

# Trends

magazine

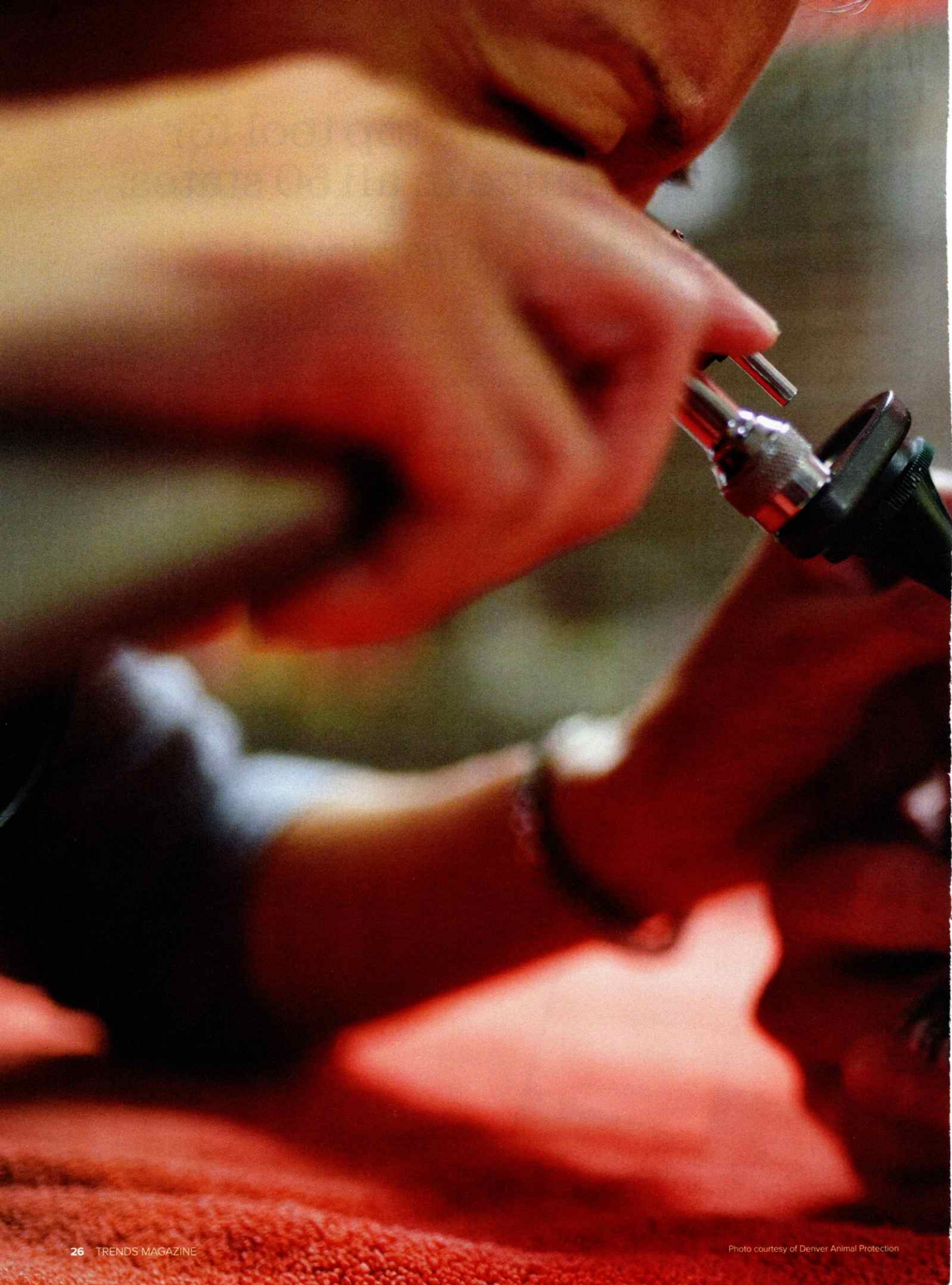
## Give Me Shelter

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# Give Me Shelter

AAHA Accreditation Helps Animal Shelters  
Offer Pets the Care They Deserve

by Jen Reeder



SIX YEARS AGO, THERE was no full-time veterinarian at Denver Animal Shelter, the municipal facility run by Denver Animal Protection. Yet around 7,000 animals enter the open-admission shelter each year.

Then, Louisa Poon, DVM, PhD, CCRP, chief of veterinary services at Denver Animal Protection, came on board.

“I’ve done academia, I’ve taught vet school, I’ve done emergency, I’ve done an internship in shelter medicine, but I actually have not had a lot of experience in managing a clinic,” she said.

Her solution: pursue AAHA accreditation.

