

Country Hills Pet Hospital



Practice Makes Perfect

Country Hills Pet Hospital is the 2018
AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year



by Jen Reeder

ASK MARK THOMPSON, DVM, OWNER OF AAHA-ACCREDITED COUNTRY HILLS PET HOSPITAL in Eden, Wisconsin, what makes him most proud of his practice, and he doesn't hesitate with his response: "My staff."

"My leadership is really more of an inclusive leadership. I want everyone to play their role and become leaders in their own right here," he said. "We're all really focused on that greater goal of getting better and doing the best job we possibly can for that pet. . . . It's not my practice, it's our practice."

That focus on excellence through teamwork has paid off: The American Animal Hospital Association just named Country Hills Pet Hospital the 2018 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year.

Thompson has been an advocate for AAHA since veterinary school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he was an AAHA ambassador throughout his four years of veterinary school, organizing speaking events featuring AAHA members. It drove home the value of accreditation in the veterinary field.

“Only the top hospitals are going to be AAHA accredited,” he said. “If you’re an AAHA-accredited practice, you do set yourself apart.”

A year after graduating in 1996, Thompson joined the staff of Country Hills Pet Hospital as an associate veterinarian and the only small animal doctor at the mixed practice. The small animal part of the practice achieved AAHA accreditation in 2000. Thompson became a co-owner in 2001, eventually becoming the sole owner in 2008 and establishing the hospital as a small animal-only practice.

Now the practice consists of two doctors (the other is Stephanie Winske, DVM), five certified veterinary technicians, two data entry specialists (the practice is paperless), one veterinary assistant, two customer service representatives, and an office manager. The entire team helps make videos about AAHA standards to educate one another as well as clients.

“Even before I was an owner, I recognized that AAHA was the thing to do as far as getting accredited and taking that step to increasing the quality of the practice,” Thompson said.

Part of quality care involves boosting client compliance, and Country Hills Pet Hospital has implemented initiatives to do just that. Thompson credits promoting wellness plans with increasing compliance in senior screenings, dentals, and other preventive care.

The wellness plans enable clients to pay for services over a 12-month period, including vaccinations, routine blood screens, stool and urine samples, heartworm checks, and other preventive measures. The plans automatically renew every year and include discounts on other services. Clients can also opt to add dental cleanings to their wellness plans in order to spread out payment. As a result of this—and other initiatives to increase compliance—Country Hills has gone from doing around 50 dentals a year to more than 150 annually.

Last year, the team set a group goal of enrolling new clients in the wellness “Petly Plans,” and when they achieved that goal, Country Hills treated the staff to a wine tasting. The surge in wellness plans led to an increase not only in pets receiving care but in overall revenue growth.

“I think it’s made a huge difference,” he said. “This year, our growth rate is more than 20%. This has been a huge, huge positive year for us. It comes to [this]: Do a good job, treat your clients like you want to be treated, and that’ll come back and help you. We do a lot of community service to try and give back.”

That’s an understatement. Country Hills Pet Hospital gives back to the community in myriad ways. The practice sponsors the K9 unit for the local police department with free vaccinations, heartworm and tick screenings, fecal exams, routine blood screens, leptospirosis screens, and urinalysis, with discounts for other services. The practice donates to scholarship funds for veterinary students and numerous charities and organizations, from a women’s shelter to the youth soccer association. Country Hills has also worked with veterinary technical schools to help students finish their externships.

Thompson’s wife is a social worker in elementary schools, so Country Hills collaborates with the school system to educate kids about veterinary medicine. They visit classrooms for “Teddy Bear Clinics,” during which the children’s dolls can get stitches or casts, and they host



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students, Scouts, and 4-H groups at a special event for “mock C-sections” at the practice. The young people dress in surgical scrubs and learn to “deliver” stuffed animal puppies. Later, each child gets to take home a plush toy.

“Hopefully it makes an impression on them as far as a positive for veterinary medicine long term,” Thompson said.

Country Hills Pet Hospital is also a major supporter of the local animal shelter. The practice recently donated 24 new dog runs—worth \$24,000—to the Fond du Lac Humane Society to double its size. In addition to



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donating to the shelter’s various fundraisers, Country Hills offers free initial wellness exams to people who adopt a pet from the shelter and provides free neuters, free or reduced-cost spays, and reduced-cost rabies vaccinations to the shelter itself. The total retail value of donated services from January 2016 to January 2018 was \$186,365.

Country Hills has also invested in the community’s pets on its own property. In 2017, the practice spent around \$90,000 to create a two-acre dog park on the hospital grounds to give pets a safe, clean place to exercise. The dog park is free to use for pets who are up to date on vaccinations. There are special rails and playground equipment for dogs undergoing physical therapy, water stations, two large fenced areas, and a 650-gallon swimming pool. Newly installed solar panels generate electricity for the lights that keep the dog park accessible at night (they also provide energy for the hospital). There’s even a 24/7 self-serve dog wash available, so after playing in the park, dogs can go home clean.

