CLINIC CHAMPION:

Windi Wojdak, RVT

Rural Area Veterinary Services (RAVS)

Windi Wojdak, RVT, knows that the right experience at the right time can change the course of one’s life. A degree in psychology, ensuing graduate studies, and possibly even a career in academia loomed on the horizon for Wojdak as she neared the end of undergraduate school—until the lifelong animal lover started volunteering at a small, rural animal shelter near her college town. That experience changed the course of Wojdak’s career, enlisting her in a life of service work.
Now, as senior director of Rural Area Veterinary Services (RAVS), Wojdak helps provide life-changing moments for others. Through high-level utilization of veterinary nurses/technicians, hands-on learning experiences, and a relentless focus on expanding access to veterinary care for underserved communities, RAVS offers veterinary professionals the opportunity to view their place in the profession through a different lens.

“So many of our colleagues leave the field because they’re not finding that real reward and opportunities for professional growth,” says Wojdak. “We’ve had more than a few technicians stay in veterinary medicine because they found [RAVS]. They were on that verge and they kind of hit that wall where they weren’t seeing a future for themselves in this field. And then they came out with us on a clinic, got to use their skills, see the impact that the work could have for the community, make new professional connections, and now, 5 or 10 years later, they are still in the field. And we would have lost them. Our profession can’t afford to lose more good people.”

RAVS, a program under The Humane Society of the United States, expands access to veterinary care for Native communities in the western United States. RAVS has developed relationships with many communities throughout the years, but currently coordinates with 10 to 12 Native Nations partners in Arizona, the Dakotas, and Washington, where geographic isolation and financial barriers make accessing veterinary care difficult for many members of the community. The program sets up temporary veterinary clinics, where a team of students, staff, and professional volunteers bands together for a week or two and delivers essential care to hundreds of patients.

Wojdak has run the RAVS program since 2011 and has been involved for more than 2 decades. She brings a passion for animal welfare, mentorship, and teaching that extends the program’s impact to patients, community members, and veterinary professionals.

“I first worked with Windi in 2010. Immediately, I became aware that the role of veterinary nurses within the clinic was raised to a level I hadn’t experienced before,” says Anne Marie McPartlin, LVT, and RAVS program coordinator. “So many clinic settings establish this archaic form of hierarchy, which hinders efficiency and morale. From the very beginning, Windi helped create a team mentality where, as an experienced credentialed technician, my opinion is heard, valued, and acted upon—even as a volunteer. Windi has an

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.
extremely rare gift of identifying and allowing people to do what they do best, which makes for a happier team.”

Though Wojdak’s focus on access to care and animal welfare spans decades, the issue is only recently gaining traction among the veterinary profession as a whole.

“It’s only been in the last few years that widespread conversations have started around access-to-care issues,” says McPartlin. “But Windi has been working on it since the ’90s—it’s just who she is.”

We spoke with Wojdak to learn more about providing access to marginalized communities, the services RAVS provides, and how veterinary professionals can make an impact in their own clinic.

**TVN: How does teaching and mentorship of students work with RAVS? What type of experience and skills do they get?**

**WOJDAK:** This is a really critical part of our mission. In a normal year, we work with about 200 veterinary and veterinary nurse/technician students. They get hands-on experience in every area of the clinic. They work with amazing mentors, one on one, in multiple areas of medicine, and they get experience in client communication and working in a different environment. They get the practical skills of high-quality medicine and surgery and anesthesia, but more important is the awareness and the opportunity to learn about the way we can provide a full spectrum of high-quality services, even with really limited resources. It’s also about the inspiration to take those skills wherever they go. For some, that lightbulb goes off and they decide that service, field medicine, outreach, and access to care is what they want to do with their career. But wherever they end up, the experience will help because even when we’re in the highest-end practice with all the bells and whistles, we’ll always be faced with clients and families who don’t have the resources to pay for that level of care. Having the skills and confidence to provide quality care with limited resources will allow folks to serve animals wherever they are, which has a pretty huge impact. We’ve worked with about 9000 students and professionals over the years, and those folks are now all over the country, making a difference.

**TVN: Is veterinary nurse/technician utilization something that you focus on?**

**WOJDAK:** We have an amazing collection of staff and volunteer technicians in our field clinics. The accumulated experience and knowledge base of that team is mind-boggling, and they are utilized in every
way. Our anesthesia section is entirely led and staffed by technicians, who are responsible for every part of the process, from protocol development through patient care. One of the things that we stress is collaborative medicine and team-based medicine. When we’re making patient-care decisions and coming up with creative solutions for the challenges and barriers our clients are facing, everyone’s involved. For the veterinary assistants and technicians who volunteer in our clinics, it can be a bit of an abrupt change from what they’re used to in practice, where very often they are not being utilized to the extent they could be.

