



# Meteoric Rise

Newly Accredited ZimmVet Wins Practice of the Year



by Jen Reeder

AS A FORMER CERTIFIED VETERINARY TECHNICIAN and passionate rescue advocate, Carrie Erickson freely admits to being “very picky” about who works with her pets. The registered nurse and her husband currently have 2 dogs and 11 cats—all rescues with health issues.

Six years ago, she found the perfect practice for her family: AAHA-accredited ZimmVet in Zimmerman, Minnesota, near the Twin Cities. “They’re amazing,” she said. “They stick to their quality.”

She appreciates that the practice’s certified veterinary technicians (CVT) are highly educated and allowed to

practice at the top of their skillset. For instance, she doesn’t worry about which tech is monitoring a pet’s anesthesia because they’re all so capable.

But beyond technical abilities, she appreciates the compassion of everyone on the team—from taking turns carrying a tiny kitten Erickson rescued from the side of the road in the pocket of their scrubs, to a veterinary assistant who painstakingly cleaned diarrhea off of a beloved dog before a sudden need for euthanasia. “That was just a compassionate moment for me, something that is above and beyond,” Erickson said.

To learn more about applying for the 2022 AAHA-accredited Practice of the Year award, visit [aaha.org/awards](https://aaha.org/awards).

So Erickson is not the least bit surprised that the American Animal Hospital Association named ZimmVet the 2021 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year. “It is the only clinic that I will probably ever walk into, hand my dog or cat over, and leave knowing that they’re being taken amazing, amazing care of while they’re there,” she said.

ZimmVet owner Maria Krenz, DVM, bought the practice in 2008 from a retiring owner. She ran it as a single-doctor hospital until about seven years ago, when she added another veterinarian and moved to a new location with a building three times the size of the former facility. “We expanded, and we had really rapid growth during that time,” she recalled. “In our new building, we added extra services: day care, hotel, training, and grooming.”

### Newly Accredited

In 2019, the practice pursued and achieved AAHA accreditation. Krenz said she wanted to help ensure her hospital continued offering high-quality care, with all employees—including five veterinarians and six CVTs—on the same page in keeping with standards.

ZimmVet was one of the first clinics in the area to offer the canine influenza vaccine, is one of just a few that offers presurgical electrocardiograms (ECGs), and requires lab work for all surgeries. Krenz insists on providing top-notch care and works with every client to provide them the best options. “We believe in the best level of care—this is what we feel like we need to do to make sure it’s safe for your pets,” she said.

The continuing education opportunities offered by AAHA also appealed to Krenz. “With our practice culture, we like to encourage growth with our employees. So AAHA fits into that because we’re always trying to grow and do better,” she said. “It fits into our culture by always providing career growth options for people.”

She’s proud of the way her team rallied to face the ever-changing challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic by not missing a beat even during curbside service on minus-30-degree winter days and problem-solving to find ways to accommodate the influx of appointment requests. “Everybody pulls together to work toward the common goal of helping pets and bettering pets’ lives,” she said.

Stacy York, DVM and lead surgeon at ZimmVet, agreed that the entire staff shares the mindset of wanting to provide the best care for patients while constantly striving to be better. She’s seen it daily while working at the practice for the past seven years. “I think a lot of us approach our job as: How would we want our pet—our fur baby—to be treated? That’s really what drives us to do what we do,” she said. “And we do try to take care of each other.”

The ZimmVet team was already doing many things that are part of AAHA standards according to York, but accreditation enhanced those efforts. One improvement involves educating clients after surgeries about what to do at home. Prior to accreditation, veterinary technicians spent a great deal of time verbally communicating information about aftercare, but now the practice also provides written instructions.

“Being able to communicate that to the client both verbally and in writing I think was a big thing because sometimes clients are overwhelmed with everything you’re telling them at the time,” she said. “We do want to continually improve, and AAHA is not a stagnant thing, right? And that’s the other part of it: AAHA’s not just about patients. It’s about the whole picture. It’s about your staff. It’s about your clients and how we can make that better for all of them.”

York is proud of ZimmVet for “deciding to go the AAHA route” and that everyone worked together to win the distinction of Practice of the Year. “It’s a team effort—it wasn’t just a one-person thing,” she said.

### Strides to Help the Profession

ZimmVet extends that team mentality to the veterinary industry as a whole. Its innovative Technician in Training Program is a prime example.

To help address the shortage of veterinary technicians in the industry—as well as the high number of vet tech schools in Minnesota that began closing or only offering classes online—ZimmVet launched the program just before the onset of the pandemic.

