real and so beneficial,” says Liddy Alvarez, a primary care veterinarian who directs the program’s curriculum.

Willow Williams ’21, DVMx’25, now in her fourth year as a veterinary medical student, has worked at the clinic since 2019. The core of its mission, she says, is making sure that “we are able to support both animals and humans. WisCARES and other places that provide access to care are allowing people to stay with their pets, and that is invaluable.”

**So Few Options**

To qualify for WisCARES services, clients share proof that they have low income or are experiencing homelessness. About 10 percent of current clients are without housing. Many also face transportation, disability, and language barriers to care.

Clinic staff do what they can to reduce clients’ obstacles, providing cab service, Spanish translation, or accommodations for people with limited mobility — “little things to help when the physical task of treating their animal is difficult,” explains Kelly Schultz ’05, MS’11, DVM’15, WisCARES’s medical director and lead clinical instructor. “I hope the pet owners feel cared for and seen, because a lot of our clients move through the world in a way that is uncaring and invisible. … I want them to feel like any other pet owner.”

WisCARES was founded as a student initiative (see sidebar). The School of Veterinary Medicine adopted and expanded the program in 2013, starting humbly through street outreach. Next, it hosted two-hour veterinary clinics at the Tenant Resource Center and Salvation Army twice a month. Then came a physical space — a donated Quonset hut — where for several years they built their client base by word of mouth.

In 2018, the clinic relocated to a newly renovated facility. Its footprint grew dramatically, as did its services. It added surgery, dentistry, an X-ray machine, and in-house lab testing. It also expanded its hours to Monday through Friday and hired additional staff. Then the economic crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic brought an influx of new clients.

On the heels of its 10th anniversary, the team sees more need than ever.

“A lot of people call us every day, and we can’t see a lot of them. That can be tough,” Schultz says. “We would like to increase our capacity. There are so few options if you can’t afford veterinary care.”

WisCARES is an early adopter of serving vulnerable communities within veterinary medicine.

“As an interprofessional program that has a brick-and-mortar clinic open five days a week, we’re one of the first and only clinics leading that charge,” Schultz says. The team shares its experiences and knowledge nationally through presentations, publications, advisory panels, and more.

**An Absolute Blessing**

On average, WisCARES sees 80 to 100 pets per week. Appointments range from wellness exams and vaccines to disease management or dental work.

Sarah Laverty has used the clinic three times, most recently visiting with her 11-year-old cat, Princess. The onset of a chronic illness of her own in 2017 changed Laverty’s life course.

“I had worked a job for 19 years, made a good income, and then suddenly I’m disabled,” she says. “My income is not what it used to be.”

The clinic has “been an absolute blessing” to Laverty and her two cats, who she says mean the world to her. “Everybody’s so friendly and really engaged in the care of the pets.”

Elisa Rosas and her blue heeler, Rexy, have been clients of the clinic for about four years. “Everybody’s very nice. This place is great,” Rosas says while petting Rexy’s head after his checkup and nail trim.

Rexy is 14 years old and blind but still sets his inner clock to a daily walk with Rosas. “He’s waiting for me. We have a certain time, around three o’clock. So he’s ready,” she says. “He’s a good boy.”

Besides veterinary care, WisCARES provides clients with pet supplies. Toys, collars, leashes, pet food, crates of all sizes, beds, and practically anything else one might need for a pet are organized tidily from floor to ceiling in a warehouse space at the back of the clinic. Stacks of dog and cat food sit on rows of shelves nearby. Puppy and kitty packs are in another set of bins containing essential supplies for new animal family members. Donations make it all possible.

**Social Supports**

Sometimes, by caring for pets, WisCARES helps people care for themselves.

Their pet fostering program allows clients’ dogs and cats to stay for up to three months in a volunteer foster home. This temporary care helps pet owners find housing or emergency shelter, access health care, seek mental health services, or enter treatment programs — options that can otherwise be out of reach for people with pets who lack housing or social support.

In 2023, the organization fostered 43 animals. Among them was a cat belonging to a man who required open-heart surgery but refused the procedure until he was sure his cat would be well cared for.

Earlier this year, a local organization that assists individuals facing domestic violence approached WisCARES. “They came to us for help because they have a lot of clients who are fleeing domestic abuse situations and have pets,” says Schultz.

