

The News-Gazette®



Celebrating — NATIONAL — **WOMEN'S SMALL BUSINESS MONTH**

OCTOBER 2025

WOMEN IN BUSINESS

'WIN THE MORNING, WIN THE DAY'

Before turning the page on National Women's Small Business Month 2025, Editor JEFF D'ALESSIO convened a panel of 31 local leaders to talk lessons learned, mental health management, celebrating wins and more.

How do you take care of your mental health while doing all you do?



JHANE REIFSTECK

JHANE REIFSTECK, principal at Champaign's Reifsteck Wakefield Fanning & Company: "Honestly, I have a standing therapy session every two weeks. You don't always need solutions, just someone who listens and acknowledges the challenges one faces as a business owner, mother and a woman."

"I also try my hardest not to bring work home. My job demands my attention, but my family does, too, and setting those boundaries eliminates one more thing to juggle while I'm taking kids to activities, making dinner or relaxing at home."

SHAYLA MAATUKA, partner at Savoy's Maatuka Al-Heeti Emkes LLC: "I prioritize giving back to the community, spending quality time with family and friends through activities like walking, yoga and pickleball, and traveling."

"A particularly memorable travel experience was celebrating my 50th birthday with a trip each month for a total of 50 days that year."



SHAYLA MAATUKA



DAWN COYNE

Keller Williams TREC licensed broker DAWN COYNE: "My mindset is the foundation of everything I do. Win the morning,

win the day.

"I start each day with coffee, meditation, prayer and devotion. That quiet time helps me set boundaries and stay focused on the vision I have for my life and business. It has made me a calmer person in many ways."

"I'm not perfect — none of us are — but this routine has shown me what consistent growth looks like. I finish my morning with a 45-minute walk, breakfast, more coffee, and then I'm ready for business calls."

DIONNE CLIFTON, designated managing broker and owner of Champaign's **LIVE Real Estate Group**: "I try to nurture my mental health by creating as much balance in my life as possible. I prioritize my spiritual and physical health, and really find joy, and see the beauty of life in simple things."



DIONNE CLIFTON

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WOMEN IN BUSINESS



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to work on my business. And that also means that I hold space for self-care, which for me is great for my mental health.

"I have a standing monthly lunch with a couple of friends, I get semi-regular pedicures and massages, and I see my chiropractor every two weeks. I also prioritize my wellness by working out three to four times a week and walking on the off days.

"I've found that my days and my brain run more efficiently when I make sure to move my body."



Provided

KELLY FINET, owner of Monticello's Kelly's Accounting Service: "With all the deadlines that we face as accountants, mental health is always a priority. Funny enough, my mental health is heavily tied to my physical health. If I can get out and exercise five to seven days per week, I can keep my mental health in check. Whether is a run, walk, bike ride or pickleball, it keeps me grounded and I can stay on top of the world."

MICHELLE BENJAMIN, owner of Champaign's Benjamin & Co. Esthetique: "As a small spa business owner, I prioritize my mental health by embracing the very principles I advocate to my guests: the importance of self-care.

"I practice what I preach by engaging in regular self-care routines, whether it's indulging in a facial, massage, taking quiet time to reflect or enjoying a relaxing moment in my hot tub. This practice not only rejuvenates me but also enhances my ability to serve



Provided

my clients effectively.

"I find immense value in connecting with other business owners through local groups and online communities, where we share our experiences and support one another. Additionally, I commit to ongoing professional development by attending workshops and training sessions, which invigorate my passion for the industry and keep my skills sharp.

"To maintain my productivity and creativity, I make it a point to schedule out time throughout my day, allowing me to recharge and approach my work with renewed energy. By prioritizing my mental health, I can continue to inspire my guests to do the same."



Provided

JILL GUTH, owner of Champaign's Guth & Associates: "Over the past few years, I've tried to institute 'Sanity Fridays.' I attempt, although not always successfully, to reserve Fridays to work from my home office and catch up on projects, emails, planning, etc.

"This allows me the chance to focus, without much distractions, on our listings and clients — and has proved to be very beneficial to my stress level and overall health."



Provided

SAMI ANDERSON, Champaign attorney: "As a family law attorney who spends a substantial amount of time in court, my mental health is impacted by the emotions of my client and the demands of each case.

