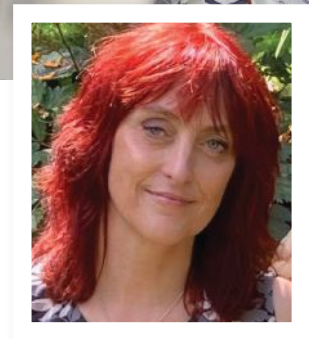




**COMMUNITY SERVICE**

Cholette Ness (right) works in a Seattle Veterinary Outreach mobile clinic alongside Kristin Kemper, DVM.



**CLINIC CHAMPION:**

# Cholette Ness, LVT

Seattle Veterinary Outreach, Washington

**F**rom India to Mexico to St. Croix, Cholette Ness, LVT, has traveled around the world helping animals in need throughout her 24-year career in veterinary medicine. But it wasn't until she started working with the unhoused and low-income communities of downtown Seattle that she finally "found her place" and sense of purpose with Seattle Veterinary Outreach. For her unrelenting drive to help the animals and people who need it most, Ness is a Clinic Champion.

Courtesy Seattle Veterinary Outreach staff



Ness developed her love of animals at a young age while visiting her grandparents' cattle ranch in Montana. She watched in awe as her grandmother would throw bales of hay off the side of the truck with what seemed like superhuman strength. Ness would help her grandmother as they brought the calves in during the winter and bottle-fed them in the kitchen.

"That's just how I grew up. I don't have any siblings, so my dogs were always my companions," says Ness. "I think it's in my blood; it came from my grandma."

After studying veterinary assisting at Pima Medical Institute in Washington, Ness worked in several different roles as a veterinary professional, including small-animal companion medicine, exotics, teaching, research, and rescue work.

"It's not that I got bored at regular clinics. It's just I always felt like there was more out there. You go to a clinic and the owners usually have the means to take care of their animals. I always wanted to help the animals that really weren't being helped," says Ness. "I started going to [Cancun] Mexico and being a part of spay/neuter clinics there. That's actually how I met my husband. It was the hardest, hardest job I've ever had.

"It was hot and dirty and exhausting—and it was amazing. I loved it."

Ness also assisted in St. Croix following hurricanes with the ASPCA and later became a professional responder for the ASPCA, working on dogfighting, cockfighting, and hoarding cases. Her professional journey even took her to South Asia, where she volunteered for a week with Wildlife SOS in India to help care for elephants and bears in their conservation and care center.

But it was back in Mexico where Ness saw the precursor of what would be her ultimate purpose: connecting with people in need through veterinary care.

"[In Mexico] we would set up in a school and get off the bus early in the morning to find just lines and lines of people with their pets," says Ness. "These people can't really afford anything for themselves. They stand there all day in the heat with their pets just waiting for their turn for surgery and some of these people would bring us food every day. They hardly had any money, but they were so grateful that they would come and feed us.

"And that's where I realized, wow, I'm not just here helping animals. These people are so grateful that they're feeding us every day. And so that's where it started for me. That's when I realized: yep, this is what I'm supposed to do. Because I'm making an impact more than I ever thought I could. This is what I was made for."

Ness has continued that mission as part of Seattle Veterinary Outreach (SVO), an organization that connects Seattle's underserved communities with health care, mental health resources, and social services and provides free veterinary services for their pets. They do so by deploying mobile clinics and seeing patients in different areas of need throughout the greater metropolitan area.

"Cholette is passionate about providing services to people and pets in need," says Hanna Ekstrom, DVM, founder of SVO. "She is empathetic, organized, and understands that sometimes one needs to work with what is available to help the pet, even if it is not what you might choose to do in a more academic setting."



Every day, veterinary nurses/technicians make a positive impact on their clients, patients, coworkers, and greater community. But the stories behind each and every one of these

professionals are often overlooked due to the selfless nature of working in veterinary medicine.

