

**REPORT OF THE BOARD OF VETERINARY
MEDICINE, VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
PROFESSIONS**

**Shortage of Large Animal
Veterinarians in the
Commonwealth (HJR 43, 2024)**

**TO THE GOVERNOR AND
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA**



HOUSE DOCUMENT NO. 2

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
RICHMOND
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COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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TO: The Honorable Alfonso H. Lopez
Chair, House Committee on Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources

The Honorable Sam Rasoul
Chair, House Committee on Education

The Honorable David W. Marsden
Chair, Senate Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Natural Resources

The Honorable Ghazala F. Hashmi
Chair, Senate Committee on Education and Health

FROM: Arne W. Owens *Arne W. Owens*
Director, Virginia Department of Health Professions

DATE: January 3, 2025

RE: Report Regarding the Shortage of Large Animal Veterinarians in the Commonwealth

This report is submitted in compliance with House Joint Resolution No. 43 and Senate Joint Resolution No. 15, which required:

That the Board of Veterinary Medicine and the State Veterinarian be requested to study the shortage of large animal veterinarians. [The Board and State Veterinarian] shall (i) identify ways to strengthen existing debt repayment programs for veterinarians, (ii) examine options for developing programs that offer business support to provide incentives or low-interest business loans for large animal private practices; (iii) identify programs that support a strong pipeline of veterinary students from rural backgrounds and help such students navigate post-secondary education to increase retention; (iv) examine other possible solutions for increasing the

number of large animal veterinarians in the Commonwealth, such as expanding veterinary technician-type or physician assistant-type programs to allow large animal veterinarians to expand their scope of practice in rural areas; and (v) reexamine the recommendations from the 2010 study on the shortage of large animal veterinarians published pursuant to House Joint Resolution 730 (2009).

Should you have questions about this report, please feel free to contact me at (804) 367-4648 or arne.owens@dhp.virginia.gov.

AO/EB
Enclosure

CC: The Honorable Janet Kelly, Secretary of Health and Human Resources

Preface

This report is submitted in compliance with House Joint Resolution No. 43 and Senate Joint Resolution No. 15 (hereinafter “the Joint Resolutions”), which required:

That the Board of Veterinary Medicine and the State Veterinarian be requested to study the shortage of large animal veterinarians. [The Board and State Veterinarian] shall (i) identify ways to strengthen existing debt repayment programs for veterinarians, (ii) examine options for developing programs that offer business support to provide incentives or low-interest business loans for large animal private practices; (iii) identify programs that support a strong pipeline of veterinary students from rural backgrounds and help such students navigate post-secondary education to increase retention; (iv) examine other possible solutions for increasing the number of large animal veterinarians in the Commonwealth, such as expanding veterinary technician-type or physician assistant-type programs to allow large animal veterinarians to expand their scope of practice in rural areas; and (v) reexamine the recommendations from the 2010 study on the shortage of large animal veterinarians published pursuant to House Joint Resolution 730 (2009).

The Joint Resolutions require the Board to submit this report “no later than the first day of the next Regular Session of the General Assembly.” This is the first of two reports. Pursuant to the Joint Resolutions, the next report will be submitted by the first day of the 2026 General Assembly Session.

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I. Executive Summary

Pursuant to the Joint Resolutions, the Board of Veterinary Medicine (“Board”) and the State Veterinarian convened a workgroup which met multiple times over the course of 2024. The workgroup considered the required topics of the Joint Resolutions, which were as follows:

1. Identify ways to strengthen existing debt repayment programs for veterinarians, including making recommendations on how to simplify application criteria, explore state matching loan repayment programs, limit barriers for participation, and improve methods for consistent identification of veterinary shortage areas to better target rural communities in need.
2. Explore options for developing programs that offer business support to provide incentives or low-interest business loans for large animal private practices.
3. Identify programs that support a strong pipeline of veterinary students from rural backgrounds and help such students navigate post-secondary education to increase retention.
4. Consider other possible solutions for increasing the number of large animal veterinarians in the Commonwealth, such as expanding veterinary technician-type or physician assistant-type programs to allow large animal veterinarians to expand their scope of practice in rural areas.
5. Reexamine the recommendations from the 2010 study on the shortage of large animal veterinarians published pursuant to House Joint Resolution 730 (2009).