"I have coached cheer for seven years now. Cheerleading is both mentally and physically demanding. I enjoy watching my athletes successfully doing the hard things in cheer. I think being able to help my athletes succeed in their sport helps balance the negative side of being a litigation attorney.

"It's fun watching them do what they do. I really do believe that if you can lift humans, flip yourself in the air and perform in front of large groups, you can do anything in life. Focusing on helping these athletes reach their potential brings me joy."



Provided

HOLLY BIRCH SMITH, owner of Mahomet's Holly Birch Photography: "As a busy business and brand photographer, it's important for me to leave chunks of 'white space' in my calendar. I make sure that during busy times I always leave some breathing room so that when I am working in my business, I still have time



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We are a team of passion

For more than 40 years, Confidentially Yours has been a trusted resource for women in Central Illinois — a place where comfort, confidence, and compassion come together. Locally owned and women-led, our mission has always been simple: **to help women feel their best, inside and out.**



What began as a small boutique specializing in intimate apparel has grown into a comprehensive bra and swimwear destination — offering lingerie, post-mastectomy products, medical and compression garments, and professional fittings. Every woman who walks through our doors is met with respect, expertise, and genuine care. Our certified fitters and knowledgeable staff take the time to listen, guide, and ensure that each woman leaves feeling supported — both physically and emotionally.

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As we celebrate Women's Business Month, we honor the strength, resilience, and beauty of the women in our community. Thank you for trusting Confidentially Yours to be part of your journey — today and always.

WOMEN IN BUSINESS

What's the most important business lesson you've learned along the way, something you didn't know when you started?



MEGAN TREVINO

MEGAN TREVINO, operations manager/designer at Urbana's Ohana Pools, Spas & Billiards: "The biggest lesson I've learned is that success in business isn't about how fast you grow, it's about how long you can keep showing up."

"My mom, Ginger, started Ohana in 2003 because she saw a real need for better customer service in the industry. She built this business with heart, creating spaces where families could slow down, connect and make memories together."

"Today, things move faster than ever with new technology and rising expectations, but that same lesson still holds true. Endurance means staying curious, listening closely to our customers and always looking for ways to serve them better."

"I'm proud to carry on my mom's passion and legacy by never settling, always improving and celebrating the small wins every day."

Animal Hospital of Monticello

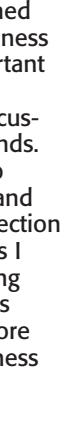
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Barbara Petersen, DVM
Shannon Heldt, DVM
Gordon Petersen, DVM



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JENNIFER HENDRICKS KAUFMANN



JENNIFER JOHNS



KAYLA BROWN

KAYLA BROWN, owner of Champaign's Fire Doll Studio: "Business growth and community growth go hand in hand."

"When I started, I thought success meant working harder and doing more myself. What I've learned is that real sustainability comes from collaboration, from inviting others into the process and trusting their strengths, and building something that serves more than just the bottom line."

JENNIFER JOHNS, owner of Monticello's Simply JJ: "One of the biggest lessons I've learned over the past decade of business ownership is just how important community really is."

"Our shoppers aren't just customers; they've become friends. Over the years, I've gotten to know their style, their sizes and their preferences. That connection changes everything. It means I can help them find something that truly feels like *them*. This is especially important as more than 80 percent of our business is conducted online."

"At the heart of it all, this business isn't just about clothes or gifts. It's about people. I'm so grateful for the incredible community that has grown around Simply JJ. It started back in 2015 as a group on Facebook with local shoppers who had attended pop-up parties. We are going strong 10 years later with members from all 50 states."

"We have had members travel to our shop in Monticello from other states and we *love* getting to meet them in person."



STEFANIE PRATT

STEFANIE PRATT, owner of the Stefanie Pratt Coldwell Banker Real Estate Group and president of Rockin Express: "It's OK to say no. That is hard for me as I want to ensure always helping everyone but sometimes there are clients that are not a good fit to work with, whether it be personalities, unreal expectations, consuming so much time that it takes away from doing the job and/or takes away from other clients, or not letting me do my job that was outlined from the beginning when we started."