*Today's Veterinary Nurse* aims to shine a light on some of these stories with its Clinic Champions series. Each issue, TVN and Midmark will honor a veterinary nurse for their contributions in community service, scholarship, advocacy, or innovation. This series will highlight unsung heroes who make a lasting impact on their patients and community.

At the end of the year, 1 of the 4 honorees will be recognized as the Clinic Champion of the Year. This individual will receive a trip to VMX 2023 in Orlando, Florida, including registration, hotel, and airfare.

→ To nominate a veterinary nurse/technician, visit [bit.ly/ClinicChampions](https://bit.ly/ClinicChampions).



We interviewed Ness to discuss her transformative experience with SVO and how it has helped bring a source of hope into her life:

**TODAY'S VETERINARY NURSE: You said that you have 3 dogs, 1 bird, and 15 cats in your home. So, what in the world is it like with 15 cats and 3 dogs in your house?**

**CHOLETTE NESS:** Luckily, I have a big house (laughs). Honestly, it's not bad. The cats are a colony from Mexico. They have their hiding places and they do their thing and you would have no idea that we have that many animals in this house. You'd have no idea. They just have their spots and it's a lot of litter box cleaning. A lot of poop scooping! But it's just the way it is, and I wouldn't want it any other way. Well, maybe without the poop scooping.

**TVN: What does a normal day look like working with SVO?**

**NESS:** We have different places we collaborate with and we set up pop-up clinics. We go to a lot of food banks or shelters. We have a couple of ambulances that we converted into little clinics. So, a typical day for me is I go and pick up my ambulance and I drive down to the location, usually in downtown Seattle. Our ambulances are packed with stuff: tents, tables, chairs, bins full of donations, leashes, collars, toys, treats, food for cats and dogs, and some other things. People sign up and we bring them into the ambulance to do the exam and get

**FOR PEOPLE AND PETS**

Founded in 2019, Seattle Veterinary Outreach aims to increase access to health care for members of the city's underserved communities and their pets with its mobile clinics.

them whatever medication they need. We always send them home with flea meds. We take them over to the resource table, we give them food that they need, leashes, toys, whatever. We also have an organization, Pawsitive Alliance ([pawsitivealliance.org](http://pawsitivealliance.org)), that has loaned us an ID tag machine. A lot of the people are just so excited that they get an ID tag for their dog's collar; I had no idea how impactful that would be, but it is. People are just so excited to have a tag for their pet with their name on it.

We see sometimes 25 pets in a few hours. Sometimes we have to turn them down because we only have a couple of hours and sometimes only have 1 doctor. But we try to see as many as we can. We're growing so fast, and people are in such need. ... It's fast. It's hectic. But it's fun.

**TVN: You spoke about how this experience opened your eyes to how you're helping people. How has this experience changed your perspective?**

**NESS:** I found that a lot of these people, all they have in the world is their animals. When they find us and we say, "yes, we can help you; we're going to take care of that ear infection," or whatever it may be, we've had people that just break down in tears because they're so happy and grateful to know that we're going to help them. That actually happens a lot more than you would think.

I get to hear their stories and what life is like for them and how their animals pretty much just keep them going. And we've found that a lot of people in this community don't really take very good care of

Courtesy Seattle Veterinary Outreach staff (3)



## How to Make a Difference

Seattle Veterinary Outreach (SVO) is only scratching the surface of need in Seattle and beyond.

“We’re so busy and there are people asking us to go to all of these different locations. We could do this if we had the funding,” says Cholette Ness, LVT. “We could do this 5 days a week and we would because we love it.”

Hanna Ekstrom, DVM, hopes for a future where this model extends beyond Seattle and into other communities of need.

“I hope that SVO continues to grow and becomes financially stable enough to provide services in other cities,” says Dr. Ekstrom. “SVO’s model can provide so many long-term gains in pet health—we do not just provide a quick fix to health issues, but help guide homeless people to social and medical services that can result in long-term improvements in the



quality of life for both ends of the leash, people and pets.”

