



DEEP DIVE · EDUCATION

Inside Fear Free's Decade-Long Effort to Standardize Animal Handling Across Pet Care

The education company behind one of pet care's most recognizable behavioral standards has built infrastructure across veterinary medicine, grooming, training, boarding, and consumer care. The outcomes data is starting to back it up.

12 MIN READ

The pet industry runs on a lot of unwritten knowledge.

A vet tech learns how to handle a stressed cat from whoever trained her. A groomer picks up restraint techniques from her first salon. A boarding attendant develops a feel for an anxious dog through trial and error.

The principles that shape how an animal experiences professional care have lived in the apprenticeship layer of pet care for as long as pet care has been a business, passed mentor to mentor, shop to shop, with no shared curriculum the industry has agreed on.

That gap is what [Fear Free](#) was built to close.

Founded in 2016 by veterinarian [Marty Becker](#), the organization started as an education movement around a single argument.

Fear, anxiety, and stress in animals are not just welfare problems. They are operational ones, and the techniques for addressing them can be taught, standardized, and scaled.

The certifications, the recertification cycles, the practice-level designations all came later, layered

on top of the education.

A decade in, the scale is worth paying attention to.

DVM360 reported that the certified individual count crossed 100,000 in 2022, and it has continued climbing.

By 2024, AAHA Trends reported more than 320,000 veterinary professionals, animal welfare workers, and pet owners had registered for Fear Free's programs.

The cross-vertical scope spans veterinary medicine, grooming, training, boarding, pet sitting, and consumer education through Fear Free Happy Homes.

That breadth is the moat.

Ten years of building the layers under the brand

The organization's history reads quickly. The earliest version of the program was individual professional certification with coursework, exams, recertification, and a searchable directory.

Practice-level certification followed in 2018, launched in partnership with Ceva Animal Health in the early years of the program.

The program has since become independent of any single industry partner. It holds practices to thirty-five different benchmarks and requires every member of the staff to be Fear Free certified individually.

By Fear Free's count, **more than 500 practices** globally now hold the designation with a similar number working through the process.

From there the program kept widening.

Animal trainers got their own certification track in 2017.

Groomers in 2018.

Pet sitters in July 2021. Boarding and daycare operators in June 2022.

Animal welfare scientist Temple Grandin came on to lead a farm animal program in February 2024.

Emergency and urgent care practices got their own designation in January 2025.

Fear Free Happy Homes opened a parallel channel for pet owners with veterinary-behaviorist-reviewed content that certified professionals share with their clients.



Fear Free has also become **required curriculum at multiple veterinary colleges**, including Colorado State, Louisiana State, Michigan State, Purdue, Tufts, and Washington State, and is encouraged or formally integrated at most other major U.S. veterinary programs.

That's the structural marker most operators don't see.

When the institutions training the next generation of veterinarians fold a methodology into their required curriculum, the methodology is no longer optional.

Behind the scale, the organization has been going through its first major leadership transition.

The founder has stepped back from day-to-day operations while remaining involved as Chief Professional Relations Officer.

Doug Korn took the CEO chair in early 2025, a few months after Civitas Growth Partners closed a growth investment in the company.

That puts Fear Free into a familiar pattern across pet care. Founder-built organization reaches scale. Outside capital comes in.

Operator CEO gets installed to run the next phase. The PE-era inflection in pet care has its own set of conversations, but the substance underneath the brand is the part worth paying attention to.

What the five-year injury study actually claims

In April, Certified Safety Training, an OSHA compliance firm that works with Fear Free and other veterinary industry partners, released a 5-year analysis of injury rates at 53 Fear Free Certified veterinary practices and 29 non-certified comparison practices.

The study examined self-reported workplace injury data from 2020 through 2024. Participation was voluntary and the findings have not been independently replicated.

The numbers were striking.

Fear Free Certified practices reported:

- 22% fewer overall workplace injuries
- 24% fewer animal bites and scratches
- 12% fewer needle stick and sharps injuries
- 52% lower rate of professional liability claims than non-certified peers

The pattern held in every category measured, in every year of the study window.

