

LONG ISLAND

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

Shortage of veterinarians grows worse with rising caseloads, bullying and burnout



MENU

JG



WATCH NOW • 2:14

Vet: 'We can only do what we can do'

Booking an appointment with a veterinarian is becoming more difficult for some Long Islanders. NewsdayTV's Steve Langford reports. Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams



By Joan Gralla
joan.gralla@newsday.com

Updated December 10, 2022 4:10 pm



Listen to this article now

00:00

 1.0x

07:25

A national shortage of veterinarians has been exacerbated in recent years by the increase in remote work, which has allowed countless more pet lovers to bring cats and dogs into their homes.

Experts say these rising caseloads — along with pandemic-related safeguards that lengthened wait times — have not always brought out the best behaviors in pet owners and are leading to burnout among veterinarians, spurring some to retire or switch to regulatory or research posts. And student debt is discouraging others from pursuing the career.

The result is there are too few veterinarians — around the country and in the New York area — even though earning a living caring for cute, furry patients would appear to be an enviable job.

"It's a tough profession," said Dr. Carmen Fuentealba, dean and professor at Brookville's Long Island University College of Veterinary Medicine, which graduates its first class next year.

WHAT TO KNOW

- **A national shortage of veterinarians** has been exacerbated in recent years by an increase in pet adoptions and burnout related to the pandemic.
- **Long Island has fewer than 1,000** licensed veterinarians as some retire or switch to regulatory or research posts and not enough students enter the field.
- **Veterinarians and their staff** have been subjected to abusive behavior from pet owners frustrated with longer wait times and delayed care, experts say.

Fuentealba said the shortage had been going on for many years, well before the COVID-19 pandemic, but it's become more noticeable "because it is affecting the general practitioner for companion animals."

Sign up for the NewsdayTV newsletter

From breaking news to special features and documentaries, the NewsdayTV team is covering the issues that matter to you.

Sign up

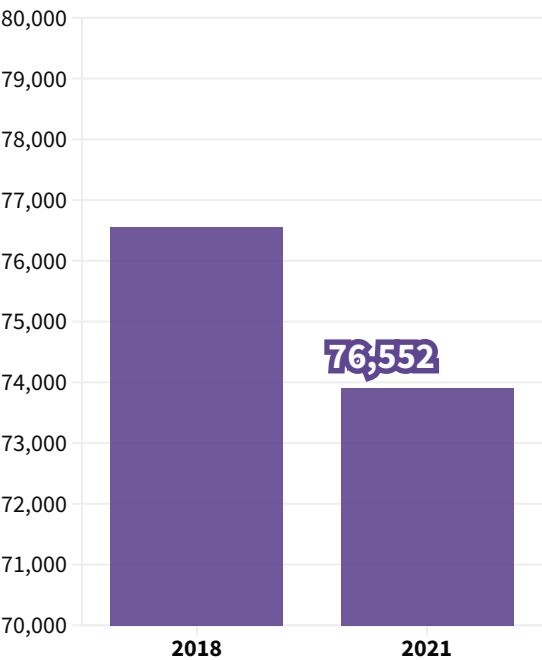
By clicking Sign up, you agree to our [privacy policy](#).

Though the ranks of vets in private practice had been growing fairly steadily in recent years, the U.S. total slipped to 73,900 in 2021, from 76,552 in 2018, according to the American Veterinary Medical

Association.

The New York State Veterinary Medical Society said there are about 7,163 licensed veterinarians statewide, while Long Island has fewer than 1,000.

U.S. private practice veterinarians



Source: American Veterinary Medical Association

 A Flourish chart

Demand also has soared as veterinary medicine increasingly resembles the price and quality of care people receive.

“We’re able to do a lot more than we could before, so that means we have a lot more services to offer,” said Dr. Alastair Cribb, dean and professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University in Massachusetts. There has been “a big jump in how far people are willing to go in ensuring their pet gets the best care possible.”

As a result, vets now not only must cope with more patients, but ones that need much more time.

But longer waits to receive care for their pets, along with general pandemic stresses, also have strained the relationships between owners and their vets.

“There is bullying, a lot of cyberattacks,” Fuentealba added.