“We said, ‘Let’s see if we can provide something that’s safe and gets those dogs doing what we’re actually recommending in the room,’” Thompson explained. “If we’re recommending that they lose weight, how are they going to lose weight if they can’t go to a dog park in town without feeling like you’re compromising their health?”

Sarah Zurmond, CVT, CCRP, staff manager, has commuted 45 minutes each day—each way—for the past nine years to Country Hills Pet Hospital because it’s such





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a special place. She agreed that AAHA accreditation is a vital part of Country Hills Pet Hospital and said it's a source of pride for the team. She's personally taken an AAHA management course and said AAHA has been a "guiding factor" in her career.

The team discusses the value of AAHA in every staff meeting, often in innovative ways. For instance, they once filmed a surgical procedure and then played it for the entire team, discussing the differences that might exist with a nonaccredited practice, highlighting how and why Country Hills adheres to AAHA standards.

Zurmond said the contrast is also apparent when talking with employees of nonaccredited practices at conferences and hearing about issues they face.

"Just listening to them talk sometimes gives you such pride because that would never happen at our clinic. We don't have those problems because we have AAHA guide us through those things, and we've already figured it out, so it's not an issue anymore."

That excitement about having high standards thanks to AAHA is something the team shares with clients. In fact, Zurmond posts social media quizzes at least once a month relating to AAHA. While they typically have to do with the value of accreditation, one post asked how many times the AAHA logo appears at Country Hills Pet Hospital, not including computer screens. The answer: 56 times. The AAHA logo is printed on plaques and the glass doors at each entrance, table mats in exam rooms, the dog park sign, staff uniforms, business cards, posters, vaccination certificates, invoices, discharge instructions, client education handouts, and receipts, to name some examples.

Country Hills Pet Hospital also hosts an annual AAHA Day, which is essentially a free carnival for the public. The team offers AAHA cookies, games, prizes, interactive tours of the facility, kids' activities, raffles, and a sign reading, "I Love My AAHA Clinic," where pets can have their photos taken. The photos are then posted on Facebook.

"We've done that to really just celebrate the accreditation in the hospital and give clients the chance to come on in and see the behind the scenes," Zurmond said.

Allison Buerger, CVT, has worked at Country Hills Pet Hospital for a decade. She said she loves her job because the practice allows her to specialize in behavior cases—her passion—and because the staff works well together thanks to years of shared experiences.

"We are a team here; it's not the doctors at the top and everybody else at the bottom. They really include us in the care of the patients. We all get along really well, so it's just a fun team to be with. We enjoy coming here and spending the day with each other and all the different things we're able to do."

Buerger said it's rewarding to be able to use her skills as a veterinary technician instead of being relegated to tasks like restraint. She's in charge of a lot of the hospitalization care, and she works with the endoscope and laparoscope during surgeries, maintains lab work machines, and helps with client education, for instance. She's also gone out into the community to talk about physical therapy options, like laser therapy and the underwater treadmill, and other services.

“Our in-house laboratory is awesome,” she said. “We can do upper-GI biopsies with no incision. We have the laparoscope available, so we can do liver biopsies with very minimal incision. We also offer boarding here for our clients. We can provide almost all aspects of care.”

Sandra Pederson and her husband, John, became devoted clients of Country Hills Pet Hospital 18 years ago, after a veterinarian from a different practice dismissed their puppy’s vomiting and bloody diarrhea as indigestion. When it persisted, they called an emergency line for Thompson, who ran bloodwork and diagnosed little Tank with pancreatitis. The shih tzu lived another 14 years thanks to his care. When Tank died, Country Hills sent flowers and condolences.

“We really feel if it weren’t for Dr. Thompson, we wouldn’t have had our puppy as long as we did those 14 years because he kept him going. He had other health issues—bladder stones, surgeries—and they were just so caring,” Pederson said. “We both have always felt that we don’t want our pets any place else because they treat them like family.”

When the Pedersons were considering adopting a three-year-old shih tzu rescued from a puppy mill, they called Thompson for advice about the breed, and he took the time to discuss potential health issues.

Now, the practice has helped the beloved dog, Leo, through issues caused by poor treatment at the puppy mill, including gastritis and dental disease. The little dog charms with his three remaining teeth and has won prizes from the practice’s various photo contests, such as the one for pictures taken of pets watching a Green Bay Packers football game. The couple’s daughters also take their pets to Country Hills Pet Hospital; one drives an hour and a half to get to the practice.

“We just have total respect for them, and believe you me, as customers, we know they have total respect for us because they’ve always shown it,” Pederson said. “We think they’re one of the greatest clinics there can be.” ❄



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder loved learning about the dedicated team at Country Hills Pet Hospital and congratulates them on this honor.



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