



Creating an Emergency Care Practice: Success Story

Ambulatory practice spins off emergency service into standalone practice

“We burned out a veterinarian, and we didn’t see it coming,” lamented Dr. James Beckman when reflecting on the abrupt resignation of a cherished associate several years ago.

Dr. Beckman and his wife, Dr. Kerry Beckman, own Gas Light Equine Veterinary Practice, a three-doctor ambulatory practice that services the areas in and around Louisville, Ky. Since its establishment in 2006, practice doctors rotated on-call responsibilities on weeknights and weekends. An informal arrangement with several other practitioners in the area enabled spot emergency coverage on weekends if a doctor needed a couple of hours off for personal reasons such as to attend a child’s sporting event.

“She was phenomenal,” Dr. Beckman said of his former associate. “We had her for three years and she was doing great. Then she came to us one day and said she was done, she was burned out, the on call was killing her and she was going to corporate medicine. At that point, we vowed to come up with a different plan.”



That plan culminated in the Beckman’s establishment of a separate, after-hours emergency practice in January 2021 following several years of planning, preparation and COVID-related delay. Bluegrass Equine Emergency Service is an “inde-

pendent,” two-doctor ambulatory practice that services only after-hours emergencies for Gas Light Equine and other equine veterinarians in the Louisville area who have chosen, or would like, to reduce or relinquish their on-call coverage.

The two employed veterinarians are not affiliated with Gas Light Equine, and each works two nights per week from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. and every other weekend. They do not see patients during the day, nor provide routine services during emergency visits. Compensation is straight salary along with profit sharing at the end of the year if deemed available.

The Beckmans are diligent to distance themselves and their Gas Light Equine practice from the client-facing aspect of Bluegrass Equine Emergency Service. Their hands-on involvement is concentrated on the back-end bookwork, including inventory. On rare occasions when the emergency veterinarian is slammed, however, Dr. Beckman serves as the backup and responds as a representative of Bluegrass Equine Emergency Service.

Emergencies are assessed a basic call charge and set fee structure. Payment by cash, check or credit card is due at the time

of service. At the end of their shift, the emergency veterinarian returns each patient to its regular veterinarian, along with an email of medical records and a full report of everything they did, saw and recommend. A phone call is made for cases deemed as needing prompt attention.

The Beckmans’ initial concerns over client reaction to new veterinarians seeing their emergencies proved unfounded. Quite the contrary. “They felt bad about calling us out in the middle of the night because we had been there all day,” he said. “Now, they don’t think twice about calling with an emergency after hours because they know that is the practice’s job.”

Bluegrass Equine Emergency Service has seen patients for seven or eight different practices in the Louisville area, several of which are subscribers. Clients of subscriber practices receive preferred scheduling and a discount on the service call. Additionally, subscribing practices can promote no on-call responsibilities when advertising for new associates, providing a leg up in the highly competitive veterinary labor market.

“Any subscriber can turn off their phone at 5:00 p.m. and rest assured that their patients are covered until 7:00 a.m., at which time they’ll have an email detailing everything that was done,” said Dr. Beckman. “With this practice up and running, there’s no reason for any veterinarian in the Louisville market to have to see emergencies if they don’t want to.”

For veterinary subscribers, improved daytime revenue is offsetting lost emergency revenue. “We’re able to be much more efficient and do more daytime work because we don’t have to deal with being out all night,” he said. “That’s something that is being found in the practices utilizing the service—yes, they’re losing the emergency funds, but the daytime work is more lucrative because of the nighttime coverage.”

Spinning off Gas Light Equine’s after-hours emergency service into a separate independent practice is a calculated business strategy by the Beckmans and one more example of how practices might tackle the all-too-common pain point of emergency coverage to help make equine practice more sustainable. Resulting improvements in work-life balance have enabled the Beckmans to work normal hours, enjoy more family time and increase their joy of equine practice.

“There are many options out there on how to cover emergencies without causing problems to your daytime practice—co-ops, partnerships, independent practices like this—but we need to work together so we can all have normal lives,” he said. “This has been a great experience for us, and I want others to love their jobs as much as we love ours.”