



Surgery Supervisor Beverly Smith, LVT, VTS (Anesthesia), of AAHA-accredited Sheridan Animal Hospital/Veterinary Specialists of Western New York, monitors a patient's vitals during a surgery. Smith is 1 of only 10 technicians in New York State to hold the title Veterinary Technician Specialist in Anesthesia and Analgesia.

# WHERE HAVE ALL THE VET TECHS GONE?

## How the Shortage of Veterinary Technicians Is Affecting the Profession—and What Can Be Done

by Jen Reeder

THIS IS AN EXTREMELY PROMISING TIME to find work as a veterinary technician. The US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics projects employment of veterinary technologists and technicians will increase 19% from 2014 to 2024—much higher than the average growth rate for all professions of 7%. With many animal hospitals already struggling to fill staff vacancies for certified veterinary technicians, a major challenge facing practices is how to attract—and retain—qualified professionals.

Julie Legred, CVT, executive director of the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA), a nonprofit organization based in Albert Lea, Minnesota, said reasons for the shortage include salary (typically \$12/hour, though this varies depending on location), lack of recognition, and compassion fatigue. Though she has been a CVT since 1985, she said the average career span for a veterinary technician is 7–10 years (up from 5–7 years in 2011).

“I’m a rarity,” Legred said. “We work a lot of hours. We have to deal with clients, and euthanasia is a big part of what we do on a daily basis. With the wear and tear, it’s hard to stay in the profession—especially when you don’t make enough money to pay your bills. You almost have to have a second and third job to be able to make ends meet.”

When Legred signed on as NAVTA’s executive director at the end of 2012, the organization had around 3,000 members, which has since swelled to 15,000. She said there are an estimated 68,000–70,000 credentialed technicians in the US. That means there aren’t enough CVTs to support veterinarians; the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) counts more than 80,000 veterinarians as members.





Janessa Shine, CVT, performs a blood draw at Coral Springs Animal Hospital.

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—JULIE LEGRED, CVT

### Trust Your Team

Legred said veterinarians should utilize technicians effectively and trust them with any task other than prescribing, diagnosing, or performing surgery.

“They’ve gone to school, they have the knowledge, they need to use that knowledge when they get out of school, whether it’s the hands-on portion or the trust with allowing them to counsel clients in client education,” she said. “It’s giving them the opportunity to succeed.”

She said a major step the veterinary profession could take to address the tech shortage would be to only hire credentialed veterinary technicians. Not all states require credentials, so technician school graduates—sometimes shouldering \$55,000 in student loans from their two-year degree—can be discouraged working alongside or competing with technicians who lack formal training.

“Only hiring credentialed technicians in those technician positions would encourage and give great relief to the technicians paying to go to school,” Legred said.

One coping mechanism when suffering from compassion fatigue is focusing on a specific aspect of the practice, such as parasites, diabetes, or surgery, if the management team will allow it, she noted. “When you like something, you get better at it, and that’s better for the practice, too,” Legred said.

Shayne Gardner, CVT, hospital manager of AAHA-accredited Coral Springs Animal Hospital in Coral Springs, Florida, which was the 2015 AAHA-accredited Referral Practice of the Year, said veterinary technicians are an integral part of the team.

He also joked that he wasn’t sure veterinarians at the 154-employee practice know how to draw blood anymore because of effective staff utilization. “The veterinarians need to do what they do and diagnose and perform surgery,

and the technicians need to do what they do and utilize assistants to allow them to be more efficient in serving the veterinarian.”

“If you can get the right dynamic and the right team of people working that way, everybody just does a lot better. From a business standpoint, the more face time you can get your veterinarians to have with the clients, the more successful your practice is going to be,” Gardner explained.

### Attracting Talent

Gardner said the starting pay for new graduates is \$13.50–\$15/hour, but that technicians with more experience at the practice earn more than \$20/hour. He checks references and makes note of where job applicants worked as externs during school.

And if a tech has been designated a veterinary technician specialist (VTS) by NAVTA, he/she garners an automatic pay differential. “I know what they have to go through to get that specialization. It is intense,” he said.

Still, while Coral Springs Animal Hospital often attracts high-caliber candidates, Gardner said the practice has struggled with the shortage of veterinary technicians for many years, just like other hospitals across the country. He said one issue is the dropout rate in some veterinary technician programs, which often start with small class sizes to begin with—plus the fact that more veterinarians graduate each year than technicians.

