

## Becoming a Cat Friendly Practice: One DAVMS Member's Story



Dr. Apryl Steele  
Tender Touch Animal Hospital

*DAVMS recently had a chance to talk to Dr. Apryl Steele, DAVMS member and current AAFP board member, about her experience with becoming a cat friendly practice.*

### **What made you decide to become a cat-friendly practice?**

Cats are a special part of my practice and I have had a passion for them my entire life. When I purchased my practice it was a feline-only practice, and

although I transitioned it to be a companion animal practice, cats remain a large part my patient base. Handling cats gently and effectively is an incredibly important skill for veterinarians. The Cat Friendly Practice program through the AAFP (see page 12) is not only a certifying program but it also educates veterinary teams about cat behavior and handling. I also completed the CFP designation to help cat owners identify my practice as one that is focused on the special needs of cats.

### **Were there any challenges or issues you faced?**

The process of becoming cat friendly practice certified was not arduous or difficult. As a practice we were already doing many of the standards and the ones we had not yet incorporated were useful and logical. The most time consuming part of the process was writing protocols. The one challenge with which I struggled was the requirement that we recommend flea and heartworm prevention for all cats. With the very low incidence of fleas and heartworms in my feline population, I did not feel that it was appropriate to put all cats on these preventives. However, after discussion with the facilitators of CFP, I determined that I could meet this requirement ethically by agreeing to have a conversation about these conditions with cat owners and educating them about prevention options.

### **What are the special things you do to make feline patients more comfortable?**

Cats are often looking for a safe place to hide when in the exam room, and I found they were either finding places that require me to be acrobatic to retrieve them or they were in the open and just stayed scared. To alleviate this I changed the benches upon which clients sit in the exam room to ones

that have storage areas under them. On one end I cut a circular hole so the cat could enter, and I build a clear box with a matching hole that sits in the bench. When the frightened cat enters the safe hole and hides it feels comforted and relaxes. When I am ready to perform an exam, I lift the seat of the bench and remove the box with the cat inside and place it on the exam table. The box's top slides open and I can retrieve the kitty with very little stress (or gymnastics on my part).

We also found these great cardboard boxes that have cat sized holes in the size (round) for cats in cages to hide. The boxes cost us \$2.00 each and we send them home with the clients. Our clients love that their cat had a safe place to be when staying with us and they like that we give them the box (we cannot clean it anyway).

Our cat boarding area is a separate room away from dogs so it is calm and quiet. This room has a wall that is almost all windows so the cats can watch outside and be entertained.

### **How have your clients and patients reacted to the changes you've made?**

Cat reactions have been great. Providing an elevated shelf for clients to place cats in carriers upon while in the waiting area has clearly increased the comfort of waiting cats. My exams are more thorough because cats are more tolerant when they are less stressed, and clients are no longer saying that they don't want to bring their kitties in for preventive care because it is too stressful.

And just as important, I think my staff is very proud to be a cat friendly practice. My clients with cats have been impressed with this distinction and have stated that they feel they made the right decision to come to my practice because of our CFP designation.

### **Do you see more cats now that you've made these CFP changes?**

Unlike many practices, our patient base is 50% cats. We are maintaining this feline focus even as we increase our canine patient numbers, which indicates to me that CFP is likely helping to bring cats to us. 🐾