The workgroup identified four subgroups for areas deemed essential to this study, which were (1) supporting data; (2) financial resources; (3) licensed veterinary technician (“LVT”) scope of practice; and (4) veterinary school class size. Each subgroup reported findings and recommendations to the workgroup as outlined below.

Supporting data

The supporting data subgroup recommended that additional governmental and private sector resources be identified to develop frameworks for proposed solutions. The subgroup further recommended that the workgroup survey stakeholders such as cattlemen, extension agents, and biological farmers, and use that gathered data to pinpoint shortage areas and assess ongoing needs.

Financial resources

The financial resources subgroup recommended exploring development of: (1) a loan repayment program that ties awards to practice in underserved communities; (2) matching awardees of grants with mentors to assist with grant-writing and other facets of mentorship; (3)

developing a pathway for haul-in¹ or shared use large animal veterinary facilities to address shortages in a variety of ways; and (4) expanding educational opportunities for participants in youth high school and agricultural development programs.

LVT scope of practice

The LVT scope of practice subgroup recommended expanding educational outreach to advance awareness of LVT as a profession. The subgroup felt this would serve as a recruiting tool and maximize utilization of LVTs in large animal veterinary practice. The subgroup additionally recommended expanding pathways to LVT educational programs and expanding opportunities for large animal training in LVT program curricula. The subgroup recommended developing a haul-in practice model to increase opportunities for LVTs in large animal medicine and recommended exploring title protection to address the misidentification of veterinary assistants as “technicians.”²

Veterinary medicine class size

The veterinary medicine class size subgroup recommended exploring additional funding options for students, expanding the scholarship programs for Virginia residents, and developing a loan repayment program to place new veterinarians in areas of need.

The full workgroup, based on the recommendations of the subgroups, believes four actions can be immediately pursued. Those include a request for budget funding to create additional seats for Virginia residents at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine (“VMCVM”), a request for budget funding for a state loan repayment program to incentivize practice in areas of need, development of a regulatory framework for large animal haul-in facilities, and provision of additional pathways to large animal medicine and veterinary assistant programs that will attract and support large animal veterinary practice in rural Virginia.

As noted in the preface, this workgroup will span two years. This report comprises only the first year of work produced by the workgroup and its subgroups and should be viewed as an ongoing project that is not yet complete.

¹ Haul-in facilities would allow owners to bring animals to veterinarians to be treated at an inspected facility. Currently, there is no provision that allows practice to occur away from the location of the animal. Under current regulations, veterinary medicine may only be practiced out of a registered establishment categorized as stationary (“bricks and mortar”) or ambulatory (generally house calls or farm visits). Large animal veterinarians often travel extensively to provide healthcare at animals’ locations, impacting patient safety and contributing to burnout and attrition. Haul-in facilities would enable veterinarians to treat more patients, would address environmental factors (inclement weather, poor barn lighting), and travel times without requiring the veterinarian to incur the financial burden of opening and maintaining a stationary establishment.

² The Board of Veterinary Medicine routinely receives information through investigations, inspections and communication with the public that veterinarians, unlicensed veterinary assistants and the public use the term “veterinary technician” to describe all staff who assist the veterinarian, regardless of whether they are licensed. Unlicensed individuals have been identified as performing duties that require a licensed veterinary technician. This includes placing IV catheters, intubating surgical patients, and accessing/administering federally controlled drugs, all of which directly relate to patient and public safety.