"It is not often but has happened over the 24 years in business. Always be true to yourself and your business."



TERESA KELNHOFER, president and CEO of Champaign's Regency Consolidated Residential LLC-Regency Multifamily: "The important business lesson I've learned is how vital it is to stay true to your company vision, your core values and the relentless pursuit of excellence."

"Our team has won the national customer service award for our class for 18 straight years and I believe it's because we focus on these things."

"Also for me, listening to and trusting our team is rewarding for them, myself and the company."

How do you celebrate wins at work?



GOZEN HARTMAN

GOZEN HARTMAN, CEO of Champaign's Fairlawn Real Estate: "That the ability to make decisions — and quickly — is like some kind of superpower."

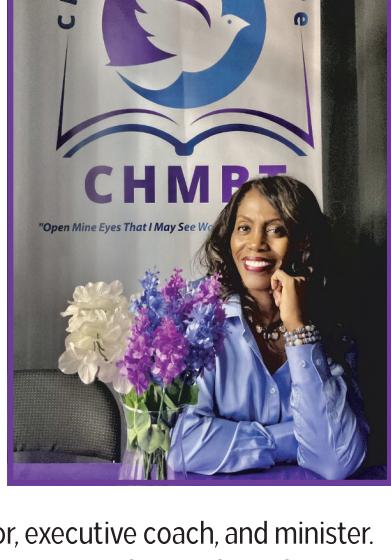
"Even if they aren't always the right decisions — not all will be, that's a certainty — taking the information you have and making the best call you can at the time moves things forward. Along these lines, you need to be prepared to quickly pivot if things aren't working."

Danville's TRICIA TEAGUE, founder of The Trep School: "I have a glass jar on my desk with colorful notes in it. Every time something good happens that warrants celebrating, I write a note, fold it up and put it in the jar."

"On New Year's Day, I reflect on the wins for the year by going through the jar, opening those notes and journaling about the accomplishments as well as the intentions I set at the beginning of the year."

"Then I put them all in a Ziploc baggie labeled for the year."

Crystal Duncan-Hogue is the Founder and CEO of CHM Bible Theatre, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that fosters faith-based arts, theater, and leadership programs for the youth and the creative adult. Her mission is to orchestrate innovative and uplifting Bible and inspirational stage plays for communities enriched by culturally sensitive educational youth programming. Her guidance and leadership ensure that everyone has an opportunity to use their God-given creative talents, skills and education to impact communities.



She is a motivational public speaker, author, executive coach, and minister. She coaches others through her for-profit company Crystal Clear Coaching, LLC. Coach For Nonprofits. Crystal has cultivated meaningful connections with community, executive, religious, and governmental leaders across diverse spheres.

Crystal's academic accomplishments include a bachelor's degree in theology and a master's degree in business administration (MBA) with a concentration in business management. She holds a teaching license with the State of Illinois and an ordination ministerial license.

Driven by her unwavering commitment, Crystal directs her multifaceted talents towards positively impacting society and encourages others to do the same. She recognizes that united can usher in unity, diversity, love, passion healing, hope, faith, and light during dark and challenging times.

Services We Offer:

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- Performing Arts
- Leadership and Training
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WOMEN IN BUSINESS

What's the one thing you're most proud of as an entrepreneur?



MORGAN STONE
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MORGAN STONE, owner of Urbana's Michelle's Bridal and Tuxedo: "When something great happens, big or small, we celebrate as a team. We cheer, high-five and sometimes even pop some confetti. It's about recognizing successes and showing our team that their dedication truly matters."



ANDREA HUNT
Provided

ANDREA HUNT, owner of The CU Flower House, A. Hunt Design and Hunny Bunny Bakes: "My ability to pivot. Running a small business in today's economic environment is more difficult than ever before. I have to constantly keep up with rising prices, rents, new

rules and regulations. My business plan has to keep morphing to keep everything afloat.

"I'm not afraid to try something new or let go of what used to work to keep building and growing. I have to keep thinking outside of the box."



LUCRETIA WILLIAMS
Provided

LUCRETIA WILLIAMS, CEO of Lucretia's Body Oils and Sprays: "What I'm most proud of is that I built Lucretia's Body Oils and Sprays from the ground up—starting in my bedroom and growing into a full warehouse operation—without ever losing the heart behind it. Every scrub, butter and oil represents consistency, faith and community."