A backlog of cases

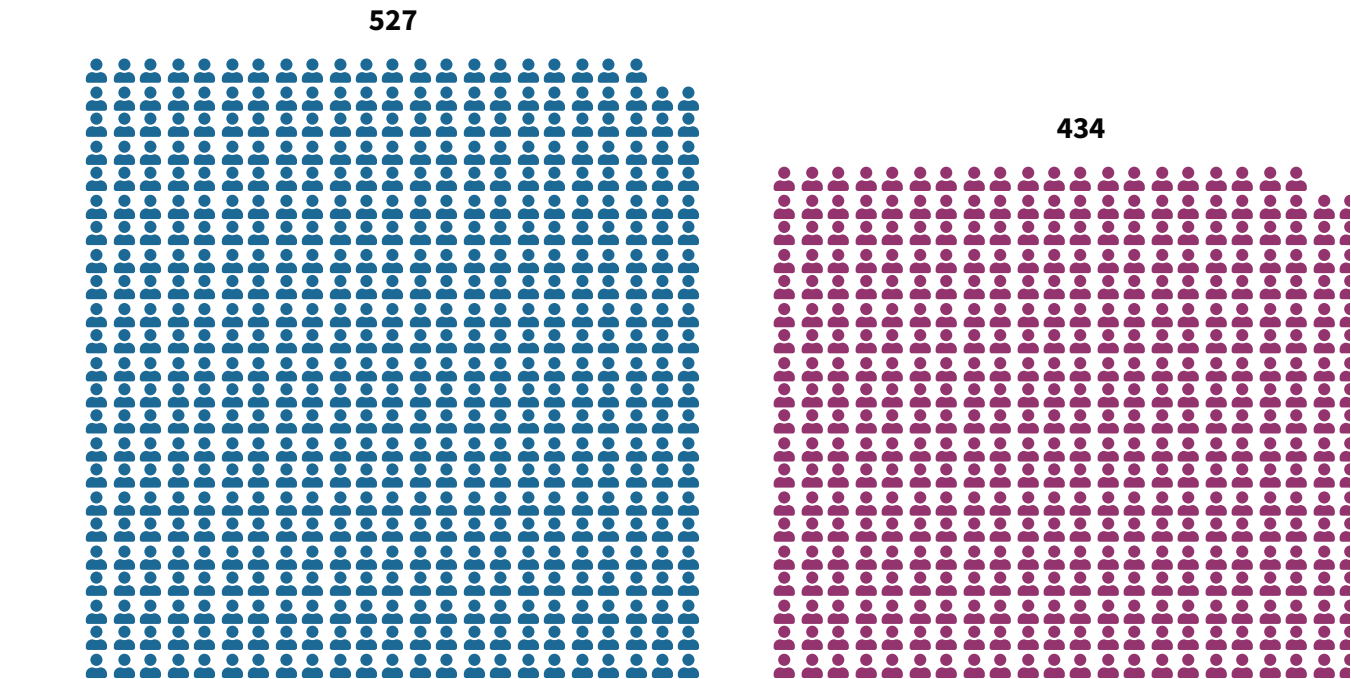
Dr. Diane Levitan with technicians, at Peace Love Pets Veterinary Care in Commack. Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

Dr. Ann Hohenhaus, senior veterinarian at New York City's Schwarzman Animal Center, said by email that "the pandemic created two medical care bottlenecks: first a backlog of deferred wellness care and lower patients ... when employees contracted COVID and appointments had to be cancelled."

She added: "There are not enough people going into the veterinary profession, and this is compounded by the increase in pet ownership the industry has experienced during the pandemic."

Licensed veterinarians on Long Island

= 1 Nassau Suffolk



Not all may be actively working.

A Flourish data visualization

In October, the New York State Veterinary Medical Society termed the shortfall of vets and staff “acute,” adding it is “very common” for overworked clinics to turn away clients even if "other nearby hospitals do not have enough capacity to take on those cases, either."

Practices are working through the backlog of patients that arose during the pandemic, Dr. David E. Lee, director of the Center for Veterinary Business and Entrepreneurship at Cornell University, said by email. “But we were also seeing sicker animals with health problems that had gotten significantly worse with reduced access to veterinary care,” he wrote.

'Very hard to find a vet'

“It’s very hard to find a vet,” said Pamela Green, executive director for Kent Animal Shelter in Calverton. "We had a very difficult time since our vet who worked here for 20 years retired, and we searched for quite a while.”

On the flip side, job-hunters should see more opportunities. The number of open veterinary positions will climb 19% from 2021 to 2031, nearly four times the 5% average increase for all occupations, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says.

About 60% of LIU's third-year veterinary students already have job offers or requests from potential employers to stay in touch, Fuentealba said.

Laura Gundersen, a student at Long Island University's School of Veterinary Medicine, at Peace Love Pets Veterinary Care in Commack. Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

But four years at veterinary school are challenging and expensive — students last year graduated owing an average of \$186,430, a 17% increase from 2011, according to the American Veterinary Medicine Association.

"You have to be very competitive GPA-wise, but ... it's not just grades that are going to make you a good vet," said Kelly Locke, 26, of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, now in her third year at LIU. "It's about having the compassion and caring, and having the interpersonal skills."

\$132,825

The average base salary for veterinarians in New York State

Though many of the nation's 33 veterinary schools are expanding classes — and LIU is one of about three new programs — the scarcity of veterinarians probably will persist, experts said, noting there are six times as many schools for physicians and osteopaths.

Less techs and support staff

Burnout also has thinned the ranks of technicians and front office staffers, compounding the difficulties.

