



CAREER EXPLORATIONS

A Credentialed Veterinary Technician's Career in Social Work

Lis Conarton (she/her), MSW, LVT, VTS (Physical Rehabilitation)
Veterinary Medical Center of Central New York, East Syracuse, New York

When reflecting on my career path and educational pursuits, I fall instantly on the phrase “seeking safety.” Seeking safety might be thought of as the universal and ongoing occupation of every animal and human on the planet. As a child, I learned through experiences of emotional distress that I could seek safety in the animals around me. I noticed that the emotional attachments and caregiving acts I provided these animals produced simultaneous sensations of calm and safety in my own body.



Just as these animals had become sources of safety for me, I in turn became a source of safety for them. We were each fleeing distress and seeking safety in the world. We both found ourselves without other members of our own species to be safe with, and so we turned to each other and became bonded in trust. This visceral experience of the human–animal bond has served as both beacon and propellant in my career and pursuit of higher education.

THE JOURNEY TO VETERINARY SOCIAL WORK

Initially, as a veterinary assistant and later as a licensed veterinary technician, I strived to expose myself to a wide range of practice settings, to develop knowledge and skills, and to make meaningful contributions in the field. And all the while, underlying these new skills and experiences was my longstanding curiosity about the human–animal bond, which led to my interest in animal physical rehabilitation. In this specialty, I worked closely with bonded families, supporting patients in pain and clients in distress, as they worked, helped, and related to each other through reciprocal care over sustained periods of time. Connections in the field led me to become a charter member of the Academy of Physical Rehabilitation Veterinary Technicians, where we attained the designation “veterinary technician specialist (VTS) in physical rehabilitation,” creating a platform to share and discuss knowledge across an international setting.

While physical rehabilitation has been the professional vantage point from which I’ve developed my understanding of the human–animal bond, I also recognize that bonded families are being supported and strengthened across the veterinary field in various capacities. From client service representatives to veterinarians, we are all involved in cultivating human–animal bonds, and I believe we now have a crucial opportunity to apply this unique knowledge to the human–human bonds that form our profession. Over the past 20 years, we have witnessed a growing mental health crisis in the veterinary field that has been impacting veterinary professionals, administration and support staff, and our clients. The time is now to take action and plant seeds for a cultural shift in the name of preservation.

Worldwide research has revealed that mental health concerns are increasingly affecting veterinarians’ lack of career longevity and causing deleterious symptoms such



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as burnout, compassion fatigue, and alarming rates of death by suicide. Discussions, such as prevention of mental health illness and reduction of stigma, have been produced with a primary focus on veterinarians. But this mental health crisis tells us in no uncertain terms that the pain and distress we’re witnessing today are being experienced by our colleagues throughout the field in every specialty and at every level of care. There is no exception and no room for doubt: We, in the veterinary industry, are in a mental health crisis, and we are all affected.

Having seen and heard about many of our veterinary colleagues in distress or despair, I yearned to be helpful in large-scale ways that went beyond the scope of my VTS duties. After careful consideration of my role in the field and the kinds of support I was hoping to offer colleagues and clients, I came to believe that my best contributions could be made through social work training. I enrolled in Simmons University in 2020 and earned a Master of Social Work degree. In the field of social work, I found resonance in its commitments to social justice, community-based actions, and trauma-informed care. Social workers don’t identify through particular practices or populations served; this is a profession that identifies principally through the social struggles and people that it involves itself with and the values that it promotes and abides. This is what drew me most to social work.

Under the auspice of veterinary social work was, for me, a means to align my vocational efforts with my social values in more comprehensive ways than I’d ever been able to before. It allowed me to address the mental health crisis much more broadly than I could have as a VTS alone and yet, my experiences as a VTS have been



instrumental to the directions I've chosen as a social worker. While attending Simmons University and working simultaneously in physical rehabilitation, I maintained my focus on the human–animal bond and evaluated what aspects of the human–animal dynamic could be useful to veterinary social work.