Essentially, ZimmVet hires students enrolled (or planning to enroll) in online veterinary technician programs as assistants who also gain personalized vet tech training

to complement their lessons and increase their skills. Throughout the course of their studies—typically two years—each technician pairs with a staff CVT to learn different skills, according to Kristin Rinkel, CVT and Technician in Training Program lead, who has been a CVT for more than 14 years (and worked at ZimmVet for 8 of them).

“Everybody’s having a hard time finding certified vet techs. Our goal is to be able to have them ready to go out into the world and be that person that another clinic needs,” she said. “Because they don’t get the hands-on experience from school when they’re learning through a computer—and being a vet tech is a lot more than what you can just read about.”



The practice’s CVTs are highly educated and allowed to practice at the top of their skillset.

To that end, a CVT starts by teaching the technician in training basic assistant roles, such as restraining and cleaning instruments. Then they’ll add more skills, such as nail trims, anal gland expression, and using the therapy laser. Next up is lab work: learning to make blood slides and running in-house chemistries. “Once they’ve gotten the basics on how to prepare these tests, we start moving into actually reading them,” Rinkel said. “So they’ll be trained on how to read ear cytologies, what the different organisms are that are in the microscope. They’ll look at blood slides.”

The trainees rotate through different aspects of the clinic, from surgery to the front desk (the only time a CVT doesn’t oversee the training). Every time they move through a different checklist of skills and have mastered them, the trainees get small, frequent raises, Rinkel added. “It’s an incentive for them to work at it, learn about it, accomplish it, be able to do it on their own,” she said. “If we can teach them best medicine, which is what AAHA has taught us, we give them that leg up in their careers to go on.”

There are currently five students in the Technician in Training Program, and they seem grateful for the opportunity, according to Rinkel. “They’ll say, ‘You know, I was learning something online today and I just don’t get it. Can you show me?’ And we’ll walk them through it,” she said. “They’re always very eager to get in there and learn and soak it all in.”

The practice culture values the contributions of the CVTs on the team. Rinkel said they’re allowed to work at their “top potential,” which helps prevent burnout in both the technicians and veterinarians.

She also appreciates working with Krenz, whom she called a “visionary person” who provides opportunities for growth and advancement to her employees. “She encourages continuing education. If you have a specific role you want to take on, she will help get you there. It takes time out of being the owner, which you don’t get a lot of when you have doctors that own clinics because they’re so focused on the doctor part that they don’t focus on their staff,” she said. “I’m not saying that’s with everybody, but that’s one of the things that I’ve loved about being here: she always focuses on individual people and gives you the best opportunities.”



To help address the shortage of veterinary technicians in the industry—as well as the high number of vet tech schools in Minnesota that began closing or only offering classes online—ZimmVet launched the Technician in Training Program.

It's a sentiment shared by other members of the team. Ashley Middendorf, CVT leader (12 years as a CVT, with the past 7 of those at ZimmVet), said every year, Krenz checks in with each member of the staff to ask, "What works for you? What helps you? What motivates you? What's something you want to do? Where do you see yourself in five years? What's a career goal for you?"

"She's very focused on that and we make goals every year as to what we'd like to complete that year," Middendorf said. "I've worked for other clinics that have no interest in that. You just do your job and as long as you're doing it right, they pay you. They don't care about career development or anything like that. So it's definitely held my attention, because I do appreciate those opportunities and the growth aspect that the clinic offers."

Middendorf feels that each of the six CVTs on the team can share their knowledge with trainees in their preferred area—whether it's appointments, client communication, surgery, or laboratory work—and that teaching experience can strengthen overall communication abilities. "Everyone is very good about just helping each other out and always looking out for the best for each other, as well as the clients," she said.

Customer service leader Valerie Ferguson brought her dogs and cats to ZimmVet for 5 years before she started working at the practice several years ago. "I absolutely loved coming here with my pets," she said. "I felt like if I had to leave them for surgery, they were in great hands. The staff was always very caring and compassionate with them—and very knowledgeable, always answering the questions I had. And now that I work here, I can vouch for that."

She appreciates the positive ways ZimmVet supports patients, clients, and the community. The practice frequently donates wellness baskets to silent auctions and fundraisers for local rescue organizations and other nonprofits and hosts CPR training classes and dog bite prevention discussions for families with children. The staff also speaks about pet care at numerous schools and community events.

ZimmVet's day care also offers a puppy program in which trained staff work with pets under 4 months old in basic obedience, reinforcing what they are learning at home while making sure play interactions stay positive. Clients can attend evening classes with a certified trainer for puppy kindergarten and additional training. "There's just a lot of positive reinforcement and positive socialization," she said. That positive approach is incorporated into the grooming services, hotel, medicine, and all aspects of ZimmVet, according to Ferguson. "I feel like we're your other family doctor," she said. "Your pets are your family."

For more information, visit: [www.zimmvet.com](http://www.zimmvet.com) ❄️



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.