

## Heartland Going Strong in 2025

By Sarah Wetzel For the Plain Talk, Aug 22, 2025



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Kerry Feilmeier provided an overview of the operations at the Heartland Humane Society (HHS) at a recent luncheon meeting of the Vermillion Rotary Club.

According to her bio, Feilmeier, a rural Yankton native, has been the executive director of HHS since 2011 when the shelter served around 200 pets per year.

Currently HHS impacts over 1,000 pets annually through adoption, outreach and education programs.

“Like Rotary, everything we do is rooted in service,” Feilmeier said. “Yes, we help animals and the people who want to surrender and adopt them, but we do a lot more crisis and communication, social work, and navigation and education than I think the typical person thinks about when they think of an animal shelter. And maybe not because most animal shelters do, but because Heartland is just really rooted into the Vermillion and Yankton communities and so we've taken on that role to do more.”

New on the shelter’s agenda this year was a multi-day summer program called “Love Your Pets,” partnered with Yankton Parks and Rec but free to youth in any community.

“Students came in and they learned good pet ownership, what to do with a stray animal in the community, what to expect when taking your animal to the vet,” she said. “So, it was just a two-week series preparing young folks to be better pet owners in the future.”

Through the Community Paws program, HHS receives donations by bringing animals into local businesses for some pet therapy or being sponsored to visit other organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club.

The Paw Boosters program allows individual donors to make monthly contributions towards items generally not on the budget such as a dog pool or laser lights for cats.

Feilmeyer mentioned how hundreds of youth have read to dogs and cats, the shelter has handed out at least 600 pounds of cat and dog food and they are on trend to be spaying and neutering over a hundred community cats annually.

“And we do pet the stress,” she said. “You're going to see us on campus here at USD at least two times a year, usually more. We do Mount Marty, we do public schools and private schools. We're at nursing homes and adult behavioral centers as well.”

Feilmeyer mentioned several notable partnerships including Pet Wellness Veterinary Hospital.

“It's a brand new organization up and coming in Sioux Falls,” she said. “They are building a vet clinic as well and its whole role is to resource animal rescue shelters and folks in financial crisis about their own pets.”

“We work very closely with 4-H and Boys and Girls Club, too, for visits and programming,” Feilmeyer said. “We provide emergency assistance to folks in shelters. We are the animal control housing for the city of Yankton. We are not animal control, but we take care of the animals for them. And many partnerships with public and private schools throughout the school years and some daycares as well.”

In regards to how community members can help HHS continue to provide all their services and programming, she said financial gifts are always welcome as well as volunteers, especially as they are gearing up for their 2026 board season.

“Our board members serve a three-year commitment,” Feilmeyer said. “They can do two terms if they wish, and we're really as we look at 2026 focusing on making our volunteer orientation become more digital, kind of getting into the digital area with volunteer communications as well. We need a new website.”

Smaller volunteer commitments are also available, she said.

“Something very simple that seems to fill folks’ cups is to just be simply on our transport team,”

Feilmeyer said. “All that is is a text message going out that we need someone to be at the Coffee Cup on Sunday at 3 o’clock to accept a puppy from Brookings Humane Society and drive it to Yankton. It could really be that simple.”

She said they do not transport animals very far and there is a van available to use if volunteers do not wish to use their own vehicle.

Individuals skilled in fundraising, human resources, facility management, maintenance, landscaping or office and IT work are encouraged to consider volunteering along with those interested in the obvious fostering and volunteering with the animals.

“That could be tightening a door handle, changing a light bulb, pulling some weeds,” Feilmeyer said. “That again is just an email and text communication thread. When you can help, you say you can help and show up...If you've got two hours a month to spare, that is more help than you can imagine.”

She shared some data from the first half of 2025.

“When we look at pet ownership, it is 66% of US households in America, but when they take that and look at the rural area, it's actually 71%,” Feilmeyer said. “So, it'd be safe to say in South Dakota, we're probably between that 66 to 71% of households have a pet in them.”

The bad news is there are not enough veterinarian services to fit the pet ownership needs.

“Not so long ago, Vermillion had two vets at one location and Yankton had seven or eight vets between the locations,” she said. “Today, if you need veterinary services, you have zero in this community. Over in Yankton, we have five vets, three of them near or at retirement age. One is for sale. One is not taking new clients.”

Feilmeyer hopes that the data showing the need for veterinary services will be enough to attract some locally.

“A lot of the reasons we're seeing surrenders is the lack of resources to care for that animal,” she said. “And when we break it down, it's not financial. It's

literally time and resources. I don't have time to take off work to drive to Sioux Falls to go to a vet and my animal is aging. It's arthritic. I don't know what to do. And so it's really good people who feel like they don't have the resources in their community to continue owning an animal.”

Other reasons for animal surrenders, according to Feilmeyer, is renters moving from one rental to another and not being allowed to bring their pet or seniors aging out of pet ownership for health reasons.

In June, HHS was able to host a Chip and Microchip and Vaccine clinic with grant money from the Vermillion Community Foundation, she said.

“We did serve 29 households that evening at the 4-H grounds for a total of 98 pets,” Feilmeyer said. “We were able to do 70 vaccines against rabies that night... and we did microchip 68 which helps for lost and found services. The alarming number we got from all of this was 12 of the homes, 43% had an unaltered animal. And then when we broke that down, 75% of those unaltered animals were females. In all those cases, they were with an animal in the home that also had an unneutered animal.”

She said that means litters of cats and dogs that will most likely end up on Heartland's doorstep sooner or later.

“We're hoping that we can work with the pet wellness center once the veterinary clinic is up and going to try to offer some spay and neuter services to these pet owners,” Feilmeyer said. “We have their contact information.”

Coming up, HHS will be hosting Amazing Acres Pumpkin Patch day on Sept. 6, a family-friendly event at the pumpkin patch West of Yankton as well as the annual Pooch Plunge in Vermillion the Tuesday after Labor day. There will also be a gala-style fundraiser in November.

For more information on HHS, their mission, events or volunteer opportunities, visit [heartlandhumanesociety.net](http://heartlandhumanesociety.net).