

**INTERNSHIP FUNDED BY THE  
SPALDING FAMILY**

**ADDRESSING THE VETERINARIAN  
SHORTAGE IN RURAL  
SOUTHWESTERN COLORADO  
MONTEZUMA COUNTY**

**Natalia Gomez**  
Animal Science  
Equine Science

**Emily Lockard**  
County Director & Agriculture Specialist,  
Montezuma County  
**Kathy Whitman, DVM, MS, DABVP (Beef Cattle Practice)**  
Veterinary Extension Specialist  
**Raye A. Walck, DVM**  
Assistant Professor, Director  
Western Slope Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory

**INTRODUCTION**

Southwestern Colorado faces a persistent shortage of veterinarians, especially in rural areas where access to both large and small animal care is limited. Previous surveys have been conducted statewide, but none focused on this region in Colorado. This issue impacts livestock producers, pet owners, and the overall health of the region's agricultural systems.

My internship, in collaboration with CSU Extension and the Western Slope Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, focused on understanding the scope of this shortage and exploring some potential solutions. The project involved engaging with veterinarians, livestock producers, pet owners, and other key stakeholders to identify barriers to veterinary access, determine community needs, and highlight resources that could support veterinary recruitment and retention in the region.

**INTERNSHIP GOALS**

1. Identify the needs of livestock owners, pet owners, and veterinarians in rural Southwestern Colorado related to veterinary access.
2. Collect information through surveys, interviews, and site visits to better understand challenges and barriers.
3. Strengthen connections between local communities and CSU resources to improve animal health services.

**HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO MY EDUCATION**

This internship directly supports my academic and career goals as a pre-veterinary student specializing in large animal medicine. I gained first-hand experience in rural veterinary outreach, stakeholder communication, and data collection methods. The project strengthened my understanding of the challenges faced by rural communities in accessing veterinary care.

These experiences have enhanced my problem-solving, communication and critical thinking skills, abilities that will be essential in serving rural and underserved populations. Most importantly, this opportunity reinforced my passion for practicing rural veterinary medicine.

**WHAT I DID**

Over the course of the summer, I worked to better understand the veterinarian shortage in rural Southwestern Colorado.

- Conducted outreach to livestock producers, pet owners, and veterinarians to gather perspectives on local veterinary needs and challenges
- Visited locations such as veterinary clinics, feed stores, animal shelters, and county fairs to connect with community members and share information
- Distributed surveys to collect quantitative and qualitative data on veterinary access, demands for services, and community priorities
- Interviewed veterinarians to gain diverse perspectives on the causes of the shortage and potential solutions for improving access to care

This hands-on approach provided a comprehensive view of the issue from multiple angles, building the foundation for identifying practical, community-driven solutions.



Photo A: Collaboration with mentors; Photo B: Outreach at the Montrose County Fair.

**WHAT I LEARNED**

- Emergency services are overwhelmingly the most difficult to access in rural communities.
- Veterinary staff support expanding para-professional responsibilities in preventive and wellness care.
- Loan forgiveness and increased staff support are consistently seen as the top methods for veterinary retention in rural practice.
- Burnout and workload strain are repeated concerns among veterinarians and staff.
- A small number of veterinarians carrying heavy workloads cannot meet community needs.

**SURVEY RESULTS**

The veterinary access survey was conducted over a 30-day period and received 314 total responses. Data was gathered through role-specific online surveys shared via email contact lists, in-person outreach at county fairs, and visits to local businesses and community locations across rural Southwest Colorado.

