

Crème de la Crème

Meet the Finalists for 2020 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year

by Jen Reeder

It's a huge accomplishment to become AAHA accredited. As *Trends* readers undoubtedly know, only 12–15% of practices in North America have achieved accreditation.

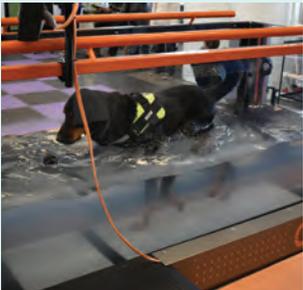
So finalists for AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year truly are among the best in the business.

Guyline Charette, DMV, immediate past president of the AAHA Board of Directors and veterinarian at Pembroke Animal Hospital, which won AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year in 2016, said she congratulates the finalists.

"I think there's a lot of glory in being a finalist," she said. "Being a finalist means that you live and breathe what AAHA should represent to everybody, and you're able to share that with your community and your staff. So, kudos!"

She also noted that since the awards are based on a scoring system, sometimes there might not be much difference score-wise between the practice that ultimately wins and the finalists. As the saying goes, it truly is an honor to be nominated.

Here's a closer look at the practices that made a splash in this year's competition.



Practice of the Year

Are You Up for the Challenge?

For more information on AAHA's Practice of the Year Award, please visit aaha.org/about-aaha/awards.



Tender Care Veterinary Center

Falcon, Colorado

When army veteran Amy Clark, DVM, and her husband, John Amen, opened Tender Care Veterinary Center in 2015, their goal was to help meet the needs of pet owners in the rural community, which is about six miles outside Colorado Springs.

“There was just such a need in this area for state-of-the-art, modern veterinary care,” said Jessica Torres, CVT, practice manager. “The practice has grown exponentially over the past five years.”

The practice offers emergency care, holistic modalities like acupuncture and chiropractic manipulation, grooming, behavior training, and onsite cremation services. But Torres thinks what really makes the practice special is the team.

“Everybody really is on the same page. It’s a drama-free work environment and everybody supports everybody to do the best by our clients and our patients,” she said.

Tender Care gives back to the community in myriad ways. The practice invested \$20,000 in building a local dog park,

hosts food and coat drives, donates to scholarship funds, and organizes teams to walk for causes like clean water in Africa and the American Heart Association. The Tender Pet Fund provides emergency care for pets whose families can’t afford it; it recently helped save a dog with a lacerated artery resulting from a dog fight.

As a veteran-owned practice near a city with multiple military bases and institutions, Tender Care regularly performs flag-retirement ceremonies in the crematorium. Then the ashes of the flags are returned to the veterans so they can scatter them as they see fit.

Torres said AAHA accreditation drives the practice.

“It really keeps everybody focused on the same goals and on providing exceptional care and exceptional service to our community and to our clients,” she said. “I think that it really does drive who we are and every single thing that we do.”



Idaho Veterinary Hospital

Nampa, Idaho

There's a large, diverse team at Idaho Veterinary Hospital, including eight veterinarians, which is guided by the practice motto: "Compassionate veterinary care by passionate people."

"We strive to create a culture of inclusiveness, appreciation, respect, and opportunities to grow," said John Calhoun, DVM, co-owner. "We firmly believe our companion animals bring happiness to the people of our community, and that any species of animal can help enhance a person's quality of life. We are fueled by our passion for serving our clients and our patients from beginning to end."

That passion is exemplified with the extraordinary measures the practice took to help an elderly woman with a diabetic cat named Mindy. When the woman called Idaho Veterinary Hospital concerned that her cat was acting strange, it turned out she'd been giving Mindy insulin every time she ate, instead of the prescribed dosage twice a day.

The cat needed immediate treatment, but the woman couldn't find someone to drive them. So the office manager rushed to her house and transported Mindy to the practice, where she recovered after two days of hospitalization. Then, this spring, when the woman herself was hospitalized, she called the practice in a panic; she feared Mindy wasn't getting insulin treatments while she was away. Once again, the office manager drove to the house, managed to get ahold of the cat after a bit of a chase, and brought Mindy to Idaho Veterinary Hospital, where the entire team cared for her until her owner was out of the hospital and back on her feet.

"We are fortunate that we get to wake up each day and empower our team to fulfill their dreams in providing health and healing of the companion animals of our community," Calhoun said.

Calhoun purchased Idaho Veterinary Hospital in 1994, and in 2019, Samantha Cavender, DVM, bought into the practice after working there as an associate veterinarian since 2013. Founded in 1966, the practice has since expanded to specialize in orthopedic surgeries, advanced imaging, and reproductive services.

