



No More Homeless Pets Forum
July 25-29, 2005

Spreading Spay/Neuter Fever

This week YOU are the forum guest! Have you found a way to break through resistance to spay/neuter, especially in a rural area? If so, we want to hear all about your success. Please share your best techniques for spreading spay/neuter fever!

If all this talk of spay/neuter fever has you eager to do even more in your own community, please visit the spay/neuter section (<http://www.bestfriends.com/nomorehomelesspets/resourcelibrary/snindex.cfm>) of our online Resource Library!

Getting around the cost hurdle

Comment from Barb:

We have not found much resistance to the idea of spaying and neutering in our area. The PRICE the vets charge is where we get the resistance, because in our area a lot of people don't have much money.

And believe me, when it comes down to buying food for your kids (or cigarettes or beer for the adults sometimes), or buying S/N for your animal, the animal usually comes out the loser. The local cost for the surgery ranges from \$107-\$127 for a neuter and \$117-\$146 for a spay.

So we have found three vets ranging in distance from 35-55 miles away and we haul animals over there 2-3 times a week. In the last couple years we have gotten over 1,000 animals done, and we are starting to see fewer animals during kitten and puppy season. And we are starting to negotiate with a fourth vet, so hopefully soon we will be able to do even more.

This is all done with volunteers and their own cars and it is making a difference. We charge \$39 to neuter a cat and \$49 for a spay. This price includes a \$10 donation for our shelter per animal (this covers incidentals, like liability insurance and phone usage to make the appointments and the reminder calls).

This is how we also get the S/N's done on the animals we adopt out. If someone wants vaccinations for their animal, we charge just what the vet charges (usually \$10). And, finally, the local vets are starting to take notice - now if they get a patient who says they can't afford the price the vet charges, they will actually send them to us.

And enough people have commented to the local vets that it's "too bad the shelter has to take the animals 55 miles away to get animals spayed or neutered" that now the vets are starting to call us to see if we can "work something out" as far as the price goes. We have called them to set up appointments to talk about having all the local vets volunteer next February for a couple of marathon spay days to S/N feral and barn cats, and we are actually getting somewhere with these negotiations. And our goal is to try to hammer the cost down even lower, by finding ways to raise money so we can subsidize the price for the very lowest income people. Because, like I said, it isn't resistance to the IDEA of S/N, it is resistance to the COST. So if we can solve that problem, we can solve the overpopulation problem, and I really believe that.

High kill rates call for high priority on spay/neuter

Comment from Judy:

Our shelter is in a rural county in Middle Tennessee so preaching the message of spay/neuter has been a challenge, but we've made it a top priority and have one of the most aggressive spay/neuter programs in the state.

We've used several approaches to increase awareness of the need for spay/neuter and we've introduced several programs to encourage it.

First, every pet adopted from our shelter is spayed or neutered before it goes to its new home.

Second, our volunteers are trained to talk about spay/neuter at every off-site adoption event, at least one every week, so we use that as an opportunity to educate. All of our events mentions spay/neuter. Our spay/neuter programs have been written about in local newspapers. We put up a billboard promoting spay/neuter. We have adoptable pets featured on local television programs and in local newspapers so we always mention the importance of spay/neuter. We have made "Kind News" available to every elementary classroom in our county school system and hope to introduce it in private schools soon. We think if we educate the children they can help educate their parents.

Thanks to a grant and donations we were able to purchase a mobile veterinary clinic, "The Spay Station". We've done over 22,000 free spay/neuters for low income pet owners who otherwise couldn't afford it in 19 surrounding counties in just a little over 5 years.

Again, thanks to a grant and donations, we started a feral cat program, "Snip & Tip", and so far have done over 700 free spay/neuters in 10 months. For a rather extended period of time, we offered discount coupons for spay/neuter to all pet owners in our county. We plan to reintroduce that program soon.

Since they usually have big litters, we sponsored a "Big Dog" spay neuter program for a limited time which offered discount coupons to use at participating veterinarians to spay or neuter dogs weighing 50 lbs or more. We've only done this once and it was for a limited period of time but we offered free spay/neuter for Pit Bulls.

Just about everything with our name on it has this tag line with it, "Saving Lives Through Prevention". We never miss an opportunity to promote spay/neuter.

Spay/neuter; it's personal!

Comment from Amber:

I have two friends that are veterinarians in rural areas. They have both told me (and they don't know each other) that especially men seem to think that removing their dogs' testicles is going to reflect on their own sex life.

