

Portré Mendez and her children, Isaiah and Lucas, wait with their dog Bear in an exam room at the Dumb Friends League Veterinary Hospital at Yuma. The league's new hospital at CSU Spur will operate much like its existing hospital on Yuma Street in Denver.



A WINDOW *on* VETERINARY MEDICINE

DUMB FRIENDS LEAGUE OPENS INNOVATIVE HOSPITAL IN THE VIDA BUILDING

PORTRÉ MENDEZ KNEW SOMETHING WAS WRONG WHEN SOPHIE, HER POODLE MIX, CAME IN FROM HER NORTH DENVER BACKYARD CRYING AND WET – AND WITHOUT HER MALE COUNTERPART. MENDEZ RAN OUTSIDE, LOOKING FOR HER OTHER DOG, A FLUFFY PUP NAMED BEAR. BUT BEAR WAS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND.

Panicked, Mendez drove around her neighborhood searching. Then, she got a call from a local animal shelter. Bear had been dropped off after being hit by a car. He needed immediate veterinary care.

Mendez rushed her beloved pet to a veterinary emergency hospital. What she learned only added to her distress: Bear had a significant eye injury, among other possible problems, and it would cost more than \$3,000 for bloodwork, X-rays, an overnight stay, medication, and laceration repair. Mendez simply could not afford the care her dog needed.

That’s when she was referred to the Dumb Friends League Veterinary Hospital at Yuma – a hospital that provides high-quality veterinary care for the pets of community residents who otherwise could not afford it. The hospital’s mission of ensuring access to veterinary care is based on a broader goal of keeping families and their pets together, ultimately preventing and alleviating suffering in animals.

Founded in 1910, the Dumb Friends League is the largest independent, nonprofit humane society in the Rocky Mountain region, offering a range of

BY SARAH RUMPLE / PHOTOGRAPHY BY VANCE JACOBS



shelter, adoption, education, and veterinary services. Its name refers to aid for animals that cannot speak for themselves.

“They were able to fix Bear’s eye, and we also got him neutered that same day,” a grateful Mendez said. “Everyone was so nice to us. It’s just nice to know there are other options for people who can’t afford to help their pets when they need it.”

Soon, many more pets like Bear will receive urgent and preventive care: In January, the Dumb Friends League will open a new veterinary hospital on the CSU Spur campus at the National Western Center in north Denver. The league’s new hospital will be a main feature of the Vida building and will help lead programs focused on health.

The hospital at CSU Spur is expected to care for nearly 8,500 pets per year, said Dr. Apryl Steele, a veterinarian who serves as president and chief executive officer of the Dumb Friends League. That matches the number annually treated at the league’s hospital on Yuma Street and will bring the total number of animals seen at the two hospitals to about 17,000 every year. The league sees many more companion animals at its shelters and at community vaccination and spay and neuter clinics.

The Dumb Friends League Veterinary Hospital at CSU Spur will be unique as the first veterinary hospital in the nation to put medical care for pets on full display for visitors to observe. Glass walls will allow visitors to see exams, dental procedures, and even surgeries. In

this way, the new hospital is on the leading edge of an emerging trend in veterinary medicine that seeks to inspire kids to pursue careers in health and medicine by showing them exactly what veterinary careers look like in day-to-day practice. The Denver Zoo takes the same approach by inviting guests to watch veterinary care for zoo animals. Walt Disney World offers similar observation opportunities at its veterinary treatment room in the Animal Kingdom theme park.

The Dumb Friends League Veterinary Hospital at CSU Spur will provide the same high-quality, subsidized veterinary care as that offered at the hospital on Yuma Street. And it is sorely needed. Steele estimated that the nonprofit is now meeting less than 10 percent of the need for low-cost veterinary care in Metro Denver. That’s clear from the lines that form well before the Yuma hospital opens at 7 a.m. on weekdays, when community residents queue up seeking care for sick and injured pets on a first-come, first-served basis.

“We offer high-quality, high-volume community medicine,” said Dr. Jodi Boyd, the league’s clinical instructor veterinarian. “We provide urgent care. We provide access to care and incremental care. But the care that pets receive at our veterinary hospital is the same they would receive elsewhere. The only difference is the cost to the pet owner, because we are funded by fantastic donors and we’re able to offer subsidized care to remove that financial barrier for some people in the community.”



Donors are the key to providing low-cost veterinary services for clients and their pets, Steele said. The goal is keeping families whole, even if pet owners are not able to pay the full cost of treatment. “Someone’s ability to have compassion for an animal is not based on their income,” Steele noted. Yet, without subsidized veterinary care, a family could be faced with a terrible choice: euthanasia or relinquishment of their pet to a shelter.

“Euthanasia because of financial constraints is obviously not good for the animal or the family. At the shelter, we would accept the animal, invest resources in healing it, and then we’d have to find a new home for it, all while the original family was grieving,” Steele explained. “It doesn’t make sense. That’s why providing this care is vital. The animals deserve it, and the people deserve it, too.”

The league’s work is important for another reason: Its Yuma hospital has been a training ground for senior veterinary students at Colorado State University in Fort Collins. The CSU veterinary program is ranked No. 3 in the nation; it is highly regarded around the world, in part because of the excellent hands-on training students gain with partner organizations and programs.

