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'First responder' dogs to receive vet care in remote First Nations



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Judi Cannon, Indigenous animal wellness specialist with Matawa Animal Wellness Services with a puppy at the Matawa's Animal Wellness Vet Clinic treated hundreds of pets in need of basic veterinary care on May 27, 2026. | Alicia Anderson

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THUNDER BAY — Caring for the animals who protect remote communities is critical.

That’s what Judi Cannon, a Matawa Animal Wellness Services Indigenous animal wellness specialist, said about upcoming remote pop-up vet clinics.

“Dogs are the first responders and the first alert to members,” Cannon said. “They are the protectors and they're the early warning signs for wildlife that shouldn't be in the community.”

The pop-up clinics, in partnership with the Toronto Humane Society, will be in Nibinamik First Nation on Nov. 23 and 24, Marten Falls First Nation on Nov. 26 and 27, and in Webequie First Nation from Nov. 29 to Dec. 1.

“They have a wonderful outreach service that they provide for communities that are in need,” Cannon said. “We're looking forward to our renewed partnership.”

The clinics will cover a variety of services, including yearly checkups, population control, vaccines, and deworming treatments.

“With free-roaming dogs, it's imperative to be able to provide support to communities so that they're staying safe while reducing the population,” she said.

“Population control will also result in less hormones in animals, which will result in fewer fights, less roaming, and of course dog bites to humans. So, it's a win-win for not only the people but also for the animals.”

When dogs aren't spayed or neutered, hormones can cause them to fight occasionally, Cannon said.

“With one clinic last year, we saw a community over 85 per cent spayed or neutered, 90 per cent vaccinated, and through our surveys we're seeing that communities are satisfied by 97 per cent with community members that have used our services and 60 per cent of them have felt safer in their community since we've started the program,” Cannon said.

“The proof is in the pudding.”

The vaccines work to prevent rabies, parvo, and other illnesses, while the deworming prevent internal and external parasites.

“We're there to support, meet people where they're at, and go door to door and make sure that every household has access, every animal has access, removing those barriers by coming to them,” she said.

“It's been a great experience and a great pleasure to be able to offer these services.”

Five staff members will be working the clinics.

“That makes for a lot more of a workload for our staff members. However, with these communities that we're going to, a lot of them are not needing as many spays and neuters because they have done such a great job in their first year,” Cannon said.

Many appointments are expected to be regular check-ups and wellness examinations, Cannon said.

“They've done such a great job of doing all the right things of spaying and neutering and vaccinating in the first clinics that they've seen,” she said.

Community members in the First Nations are encouraged to reach out to animal guardians or community leaders for more information.

“When we also go to communities, we really make sure that we can see that the community sees us there as well,” Cannon said.

“If they didn't have an appointment before we're flying up, then we'll make sure that they can get one while we're there.”

The goal is for every animal to be served, Cannon said.

“It really depends on the community,” she said.

Rabies is particularly prevalent in the region, Cannon said.

“If the protectors are vaccinated against rabies, they can't pass that along to community members,” she said. “There's also a zoonotic interest in this program to public health and safety.”

Helping First Nation community members care for their animals is amazing to see, Cannon said.

“I think especially now there seems to be some hatred towards First Nation communities and their animals and all kinds of social media myths,” Cannon said.

“First Nation communities love their animals, and they're coming for their services because not only do they love their animals, they love their community members.”

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