

The Cat's Out of the Bag



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Feline-Friendly Resources Help Practices Offer “Purrfect” Service to Feline Patients and Clients

by Jen Reeder

Terrie First considers her cats part of her family. So when First and her husband moved with 12 beloved cats from Michigan to Texas, she began visiting animal hospitals in search of the right fit. She admits to walking out of a few. Then, at AAHA-accredited All Pets Animal Hospital and 24-Hour Emergency Care in Katy, Texas, she was telling the receptionist about Princess, her special-needs cat, and a passing veterinarian overheard the conversation and stopped to learn more about the cat—for 20 minutes.

“Obviously, that endeared that practice to me right then and there,” First recalled.

A decade later, First is a loyal client who’s even adopted two cats through the practice when they needed a good home. She’s also seen the hospital relocate to a larger building with a separate room for feline patients and become a designated Cat Friendly Practice (CFP) through the American Association of Feline Practitioners’ (AAFP) signature program.

Now, when First arrives for an appointment, she and her cats are immediately escorted upstairs to the quiet, cats-only room. She likes



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that the veterinary team doesn’t rush through exams or procedures and that Sarah Heineman, DVM, spends time training and staying abreast of the latest feline research and cat-friendly handling techniques.

“They do everything they can to make it easier for my cats. It makes a big difference,” she said. “It really makes me feel like they’re engaged with my animals.”

This type of positive feedback and loyalty from high-value clients like First is leading an increasing number of animal hospitals in North and South America to pursue designation as a CFP. Since the AAFP began offering the designation in 2012 as a benefit to members who meet the requirements, membership has more than doubled to roughly 4,000 members. As of February 2018, 1,192 practices have achieved CFP status,

with an additional 409 in progress. Interestingly, the vast majority are not “cats-only” practices; 1,003 are mixed canine and/or feline practices, according to the AAFP.

Veronica Griffin, CVA III, floor supervisor at All Pets Animal Hospital, said the practice achieved “Gold Level” CFP designation after six months of staff training (which is ongoing for the approximately 75 employees). She said the practice decided to pursue the designation because so few clients brought in cats for appointments—even pocket pets were visiting more regularly.

“We wanted to make the experience better,” Griffin said. “Cats are so different from dogs. We had to start learning cat behavior, like when a cat freezes, that doesn’t mean they’re letting you do what you want—it means they’re terrified. We had to



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Results of the AAFP's 2017 Cat Friendly Practice Survey

98% would recommend the CFP program to other veterinary professionals.

92% state the CFP program has positively impacted their team morale when handling, treating, and caring for cats.

91% reported an improvement in feline knowledge and care among practice team members.

80% received positive feedback from clients on implementing the program.

80% have increased visits because they are a CFP.

79% report increased practice revenue since implementing the CFP program.

75% state the acquisition of new feline patients due to their CFP designation.

61% of CFPs report a reduction in injuries when handling cats.

Source: American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP)

learn the different levels of stress with cats, and we've done a lot of restraint training and just getting everyone used to being a little quieter and going slower than you would with a dog."

In addition to learning cat-friendly handling techniques and adding the cats-only room, the team began using feline pheromones in the exam room and offering overnight boarding again, in a separate, quiet section of the hospital. The efforts have paid off. Griffin said being a CFP has helped attract and retain clients. Like AAHA accreditation, she said, the CFP designation is a sort of "seal of approval" the practice promotes on Facebook and through community outreach, such as volunteering at low-cost microchip clinics and caring for displaced pets at rescue events in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. Cat owners are often impressed when they see cat-friendly handling techniques in action.

"We do a lot of word of mouth," she said. "Our [cat-owning] clients will always be the first ones to tell more of their friends and family. And at events if someone mentions, 'Just to get my cat here was a horrible experience,' we can say, 'If you want to come in for a free consultation, we can go over some things to help you get your cat in the carrier and in the car.'"

AAFP President Paula Monroe-Aldridge, DVM, said the organization is working to create a culture change toward cats by providing feline-specific education for veterinary professionals and caregivers (owners). She's particularly optimistic because several veterinary schools have recently become CFPs, a trend she hopes will continue so students are no longer taught to

treat cats like small dogs and will instead learn to understand cats' unique needs.

"When I was taught to restrain a cat, I was taught to scruff them. That's just not right," she said. "It's disrespectful to the cat. It's almost like Mom shaking her finger at you. . . . You have to understand a cat's body language and when they're scared or hurting."

The AAFP offers free brochures, flyers, and videos at catvets.com (even for nonmembers), and in January of 2017, it launched a consumer site, The Cat Community (catfriendly.com), to share information about cat care, from how to choose the right scratching post or litter box to grooming tips and disease prevention. It's a resource veterinarians can share with their clients.

Monroe-Aldridge said there can be a misconception that qualifying as a CFP involves remodeling the building, but the key element is actually more philosophical: knowing a cat's natural behaviors and understanding low-stress handling techniques for cats. The AAFP offers help throughout the application process for anyone who is interested.

Those who do almost always find it worthwhile: The AAFP's 2017 Cat Friendly Practice Survey found a whopping 99% satisfaction rate, with 92% of respondents reporting the CFP program "has positively impacted their team morale when handling, treating, and caring for cats" and 61% reporting a reduction in injuries when handling cats.

"That's directly related to knowing how to handle the cat, knowing

how to read the cat—decreasing their stressors and their fears,” Monroe-Aldridge said. “It’s really amazing to see the change . . . and it’s special to the clients when their cats are trying to bite or scratch, and team members know what to do in those circumstances.”