Idaho Veterinary Hospital provides veterinary care for the local prison K-9 unit, the World Center for Birds of Prey, and support animals for domestic violence survivors at a shelter. The team also works closely with Future Farmers of America groups and donates to local sports teams, animal rescue organizations, and high schools.

Calhoun said the team relies on AAHA to stay focused on and accountable to the high standard of care. He appreciates the extensive network of like-minded practices and individuals to learn from and collaborate with.

"With AAHA by our side, we are confident we are providing a place of comfort, compassion, and the best possible care to our patients," he said. "Idaho Veterinary Hospital is not only proud but honored to be an AAHA Practice of the Year finalist."



Loyal Companions Animal Hospital

St. Charles, Illinois

Vicki Petsche, DVM, owner of Loyal Companions Animal Hospital, had worked in other practices for 20 years before she designed her own practice, which opened in May 2016.

“It was an existing building and I did a big remodel with all of my dream plans in place,” she said. “My vision was to provide everything in one place for owners.”

To that end, the back of the practice features a large pet resort for daycare and boarding, as well as professional grooming and training services. There are windows or skylights in every room of the facility to let in natural light and help boost everyone’s mood. There’s a dedicated surgical suite, radiology room, dental suite with space to perform two dentals at a time, and top-of-the-line medical equipment.

Loyal Companions Animal Hospital is also a certified Fear Free and Cat Friendly Practice, so there’s a separate entrance for cats—the Red Carpet Cat Entrance—so felines don’t have to see or smell dogs. Cat rooms have window seats that overlook hummingbird feeders, and there’s a cat box where Petsche and her team can perform exams on cats who feel safer hiding.

Patients (and, pre-COVID, clients) are ushered directly into exam rooms because there is no waiting room. That way, pets don’t have to interact with other animals.

The practice also features an isolation room with its own ventilation system.

“When you open the door, the ventilation is such that the air gets sucked in. So it’s a negative-pressure zone—no contagions would get pulled into the space there,” Petsche explained.

There’s also a run next to a big window for dogs who need some time alone if they’re overstimulated or anxious. It looks out on the serenity garden, which Petsche intended as a place for staff to relax, though during the coronavirus pandemic, it’s doubling as an exam area for pets who are too stressed when separated from their owners.

When establishing her policies and protocols, Petsche used AAHA’s recommendations and standards to make sure nothing fell through the cracks. She’d previously worked at practices that were AAHA accredited as well as those that weren’t, so she knew the value. Loyal Companions achieved accreditation in January 2017.

The practice donates money and medications to the local animal shelter and participates in the veterinary assistant program of a local high school. College and high school students also shadow Petsche as part of career programs. She enjoys teaching the next generation and showing them what an innovative practice looks like.

“I feel proud that I actually had a vision in my mind after 20 years of practice and I was able to implement it,” she said. “And I definitely feel proud that I have staff that is happy on a daily basis and I don’t have turnover. I’m always hiring because I’m growing, which is nice, instead of people leaving.”



Madison Veterinary Specialists

Madison, Wisconsin

In October 2012, John Silbernagel, DVM, DACVS, and Amy Pauli, DVM, DACVO, leased space at a little emergency clinic that had no specialists. After a strong first year, they purchased the hospital on January 1, 2014, and soon achieved AAHA accreditation.

That accreditation has not only helped hold the team to high standards but also fostered trust with referring veterinarians as well as clients.

“Clients are getting more and more savvy about that, too,” Pauli said. “I think that helps gain us some clientele, and certainly a level of respect that we wouldn’t otherwise necessarily have.”

Madison Veterinary Specialists grew so rapidly that the founders expanded into a new facility and have hired nearly 100 employees. Silbernagel said the key is upholding the motto “We are an extension of your practice” by getting to know primary-care veterinarians on a first-name basis and building relationships.

“That’s been a big part of what differentiates us: really trying to be a good partner to them,” he said. “We always have viewed ourselves as just a complement to what the primary-care veterinarian is already doing. For those cases that need to go to the next level, we’re there for them.”

Madison Veterinary Specialists offers 24-hour care along with dermatology, internal medicine, neurology, oncology, ophthalmology, surgery, radiology, and a blood bank.

The practice founders believe so strongly in giving back that they offer each member of the staff a paid day off to volunteer for their favorite charity. The practice is also involved with OccuPaws Guide Dog Foundation and donates to the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists Vision for Animals Foundation and the local Humane Society. The hospital supports pets of survivors of domestic violence, offers pro bono and discounted services for Madison’s police dogs, has joined the Clean Lakes Alliance, and participates in community events.

Like all of this year’s finalists, both owners voiced appreciation for and pride in their team.

“It’s an amazing group of people—professionally and personally—that we’re lucky enough to be able to have working here,” Pauli said. “And that’s what makes the practice.” ✖



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.