

In response to queries from several members of the local press, we would like to share the following information. Historically, access to veterinary care on Martha's Vineyard has been complicated, most of which is another story for another day. In brief, the first private veterinary practice opened here in the mid-1970s and was staffed by two or three veterinarians whose primary residences were on the Cape. These doctors rotated staying on Island at night and on weekends to do their best to provide after hours emergency care. In the 1980s and 1990s, more veterinary practices opened and more veterinarians moved to the Island as full-time residents.

For many years now the Vineyard has been lucky to have six full-time veterinary practices open during regular business hours. The six practices on the Island included the Vineyard Veterinary Clinic, Animal Health Care Associates, Sea Breeze Veterinary Service, My Pet's Vet, Caring For Animals, and Michelle Jasny, VMD. What we have never had here is a 24/7 emergency clinic with full time staffing, in-patient care, and specialists.

Twenty-three years ago, in an effort to provide emergency care to all the Island animals after hours, on weekends, and holidays, the doctors from these practices formed an informal coalition to rotate being On Call. These doctors work a full day during business hours, then are on call after hours, often covering 24 hour shifts alone. In order to make this feasible, we had to juggle many issues. Not every veterinarian treats both "small" animals (like cats and dogs) and also "large" animals (farm animals such as horses, cows, sheep and goats.) Some of the practices have multiple doctors on staff. Others have just one doctor.. Some have more specialized equipment and larger staff and thus can offer more state-of-the-art diagnostics. It has been very challenging for us to provide 24/7 care but we have done the best we can..

Several things are now occurring simultaneously and changing the situation. The first is a nationwide shortage of veterinarians and veterinary staff. Many factors are contributing to this which are beyond the scope of this discussion. Suffice it to say, the Island practices have been unable to find enough new, younger associate veterinarians willing to come to the Vineyard to work. Even if new veterinarians are willing, the lack of affordable housing here impacts the veterinary community just as it does the wider community. Many younger veterinarians also do not want to work in areas like ours where they are asked to be On Call for emergencies after hours.

The question is often asked as to why we don't just sell our practices to new owners, or to one of the large corporate veterinary conglomerates like Banfield or VCA, and why we can't just get someone to set up a 24/7 emergency veterinary hospital here. Several Island veterinarians have been trying to sell their practices for many years. Due to the shift in the economics and overall gestalt of veterinary practice in recent years, these practice owners have not been able to find veterinarians, individually or corporate, interested in buying and taking over their clinics. Real estate prices, zoning issues, seasonal economy - all these factors have discouraged new veterinarians from coming here and/ or from setting up an emergency hospital.

We have been trying to alert the Vineyard community to this situation for several years now. The year-round population has been steadily increasing, especially since the pandemic, with both the number of people and pets rising. People who used to stay here one or two months a year are now here for six months, or eight months, or more. The standard of care in veterinary medicine has also changed so dramatically that the expectations of pet owners often exceed what our small local practices can provide. People stuck at home during the early days

of the pandemic adopted new pets. At the same time, we now have fewer veterinarians than we used to have, and those of us who have been here working for twenty, thirty, forty years are getting older. Some of us are dealing with serious health issues, including severe injuries sustained while working. Others have important family concerns that demand our time and attention. Some of us simply want to retire, or at least to slow down after being “On Call” for so many years.

In November 2021 the same group of Island veterinarians started working with a telemedicine service called VetTriage in an attempt to lessen our load. We continued to have local veterinarians on call for both large and small animal emergencies but all after hours calls first went through VetTriage. This service is easily accessed online at [www.UrgentVetCareMV.com](http://www.UrgentVetCareMV.com) or by calling 1-800-940-1921, though using the website is preferable as it allows the telemedicine veterinarian to actually see the animal in question by video. The client pays a \$50 fee and gets a video telehealth session with a veterinarian, who assesses the animal’s situation and gives the owners medical advice. If the VetTriage veterinarian thinks the animal needs immediate emergency care, they then call the Island veterinarian On Call. Otherwise, if the animal is stable, they ask the owners to wait and call their regular veterinarian during office hours.

Sometimes these emergencies are too serious for us to handle locally. In those cases, we provide animal owners with necessary information about traveling off Island to emergency facilities. (More details about this below.) We found that about 67% of after hour and weekend calls were able to be handled by the VetTriage doctors and could wait until office hours to be seen in person. This, however, does not change the fact that the Vineyard simply has too many people and too many pets for the number of local veterinarians. We are grateful for the hard work put in by all our dedicated staff members, and for our understanding clients, but we have been overwhelmed for years.

Dr. Kirsten Sauter of My Pet’s Vet has recently announced that she is retiring and closing her practice at the end of April. We wish her well and thank her for her many years providing veterinary care. This will, however, have a significant impact on all of us. Most of the local practices have not been accepting new clients for some time now, some of us not for many years. Some of us have had to stop providing certain services as a result of our own health limitations or staffing issues or changes in the standard of care.