SVO is looking for veterinarians, veterinary nurses, and veterinary assistant volunteers. They

also form partnerships with other businesses and accept donations online. To inquire about volunteering, contact [vettech@seattlevet.org](mailto:vettech@seattlevet.org), and to learn more visit [seattlevet.org](http://seattlevet.org).

themselves. Mostly because they don’t trust people. ... They don’t trust doctors, but they’ll do anything in the world for their pets.

I had a woman who was homeless for a long time, brought her dogs to see us, and had some medical issues. We helped her with that, and she was so grateful. She reached out to me not too long ago, needing the vaccine records because she was finally getting housing. She was so happy that her pets got vaccinated and treated and now she was able to get into housing. She sent me pictures of her pets in their new home. It’s stuff like that. I didn’t know that I have this impact on people—I’m this random person they meet at the clinic, but they’re just so happy that they’re sending me pictures to show how happy they are and what life is like for them now. Now they have a home for their dog.

Another thing we find with people in this community is that a lot of them struggle to even be in a home because of different things, but they want their pets to have a home and they know that their pet deserves

something better. They will do whatever they can for their pets, including getting themselves housing.

We’re trying to develop a foster program, because there’s also a lot of people in this community that refuse to go into the hospital because they don’t know what will happen to their pets. ... We had a woman who lost her home and was living on people’s couches, and she had 2 cats. We fostered them for her until she got a home. That’s another little project that Seattle Veterinary Outreach does. We dabble in everything we can.

We do this to help the animals—we set up these clinics for the animals, but then after listening to these people’s stories and what life is like for them, we learn what needs are out there. That’s why we started this foster care program and we also started our One Health outreach, because a lot of people don’t go to get medical care for themselves. We now have a doctor, nurse, and a social worker that help out on Fridays. They provide anything from wound care to resources for whatever is needed. Sometimes all they need is an ID so they can get a bank account and their tax returns.



CLINIC CHAMPIONS

Just by talking to these people that come for their pets, you know, just have conversations with them and get to know them and see how we can help. That's something I love about Seattle Veterinary Outreach—it doesn't end with the pet.

**TVN: Personal wellbeing and mental wellness has become an important topic for veterinary professionals. As someone who works closely with people who are experiencing great personal and financial burdens, do you find this difficult personally or do you find hope in being able to help?**

**NESS:** Definitely a little bit of both. As an example, we have a client with a cat that has cancer and we don't know how long it's going to be. This cat is this woman's life, and she's in tears. It's heartbreaking, because I know that this cat is all she has and there isn't anything more we can do for her. So that is hard and heartbreaking. There are also situations where we could do so much more if we had the funding. There is this dog we've been seeing for a while that has mammary tumors. If we had the funding in place, we could probably remove this mammary tumor, and the dog would live longer. But right now we don't have that option, and the dog is getting sicker and sicker and the poor woman is pretty upset. But we also are able to provide euthanasia for them, so that's something we can offer to help them through.

It also gives me hope, because when I was working with the ASPCA and working with dogfighting cases and cockfighting cases, it really kind of destroyed my hope in humanity. Then I work for a place like Seattle Veterinary Outreach, and I see these people that would do anything in the world for their pet. They can't feed themselves, but they would do whatever they can for their pet. That brings me hope. Just knowing that there's love in the world and good in the world, and being able to help treat even just a simple ear infection. We make the dog comfortable. Otherwise, that dog would suffer because the people have no money and no resources.

It brings me hope knowing that at least 1 more animal in this world is not suffering, at least for the moment. That's why I do it. Maybe I don't have a huge impact in the world, but at least I have an impact on that dog and a person today. That brings me hope and makes me happy. That's why I do it. It's stressful and exhausting, but it makes me happy. — *By Andy Zunz TVN*



2022  
TODAY'S VETERINARY NURSE  
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