Workgroup Members

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Executive Director
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II. Meetings of the workgroup

The workgroup held its initial meeting on April 15, 2024. At that meeting, the workgroup created subgroups to tackle the wide array of topics the workgroup was charged with addressing in the Joint Resolutions. The supporting data subgroup met on July 8, and August 19, 2024. The financial resources subgroup met on July 8 and September 4, 2024. The LVT scope of practice subgroup met on July 8 and September 9, 2024. The class size subgroup met on July 8, 2024. The full workgroup met for its final 2024 meeting on October 9, 2024.

As directed by the workgroup, an ad hoc committee met on November 6, 2024 to draft budget amendment requests for a state loan repayment incentive program and funding to increase the number of seats available to Virginia veterinary students for consideration by the 2025 General Assembly. This subgroup discussed survey questions for producers, developing a certification program for large animal veterinary assistants, and considerations for haul-in facilities.

In total, the workgroup or its subgroups met 10 times over the course of 2024, which entailed a significant contribution from the participants and the state agencies leading the workgroup.

III. Supporting data

The supporting data subgroup collected and compiled information to share as reference materials with the workgroup. This reference material will facilitate development of proposed solutions and recommendations for the two-year study. The reference collection will be updated as additional governmental and private sector data are identified and will serve as an ongoing resource to the workgroup. The information will additionally serve as a public resource which will facilitate awareness and participation in programs and implemented solutions of the workgroup.

The subgroup additionally developed targeted questions for the Board of Veterinary Medicine's annual veterinarian license renewal survey. Those questions were included in the 2024 renewal survey and will capture data regarding types and locations of large animal veterinary shortages. The survey questions will be revised by the Board of Veterinary Medicine as needed in subsequent years to measure the efficacy of implemented solutions proposed by the workgroup and to identify shortage trends.

The subgroup will continue to collect data from food animal producers through various professional associations and large animal veterinarians to assess ongoing shortages or needs. This information will be included with the aggregate data compiled by the supporting data subgroup.

IV. Financial resources

The success of financial resource programs depends on early and ongoing community involvement to place, support, and retain veterinarians in rural areas. The subgroup identified organizations that support community connections and include: (1) local agricultural economic development offices; (2) the Virginia Tobacco Regional Revitalization Commission; (3) county Farm Bureau offices; and (4) Virginia Cooperative Extension offices.

The subgroup recognized that the development of a state loan repayment program tied to practice in underserved communities may be combined with other loans to reduce the financial burdens on new veterinarians wishing to enter large animal practice. The subgroup recommended matching students and former students awarded such loan repayment with mentors to assist with grant-writing, finding this to be a key component to the success of a loan repayment program. The subgroup also felt student financial resources should be coordinated through a program administrator.

The subgroup identified geographic challenges, environmental conditions, and lack of shared resources as factors contributing to the attrition of large animal veterinarians in the Commonwealth. A proposed solution is to develop a regulatory pathway under the Board of Veterinary Medicine for haul-in or shared use veterinary establishments for large animals. Such establishments may expand utilization of LVTs in large animal medicine because only veterinarians and LVTs are authorized to access controlled drugs. For this reason, LVTs frequently oversee controlled drug management and inspection compliance for practices. A haul-in large animal practice model may be matched with grants or other funding for ongoing support. These establishments may also expand educational opportunities for participants in Future Farmers of America, 4-H youth development, and high school agricultural programs to generate early interest in large animal veterinary medicine.

V. Licensed veterinary technician scope of practice

The subgroup examined a variety of references defining current LVT scope of practice to identify barriers to expansion. Virginia's LVT practice act may benefit from clarification to distinguish the role of an LVT from an unlicensed veterinary assistant. Title protection for LVTs may elevate the earning capacity of practitioners and address the misuse and misidentification of veterinary assistants as "technicians." Geographic variability, prohibitions to independent diagnosing and prescribing by LVTs, government requirements for food animal medicine, and financial constraints of large animal veterinarians to employ LVTs limit the practical use of LVTs in large animal medicine.