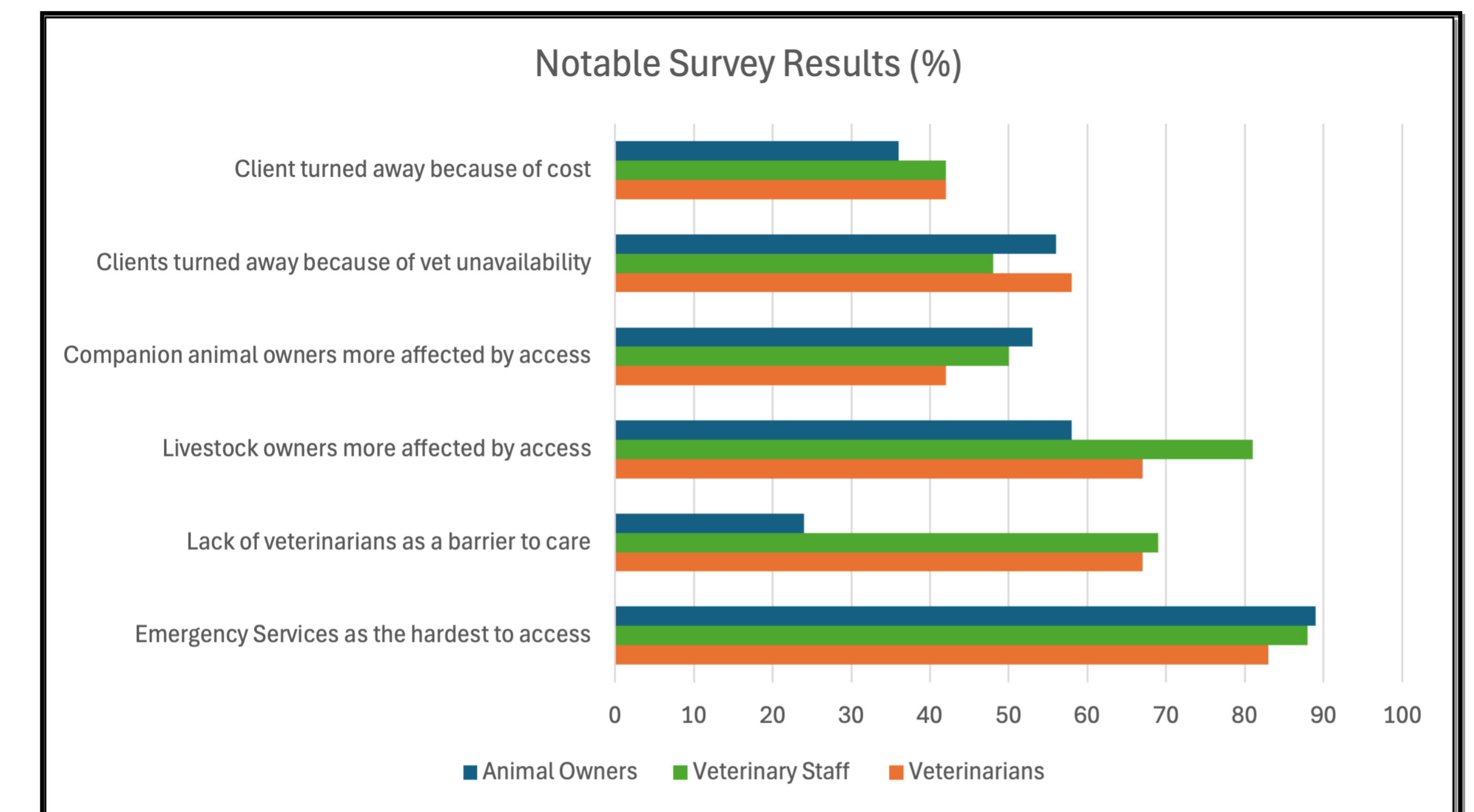


Table 1: Reported barriers to veterinary access. Results are shown as the proportion of respondents within each role (animal owners, veterinary staff, and veterinarians) who identified specific barriers. For example, about 40% of veterinary staff reported that clients are most often turned away due to cost.

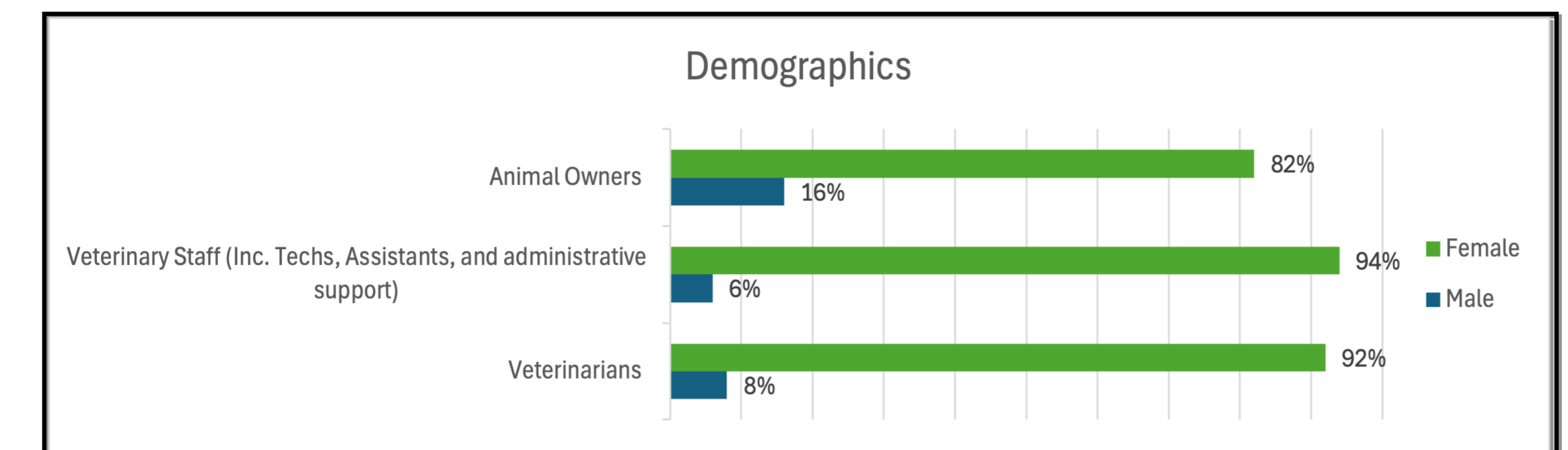


Table 2: Gender Distribution of survey respondents. The chart shows the proportion of male and female participants among animal owners, veterinary staff, and veterinarians, based on 314 total responses.

**OUR NEXT STEPS**

- Create a summary document of survey results for veterinarians, stakeholders, producers, and pet owners.
- Host or facilitate discussions to gather community feedback and proposed solutions.
- Explore targeted solutions to survey identified challenged, including veterinary relief services and collaborative emergency duty models.