The support organization now covers the cost of a package of veterinary care at the clinic for pet owners trying to leave an abusive partner. This includes an exam, core vaccines, and other essentials that a landlord might ask to see — so the animal is ready to move once the owner is.

**Real-World Experience**

Veterinary medical students get critical training at WisCARES through hands-on care and client interactions. “There is so much the students gain and learn through experiencing even just briefly the lives of the clients they’re working with,” Alvarez says.

About 70 veterinary medical students train in the clinic annually in groups of three to five for two weeks at a time. Students manage all cases, communicating with clients, examining patients, and providing care to the animals in coordination with veterinarians and technicians.

Others train at the clinic, too. Pharmacy students fill prescriptions and stock medications. And social-work students help identify social service resources and counsel clients. “A lot of times, our clients are not treated well in the world,” says Jennifer Wheeler Brooks, the organization’s director of social work and outreach. “They come here, and they’re treated well.”

Student trainings cover topics ranging from poverty, homelessness, and the social determinants of health to ways of approaching client conversations with empathy and an open mind. How to help people keep their pets as healthy as possible within a budget is a significant point of emphasis.

“Every client that comes in, we teach the students to work with them where they are,” explains Alvarez. In recent years, veterinary medical schools have prioritized training graduates for a full spectrum of care or a broad range of diagnosis and treatment options from state-of-the-art to more conservative. Again, the UW and WisCARES are at the forefront. Alvarez says a spectrum of care has been a central focus of their curriculum “in an organic, natural way” for a decade.

“Not every client is going to be able to do the most advanced and amazing things, and that’s okay,” she says. “So, let’s figure out how to treat the patient in front of you.”

**Understanding and Openness**

Maura Enright DVM’24 began working at WisCARES as an undergraduate who hoped to attend vet school — a dream that culminated with her graduation in May. Her time at the clinic made her aware of the challenges facing many pet owners.

“It’s been so transformative in how I view the veterinary field,” she says. Her mindset as she enters her career: “How can we support this patient and the owner, regardless of what they can bring to the table that day?”

Alvarez wants students to leave with an understanding that veterinary medicine isn’t solely about working at an upscale clinic where clients can pay full price when they walk in the door. “There’s more to veterinary medicine than that, and there’s more to society, people, and pets than that,” she says.

The team finds purpose in WisCARES’s dual approach of veterinary medicine and social justice, helping to change the trajectory daily for pets and people. Teaching students adds extra inspiration, and Schultz sees potential for long-term impact. “I like to think that I’m making a difference every day and that because we have the students with us, maybe four decades from now, a past student will think about WisCARES and make a different medical decision.”

What kind of decision would that be? “A kinder, more thoughtful decision,” she says. **•**

**SIDEBAR**

**WisCARES Started with Students**

As a veterinary student at UW–Madison, Katie Kuehl DVM’12 knew she wanted to help vulnerable pet owners.

At the time, there was a pervasive attitude in the medical field that considered pets unsafe for people who were immunocompromised. But a lecture by Professor Chris Olsen opened Kuehl’s eyes to ways to make pet ownership safer for these patients.

Along with fellow student William Gilles DVM’13, she was inspired to approach the AIDS Network of South-Central Wisconsin to provide training for AIDS Network clients and case managers about safe pet care.

They named their venture WisCARES. Following graduation, Gilles served for several years as director of WisCARES, helping to build the program in its broader iteration as a School of Veterinary Medicine initiative.

In 2017, Kuehl joined the Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine to lead the university’s Shelter Medicine program and help found the [One Health Clinic](https://vetmed.wsu.edu/departments/veterinary-clinical-sciences/one-health-clinic/), where she serves as veterinary director. The clinic provides human and animal health care side by side in a shelter for people and their pets experiencing homelessness.

“If you think about folks who are houseless,” she says, “they have this animal that’s literally their best friend and support. Maybe the dog is the reason they get up in the morning and even try, because they want to be able to care for their special friend. Being able to receive care for their animal can make such a huge impact for their own well-being.”

Kuehl was in close contact with WisCARES during the One Health Clinic’s creation and as she incorporated student training. Their paths continue to intersect as collaborators on veterinary continuing education around access to care.

She’s grateful for ongoing connections with UW–Madison mentors and peers and aims to embody the same compassion and drive she experienced at her alma mater.

“It goes full circle,” she says.