“Using AAHA accreditation really gave me the tools to see what I need to do to make our clinic as awesome as possible,” she said.

For example, she used AAHA standards to get her team on the same page, such as training the staff in radiation safety and CPR each year and maintaining certain equipment at least twice a year.

Denver Animal Shelter became one of the only AAHA-accredited municipal shelter clinics in the US in December 2019.

“I really used the guidelines for accreditation to help me build the clinic that we have currently,” she shared.

The staff—which includes Poon, a part-time veterinarian, and three certified veterinary technicians—collaborates frequently with other veterinarians in the community. In one recent case, an emergency room colleague noticed an eight-month-old Australian cattle dog named Bella who’d been brought in for lameness and acting strangely. She ran a drug panel and discovered opioids, amphetamines, MDMA, and other illicit substances in Bella’s system—on top of two fractures in her pelvis and one in her left femur.

Bella was confiscated and taken to Denver Animal Shelter for supportive care and pelvic surgery. She lived with Poon for four weeks—many veterinary team members foster pets to monitor their recoveries—before she was adopted into a loving forever home.





“It really took a whole community to get Bella well,” she said.

Not knowing the medical history of the vast majority of animals who enter the shelter is a challenge. So veterinarians need to be particularly thorough in exams and avoid “tunnel vision” regarding diagnosis. For instance, bruising around the skin and conjunctiva of the eye could be caused by being hit by a car, or a bleeding disorder.

Poon is grateful for support from veterinarians who volunteer to help with dentals and surgeries and veterinary students who pitch in. AAHA-accredited Seven Hills Veterinary Hospital in Aurora, Colorado, helps enormously by offering free fracture repair several times a week.

Even if community veterinarians can't volunteer their time, Poon said, they can help keep animals safe by urging owners to microchip and spay or neuter their pets, and keep current on vaccinations.

As an open-admission shelter, the organization must accept any animals who come through the doors. So they've treated and re-homed many different species, from reptiles, turtles, and a six-foot python to rabbits, mice, guinea pigs, and rats.

In one instance, the team saved a stray goat found by Animal Control officers running through traffic. The goat—later nicknamed Goatus Operandi—appeared to have a traumatic amputation on the hoof on the left hind leg that was getting infected. Despite receiving antibiotics and pain medication, the infection continued to spread.

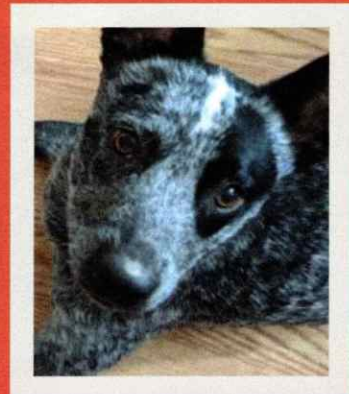
“I'm a small-animal practitioner and had not really worked with goats before, even though I've done a lot of amputations in dogs and cats, but we decided, ‘Well, we can give it a shot,’” she recalled. “So we anesthetized the goat and successfully amputated the [leg], and then about a week and a half after the surgery was done, the goat was adopted directly from our shelter.”

Though the work can be intense, Poon said seeing animals recover and then find permanent homes is incredibly rewarding.



“Using AAHA accreditation really gave me the tools to see what I need to do to make our clinic as awesome as possible.”

—LOUISA POON, DVM, PHD, CCRP





"We see a lot of traumas, we see a lot of neglect, so we hold those cases special in our hearts," she said. "It helps us get through a hard day."

### Few and Far Between

While Denver has one of the country's only AAHA-accredited veterinary clinics for a municipal shelter, it is less rare among nonprofit animal shelters but still unusual: fewer than 50. These shelters typically serve homeless pets as well as animals from low-income families, so resources can be tight. But like Poon, veterinarians working in shelter medicine say AAHA accreditation helps animals get the care they deserve.

In 2014, the Humane Society of Tampa Bay's Animal Health Center became Florida's first nonprofit animal hospital accredited by AAHA. Karla Bard, DVM, director of medical operations, said accreditation has been important for team building and to instill confidence in clients and local veterinarians who might need to refer pet owners who need more affordable care.

"We were doing very excellent medicine before, [so] it wasn't that hard, but it's such a nice intellectual exercise

that everyone got into," Bard said. "The technicians took part in everything—how to use what we do to make it follow these protocols and make sure that we are all on the same page. I think that really got everyone all together."

She said there can be misconceptions about shelter medicine, such as that veterinarians use expired medications, offer low-quality care, or are trying to "steal clients" by offering deep discounts through grants.

"The financial part is the hardest part of anything. No one goes in here trying to build a clientele and make a lot of money. Everyone just wants to help animals," Bard said. "I hope AAHA accreditation gives them good feelings that we are doing the right thing by these animals, and that we're not doing things that are backwards or antiquated."

