What do pets in New Mexico have to do with one health?

We know that not every household has adequate access to veterinary care on a consistent basis. We also know that a lack of veterinary care not only causes problems for the health and welfare of animals, but can also negatively affect the health of their owners and other members of the community.

Access to care and one health are inextricably linked. That is why we have partnered with the Native America Humane Society and tribal communities in New Mexico to deliver the AVMA’s Reaching UP program. The program, coordinated by a staff veterinarian in the AVMA’s Animal Welfare Division and funded by the Banfield Foundation, offers targeted preventive care and high-quality, high-volume spay-neuter services to traditionally underserved populations. Preventive care services are generously provided by AVMA and SAVMA member volunteers, while surgery is performed by AVMA member veterinarians trained in HQHV spay/neuter.

Within these communities in New Mexico, lack of access to veterinary care has resulted in a substantial population of free-roaming and unmanaged dogs and cats, negatively affecting the animals’ welfare and putting the community at risk for bite injuries and zoonotic and vector-borne diseases. It is important for the welfare of the animals and the safety of the community that this population management challenge is addressed humanely; the spay-neuter component of Reaching UP accomplishes that. The program’s preventive care component evolves with the needs of the community. When tick-borne disease issues in humans and animals were recognized in this community, long-term external parasite control options were explored and integrated into the program.

In collaboration with the community’s animal control officers, veterinary volunteers also talk with pet owners about their animals’ health and the importance of preventive care, and educate the community about the connections between animal health and human health. Education is designed to protect the health of family pets, support and prolong lasting human-animal bonds, and break the cycle of zoonotic diseases.

Reaching UP benefits not only veterinary patients and their owners, but also those who provide these much-needed services. Participants are exposed to unique communities and have an opportunity to learn how differences in experiences, traditions, values, and socioeconomic conditions can affect the delivery of veterinary care and community education. Creativity is key, and those ideas that emerge and work well may be effectively applied to other pets and owners who face similar challenges.

Ask around, and you will discover that Reaching UP volunteers are moved by the life-changing experience. Take, for example, this account from Dr. Ellen Carlin, who participated in Reaching UP last April at the Pueblo of Laguna reservation near Albuquerque. “It was an extremely memorable few days, and I loved getting to know the animals and the people who clearly love them...I believe it makes a significant contribution to the welfare of dogs and cats on the reservation, through both the medical and surgical care provided. It also assists with the well-being of their guardians via the promotion of the human-animal bond.”

To demonstrate the impact Reaching UP is having on these communities, consider the following statistics: Since 2016, Reaching UP has provided care to more than 1,000 animals. At our last clinic in April, the team cared for more than 300 animals, half as surgical patients and half for targeted preventive care. Over the course of three clinics in 2016, the team saw 850 patients, performed 475 spay or neuter surgeries, performed 375 preventive care or outpatient medical care exams and treatments, and distributed 1,200 pounds of cat and dog food.

The AVMA will host its next Reaching UP clinic from November 9-12, in honor of One Health Day on November 3.

Reaching UP moves the one-health concept from a conversation into practice and makes it tangible. It shows the value of consistent, quality veterinary care, and goes a long way toward advancing animal health and welfare, public health, and the human-animal bond in underserved areas.

I invite you to learn more about Reaching UP and its benefits for animal and human health—and to consider volunteering at a future clinic—by visiting avma.org/ReachingUP.

Michael J. Topper, DVM, PhD, DACVP