To cope with the shortage, his practice is compiling a list of contact information for the program directors at each of the 224 veterinary technician programs in the US that are accredited by the AVMA's Committee on Veterinary Technician Education and Activities (CVTEA).

"Once every semester, we're going to send a flyer to each of them and ask them to post it for their students on their job forum," Gardner said.

Gardner said other outreach includes hosting Girl Scout troops and school groups to tour the facility and learn about veterinary medicine, and offering externships to students as frequently as possible because "it's kind of like a six-week interview for us."

As for what the veterinary profession can do to help address the vet tech shortage, Gardner said he agrees with the recent "chatter" about changing the title of veterinary technician to "veterinary nurse." In fact, he said Coral Springs Animal Hospital has referred to veterinary technicians as veterinary nurses for years.

"In my career, I've never 'teched' an animal back to health, but I've nursed many of them back to health," he said. "We started calling our technicians 'veterinary nurses' years and years and years ago because of what we do. That might seem like a small and insignificant thing, but changing the term to credentialed or registered

veterinary nurse may in itself get more attention from people who are looking for a profession."

Cynthia Medina, student services director at Bel-Rea Institute of Animal Technology in Denver, Colorado, one of the oldest and largest vet tech schools in America, said "career changers" comprise the majority of students. The average age is mid-20s, but she said "quite a few" students are in their 30s and 40s, and some are older people looking for something to do in their retirement years.

"When the economy is good, college numbers go down: People don't need to go to school because they have jobs," Medina said. "If your main student group is career changers, and they're already out there making a decent wage, for most of them it would be difficult to go into a helping field and take a huge pay cut."

She said in the first six months of 2016, the school's Facebook page for graduate vet tech jobs has had about 120 postings just for the metro Denver area alone, and that she receives frequent requests from out-of-state employers for graduates willing to relocate. Because starting salaries for new grads in the Denver area stalled around \$11–\$13/hour in the last decade, she said many graduates left the state—and experienced techs left the field. The issue was compounded by a rental housing

crisis in Denver that led to the average apartment price rising from \$728 to \$1,256 per month.

"We did a salary comparison recently . . . if you start at \$12 an hour for 40 hours a week, you make almost \$25,000 a year," she said. "Your monthly take-home pay is only \$1,638. So if you're paying for that basic one-bedroom apartment, you only have \$382 a month left to live on—that's groceries, that's health

insurance, that's childcare, that's medical expenses, that's transportation, recreation, retirement planning—everything under the sun, plus your student loans."

## Veterinary Technician's Oath

I solemnly dedicate myself to aiding animals and society by providing excellent care and services for animals, by alleviating animal suffering, and by promoting public health.

I accept my obligations to practice my profession conscientiously and with sensitivity, adhering to the profession's Code of Ethics, and furthering my knowledge and competence through a commitment to lifelong learning.

## What About Veterinary Assistants?

One of the reasons cited by the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) for the projected job growth for veterinary technicians and technologists of 19% by 2024 is "veterinarians will continue to prefer higher-skilled veterinary technologists and technicians over veterinary assistants for more complex work." But this doesn't mean there aren't opportunities for veterinary assistants as well.

The BLS projects a less robust job outlook for veterinary assistants—a 9% increase by 2024—but it's still higher than the national average for all occupations. Shayne Gardner, CVT, hospital manager of AAHA-accredited Coral Springs Animal Hospital in Coral Springs, Florida, said veterinary assistants are valued and play a crucial role in helping a practice maximize efficiency.

"It comes down to proper utilization," Gardner said. "I think that one good technician who knows how to delegate and utilize the system with two assistants could probably accomplish four times as much as two technicians could."

For instance, he said people with higher hourly rates should not be spending a lot of time walking dogs, folding laundry, cleaning kennels, and stocking. Veterinary assistants should be the team members who restrain animals for blood draws, instead of technicians holding for technicians or veterinarians, he said.

"The role of the veterinary assistant—I don't think it's one that should be downplayed because it is as important as any other position in the hospital," Gardner said. "And when it's utilized appropriately, it makes everybody in the hospital much more efficient. It allows them to do the job they should be doing."