Here is what local pet and livestock owners can do at this time. If you have had a relationship with one of the existing practices, always check with them first to see if they can accommodate your basic veterinary needs. If you cannot get one of the local practices to be your “primary care” veterinarian, we are referring people to Vista Vet in Falmouth. ([Vistavetfalmouth.com](http://Vistavetfalmouth.com)) This is a recently opened practice, staffed by experienced veterinarians, and they are taking new clients. You don’t even need to take your car off to go there as it is an easy Uber or taxi ride from the ferry to their office. However, like many mainland practices these days, they are not open for emergencies after hours or on weekends or holidays..

Our current system will continue until the end of April. If you are on Island and have a “small animal” emergency, here is how things stand at this time.

1.) If you have a regular Island veterinarian, call their office. Please do not wait until the end of the day, or until Friday. The earlier you contact us, the more likely we can fit you into our schedule during office hours.

2.) If you don't have a regular veterinarian or if your regular doctor can't see you, see if there is a local 'on-call' clinic open that is able to see urgent cases. This may vary depending on the day, time, availability, case load, current staffing, etc. During office hours, whichever veterinary office you call should be able to tell you who is on call locally.

3.) After business hours, all urgent calls must go through VetTriage. You contact VetTriage at by going to the website [www.UrgentVetCareMV.com](http://www.UrgentVetCareMV.com) for a telemedicine consult. VetTriage can give advice for both large and small animals, and they can contact the On Call Island veterinarian for you if they think your case cannot wait until office hours. If you are seen on an emergency basis on Island, there will be emergency fees just like you would pay at an emergency clinic. Since none of us are open 24/7, these fees may be higher than large 24/7 ERs as we have to call in staff, pay overtime, and so on.

4.) In some cases, there may not be a local veterinarian available. Although we have been continuing to do the best we can, we have had disruptions in our coverage due to Covid, other illnesses, and family emergencies. If VetTriage advises emergency care and no one is available locally, for small animals we advise going to one of the 24/7 emergency veterinary hospitals on the mainland. Several of these are listed, including contact information, on the website [www.UrgentVetCareMV.com](http://www.UrgentVetCareMV.com). The closest places are Cape Cod Veterinary Specialists in Bourne or VCA South Shore Veterinary Associates in South Weymouth. The Steamship Authority has been very supportive in getting critical cases onto the ferry but call ahead. If the ferries are not running, then pet owners should call the Patriot Party Boat to charter a boat to the mainland. The Patriot does not take vehicles but you can arrange in advance to have an Uber or taxi meet you and transport you and your pet to one of the mainland emergency centers.

5.) For large animals, if you have a regular large animal vet either here or off Island, contact them first for advice. If they are not available, VetTriage can give you telehealth advice. If they advise immediate care and no one is available on Island, things are more complicated. If the ferries are running, you can arrange to trailer your horse to a veterinary hospital such as Tufts Equine Center in Grafton, but always call ahead before bringing your animal to ANY emergency center. Many local horse owners use off Island equine veterinarians for their routine care. You can also reach out to them ahead of time to ask for advice on how to handle emergencies and where to go on the mainland.

6.) One other good tip is if your emergency is about ingestion or exposure to a toxin, first call one of the emergency poison hotlines. Pet Poison Hotline 1-800-213-6680 or ASPCA Poison Control Hotline 1-888-426-4435. They will help you know if it is actually an emergency or not. They, too, have a fee that you will need to pay by credit card.

How will things change when My Pet's Vet closes in late April? . We are still working on that. A small group of us are hoping we can continue to have a veterinarian on call for small animal urgent care as close to 24/7 as we can. Most likely we will no longer be able to provide any emergency coverage for large animals. We encourage everyone to get familiar with [www.UrgentVetCareMV.com](http://www.UrgentVetCareMV.com), VetTriage, and off Island options, including transportation.

We ask everyone to understand that this is one of the challenges of choosing to live on an island (where there has never been a 24/7 veterinary emergency hospital) as well as a reflection of a nationwide crisis in the veterinary profession. Please do not blame the local doctors or their staff. Most of the veterinarians here have put in twenty, thirty, forty years plus of service including round-the-clock on call shifts, covering every night, every weekend, every holiday. We care deeply about the Island animals and their owners but there is only so much each of us can do. More of us will likely be retiring in the not too distant future. We hope new veterinarians will come here eventually, especially those who are willing to provide emergency care, but we have not succeeded in making that happen despite our best efforts. In the meantime, we encourage all Island animal owners to be aware of the situation, set up a VetTriage account, learn about all the options in advance, and be prepared.

Michelle Jasny, VMD  
Steven Atwood, VMD  
Charles Rogers Williams, DVM  
Kirsten Sauter, DVM  
David Tuminaro, BVetMed, MRCVS  
Constance Breese, DVM

Dr.Jasny's Office  
Animal Health Care Associates  
Vineyard Veterinary Clinic  
My Pet' s Vet  
Caring For Animals  
Sea Breeze Veterinary Service