"My greatest pride isn't just in sales; it's in knowing I've created something that uplifts others. I employ local people, pour into women and remind my customers to care for themselves inside and out. What started as one woman's dream has become a movement—and that's what makes me proud every single day."



Carolyn Baxley opened Cinema Gallery in the former Urbana Cinema in January 2001.

She represents 58 artists of the Midwest with emphasis on those who have connections to Urbana-Champaign.

Media on display include ceramics, glass, sculpture, paintings, prints, and studio furniture.



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Who says you can't start a business in your 50s?

Lisa Crane started Crane Feeding and Speech when there was a definite need in the community for feeding specialists helping families help their picky eater, or better said very specific eater. Speech therapy services were also in high demand. There simply were not enough SLPs in 2022. Lisa also wanted to give back to the community by accepting Medicaid based insurances. CFS has grown from just me and my biller Kari Findley, a sorority sister who is remote from Ohio, to 5 treating speech therapists and a billing team of 3. This next month we will add occupational therapy to our team.



What We Do

We provide speech, language, and feeding therapy to children ages 0-17. We have experience in treating a variety of areas, including articulation delays, apraxia, language delays, stuttering, AAC, autism spectrum disorder, picky eaters, and dysphagia. We require a doctor's referral faxed to 217-215-3016 to begin the process. We will then contact you to schedule an initial evaluation. At the evaluation, we will discuss our recommendations, which may include ongoing therapy, home programming, or follow-up visits as needed.



WOMEN IN BUSINESS

ELSAR EIFSTECK
ELSAR EIFSTECK

ELSAR EIFSTECK, principal at Champaign's Reifsteck Wakefield Fanning & Company: "I'm most proud of figuring out how to run a business while raising two young children."

"Both of my daughters were born shortly after I became a business owner, and at first, I couldn't imagine how it would all work. It's still a juggling act some days, but I'm proud that I've made it work and that my girls will grow up knowing women can do it all."

MARY MANZELLA RACZ
Provided

MARY MANZELLA RACZ, general manager at Champaign's Manzella's Italian Patio: "Every day, I feel grateful and proud to carry on the business my dad started more than 65 years ago. Family businesses don't always make it — in fact, only 30 percent continue on into the next generation — so being part of that small percentage feels like an incredible honor."

"I owe so much to my dad's vision, and the hard work of my brothers, sister-in-law, the staff and the support of our amazing customers who've been with us through the years."

CINDY SOMERS
ProvidedDIANA STEWART
Provided

DIANA STEWART, president/owner of Danville's Envirox LLC: "This one is easy. I'm most proud of the organizational culture Envirox has become."

"We've fostered an environment where our team cares for each other, our customers, our company and the quality of our products. When mistakes happen, individuals and teams take accountably; everyone jumps in to help make it right."

"We focus on 'doing well by doing good.' This philosophy is woven into our relationships with customers, vendors, each other and how we invest in our employees and business growth."

"Every team member at Envirox makes this kind of work environment a reality. We put a great deal of intention, time and organizational effort into being a great place to work. It is 100 percent worth it."

Spherion Staffing franchise owner CINDY SOMERS: "I can't limit it to just one, but I can narrow it down to two."

"I am proud of sustaining the business my father started in 1981. I am also proud of the relationships I have been able to have over the past 33 years. This includes a strong bond with my staff, the employees we have put to work and the people that work at the businesses we partner with."

JENNY SHIMA
Provided

JENNY SHIMA, owner of Champaign's The Literary: "I am really proud of the culture we're creating at The Literary — we do our best to nurture a trusting, collaborative, mission-driven environment and make it a pleasure to be at work."

"Our theory is that when you're feeling good at work, you share those good vibes with the guests who bring a little bit of that glow into their days, and things get just a smidge better."

"For me, one of the best parts is that creating and growing a culture is an imperfect process, which means that I'm always learning."



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Women in Business has been a family tradition. Peter Pan Early Learning Center, a long-standing child care facility, started in 1965 with my grandmother, Katie Gray, and my mother, Rosetta Gray. They started a tradition for me. With my mom owning her own child care center, it was natural for me to attend the center as a student and experience the other side of the business, including being a latchkey kid after school, spending weekends with my mother running errands, purchasing groceries, and buying school supplies for the center.

