Every June, a large group of Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine students, faculty, and staff descend upon the Crow Creek Reservation in South Dakota. For 3 days, these individuals provide needed veterinary care to Tribal members’ dogs, cats, and horses of the Crow Creek Nation, busy from dawn to dusk, providing spay, neuter, and preventive care for hundreds of animals.

“Every year we essentially put together a temporary small animal hospital and equine clinics,” said Dr. Joan Howard, clinical associate professor of veterinary clinical sciences. “We need to be prepared to care for the expected and the unexpected cases.”

Planning is essential. Team members start meeting 6 months before traveling to the Crow Creek Reservation, focusing on assessing equipment needs, fundraising, and seeking product donations, while coordinating with Tribal members. A 2-week clinical rotation is offered for College of Veterinary Medicine fourth-year students.

“We wanted students to have a fuller understanding of the community that we were working with,” Howard said. “This is a good opportunity for students to discuss and explore ways in which we can make veterinary medicine more equitable and inclusive.”

Students refine their physical examination skills, understand equine and small animal preventive health care, as well as hone their surgical skills. It is also an opportunity to work in a diverse community.

“Engaging with the Tribal members as well as working with people from all over the country was really great,” said fourth-year student Caitlin Knutson. “The experience not only increased my confidence in performing various procedures, but also expanded my interpersonal skills.”

Students like Siyu Xiao worked with the Tribal members’ horses, including doing her first castration on her own at the Tribe’s rodeo grounds.

“One big thing I learned is how to provide health care under an environment with limited resources,” Xiao said. “I used to think without large animal hospital equipment what can I do to provide health care, and everything needs to be built from zero.”

Back in town, the fire station has been transformed into a surgical unit for dogs and cats, which come and go throughout the day.

“When we would arrive in the morning, there was already a line of people at the door waiting for their appointment,” Knutson said. “It was a valuable experience to get to speak to Tribal members and good practice for me to explain the vaccines, dewormer, preventer care, and at-home care instructions.”

The operation resembles an assembly line. Owners check in at an outside tent, fill out paperwork, and then wait in their car or underneath a shade tree. Students greet the clients and their patients, getting a brief history before taking the animals inside for a physical exam.

After the physical exam, patients are either released back to their owners or moved into surgery for a spay or neuter. Most times, 4 different surgical tables are in use.

“Every day we were busy seeing patients, helping each other, and learning new things,” Knutson said. “I saw quite a few things I had only ever read about, so seeing how to address and treat those issues was really neat.”