**TVN: If you were making a pitch to someone in their own hospital or clinic for why they should replicate this level of utilization, what are some of the benefits that you would highlight?**

**WOJDAK:** First, it improves the quality of our care. Obviously, everyone’s goal is high-quality patient care. Empowering everyone on the team to expand and use their skills and to have input on patient-care decisions will always improve the ability to provide care. From an access-to-care perspective, the profession is facing a time when we have to ask: Are the ways we’re providing care serving the community and everyone that we need to be serving? And if not, what are we going to do? How are we going to shift the way veterinary medicine is working to not exclude so many of the animals and families in our communities? One of the ways that we know we can improve cost of care and expand options for how we provide care is through utilizing and engaging veterinary nurses and veterinarians to the greatest scope of their professional capacity. There are some really interesting ways that we could utilize our teams better—from telemedicine, to varying types of appointments, and clinics and outreach services. There’s a whole range that we are just beginning to explore. In terms of building up our capacity to provide care to all the animals in our communities, credentialed technicians should play a huge role.

**TVN: Help paint a picture of what it looks like when you make it to an area. How do you get everything up? And where do things go from there?**

**WOJDAK:** We run MASH-style medical and surgical clinics. A normal clinic team is about 40 people. There may be about 20 veterinary or veterinary nurse/technician students and then the rest are veterinary professional staff and volunteers. Clinic trips run 1 or 2 weeks at a time, and each week a new team arrives. So you’ve got everyone coming together from all over the country, meeting in a single location, and caravanning out to the community. Most of the communities we work in are several hours’ drive from [the nearest airport]. Our equipment and supplies are carried in a modified horse trailer. We set up in whatever facility the community has been able to arrange for—often, a high school gym, community center, fire hall, or church.

Within the first 24 hours, we set up a full-scale teaching clinic. We might have 5 or 6 surgery tables, a whole anesthesia and recovery section, medicine, pharmacy, intake area, the whole shebang. At the same time, we’re training our volunteers and getting everyone on board so that we have a fully functioning team. One of the most exciting things is that you start with a group of people who 12 hours earlier hadn’t met one another. Within a day or two, the flow and the ability of folks to come together and create a team never ceases to amaze me. It’s a thing of beauty.

**TVN: Was there a moment where it clicked for you—a particular experience where you felt that this was your calling?**

**WOJDAK:** There are a lot of them. After my first clinic, there was this sense of: “That was the hardest thing I’ve
ever done in my life and I can’t wait for us to do it again.” We work really long days. It’s physically, emotionally, and mentally draining. It’s a challenging environment and constant problem solving: Is the power reliable? How are we going to help with aftercare when we leave town? But on every single trip there is a moment when I take a step back and look around. There are teams of people working with clients in a parking lot full of hundreds of dogs and veterinary students, doing exams in the beds of pickup trucks. And everything is right with the world because I know there are 500 animals that week that without those services would have absolutely no veterinary care. All of those animals are connected to families who are incredibly attached and who love those animals and will do anything to get them the care they need. We’ve made a difference for the animal, the family, the community at large. The team of volunteers are building relationships, making connections, and gaining experience that is going to ripple out to everyone they work with. There are thousands of individual animal experiences—particularly when the family has worked so hard to seek care and made enormous sacrifices and has been so creative in coming up with solutions to find care. To be able to support that and to provide the best possible care is always an amazing experience.

**TVN:** What is your advice to someone who’s feeling overwhelmed by the issue or doesn’t know where to start?

**WOJDAK:** Just do something. That’s the thing—you don’t have to travel the world or change your whole career path to help folks who don’t have access to the resources. Those people are found in every community and in every practice. I remember having conversations with a veterinarian once who was one of the most compassionate, biggest-hearted emergency clinicians: “I don’t like to think about these things because there’s nothing I can do about it.” My response was that veterinary professionals have more power than we know and whatever our role is in the clinic or in the field, we have an enormous amount of influence and the skills to make it happen. Whether it’s networking with low-cost services in the community, looking at various spectrum-of-care approaches, providing outpatient treatment, telemedicine services, or other ways to reach folks in the community, or taking our skills and volunteering at the local shelter or the outreach program, we can do something. Not one of us can do it all, but more and more of us are doing something, and it’s coming together to make a change. — Andy Zunz