The subgroup developed targeted questions for the Board of Veterinary Medicine's annual veterinary technician license renewal survey. Those questions were included in the 2024 renewal survey to capture data to identify ongoing factors contributing to the low number of LVTs practicing in large animal veterinary medicine and animal shelters. The survey questions will be revised by the Board of Veterinary Medicine as needed in subsequent years to measure the efficacy of implemented solutions proposed by the workgroup and to identify shortage trends.

Limited exposure to large animal medicine in LVT educational programs contributes to fewer numbers of LVTs participating in large animal medicine upon graduation and licensure. Expansion of pathways to LVT programs and opportunities for large animal training in LVT program curricula is needed and may be integrated into a haul-in practice model to increase opportunities for LVTs in large animal medicine.

Large animal veterinarians typically work unassisted or use trained individuals to assist with corralling and restraining large animal patients. A certification program is available through the Department of Education vocational training that may be developed to meet national certification standards. This would provide large animal veterinarians with larger numbers of adequately and appropriately trained assistants to increase efficacy and safety of patients and the public.

VI. Veterinary school class size

After reviewing information about enrollment, available financial assistance, current class size, and new veterinary programs seeking accreditation, the subgroup determined that available seats at veterinary schools could potentially increase by approximately 30%. Given the constraints of current programs in recruiting qualified faculty, available facilities, and budget, an overall increase in class size is not a feasible option to address the large animal veterinarian shortage. It is possible to increase the percentage of seats offered to Virginia residents if funding is made available and contractual obligations with neighboring states to provide seats are met. Additionally, VMCVM must secure adequate state funding to offer more seats to Virginia residents pursuing large animal medicine.

Lincoln Memorial College of Veterinary Medicine (“LMU-CVM”), a private program in Tennessee near the Virginia border, discussed expanding its scholarship program for Virginia residents. This would create another pathway to expose veterinary students to local mentorship, resources, and state infrastructure from which to develop a practice network upon graduation.

VII. Workgroup recommendations

In its first year, the workgroup recommended addressing the large animal veterinarian shortage with the following steps:

1. Develop a pathway for rural and farming community youth to obtain training for national certification and recognition as large animal veterinary assistants.
2. Gather additional data from food producers to pinpoint which areas are most impacted by veterinarian shortages and gather data from large animal veterinarians to assess current practice needs. Use data for loan repayment incentivization program to establish new veterinarians in areas of need.
3. Create a board or partnership for ongoing dialogue among stakeholders and an information repository to identify continuing needs and shortages.
4. Draft budget amendment requests for an incentive-based loan repayment program in Virginia to place veterinarians in shortage areas.
5. Develop support systems to provide ongoing engagement to retain rural veterinarians after satisfying loan terms.
6. Develop a regulatory pathway and model for haul-in facilities.
7. Develop an integrated haul-in practice model to address a variety of needs, including environmental factors, opportunities for licensed veterinary technicians, shared resources, earlier educational opportunities in large animal medicine, and matching with grants or other available funding.
8. Draft budget amendment requests to fund additional seats at the state veterinary school for Virginia students.

VIII. Conclusions and next steps

The workgroup determined that the success of addressing the large animal veterinarian shortage in rural areas depends on a multifaceted approach. This approach includes providing opportunities for students to learn about large animal veterinary medicine in primary and secondary education, offering diverse public and private financial assistance during veterinary school, and linking incentives to rural practice and developing infrastructure and resources for long-term success in underserved communities. While a shortage of LVT practitioners exists in the Commonwealth, this issue does not align with the mandates for this study. Solutions to address the shortage and issues like LVT title protection are outside of the scope of this workgroup. The Board of Veterinary Medicine will review data collected from the annual renewal survey to determine the best process to address shortages.

The workgroup will continue meeting in 2025 and the Department of Health Professions will produce its final report no later than the first day of the 2026 Session in accordance with the Joint Resolutions. Responses from the Board of Veterinary Medicine's annual renewal survey, food animal producers' survey, and large animal veterinarians' survey will be presented to the workgroup at its next meeting. The workgroup will discuss public engagement to increase awareness of the financial incentive programs and other resources as they develop.