(Although the Dumb Friends League helps train CSU students, the league’s hospitals are run entirely by the nonprofit, not the university. In Fort Collins, Colorado State University operates its well-known Veterinary Teaching Hospital to care for animals and to serve



Facing page: Dr. Jodi Boyd, clinical instructor veterinarian, checks a triage list of patient cases on a white board. At top: Boyd assesses a patient’s knee joint as veterinary assistant Kchera Phillips restrains the dog and Dr. Sara Oden, staff veterinarian, confers on the case. Above: Michelle Salomon, a Colorado State University veterinary student, examines the dog’s injured hind leg with help from Boyd.



During a busy day at the veterinary hospital, above, a team prepares one dog for surgery as another patient undergoes physical examination. Meantime, at right, a veterinarian rushes out of a dentistry suite to take a client phone call, while one team assesses dental X-rays and another works with a patient under general anesthesia.



At top: Veterinary assistant Kchera Phillips provides oxygen to a dog while discussing case details with Dr. Patricia Crystal, staff veterinarian, who holds another patient in her arms. Above: Veterinary technician Katie Dominguez and CSU veterinary student Kira Hulsing don gowns and other personal protective equipment to examine a patient with an infectious disease.

as the main education site for CSU veterinary students. Its leaders helped envision and plan the new hospital at CSU Spur but are not involved in its daily operations.)

Soon, students in the university's Doctor of Veterinary Medicine Program will start externships at the Dumb Friends League Veterinary Hospital at CSU Spur. Two students at a time will work at the new hospital on two-week rotations; two more will simultaneously complete two-week rotations through an externship program at the league's shelter. With these opportunities, nearly 100 CSU veterinary students will train each year with the Dumb Friends League.

Michelle Salomon, a fourth-year veterinary student from Seattle, recently completed a rotation with the league's hospital at Yuma and appreciated the experience. "The great thing about this externship and the Dumb Friends League is they treat you like a young doctor," Salomon said. "We're the primary veterinarians on cases. We're still talking to the doctor and getting that mentorship and support, but we're able to make the decisions."

Boyd, who supervises veterinary students, said the experience allows aspiring vets to gain essential communication and surgical skills. In particular, students learn to make treatment decisions in partnership with pet owners, keeping in mind financial limitations and options within those constraints.

Veterinary students complete physical exams, come up with diagnostic plans, interpret diagnostic results, and determine treatment

recommendations. They plan client communication, and then engage pet owners in decisions about treatment. "It's a unique opportunity for students to work as primary veterinarians and still have the support of experienced staff veterinarians," Boyd said.

Immersion in community medicine is critical for veterinary students, said Steele, who is an alumna of the CSU Doctor of Veterinary Medicine Program. That's because the field meets veterinary needs commonly found in local communities, much like general or family medical practice, with an emphasis on preventive care, client relationships, community needs, and, in many cases, practical constraints. "The feedback we get from externs is that it was exactly what they needed to complete their education and feel competent going out into practice," she said.

The innovative design of the Dumb Friends League Veterinary Hospital at CSU Spur will add another layer of education – for the public and K-12 students. Observation windows will invite public viewing of veterinary care; nearby video screens will display patient X-rays and additional case information. Docents will be on hand to explain what's happening, and Dumb Friends League veterinarians will at times wear microphones, allowing them to answer visitor questions. Presentations may be tailored for visiting schoolchildren.

"Since kids and families will be able to see and talk to the vets, vet technicians, and other veterinary professionals while they are working, we can take some of the mystery out of these careers.



At top: Dr. Rose McDonough, staff veterinarian, and Emily Henning, veterinary technician, work with a cat in dental surgery; at right, Dr. Kimberly Palgrave, chief veterinarian, and Dr. Dylan Whitaker, veterinary intern, prepare for another dental case. Above: CSU veterinary students Michelle Salomon, center, and Kira Hulsing, right, discuss a case with the chief veterinarian.



That direct interaction helps kids see themselves working in health fields,” said Jocelyn Hittle, a leader with the CSU System who is coordinating development of CSU Spur. “At the same time, kids and families can learn about the importance of veterinary care for their own companion animals, and explore connections between human and animal health.”

Exposing Colorado schoolkids to veterinary medicine – and providing information about educational pathways to veterinary careers – will help the profession open its doors to more practitioners, especially those with diverse backgrounds, Steele said. According to 2019 data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 90 percent of U.S. veterinarians are white, meaning veterinary medicine must find new ways to welcome a broader array of people into the field.

“We want to get people interested in STEM careers, and get some diversity in veterinary medicine and animal welfare,” Steele said. “We want to help visitors see what a veterinarian really does, and get people excited about the career opportunities that exist.”

The work is especially important given the highly diverse communities that veterinarians serve.

For Mendez and her dog, the Dumb Friends League offered an important safety net. “It’s nice to know there are people who care, and who can provide those services at a lower cost,” Mendez said. “Bear is my baby. I’m just so happy he’s alive.” ■



At Left: Carlos Alvarez waits for an appointment with his Chihuahua, Sophia, at the Dumb Friends League Veterinary Hospital at Yuma.
At top: Dr. Patricia Crystal and Dr. Sara Oden, staff veterinarians, discuss a case as Dr. Jodi Boyd, clinical instructor veterinarian, talks to a pet owner by phone. Above: CSU veterinary student Kira Hulsing holds a newborn calico kitten while performing a health assessment.