A few caveats are worth keeping in mind. The study is observational, not experimental.

Practices willing to pursue any kind of certification tend to already be better-run than peers that don't, which means part of any positive finding reflects that pre-existing quality rather than the certification itself.

Animal handling protocols are one variable in a system that includes reporting culture, staffing levels, training cadence, and ownership structure.

The findings should be read as a directional signal rather than proof of causation.

This isn't the first time Fear Free's outcomes have been measured.

A 2021 three-year study by VetSuccess, a veterinary data and analytics firm, looked at 41 Fear Free Certified practices and found:

- 13.8% increase in patients per practice
- 43.7% increase in canine forward booking
- 37.5% increase in feline forward booking

When compared to non-certified peers. A separate 2020 survey of 1,429 Fear Free Certified professionals showed:

- 86% reporting an increase in client visits
- 82% reporting revenue growth
- 93% documenting an increase in workplace safety

Different methodology, different time window, same directional pattern as the CST findings.

Forward booking climbed sharply — for both species.

A three-year VetSuccess analysis of 41 Fear Free Certified veterinary practices found large, parallel increases in pre-scheduled return visits for dogs and cats relative to non-certified peers.

41 FEAR FREE CERTIFIED PRACTICES

3 yrs STUDY WINDOW

2 species CANINE + FELINE

CANINE

▲ 43.7%

Increase in forward booking for dogs

Pre-scheduled return appointments at certified practices, measured over the three-year study window.

FELINE

▲ 37.5%

Increase in forward booking for cats

Same study, same practices — the lift holds across species, with cats trailing dogs only modestly.

VS. PEERS

Both increases are measured against non-certified peer practices over the same period.

Forward booking is the share of visits that close with the next appointment already on the books — a leading indicator of retention.

Source: VetSuccess three-year analysis of 41 Fear Free Certified practices, as reported by DVM360 (2021). The Underbite analysis, May 2025.



The operational context gives the numbers weight.

Veterinary medicine sits among the most dangerous fields in healthcare.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics tracks workplace injury rates in veterinary services at roughly four to five times the U.S. workplace average.

According to HUB International data cited by DVM360, animal-related injuries account for about 70% of workers' compensation claims in the field.

The industry files roughly 3,200 claims annually at an **average cost of \$2,700 each**.

In a profession where a single technician turnover runs roughly a third of base salary in direct replacement expense and 12.8 months to refill on average, per AAHA's Stay, Please [retention survey](#), fewer injuries means fewer disrupted weeks, fewer claims to manage, and fewer reasons to leave.

CEO Doug Korn's framing of the logic, from an interview with The Underbite, is straightforward.

"Fear Free is often introduced as a way to improve the patient experience, but what this data shows is that it also functions as a practical risk-reduction strategy. When patients are calmer, procedures are smoother, and that directly reduces the situations that lead to injuries, claims, and disruptions."

Doug Korn | CEO, Fear Free

Whether the study's specific numbers hold up under independent replication is a question for the next round of research.

The broader argument they support has been visible to veterinary operators for a decade.

Calmer patients drive better operational outcomes.

Better operational outcomes show up on the workforce side of the P&L.

What makes Fear Free's scope structurally different

Several other organizations do rigorous work in pet care certification, each in its own scope.

The American Animal Hospital Association runs the most comprehensive veterinary practice accreditation in North America, with [on-site evaluation](#) against roughly 900 standards every three years and accreditation at roughly 12% to 15% of small animal hospitals on the continent.

The [Cat Friendly Practice program](#) has produced the only independent peer-reviewed outcome study in the pet certification space, a 2023 [paper](#) in the Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery showing higher diagnostic testing, higher annual revenue, and higher visit volumes at certified practices.

The Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers maintains the only NCCA-accredited credential in dog training.

The Low Stress Handling certification from CattleDog Publishing has built a community of certified professionals across roughly 40 countries.

Each of these does excellent work in its own scope.

What's structurally different about Fear Free is the breadth.

A single curriculum and behavioral standard spans veterinary medicine, grooming, training, boarding, pet sitting, and consumer education.

That cross-vertical scope is the part most operators outside veterinary medicine misjudge.