Jessica Krafthefer, CVT, at Riverview Animal Hospital with intern Kayla Bentley

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—SHAYNE GARDNER, CVT

So to attract CVTs, veterinary hospitals are offering higher salaries, she said. "If we can consistently keep it at an average \$15–\$16 an hour and up, you're going to see a lot more career changers," Medina said.

Bel-Rea is also seeing more animal hospitals offering signing bonuses, which start at \$300–\$500—one recent grad's was more than \$1,000—as well as offers to pay for relocation expenses and even to cover housing in areas with limited rental options. Medina said practices will also offer full coverage of health insurance costs, some of which is a tax writeoff.

"I'm always telling managers, 'You need to tally the amount that your benefits package is worth and show that to applicants,'" she said.

### Culture Is Key

Medina also suggests offering continuing education support (whether in the form of time off or funds to



pursue it), acknowledgment for bringing in new clients, and financial planning services.

While these salary and benefits trends might create sticker shock for many hospitals, she recommends hiring veterinary practice consultants to help save money through inventory control and smart utilization of employees.

“I’m recommending to a lot of employers that they look at what the needs are right now of their businesses and of the profession,” Medina said. “The schools would love to work with the employers on these things.”

Mark McConnell, BVMS, MRCVS, co-owner of AAHA-accredited Emergency Veterinary Hospital in Springfield, Oregon, and president-elect of AAHA’s Board of Directors, said the importance of a practice’s culture cannot be overemphasized for attracting and retaining high-quality veterinary technicians.

He said while the emphasis in animal hospital cultures has traditionally focused on practicing the best medicine, culture needs to incorporate providing a good work environment that promotes personal and professional growth. “Then the high level and high standard of medicine just falls into place,” he explained.

McConnell added that having the right people in management is key—and ensuring managers are properly educated and trained in managing technicians. He said AAHA’s Veterinary Management Institute and AAHA’s Veterinary Management School can help train managers and develop a positive practice culture.

Still, while McConnell said the veterinary profession needs to do a lot of work to recognize and value CVTs, technicians also need to act professionally and be advocates for their own careers.

“They need to take charge of, ‘How will I become a better team player? What is my role for creating my own career path? What can I do within my practice to keep engaged and continually learning?’” he noted.

One thing hospitals can do to support dedicated CVTs during National Veterinary Technician Week and beyond is to educate the public about the profession. McConnell

suggested veterinarians have a brief conversation with clients in the exam room to help explain everything that vet techs are licensed to do.

“A certified veterinary technician has extensive training in anatomy, physiology, pharmacology, anesthesia, behavior, client education. . . . They’re interacting with controlled substances,” he said. “There’s a lot of responsibility that comes with being a veterinary technician.”

McConnell said veterinarians should value and respect CVTs as colleagues. “The demands of patient care are growing. With that, we need to have a more skilled team, and the certified veterinary technician is crucial to that team,” he said. “They are the backbone of our profession.” ✱

#### For More Information

- The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a job growth rate of 19% for veterinary technicians by 2024: [bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/veterinary-technologists-and-technicians.htm](https://bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/veterinary-technologists-and-technicians.htm)
- AVMA’s National Veterinary Technician Week page: [avma.org/Events/pethealth/Pages/National-Veterinary-Technician-Week.aspx](https://avma.org/Events/pethealth/Pages/National-Veterinary-Technician-Week.aspx)
- National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America: [navta.net](https://navta.net)
- Coral Springs Animal Hospital: [coralspringsanimalhosp.com](https://coralspringsanimalhosp.com)
- Bel-Rae Institute of Animal Technology: [belrea.edu](https://belrea.edu)
- Emergency Veterinary Hospital: [emergencyvethosp.com](https://emergencyvethosp.com)
- AAHA’s Veterinary Management Institute: [aaha.org/vmi](https://aaha.org/vmi)
- AAHA’s Veterinary Management School: [aaha.org/vms](https://aaha.org/vms)



Award-winning freelance journalist Jen Reeder recently spent a day shadowing a certified veterinary technician at AAHA-accredited Riverview Animal Hospital in Durango, Colorado, and gained an even greater appreciation for the passion, knowledge, and commitment of veterinary professionals. She is so grateful to everyone who dedicates their life to helping animals and the people who love them.