Spending time at the center became my first job as a teenager. I was being trained and didn't even know what was happening. Since then, it has become a part of me, so it was natural for me to want to pursue a career in early childhood education. It became a dream for me, but my mom felt that I should pursue a different path. I graduated with a BS degree in Therapeutic Recreation and worked in that field for five years. Even though I continued my interests in children, it wasn't satisfying enough, so I went on to pursue what was natural for me.

In 1994, I quit my job and went into business with my mom. Once she retired, I continued my educational career and obtained a Masters of Education degree in Early Childhood Administration. I have over 30 years of providing child care services and still continue to provide these services to families and flexible employment for the community.

Today, owning my own business has become a dream job, a dream career, and a lifelong passion of continuing the tradition, the legacy.

— Yvette Gray Brown, Owner —
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WOMEN IN BUSINESS



JEFFREY AND LAUREN BROKISH

Anthony Zilis/The News-Gazette

LAUREN BROKISH, co-owner of Salt Fork Food Works, Central Illinois Bakehouse, Martinelli's Market, Pekara Bistro, Prairie Fruits Farm and Creamery and Espresso Royale Cafes: "I am most proud of the amazing team that we have built to support our growth as a company. There is no way that Jeffrey and I would have been able to grow our company so quickly and have the impact we do without the exceptional people that we get to work with every day."

"Our company was founded with the vision to make Champaign the best place possible to live and to eat, and the caliber of people that have been inspired to come help us build this blows my mind every day."

"They make work feel like joy and I am so grateful to them all."



MADELINE MANCUSO

MADELINE MANCUSO, owner of Tolono's Madeline Wilson Photography: "I'm most proud of the connections I've made with my clients during my career in photography. I have formed such meaningful relationships with a lot of folks I do photos for."

"It means so much when I have clients that return every year and I feel like I've known them my whole life. I'm so lucky to have clients that turn into friends. It's an honor being able to document their memories."

EMILY DONOHOE, owner of Mahomet's Pixels by Emily: "The most important lesson that I have learned and what I am most proud of as an entrepreneur is that it is so much harder than I ever dreamed it would be to own a customer service-based

business (the lesson), but I am still here navigating the endless twists and turns (what I am most proud of).

"Along with entrepreneurship come the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. I definitely didn't realize how emotionally attached a person could be to a business when I set out 11 years ago. I just wanted to take pictures and create something beautiful for families to treasure for a lifetime."

"Along the way, though, I have intentionally raised the bar on what we create, how we create it, the excellence with which we serve our clients, and the standards set for our employees and most definitely for myself. I have poured every ounce of determination, love, grit, time and faith that I have into the art we create and how we serve our clients within the walls of my studio."

"I have jumped for joy and felt untouchable more times than I can count, but on the flip side, I have cried countless tears, felt

ultimate defeat and prepared to close the doors just as many times because I felt defeated, misunderstood and like I didn't have any more to give."

"Yet somehow, even in the bleakest moments, I have been able to dig deeper than I thought I was capable of, lean on a very supportive network of family, friends and other entrepreneurs, and find a way to keep moving forward."

"Owning and operating a luxury business that offers wants and not needs in a time when the economic landscape is so volatile has been exceedingly difficult. The ends don't always meet, but when I consider what I would do if I didn't do this, I have no answer. Telling people's stories through legacy fine art portraits is what I feel like I was put on this Earth to do."

"So I will take the highs with the lows and ride the this roller coaster of entrepreneurship until it's something I can physically no longer do."



EMILY DONOHOE

Holly Birch

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people say as a woman it is difficult to run a business because of this and that but Meghan has never let that mind set interfere with her goals. If a man can do it- most likely Meghan already has.

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The Story of Mahomet's Woman-Led Veterinary Team: All About Animals Pet Clinic

In the heart of Mahomet, just off Interstate 74, you'll find the bold, caring, and community-loved veterinary clinic — **All About Animals Pet Clinic**. Founded and led by **Dr. Joella Koss**, this **independent, women-owned practice** stands as a shining example of entrepreneurial spirit, compassionate leadership, and dedication to both people and pets.