For a small or mid-sized grooming salon competing against five other shops within a ten-mile radius, the question of how to differentiate is the single most common pain point.

Same for a regional boarding operation.

Same for a trainer trying to build a referral network.

Most pet service businesses respond by buying more social media ads, refreshing their website, or doubling down on the same marketing buzzwords that operators and consumers have already learned to discount.

None of which solves the underlying differentiation problem.

The structural alternative is to align with an established educational program and the credential that comes with it.

Fear Free is, in practice, the only one of those available outside the vet clinic that operates across multiple service verticals.

The Dog Stop® and Fear Free: A Game-Changing Partnership

SHARE  



The Dog Stop was the first national dog care brand to partner with Fear Free

Veterinary referral networks recognize it.

Pet parents shopping for services online increasingly find it through the Happy Homes channel.

The cost to a small business of getting a team Fear Free certified is lower than the cost of a six-month digital marketing campaign with comparable lift, and the credential keeps working long after the campaign budget runs out.

Korn put the logic in operational terms during the interview.

"It's not an added step. It becomes the standard."

For operators across the gradient of pet care, the implication is that the marketing function and the operations function start to look like the same thing.

The harder problems waiting in decade two

Fear Free's 2026 roadmap runs on three tracks.

The first is curriculum expansion.

More than 80 new hours of continuing education are entering the library this year, with new modules covering feline and senior pet health, communication, mental health, professional

development, and burnout prevention.

The second is access.

The company has simplified its practice certification pathway to lower the lift for small and mid-sized clinics.

The third is ecosystem.

Weekly webinars, short-form video, written resources, and an active member community are designed to keep professionals engaged with the education long after initial certification, treating it as an ongoing relationship rather than a one-time exam.

The retention story is implicit in the roadmap.

Veterinary medicine's labor crisis has been visible for years.

A [CDC-led analysis published in JAVMA](#) found veterinary suicide rates running roughly **2 to 3.5 times** the general population, and recent industry surveys show serious psychological distress in the field remains elevated.

Building professional development and mental health into a clinical curriculum is not a soft proposition for a practice owner.

The harder question, and the most interesting one for the next decade, is whether the same data-backed credibility Fear Free is building inside veterinary medicine extends across the rest of pet care.

The vet world has a peer-reviewed predicate to build on, the published literature on handling and welfare, and a growing body of operator data on outcomes.

Grooming, training, boarding, and sitting do not. Building the equivalent body of independent evidence in those verticals is the structural work of the next ten years.

If Fear Free pulls that off, it ends up as something pet care has not had before.

A single behavioral standard with definition, accreditation, and outcomes data across every consumer-facing surface in the industry.

That's what holds up over time.

And it is the part operators reading this should be paying attention to whether they sell food, groom dogs, run a boarding facility, or own a vet practice.

Why the pattern matters beyond Fear Free

There is a broader argument underneath the Fear Free story that travels well outside any single organization.

Pet care is a fragmented industry running on a lot of tacit knowledge. Handling techniques in muscle memory.

Customer-service norms passed shop to shop. Business practices that vary wildly between independent operators and corporate chains.

Industries that mature tend to codify what their best practitioners already do, turning that knowledge into curriculum, certification, and a shared body of evidence.

The verticals in pet care where that codification has happened (veterinary specialization, food safety, professional dog training) are the ones operating at higher trust and higher margins.

Fear Free has spent the last decade doing that codification work for animal behavior and handling, first inside veterinary medicine and then across grooming, training, boarding, pet sitting, and consumer education.

Whether it continues to extend that infrastructure across the rest of pet care is a function of how seriously the company invests in independent validation, transparent methodology, and external outcome data over the next five years.

The operators most likely to benefit are the ones who recognize what the organization has become rather than what the language around any single certification might suggest.

A decade ago, Fear Free was an educational argument about animal welfare.

Today it is operational infrastructure with five years of outcome data, cross-vertical coverage, a corporate ownership transition behind it, and a roadmap that reads less like a passion project and more like a platform.

The next ten years will decide whether the rest of pet care follows the curve.