



To Board or Not to Board

Pros and Cons of Offering Pet Boarding at Your Practice

by Jen Reeder

THE FIRST TIME ANN SNYDER TOOK HER DOG BULLET TO THE BOARDING FACILITY at AAHA-accredited Lafayette Veterinary Care Center in Lafayette, Louisiana, she felt “scared.” It’s not that she didn’t trust the reputation of the 2022 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year, just that her rescued terrier mix had been reactive to other dogs at a commercial boarding facility.

“I don’t know what happened to him in his first three years, but he gets intimidated, and he tries to bite and snap and carry on,” she said. “He got to the point where he wouldn’t go in the door at the other one.”

Things proved different at Lafayette Veterinary Care Center, where the staff gave Bullet the extra attention he needed to feel safe. Now the little dog has been a loyal

attendee of both the practice and its boarding facility for a decade.

“To this day, he runs in the door,” Snyder said. “Whatever your dog or cat needs, they will provide it. Everything is just over the top: their staff, their knowledge and services available are all just wonderful. I couldn’t ask for anything better.”

When animal hospitals offer boarding, it can be a terrific service to clients like Snyder, providing convenience and peace of mind in knowing veterinary care is readily available if necessary. But while it might seem like adding boarding could easily boost revenue, there are major considerations to weigh when contemplating the question of whether or not to start offering boarding at your practice.

While it might seem like offering boarding could easily boost revenue, there are major pros and cons to weigh when contemplating the question of whether or not to start offering boarding at your practice.

Service or Liability?

At Lafayette Veterinary Care Center—which offers boarding, daycare, and grooming services in addition to veterinary medicine—the pros outweigh the cons, according to Resort Director Brittlyn Boudreaux. “It absolutely brings in revenue,” she said.

Around 15 pet care specialists staff the boarding facility, which can host up to 150 dogs and cats each night in “condos” or luxury “suites” replete with televisions to feel more like home. All guests receive a complimentary “VIP snack” their first night—typically a dog biscuit covered in peanut butter and kibble—and the team texts photo updates from the two resort cellphones to owners during each stay.

Owners can also purchase add-ons like snacks; daycare playtime with toys, pools and sprinklers; and a departure bath or a “spa” that includes two shampoos, conditioner, nail trim, and ear cleaning. Clients sign a contract that says the team can seek medical care if needed, and team members follow safety tips in a protocol binder to protect the pets and the staff. One protocol states that employees must check on a dog 15 minutes after a meal, which once led to saving a dog from bloat.

“We are definitely a one-stop shop, which I think is our biggest feature,” Boudreaux said. “Most of our clients who board their babies here also see some of our veterinarians. They already have that trust built with us.” Boudreaux feels it’s crucial to have different personnel for the various departments (the hospital employs around 150 people between the hospital, boarding, daycare, and grooming departments); she calls hers “the Fun Side.”



“A con is that it’s hard for smaller facilities that can’t facilitate their own team for this,” she said. “But if you can, it’s absolutely worth it.”

Staffing can be a major con, with kennel assistants making low pay for a physically demanding job in the midst of nationwide staffing challenges. In fact, just 25 minutes before an interview for this article, a boarding employee texted Megan Danner, practice manager at AAHA-accredited TotalBond Veterinary Hospital at Forestbrook in Gastonia, North Carolina, to say she didn’t want to work that weekend—and quit.

Danner sent a message to the practice’s group chat looking for a volunteer to fill in. She’s personally had to cover boarding shifts when employees have called in sick at the last minute or quit. “That’s probably one of the biggest cons: the turnover rate for kennel attendants,” she said. “It is a constant revolving door.” Either boarding employees leave for higher-paying work or have a strong work ethic and are quickly promoted to technician assistant or other jobs at the practice, Danner noted.

The boarding—which features seven large runs, 10 cages that could each fit at least two small dogs, and eight cat enclosures—brings in “a little revenue.” But the headache is no longer worthwhile. After the employee quit, Danner instructed her staff to honor existing boarding reservations but stop taking new ones.

When the practice is renovated later this year, it will phase out boarding and instead add amenities like another treatment room and large break room. (The hospital will continue to offer *medical* boarding in a few runs, which will help chemotherapy patients who typically aren’t allowed to board elsewhere in the area.) In fact, TotalBond has five practices in North and South Carolina, and each location phased out boarding during renovations to expand veterinary services.

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Danner’s advice for practices considering boarding pets is to be sure to offer a yard and enrichment activities. “If you’re thinking about doing it as a veterinary clinic, then you need to invest in making it worthwhile for the pets,” she noted.

More Considerations

It’s also important to consider how adding boarding to a practice will impact the veterinary team, according to Page Mader, DVM, co-owner of AAHA-accredited Five Parks Animal Hospital in Arvada, Colorado.

Early in her career, Mader worked at a large practice in Arizona that offered extensive boarding. Owners could schedule vaccinations, wellness exams, and other services while their pets were boarded, plus the team treated any issues that arose.

After that experience, she vowed never to work for a practice with pet boarding again. “Each veterinarian had a day where we were responsible for all the boarding dogs. The kennel staff would bring the medical charts over,” she said. “Some days, it was fifteen dogs you had to look at on top of your shift.”

Many boarding cases involved diarrhea from stress colitis, eye infections, or simply “ADR,” (short for “Ain’t Doing Right”). “Then sometimes we can’t get ahold of the owners,” she recalled. “Are we allowed to treat? Are we not? And some of these people are in places where they can’t really be reached all that well with cell service. That was another complication that you throw into the mix.”