My social work education has helped me develop and direct a program that supports wellbeing for veterinary colleagues and the pet caregiver community. My micro-level social work involves support sessions for employees, helping employees access resources, and

empowering individuals and teams to create their own solutions and build on these successes while maintaining positive shifts in culture that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Mezzo-level social work, for me, is primarily about supporting the human–animal bond through fostering programs with local shelters that support domestic and interpersonal violence survivors remaining with their pets as they navigate the challenges of recovery. Lastly, at the macro-level of social work, I'm joining fellow social workers in the petitioning of local, state, and federal government agencies to change existing constraints on interdisciplinary licensed professionals practicing together so that they may more effectively support those caring for our patients and pet caregiver communities.

Resources

For more information on how to address the mental health crisis affecting the veterinary medicine community, explore the following resources:

- **University of Tennessee College of Social Work Certificate Programs**
 - Veterinary Social Work Certificate go.navc.com/3UPP76I
 - Veterinary Human Support Certificate (licensed veterinary professionals) go.navc.com/3y2wuDq
- **Not One More Vet** CLEAR Blueprint (workplace wellness certification program) go.navc.com/3Ufiuic
- **NAVc VetFolio Human–Animal Bond Certification** go.navc.com/41dAhYY
- **International Association of Veterinary Social Work** iavsw.org
- **AVMA** Journey for Teams diversity, equity and inclusion initiative go.navc.com/3xAzwi7
- **American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges** wellbeing resources go.navc.com/3UfiWwU
- **Merck Animal Health** veterinary wellbeing studies and press release for 2024 study go.navc.com/4aQSLIL
- Loue S, Linden P. *The Comprehensive Guide to Interdisciplinary Veterinary Social Work*. Springer Cham; 2022.
- Daniel AJ. Creating a path to diversity in the veterinary profession. *Today's Vet Pract.* 2021;11(2):8-13.
- **Veterinary wellbeing support and veterinary wellness program development** Lis Conarton Lis.Conarton@vmccny.com

THE INTERSECTION OF VETERINARY MEDICINE AND SOCIAL WORK

Essential to any human–animal bond is the safety that each participant seeks in the other. Safety is not the absence of danger; it is the presence of connection. And I believe connection is at the heart of all wellness, for animals and humans alike. With over 20 years in this field, I have witnessed firsthand the difficulty that veterinary team members consistently have seeking and successfully finding safety in one another. Where safety and connection are not felt deeply among members of an organization, that organization will inevitably be plagued by interpersonal conflicts, declining morale, and high turnover rates, all of which lead to unwieldy levels of burnout and suicide as we've already experienced in our field for years. However, I believe the key to our healing lies within the knowledge we already possess. Our understanding of the human–animal bond and its implications for human–human bonds will surely be our most essential asset on our path to safety, connection, and collective recovery.

As members of our profession find themselves in mental distress—when they are faced with overwhelming emotions and life struggles, when thoughts of self-harm and suicide bear down—we can be certain that the safety they'll be seeking will be most readily found in the connections produced through human–human bonds. The intersection of the veterinary and social work professions has drawn together the imperatives and values of the human–animal bond with the human–human bond. We are calling each other in to see and hear one another and to

be true sources of compassion and safety for others, just as they, from time to time, will be sources of safety for us.

SUMMARY

My pursuit of an advanced degree was motivated foremost by a desire to help my colleagues in the veterinary profession who have been and are still suffering, but what I've come to discover since undertaking this journey is that this crisis will require much more than a few veterinary professionals turned social workers. This crisis will require collective action, mutual compassion, and human understanding of every member of this profession, no matter the specialty or level of care. Through my long experience as a VTS and my education as a social worker, I have learned that the wellbeing of every individual is essential to the wellbeing of us all. For animals and humans to thrive on this planet, we will need each other. For the veterinary profession to survive this mental health crisis, we will need each other. Our unique understanding of the human-animal bond offers us a precious resource in our efforts to bond as humans. The safety we seek will largely be found in the people we see and work beside every day. **TVN**

Lis Conarton

Lis has been working in the veterinary field since 2003 with experience as a credentialed technician in emergency and critical care and surgery prior to investing herself fully in physical rehabilitation. She is the director of organizational culture and engagement at Veterinary Medical Center of Central New York (Suveto); manages CARE Pet Therapy, a veterinary pain management and physical rehabilitation center; contributes to education for veterinary professionals locally and nationally; and publishes on various aspects of veterinary pain management and rehabilitation. She is developing a comprehensive program utilizing her social work degree for veterinary workplace wellbeing including cultivating a diverse and equitable culture with the support of her colleagues.



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