

Background Document

Veterinary Services Districts

History

In 1949, Manitoba enacted the Veterinary Services Act to help fund rural veterinary services. The Act allowed rural municipalities to create veterinary districts and cost-share veterinary incentives with the provincial government. Veterinarians who agreed to work in these districts received regular grants. The goal was to boost veterinarians' income and keep fees affordable for farmers. However, the program did not include funding for building or operating veterinary hospitals.

By the late 1960s, the number of veterinarians in rural Manitoba was dropping.

It was proposed that publicly funded veterinary hospitals be created to address challenges. These facilities would allow more services to be delivered at the hospital rather than on farms, improving working conditions and reducing travel time for veterinarians. Government funding for building and operating these hospitals was considered essential to making this plan work.

In 1970, Manitoba launched the Rural Manitoba Hospital Program under an updated Veterinary Services Act. The program aimed to:

- Build veterinary hospitals about 60 miles apart across the province so farmers could access better veterinary care.
- Have each hospital managed by a district board.
- Require veterinarians to follow a province-wide fee schedule and provide both regular and emergency services in exchange for using the facilities.
- Share the costs of running and maintaining the hospitals between the province and local municipalities.
- Create a commission to oversee all veterinary districts.

The plan was to set up as many as 35 veterinary districts, each with its own hospital building.

How the hospitals were built and managed

The basic model for building and overseeing the hospital facilities was:

- Local municipalities provided land with hydro, sewer, and water services.
- The provincial government with some federal assistance paid for the construction of the hospital building.
- The district board held the property title.

Once built, the operating and maintenance costs were shared by the municipalities and the provincial government.

Fee Structure

Oversight of the provincial fee schedules by the Veterinary Services Commission was added. Municipalities were also given options to increase funding to help attract veterinarians to areas with lower populations.

Current Legislative Framework

On July 17, 1987, the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba enacted [The Veterinary Services Act](#) (hereafter 'the Act'), which incorporated previous changes and created the legal framework still in force today for the Veterinary Services District (VSD). There are two regulations:

1. the [Veterinary Services Districts Establishment Regulation](#)
 - a. outlines the communities for each active VSD.
2. the [Veterinary Services Regulation](#)
 - a. outlines the terms of assistance plans and corresponding grant assistance.

By regulation, municipal contributions and provincial grants to the Board can be used to cover operating costs for the veterinary hospital, including property taxes, insurance, utilities, equipment, repairs, upgrades, and caretaking.

Current Status of Veterinary Services Districts

Several districts have dissolved at the request of municipalities, and their properties were sold. Four districts were closed in the 1990s: Lac du Bonnet VSD, St. Lazare VSD, Selkirk VSD, and Southeast (Steinbach) VSD. One district closed in the 2000s (Hamiota VSD), and the St. Pierre VSD was dissolved in 2023. There are now 26 VSDs in Manitoba and some of them are linked to other VSDs or to private clinics.

While the number of districts has declined, the VSD program has remained largely the same with few changes over the years. The VSD program continues to be a framework for a landlord-leaseholder arrangement where the VSD board establishes a veterinary hospital and a veterinary practitioner(s) provides local services for pet owners and livestock producers under an agreement. These veterinary district hospitals are complemented by private veterinary clinics and practices that are mostly located around major city centres as well as areas with high livestock density.

In addition to the operation of VSDs in Manitoba several other models of operation exist to provide veterinary medical services. Private or independent veterinary services or clinics exist and operate in the same manner as a VSD providing rural mixed animal services. These practices are owned directly by veterinarians which offers flexibility in care, pricing etc. There are instances that the same veterinarians manage both a VSD site as well as a private clinic. The operation of private clinics in Manitoba are often small animal or equine practices. These clinics generally operate under a corporate tax structure.

The evolution of independent corporate veterinary services has largely been driven by the ability to purchase medications and supplies as part of a larger buying group. Some of the partner practices are outside of the province of Manitoba. These independent or private models may operate similar to a VSD, it could also be a mobile practice or a hybrid of all types.

Some species-specific veterinarians operate under the employment of a company or business; this is common in swine and poultry sectors.

An additional model of veterinary services in Canada including Manitoba includes the operation of clinics owned by large corporations. In Manitoba these corporate clinics are currently limited to small animal practice within Winnipeg. These clinics standardize pricing, practice and equipment across their network. This shifts away from a standard family veterinary practice while offering a wider network of care for pet owners.

Other Jurisdictions

Manitoba's VSD program is unique within Canada. While Saskatchewan has their own version of veterinary districts, theirs have been self-sustaining through user fees and rent for the use of clinics since the suspension of provincial funding in 1987 and have been operating without a governing body.

Other provinces have utilized other strategies to support rural veterinary needs. Alberta, for example, incentivises veterinarians to practice in rural areas and splits veterinary costs with ranchers. Municipalities fund the program and contract with veterinarians while the provincial government funds rabies support and disease investigation initiatives.

Board

A VSD's board is responsible for:

- Rendering financial or other assistance to enable and encourage veterinarians to practice veterinary medicine and surgery in the district at uniform fees within the district as prescribed in the regulation.
- Maintaining, equipping, and upgrading district animal hospitals to standards.
- Enabling veterinarians to confer for the interchange of information on matters relating to veterinary medicine and surgery.
- Imparting information and instructions and other means necessary to prevent the spread of diseases among animals.

The board and its members are named as a body corporate under the Act.

Each VSD should have a veterinary services board, with membership as per the table below.

# of Municipalities	# of Members
One municipality	3 members up to maximum of 5
Two or more municipalities	3 members up to maximum of 9 (each municipality with at least one member in accordance with their agreement)

Each member has a maximum term of three years from the date of their appointment and may be a municipal councillor or a resident. They continue to hold office until a successor is appointed and may be reappointed for a further term.

Funding and Oversight

In 2025, the VSD annual operating grant total budget increased from \$494K to \$569K. The VSD operating grant program matches 95% of the municipal levies up to a maximum of \$21,884.61.

Veterinary Services Commission

The VSC is an independent body that oversees Manitoba's VSD program under the Act. The VSC is responsible for:

- Approving or denying the establishment of a VSD.
- Approving, denying and recommending amendments to the terms of VSD by-laws or agreements.
- Making recommendations to the Minister on the withdrawal of a municipality from a VSD as well as alteration and disestablishment of a VSD.
- Investigating and resolving disputes among VSDs, veterinarians, and municipalities, and addressing complaints by the public over fees and services.
- Approving the VSD fee schedule.

Activities and Role Changes

The VSC's role and responsibilities have diminished over the years. The VSC's administrative duties, for example, were reduced following the elimination of reporting requirements for the VSD's annual grants as part of the government's red tape reduction efforts.

VSD Outreach

The VSC has two main VSD outreach opportunities every year: an annual VSD meeting that the commission typically organizes in the spring and a presence at the Association of Manitoba Municipalities' (AMM) annual general meeting in the fall.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic impacted these events due to the suspension of in-person meetings and it was only on November 25, 2024, that the VSC resumed engagement activities by organizing a meeting during the AMM fall convention. In this meeting, the VSDs had a round table discussion with the Minister of Agriculture.

VSD Fee Schedule

The VSC is responsible for reviewing and setting the maximum amounts on the veterinary fee schedule. On July 1, 2023, a new fee schedule was released that saw a 10% increase in the maximum amounts after remaining unchanged since 2012. The current fee schedule remains in effect until a new schedule is released.

Membership

The VSC can have up to seven members. Each member is appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council under the Act.