A Vision Born from Education and Heart

Dr. Koss's journey was shaped by education, determination, and a deep respect for the bond between people and their pets. A proud **Triple Illini**, she earned her **Bachelor's degree in Animal Science, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, and Master of Business Administration** — all from the **University of Illinois**.

Her goal in opening All About Animals Pet Clinic went far beyond providing exceptional medical care. She envisioned an environment and culture where her team could truly thrive — a place where everyone loves coming to work each day, united around a shared purpose: delivering the best care possible for pets and the best customer service for their families.

More Than "Just a Vet"

Walk into All About Animals and you'll feel the difference immediately. The clinic offers everything from wellness exams, dentistry, and surgery to luxury **boarding and grooming** through its sister brands, **4 Feet ReTREAT** and **4 Paw Spa**. Every detail — from the warm greeting at the front desk to the gentle handling techniques in each exam room — is designed to make both pets and their people feel comfortable and cared for.

The clinic's motto captures its philosophy perfectly:

"At All About Animals Pet Clinic, we don't just treat pets. We care for them as if they were our very own."

It's a promise that has guided the practice since day one and helped it become one of the most trusted names in Central Illinois veterinary care.

Rooted in Community

Located at **305 S Prairieview Road** in Mahomet, the clinic serves families across Mahomet, Champaign-Urbana, and beyond. It's a place that feels local in every sense — familiar faces, friendly service, and a deep understanding of what pets mean to the people who love them.

The community has taken notice. All About Animals has earned **multiple first-place awards** in the **News-Gazette People's Choice** competitions for veterinary care, dog and cat boarding, and grooming. But for Dr. Koss, the greatest reward is seeing families return year after year — often with generations of pets who have grown up under her team's care.

Leading the Way as an Independent Woman in Business

Behind the clinic's success is a woman whose vision reaches far beyond medicine. Dr. Koss blends veterinary expertise with a sharp business mind to build a sustainable, forward-thinking model for independent practice that prioritizes both care and culture.

Her leadership style centers on empowerment. She invests in continuing education, professional growth, and innovative care models — including the launch of **All About Animals At Home**, offering mobile in-home visits, and **pet wellness subscription plans**. Through these, she strives to make veterinary care more accessible, less stressful, and more personal for families.

In an industry increasingly dominated by corporate consolidation, Dr. Koss proves that **independent, women-owned practices** not only can thrive — they can redefine what excellence looks like. Her



From left to right: Dr. Meg Gantzer, Dr. Joella Koss, Dr. Cailey Vandermark, Dr. Averie Field

focus on community, innovation, and genuine connection has made All About Animals a model for other small-business owners seeking to grow with integrity.

A Local Legacy of Care

For Dr. Koss, success isn't measured in numbers alone but in the trust her team earns every day. From pediatric to geriatric care, every pet who walks through their doors receives the same level of compassion and attention.

In a world of large corporate clinics and impersonal service, All About Animals

stands apart — a place where passion meets professionalism, where the human-animal bond is celebrated, and where a local woman's vision has blossomed into something extraordinary.

So the next time your furry family member needs care, remember: you don't have to travel far to find exceptional service with heart. It's right here in Mahomet — at **All About Animals Pet Clinic**, an **independent, women-owned practice** where compassion, community, and leadership come together under one roof.



ALL ABOUT ANIMALS PET CLINIC

Caring for Pets Like Family

At All About Animals Pet Clinic, we know pets are family. Our friendly, experienced team provides high-quality, stress-free care for dogs, cats, reptiles, and pocket pets in a warm, welcoming environment. With state-of-the-art facilities, gentle handling, and a personal touch, we make every visit comfortable and compassionate — helping your pet live their happiest, healthiest life.

\$1 New Client Exam*

In-Clinic Appointments Only - Call Us Today to Book!

*One coupon per household. Cannot be combined with any other offer.



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Convenient, Compassionate, In-Home Care

No car rides. No stress. Just expert veterinary care where your pet feels safest — at home. Our In-Home Visit Service makes it easy for busy pet parents or anxious pets to get the care they need in a familiar environment.

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- Call: 217-586-4477
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