Former AAFP President Jane Brunt, DVM, executive director of the nonprofit CATalyst Council, said she opened AAHA-accredited Cat Hospital At Towson (CHAT) in Baltimore in 1984 as a cats-only practice, and it’s always been profitable. In fact, it was the first cats-only practice in Maryland. (Unsurprisingly, the practice is now also a Gold Level CFP.) She said the

CATalyst Council was founded in direct response to pet cats receiving far less veterinary care than dogs in the US, despite outnumbering them.

Brunt explained that the issue is complex, but some of the reasons why cats are undertreated are that cats are adept at hiding illness as a “predators and prey” species, owners of indoor-only cats often think their pets don’t need veterinary care, and caregivers dread trying to get their cat into a carrier.

Since many clients have both dogs and cats, she suggests veterinary teams ask dog owners at visits, “How many cats do you have at home?” Better yet, “How many cats do you



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“Heartworm in particular is mosquito spread, and unless you live in a hermetically sealed, high-rise condo—which some cats do—there’s no such thing as an outdoor-only mosquito.”

—JANE BRUNT, DVM



feed?" Some people might feed free-roaming cats but not consider them their own.

If a client suggests their cat doesn't need to visit the veterinarian because he's an indoor-only cat or not at risk, Brunt suggests that teams explain the importance of preventives for fleas and diseases.

"Heartworm, in particular, is mosquito spread, and unless you live in a hermetically sealed, high-rise condo—which some cats do—there's no such thing as an outdoor-only mosquito," Brunt explained.

Brunt said becoming a CFP includes a chance to offer exceptional care to feline patients as well as cobranding opportunities. She helped create several modules about cat-friendly

handling techniques for Marty Becker, DVM, and his Fear Free Certification Program, which seeks to reduce fear, stress, and anxiety for pets at animal hospitals.

"Being AAHA accredited, [a] Cat Friendly Practice, and Fear Free [Certified]—wouldn't that be a triple crown?" Brunt said.

In working toward the shared goal of helping more cats get lifelong veterinary care, and because about half of pet cats in the United States are acquired through rescue, Brunt said the CATalyst Council launched "CATalyst Connection: Forever Homes, Forever Health." The initiative focuses on dog and cat adoptions. On the Gotcha Day, adopters are offered a free exam at a local veterinary hospital, and

the shelter or rescue organization forwards the medical records to both the adopter and the selected practice. This not only creates potential new clients for animal hospitals but ultimately helps keep pets from being returned to shelters.

Ted Gannon, head of Pet Care Digital Marketing for Zoetis, said the company offers free digital resources to encourage veterinary visits. The Pet Wellness Report, for instance, is an online pet health-risk assessment that can provide cat owners with a rationale for going to the veterinarian.

The latest initiative, an online educational tool called PawPath, was launched in January 2018 and focuses on encouraging new adopters to take their pet to the veterinarian. Participating shelters invite people to sign up when they adopt a pet.

"We know from our research that roughly 50% of people, while they're really excited about their new pet, they're also feeling overwhelmed, and they're looking for help," Gannon shared. "We also know that if you get that new adopter in to the veterinarian within 30 days, the rate of keeping [the pet] in their forever home is exponentially higher."

PawPath provides new adopters with a 60-day "Journey of content" via daily emails or texts, depending on the customer's preference. (Shelters can also add custom content for their clients.) Day 12 triggers information about preparing for the first visit to the veterinarian.

Gannon said the service proved instantly popular with rescue

advocates, and interest at veterinary conferences has also been high, so in the future, Zoetis plans to create a similar offering for animal hospitals.

"It's all about best practices for helping take care of your pet," he said.

Ken Lambrecht, DVM, founding owner and medical director of AAHA-accredited West Towne Veterinary Center in Madison, Wisconsin, has been helping people take care of their pets for several decades. His animal hospital became a Gold Level CFP in 2015 and has been AAHA accredited since 1995.

"It always made sense to me to [follow] all the standards set by the leaders," he said.

Inspired by his pet, "Bug the Adventure Cat," with whom he's traveled in five countries, Lambrecht moved the practice to a new facility and converted the entire top floor into "Bug's Gym," a gymnasium with cat perches, hiding places, ladders, and tunnels that hosts "Cats' Night Out" social events.

"We get new clients all the time from that," he said. "The word gets out in the cat community pretty quickly."

West Towne also offers cat boarding, and Bug the Adventure Cat has more than 1,300 Facebook friends. But Lambrecht, who recently joined the AAFP Board of Directors, emphasized that practices don't need to go to such extremes to become a CFP. For instance, if an animal hospital doesn't have a separate entrance for cats, the practice could offer a cat courier who will alert a client waiting in the

car via pager or text when the team is ready and escort them directly into an exam room. There's plenty of room for creativity.

"The bottom line is it's all about educating your staff . . . and making that cat feel comfortable in the room," he said.

Lambrecht's client Jan DeOrio has had cats for 30 years, and she said her best experience has been at West Towne. When she first moved to Madison, her cat Clover weighed 18 pounds, so "Dr. Ken" and his team devised a weight-loss plan that helped the cat safely lose 8 pounds during a fun weight-loss challenge. They also work to reduce anxiety at visits for Clover, now 18 years old, and DeOrio credits Lambrecht with teaching her how to travel with her cat on airplanes.

Now DeOrio and her husband are preparing to move to another state, and she's nervous about being able to find another veterinarian of Lambrecht's caliber because, in the past, most veterinarians she's met have seemed to care more about dogs than cats. She found his passion for feline patients refreshing.

"He's really, truly cared about my cat," she said. "I need a cat-crazy vet who I know is going to love my cat and want my cat to be healthy and happy." ✨



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder is an award-winning member of the Cat Writers' Association.



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