"From my vet tech side, it seems the demand is so high now that people are paying astronomically more than many vets can afford, [but] they are actually just making what they should," said Elaine James, practice manager at Mattituck-Laurel Veterinary Hospital.

Angry outbursts from frustrated pet owners also have prompted career switches, experts said. "There was a lot of burnout with the pandemic," James said. "People became much more abusive toward the staff."

Vets and techs have worryingly high rates of suicide, studies show. Men who are vets are 2.1 times — and women 3.5 times — as likely as the general U.S. population to kill themselves, the American Veterinary Medical Association says.

"We are just so empathetic. Vets are a rare breed," said Dr. Diane Levitan, associate professor in LIU's department of veterinary clinical services. "A lot of people just aren't very understanding, and they are very demanding and we have to make choices in how we prioritize patients, and it's not personal."

How to help your pet

Experts recommend pet owners get to know a practice through yearly checkups and stress the importance of preventative care to help their animals stay healthy and detect problems early.

"Be patient, be well-organized, and be sort of consistent with your appointments — and then you will be able to get in in a reasonable amount of time," Fuentealba said.

Said Cribb: "It's really important that we have the vet-client partnership" to improve diagnoses and devise treatments.

To better assess emergencies, Tufts added trained staff to answer these phone calls. “They are not going to make the diagnosis,” Cribb said, but will advise whether the pet should be seen immediately or can wait.

As a general guide, difficulty breathing or walking, coughing, digestive upsets, injuries or bleeding and any drastic changes in behavior all could signal emergencies, vets said.

Some clinics are adding telemedicine services. “You’re going to see this evolve in veterinary medicine the same way it evolved in human medicine,” Cribb said.

But as physicians have found, telemedicine has its limits.

“Sometimes telemedicine can be helpful, when you can’t get in where you need to go, so you can get answers quickly,” Levitan said. However: “You can’t give too much advice over the phone, unless you have a doctor/patient relationship — and a lot of the times, the advice is, ‘You really need to go see a vet.’”

An 'acute' shortage

The national shortage of veterinarians and technicians is an “acute” problem in this state too, according to the New York State Veterinary Medical Society.

- **New York State** has about 7,163 licensed veterinarians, though they may not all be active.
- **Suffolk** led with 527 vets, followed by **Nassau**, which had 434.
- **New York State** had 5,889 veterinary technicians, with 515 in Suffolk and 309 in Nassau.
- **About 50%** of the state's 7,417,224 households own a dog or cat.
- **Base salaries** for veterinarians in this state average \$132,825; for those with at least a decade of experience, that figure climbs to \$188,970. Specialists, who may have many more years of training, can earn multiples of those averages.

Sources: New York State Veterinary Medical Society; New York State Office of the Professions; U.S. Census, Indeed.com

By Joan Gralla

joan.gralla@newsday.com

TOP STORIES



Fill the box: Amityville program helps homeless for the holidays

🕒 2m read



New Yorkers using public transit have longest commute, report says

🕒 2m read



Cold but sunny Tuesday, Wednesday, forecasters say

Advertisement

MOST POPULAR

AG James sues East Meadow nursing home over claims of fraud, abuse

51 mins ago



New Yorkers using public transit have longest commute, report says



LI bakeries with traditional holiday treats

46 mins ago



Feds: 11 top union officials plead guilty in bribery case

47 mins ago

Siena poll: Gov. Hochul didn't make good on many 2022 goals



Advertisement

LATEST VIDEOS

Blessings in a Box volunteer: 'People are struggling'



Fitness guru loses 130 pounds, then helps the community

1:59

'It was very sad news for us'

1:37

Advertisement

SPONSORED CONTENT

NOLET'S Gin Cocktails That Will Have You Rocking Around the Christmas Tree [↗](#)

BY NOLET'S SILVER GIN

NOLET'S Silver is a fresh and surprising take on gin that features real botanicals of rose, peach and raspberry.



ALSO OF INTEREST

[New York Yankees](#)

[Long Island Restaurants & Dining Out | Newsday...](#)

[New York Mets](#)

Didn't find what you were looking for?

Search newsday.com



Quick Links

- About Us
- Subscribe
- Today's paper
- Email newsletters
- Newsday Live
- Newsday Charities
- Careers

Partners

- Newsday Productions
- Newsday Cars
- Newsday Homes
- Newsday Jobs
- Newsday Connect
- Hometown Shopper

Manage my account

Media Kit

Brand 360

Mobile & TV apps

Contests

Archives

News

Long Island

Sports

Opinion

Politics

News

Business

Towns

High school sports

More

Funbook

Obituaries

Crosswords

Things to Do

Entertainment

Restaurants

Family

Travel

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of service](#) | [Subscription terms](#) | [Your ad choices](#) | [Cookies Settings](#) | [California Privacy Rights](#)
[About Us](#) | [Contact Newsday](#) | [Reprints & permissions](#) | [Advertise with Newsday](#) | [Help](#)

Copyright ©2022 Newsday. All rights reserved.

