



## Addressing the Need for Mental Health Resources in the Veterinary Community

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**Contact:** Kevin Hoffman, Public Information Officer, (608) 224-5005, [kevin.hoffman@wisconsin.gov](mailto:kevin.hoffman@wisconsin.gov)

*A commentary from Dr. Darlene Konkle, state veterinarian, DATCP Division of Animal Health*

MADISON, Wis. – Mental Health Awareness month is an opportunity for us to take stock in the well-being of our friends and family. It’s a reminder to give our support to those who need it most, and to check-in on those whose need for help may not be as apparent.

Veterinary professionals are especially vulnerable to mental health struggles. They experience compassion fatigue from daily discussions with their clients about illness, death and grief. They are asked to manage an overwhelming workload, which can often strain their delicate work-life balance. They can face crushing debt that persists long after they’ve left veterinary school. In recent years, more veterinarians have been victims of cyberbullying by those who are unhappy with the care received by their animal companion.

All of this pressure takes a physical and emotional toll. According to a study published in 2019 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, veterinarians are up to five times as likely to die by suicide compared to the general population. Previous research has found that depression, burnout and anxiety are prevalent among veterinarians and veterinary technicians. It’s a profession that can be simultaneously rewarding and emotionally draining.

It’s these challenges that recently led to the creation of the [Veterinary Professional Assistance Program](#) (VPAP), which provides confidential assistance to help overcome the physical and mental challenges associated with the profession. The idea was conceived by the [Veterinary Examining Board](#) in collaboration with the [Wisconsin Veterinary Medical Association](#) (WVMA) after the WVMA recognized an uptick in the number of calls from veterinarians who were in crisis. The veterinary community needed somewhere to turn, and the hope was that the VPAP would become the first line of defense against the growing number of issues plaguing the profession. The majority of veterinary practices in Wisconsin are small businesses, so access to this type of support was something that may have been impossible or unaffordable through their personal health insurance.

Since the VPAP launched, it has offered assistance to veterinarians experiencing family issues; support for finding child and adult care; guidance with legal and financial issues; counseling for mental health struggles; and a number of other resources to help veterinarians overcome the obstacles they may face throughout their careers. The program has hosted specialized workshops on suicide prevention and substance abuse, and it also teaches veterinarians how to better manage their clinics and personnel.

It’s easy to feel isolated in the veterinary community, but the VPAP and programs like it open doors that can provide much needed perspective and assistance that may otherwise not be possible. Above all else, veterinarians should know they don’t have to face this battle alone and can lean on others in their darkest moments. Veterinarians and their teams provide critical services to agriculture, companion animals, wildlife and research, and any support we can provide in return benefits us all in the long run.

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