

Early career survey indicates improving practice climate, but challenges remain

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Introduction

Early career veterinarians face unique challenges within the equine veterinary industry and, as such, have different perspectives. As an outcropping of AAEP's Commission on Equine Veterinary Sustainability, the organization established the new Early Career Committee to evaluate these challenges and create solutions. The committee is comprised of 15 early career veterinarians from a range of disciplines.

The first priority of the committee was to survey this membership segment to evaluate their views on career sustainability and the effectiveness of AAEP's efforts to support retention in equine practice.

Demographics

A 12-question survey was emailed in June 2025 to current AAEP members who graduated between 2015–2024. A total of 446 veterinarians responded with representation across all graduation years. Approximately 55% of respondents graduated from 2020–2024 while about 45% graduated from 2015–2019.

Most respondents (59%) reported a 100% equine caseload, with 78% of respondents reporting a caseload of at least 75% equine.

Most respondents (62%) were in a group practice comprised of 59% offering hospital and ambulatory services and 3% only having hospital services. Solo ambulatory practitioners accounted for 17%, a notable decrease from 38% in earlier surveys (2016 AVMA AAEP Equine Economic Survey and 2021 State of Equine Veterinary Practice Survey). Approximately 10% worked in academia, and another 10% in other types of practice.

Internship

Respondent internship participation was common, with 69% completing at least one internship. Most internships (64%) included both hospital and ambulatory experience in private practice. Others were limited to ambulatory-only (11%), hospital-only (12%) or academic settings (10% rotating, 6% specialty). About 28% of those who completed an internship pursued further training, primarily residencies.

Over half of respondents who completed an internship felt their internship made them more likely to remain in equine medicine, crediting the experience with improving clinical confidence, skill development and access to mentorship. Conversely, 7% of respondents felt their internship discouraged them from equine medicine, citing long hours, toxic work cultures and technical versus veterinary responsibilities. For some, particularly those who were set on equine medicine prior to their internship, negative experiences contributed to leaving veterinary medicine altogether.

Career longevity

Respondents were split almost evenly between those who had remained in their initial position since graduation



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(49%) and those who had changed jobs (51%). Among those who changed positions, the number of jobs held in the first 10 years of practice ranged from 2 to 5 and averaged 2.5. These early career veterinarians remained in their jobs for an average of 1.98 years.

A majority (59%) felt that their current path supported career longevity. Positive factors included strong work-life balance, supportive mentorship, collaborative practice culture and opportunities for growth. In contrast, factors such as toxic workplace dynamics, excessive work hours, financial stress and poor work-life balance were cited as threats to sustainability.

Resources that supported career longevity included mentorship (both direct and indirect), shared on-call duties, CE funding, flexible work schedules (4-day work weeks), direct support staff and access to health benefits.

Climate and challenges

About two-thirds of respondents believed the climate in equine practice has improved over the past five years. Feedback suggests that there is growing awareness of the efforts being made to improve work-life balance, mental health, compensation and sustainability within the profession. There is a notable improvement in mentorship, internship conditions and professional development opportunities—factors which contribute positively to early career experiences.

While many practices are evolving, others still lag behind in adopting supportive models. High client expectations and resistance to changes in billing and communication methods continue to strain practitioners. Additionally, entrenched cultural norms can slow efforts toward

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meaningful structural change. Long hours, demanding on-call schedules and lower pay compared to small animal practice remain key barriers.

Resources

Respondents reported high engagement with some AAEP resources, primarily CE programs (88%). Others seem under-utilized: Early Career Practitioners' Reception (37%), Decade One stipend (35%), Internship Hub (28%), Member Assistance Program (19%) and Outrider Mentee Program (13%). When asked about the Sustainability in Equine Practice Initiative, 24% of respondents agreed that the initiatives have supported industry improvements, 42% supported the initiative in principle but had not observed significant change, and 30% were not aware of the sustainability initiatives.

While there is increased dialogue, effective progress remains slow and may be hindered by outdated practice models and resistance to innovation. The Early Career Committee is working to refine and revitalize under-utilized programs to better serve AAEP members.

Take-home message

While progress is ongoing, it remains uneven. Main drivers of the sustainability initiative, such as internships (mentorship), emergency coverage and practice culture, are reflective in factors contributing to career longevity. Ongoing improvements in these areas are essential for attracting and retaining veterinarians in equine practice.

Drs. Parkinson, Lemus and Tyma (chair) serve on the Early Career Committee.