There are advantages to working in a shelter environment, she noted. For instance, if a client can no longer afford to care for their pet, the animal can enter the shelter instead of being euthanized. Good Samaritans and foster-based rescue organizations often bring in pets who need help, such as community cats for TNVR (trap, neuter, vaccinate, return).

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—KARLA BARD, DVM





Bard said the practice sets aside certain days just for spay/neuter to streamline efficiency. In 2019, Animal Health Center sterilized nearly 12,000 pets. That same year, it treated nearly 46,000 animals through wellness—and the shelter found homes for 8,420 pets.

“When you’ve got a hospital associated with a shelter, you can save a lot more, which is what really makes everyone here feel so good,” she said.

Across the country in Oakland, California, the East Bay SPCA operates AAHA-accredited Theodore B. Travers Family Veterinary Clinic, which serves a large population of homeless pets—as well as homeless people who have pets. Many other clients have considerable financial constraints.

Gwen Gadd, DVM, a veterinarian at the clinic, enjoys the challenge of “MacGyvering” solutions without compromising patient care.

“I love it. For me, this is a calling. It keeps me creative,” she said. “It keeps me looking and being more open to different ways of doing things.”

## Reaching Out

Client communication is critically important, from warning clients before a spay/neuter that their pet will have a tattoo afterward, to discussing compliance. That means talking about what monitoring thyroid medication will entail, or diabetes treatment, for instance.

“We have to lay it out with the client and find out whether that’s going to be possible. Is this a backyard dog that we can’t bring inside and his life is running around chasing squirrels? We have to be more open to the alternative lifestyles of our clients,” Gadd said. “Everybody’s really, for the most part, doing the best they can with what they have.”

One of her favorite cases involved a bulldog named Olivia who came in as a skinny stray with a cleft palate and cleft lip. A dentist came in and did the initial repair, which Olivia happily licked out.



“The next week I went back in and was able to repair it,” Gadd said. “Now she’s with a family and they send us pictures and let us know she’s having the time of her life and doing really, really well. She’s adorable. At one point I had pasted pictures of her all over the clinic.”

In another case, a Chihuahua named Popsicle presented with a “funky gait” that turned out to be atlantoaxial subluxation.

“Basically, her head was flopping around and pinching her spinal cord,” she shared.

The shelter lacked the resources for the expensive surgery, but reached out to veterinary surgeons at University of California, Davis, who kindly agreed to perform it. After the successful surgery, Popsicle soon found a forever home.

Gadd said finding creative ways to help save animals is a source of pride for the staff, as is AAHA accreditation.

“It’s a way for us to say, ‘Look, we are not giving you poorer-quality care because you don’t have money, or poorer-quality care because this is a shelter animal,’” she shared. “What AAHA accreditation does is it’s saying, ‘We met these standards that a lot of for-profit hospitals haven’t met.’”

Kristen Beitzel, CVPM, vice president of medical services at East Bay SPCA, said AAHA accreditation is also a source of pride for financial backers.

“It really resonates with our donors,” she said. “They think that we are going above and beyond, so it really makes them feel empowered to support our mission and our goals.”

The community is very supportive of East Bay SPCA, which in 2019 donated a whopping 15,775 pounds of pet food to those in need and enrolled 8,489 K–12 students in its humane education programs. The full-time behavior team supports the medical practitioners; trainers who have bonded with animals often accompany pets to exams or medical procedures to decrease their stress while being anesthetized or sedated.

“They’ll be there when the animal is waking up and recovering so that they have a familiar face and smell when they’re coming to,” she said.

Out of financial considerations, Beitzel said the clinic often needs to amputate broken limbs that would have required plating or pinning by an orthopedic specialist. But people in the region are eager to adopt special-needs pets, so tripods find homes quickly.

When the deadly 2018 wildfire called the Camp Fire forced pets into shelters, East Bay SPCA quickly worked to transport animals from affected municipalities into its own kennels to make room for other pets that would be coming into the needed space.

“There’s a lot of networking that happens in a shelter setting to try to get the animals in,” she said.

More recently, when the Bay Area received a stay-at-home order from health officials during the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, hundreds of people volunteered to foster, and more offers rolled in even after all available animals had been placed.

Beitzel is grateful to the community, as well as the entire team.

“We try to be as cutting edge as possible and really be on the forefront of making changes in the lives of animals in our community as well as people in our community,” she said. “We definitely are striving to focus not just on the animals, but the human-animal bond.” ✨



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is grateful to shelter veterinarians and their teams, including those who took the time to speak with her in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Thank you for inspiring hope in such fraught times.