Veterinary technicians are making the most out of really erratic and tough situation. Veterinary medicine is no different than most other businesses—there’s been a ton of hurt throughout the profession as a result of the pandemic and associated economic repercussions. However, don’t believe for one moment there also isn’t a great deal of good happening.

Beckie Mossor, RVT, is like a light bulb. She has bright ideas all the time. This one, called the Veterinary Industry Giving Tree, was created October 22 to help raise dollars for colleagues in need, such as a technician who lost her job and insurance and is fighting cancer. The Veterinary Industry Giving Tree Facebook page was up only about a month, as Mossor (with colleagues Lily Preston, RVT and Crystal Vaquera, RVT) wanted to be sure to give out the money raised well before Christmas and Channukah, which added up to over $3,100 (as of deadline day for this story).

Mossor says, “There are so many people in the profession who are working and every day they give it their all to help the animals. Then, they return to their homes with some significant financial problem of their own to deal with—and they need help. Even if people may receive, say $100—and that’s not huge. I want to help more people and raise more money. But I also think even a little bit of help makes some difference which is better than no difference at all.”

Mossor notes that while Not One More Vet (a Facebook group supporting guidance and awareness for depression and suicide) has an emergency fund, and veterinary practices have local funds—there’s no national effort as Mossor launched. “I know we started small but at least we started,” she says. I suggested that perhaps industry partners attach themselves to the idea to give money and to raise money. “Oh, I’m all about it if that happens,” she says.

Mossor notes that all staff is paying a price but technicians are often particularly hit hard.

Indeed, some veterinary practices have seen a significant rise in business, in part, because of the unmistakable stampede to adopt and foster pets from animal shelters at the start of the pandemic.

Data on this is hard to come by at this point, but according to the PetPoint data management system, among about 1,100 shelter organizations, in March, 2020, adoption rates increased 11 percent (compared to March, 2019), and were up 18 percent this April (compared to April, 2019). These numbers don’t include the significant number of pets going into foster homes.

Still, even this increase appears way low to what has been anecdotally evident from March even into the fall months, particularly in large urban areas. In Chicago, for example, as far as anyone knows—there were never so few dogs and cats at Chicago Animal Care and Control, the Windy City’s municipal facility.

“Clearly, people wanted to do the right thing for shelters who put out a cry for help,” says Chumkee Aziz, DVM DABVP (shelter medicine), Houston-based President of the Board of the Association of Shelter Veterinarians.

With far fewer animals to care for, shelters were able operate with less personnel and volunteer hours not so much required, a necessity when so little was known at the onset of the pandemic.

“We needed shelters to step up and further develop their community foster orientation, and foster programs for cats most especially,” says Aziz. “We achieved this. The hope is that moving forward foster programs are more established, and individuals who never before fostered will do it again, and again.”

But why the run to clear the shelters? Certainly, people responded to a cry for help. “The good in people to do something altruistic was evident” Aziz says. But was it something more?

The Veterinary Industry Giving Tree was created to help raise dollars for colleagues in need, such as a technician who lost her job and insurance and is fighting cancer.
“In part, it was pragmatic,” she adds. “We were all home and unable to connect with one another, so why not a pet? But I also think we were unconsciously seeking something to depend on for joy and for love.”

The obvious—fewer animals euthanized and more animals in homes. How’s that for good news? It’s also good news for industry, as many companies are actually having pretty good years.

And pets have appeared to be therapeutic. According to American Pet Products Association COVID-19 Pulse Study: Pet Ownership During the Pandemic, Volume 2, July 2020, 71 percent of respondents indicate they would rather continue spending time with their pet(s) while social distancing from people as a way to reduce stress and increase their sense of well-being during the pandemic. And 59 percent of pet parents indicated they feel more closely bonded with their pets due to COVID-19.

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Being home all the time—anecdotally, veterinarians report clients noting pet behaviors they didn’t previously observe.

One certified technician (who asked to be off-the-record) told me, “One pet parent asked to use telehealth to show me how her cat walks on the ceiling. And that her dog sometimes meows like a cat. All I learned is that this client clearly has a drinking problem.”

Questions from curious pet parents are increasingly being addressed using telehealth services for collaborative pet care—connecting clients and their pets with veterinary professionals—like PetPro Connect. And an associated platform directed at pet parents with tons of content, almost like a TV pet news channel, called PetPro Tele+.

Petzey offers an on-demand 24/7 way to reach a veterinary professional. When appointments may be hard to come by in some places, particularly for new clients, this service offers instant access for $20 per consultation. Petzey argues this service doesn’t compete with practices but augments vet care as a front-end triage service. One example, a technician using telehealth helped to guide delivery of puppies.

So far, more than so good. The service’s soft launch was in July, and though they won’t say how many pet parents they’ve serviced, CEO Mike Ortega says they’ve exceeded expectations.

He says a part of that secret sauce are millennials, who now comprise the largest sector of pet parents, and who seek out instant soup replies and prefer using technology to help them to feel better about their fur babies.

Weave is a veterinary software and phone/text system to enhance and support client communication, and that too is thriving in the pandemic. Indeed, millennials not only enjoy these types of services, they’re coming to expect them. For example, according to a marketing research agency TrendCandy study, 83 percent of millennials expect a follow-up call or text or any form of communication within 48 hours to check in on their pet after a visit.

Another positive was simply how the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) valiantly took control of the messaging regarding SARS Co-V2 and COVID-19 providing real time factual information to both the profession, the pet owning public as well as the media. The AVMA worked in tandem with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and World Health Organization to insure consistent messaging. The AVMA also worked with the World Small Animal Veterinary Association, Association of Shelter Veterinarians and so many others (including myself). With so much misinformation on the Net, the AVMA has proved to be a dependable source of information.

I realize it’s a challenging statement to make because for so many the pandemic has been devastating, life altering and too many we all know have lost lives. Still, I believe some good has come out of this horror.

ABOUT STEVE DALE

Steve Dale, CABC, has been a member of the Winn Feline Foundation Board of Directors for thirteen years. Steve is a founding member of the CATalyst Council, and serves on the Board of Directors of the Human Animal Bond Association. He’s a contributor to several books including The Cat: Clinical Medicine and Management, edited by Dr. Susan Little; and Treatment and Care of the Veterinary Geriatric Patient, edited by Dr. Mary Gardner and Dr. Dani McVety; and he edited Decoding Your Dog, authored by members of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. Steve is the host of three radio talk shows, and he speaks at veterinary and animal welfare conferences around the world. His website is www.stevedalepetworld.com.