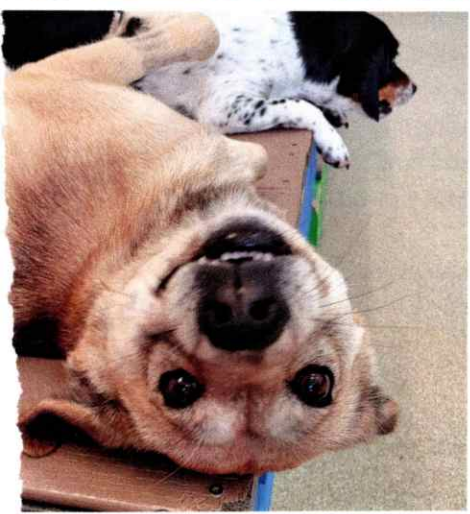
Unsurprisingly, the animal hospital she opened in 2020 doesn’t offer boarding. However, for over a year after opening, she personally offered pet sitting services to pets of clients and friends in her home above the practice because she and her business partner prioritized paying their staff rather than their own salaries.

It proved too much on top of a full caseload at work as well as taking relief shifts at a regional hospital. She grew tired of dogs destroying her property; her schedule doesn’t allow her to house sit, where pets would feel less anxious in their own environment, plus she’s seen a rise in separation anxiety and general anxiety in patients (and people) during the pandemic.



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After having to euthanize a dog she was pet sitting over the holidays, she drew the line and stopped pet sitting. “It’s also just the liability,” she said. “I felt like I was always responsible for the wellbeing of someone’s pet. And the stress: What if something were to happen on my watch? I already deal with that at work.”

Still, she permits her employees to pet sit since any liability belongs to the pet sitter, not the hospital.

Life-Saving Side Gig

Keali Stewart, RVT, has been a veterinary technician for 13 years and pet sitting on the side for 10. She used to work at a corporate practice that didn’t allow employees to pet sit for clients, but her current hospital does: AAHA-accredited Urban Vet Care in Denver, Colorado. Clients often email the practice asking for help finding a pet sitter to come to their home, and she’s one of several technicians who offer their services.

As a veterinary professional, clients trust Stewart more than a stranger working for a pet sitting app, which also means she can charge a little more. “I personally love pet sitting as a technician,” she said. “It’s nice that they have trust in you.”

The trust can pay off for pets. Once while sitting, Stewart noticed a cat going into heart failure and Urban Vet Care



Price Advice

Pet boarding fees can fluctuate based on additional services like bigger rooms, number of pets in a kennel, add-ons like group play, treats or grooming, and holidays.

Jeff Smith, DVM, medical director of AAHA-accredited Danville Family Vet, suggests counting how many people call looking for Fourth of July boarding and charging according and keeping an eye on how much rates for human hotels increase around special events.

“I think you should really look to the hotel industry,” he advised.



saved him. It happens at veterinary boarding facilities, too. Members of the veterinary team at AAHA-accredited Harbor Point Animal Hospital in Mooresville, North Carolina, rushed to the practice one Sunday—when they're closed—to provide emergency surgery to remove a urinary stone from a bulldog boarding at the practice's Harbor Point Hotel, according to Practice Manager Diane Vermillion.

"It was a good thing he was here because we were able to see it and handle him. We knew the dog—he was a long-term patient of ours, so we knew the history," she shared. "But certainly, it's nonstop when you have that boarding part and you still have to address these pets."

Staffing and Size

Harbor Point Hotel can host about 20 dogs and cats in a separate area of the hospital and opened when the practice did in 2016. Each suite is destination-themed—think Paris, Tahiti, Tuscany—with soothing music piped in and filled Kongs at naptime.

Initially anyone could board at the practice, but as of 2023, it's only available to hospital patients with updated annual exams on file. The practice also offers grooming and daycare.

"Six years into it, I think there are cases to be made for not having all those ancillary departments and being able to focus truly on veterinary medicine," she said. "Take a look at (boarding) staffing: it's seven days a week through holidays. Unless you've got a really large facility to make it work, I don't know if it's worth all of that, to be honest."

Jeff Smith, DVM, medical director of AAHA-accredited Danville Family Vet, a Galaxy Vets location in Danville, Virginia, agrees that size is important. The practice has offered boarding for nearly 30 years and expanded capacity five years ago when he built a new animal hospital with an adjoining luxury pet resort that can accommodate up to 70 dogs and 10 cats.

"That's one of the keys to having a pet hotel: if you're going to do it, you have to commit to it," Smith said. "It can't just be a little add-on boarding wing for 10 patients. It doesn't work financially or staffing-wise or anything else."



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—JEFF SMITH, DVM

Just as he enjoys being part of Galaxy Vets so he can focus on practicing medicine rather than tasks like hiring and firing, he strongly recommends hiring a resort manager "with a passion for it" to handle boarding separately.

"A common concern of veterinarians is that it's just a big headache. Somebody's dog collar got lost, and then the people are very upset about it and there's a lot of follow up with that," he said. "Those headaches happen because people are not focused on having a pet resort. You run it like a separate business, and you run it by the same standard of high quality that you run your vet clinic by."

He noted there's a reason why pet resorts are popping up around the country. "Pets are becoming more part of the family," he said. "People want a supervised boarding facility where there's a veterinarian on staff, and they know they can trust their little member of the family is going to be safe while they're gone for the weekend. It is really a growing industry." ❄



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