

## **Getting to the Bottom of the Veterinary Technician Shortage in Minnesota** **By Dr. Al Balay, Chair, MVMA Veterinary Technician Committee**

In this article, #17 in the series, we share an update as of early April regarding the status of the veterinary technician licensure initiative during the 2023 legislative session. Also included is an update of enrollments at the State college's veterinary technician programs and the availability of MVMF scholarships for veterinary technician students. It is a good time to consider encouraging a potential student to apply to veterinary technology programs!

The Veterinary Technician Licensure bill was introduced in the House of Representatives (HF1228) on February 2, 2023, and in the Senate (SF 1522) on February 9, 2023. Both bills have bipartisan support and authors. Members of the MVMA Veterinary Technician Committee and others have given testimony at several Senate committee hearings in support of the bill. Additionally, many veterinary technicians and veterinarians met with legislators to discuss support for the bills on March 8<sup>th</sup> during MVMA's Veterinary Day at the Capitol. Senator Putnam, Chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee has included the bill in the Agriculture Omnibus Bill. Both the MVMA lobbyists and Veterinary Technician Committee members have been unable to successfully get a hearing in the House of Representatives Health and Human Services Committee. Since the bill is included in the Agriculture Omnibus Bill, it will be discussed on the Senate floor which may force a hearing in the House. The bottom line is that the licensure bill has an overall chance of passage this year, but the outlook is guarded at about 50/50. We remain cautiously optimistic and continue to push for passage. Remember that if the bill is passed, the Board of Veterinary Medicine anticipates 18 months for rule writing and implementation. Therefore, the soonest that licensure could start would be 2025.

Now is a great time to identify and nurture a prospective veterinary technician. With unemployment low state-wide and possibly because of COVID 19, applications at all the State's veterinary technician programs are decreased. All the colleges have openings available for fall 2023. As a review, in 2016, we had twelve veterinary technician teaching programs in Minnesota. Now there are only four and all of programs are Minnesota State Colleges: Dakota County Technical College in Rosemount, Minnesota North College (formerly Vermillion Community College) in Ely, Ridgewater College in Willmar, and Rochester Community and Technical College. Additionally, there is a college close to the Twin Cities at Northwood Technical College in New Richmond, Wisconsin. Certainly, a person can be taught "how" to do many of the important skills of a veterinary technician on the job. The huge difference between on-the-job *training* and a veterinary technician *education* at an AVMA accredited program is the "why". The AVMA's process for accreditation of veterinary technician programs includes over 200 required skills on live animals that students must show minimal levels of performance to graduate. Additionally, accredited programs have a long list of didactic knowledge-based materials that must be taught including communication and basic sciences. Additionally, in order for a veterinary technician to advance their career to become specialized in one of the 16 recognized NAVTA Veterinary Technician Specialty (VTS) programs, credentialing is a requirement. The last year that an on-the-job-trained veterinary technician was allowed to take the VTNE exam in MN to become certified was 1990. Having the opportunity to specialize aids in keeping these individuals actively engaged and helps retain them in the profession.

Another great reason to encourage a prospective technician student is that there are more scholarships available to veterinary technician students now than ever before. Specifically, the Minnesota Veterinary Medical Foundation has increased both the number and dollar amount of scholarships available at all four State Colleges and at Northwood Technical College. Considering the Foundation didn't support any technician scholarships about 20 years ago, there is now approximately \$20,000 available each year for veterinary technician students. In addition, most of the colleges have other scholarship opportunities and veterinary organizations such as MAVT and NAVTA offer scholarships as well. Many of the scholarship dollars available are not awarded because students don't apply and then the money is left undistributed. It is important to encourage these students to apply and take advantage of the funds available.