I thought this was hilarious at first but they both insist that people internalize the spaying/neutering of their pets. They actually have gently told people that dogs don't have sex for enjoyment and they won't be missing that part of their life, like a person would. This makes more of an impact than explaining the health benefits!

On a very different (but related) note, we have a very urban, sophisticated friend who was hesitant to neuter his large breed dog. I kiddingly told him about testicular prosthetics and a few months later...I discovered that he had neutered his dog and gotten the implants! It was all about vanity for him, I guess.

You would think health would be a major concern, but in my experience it is much deeper and more personal.

And once we can identify the true reason that someone is hesitant to do what's best for their animals, we can address the problem at its core.

Merchandise, merchandise, merchandise!

Comment from Tammi:

Here are some ideas to get the spay-neuter message out there:

Add a spay-neuter "signature" to every email message you send; it is easy to do and the message can be changed to suit different seasons. When you think of how many emails we forward on to others, who forward them on to yet more people; a simple email message could reach 1000's of people! Here's an example:

"Every year shelters kill almost 5,000,000 cats, dogs, puppies & kittens.
Most were beautiful, loving creatures that died simply because they did not have a home.
Every puppy or kitten born costs a shelter animal its life.
Save lives, spay-neuter & adopt for life!"

Carry business cards for the local spay-neuter clinic, (print them up yourself if you have to). When you see someone shopping for "new" pet supplies at Wal-Mart or Petsmart; start a conversation with them and ask them if the animal is "fixed". If not, than explain why it's important and give them a business card. Also include a card in the envelope with any local bills you pay, tack them up on bulletin boards, etc.

For \$10, Wal-mart sells an inked stamp in the office supply section, which you can have made with a spay-neuter saying. They can be designed with a paw print, dog or cat logo in addition to your text and are great for stamping mail, receipts, etc.

Many of us remember Shrinky-Dinks as a kids craft item, but heat shrinking plastic is now available for the adult crafting market; even in a form that can be printed using an inkjet printer. This enables the use of photos, text and/or graphics in endless possibilities...You can make and wear your own Spay-Neuter buttons, barrettes, bracelets, charms and more. Other possibilities are plant stakes, magnets, thumbtacks and more. The plastic is available at craft and scrap booking stores or online at www.wilde-ideas.com.

Put a large decal on the back window of your car-with a spay-neuter message or quote. They can be made by most sign shops for \$20-50 (or donated?) depending on the size, which is very cheap considering how many people will end up reading it.

Print your own "address" labels with a spay-neuter message instead. Stick them on envelopes, credit cards, billing statements, etc. Hand them out at fundraisers, booths, parades. Make some up that say "I LOVE my pet, I had them Fixed" for folks that bring their animal to the spay-neuter clinic to wear; kind of

like the "I gave Blood" stickers that the blood banks use. Keep some in your purse or wallet and hand them out to little kids.

There's a saying that self-consciousness is the death of fashion. I say, it's the death of animals who need us to come out of our shells! That always helps me to cast aside fears so that I can make a difference in the way people think about their animal companions.

It's all part of the package!

Comment from Beri:

We try to promote spay/neuter as part of the adoption "package".

As we have a good relationship with our vets and get a rescue discount, we offer attractive adoption fees with a lot of extras included.

We break down what it would cost them vs. us to have all the vetting and spay/neuter done.

Our area is just starting to do early age spay/neuter, when patients are 2 pounds or older, which generally happens when dogs or cats are 6-8 weeks old.

People are usually thrilled that the puppy or kitten they adopted comes "fixed." They turn into advocates for early age spay/neuter!

We have done away with spay/neuter contracts. We found that it was often not effective having people 'promise' to spay/neuter later on, after they brought the puppy or kitten home. They would get busy, or an illness in the family would crop up, or their financial situation would change, or they simply didn't want to 'hurt their new baby.' Whatever the reason, we were tired of the excuses--and the accidental breeding that resulted. Now we're much happier and adopters are too; they never have to feel like the 'bad guy' dropping off their pets for spay/neuter surgery!

Comment from Jean:

One thing that's just been such a blessing in our area is that, without exception, ALL of the animals, no matter their age, are neutered or spayed before they leave our shelter or foster doors. There's no such thing as 'too old' and if they're old enough to go to their new homes, then they're old enough to get fixed first!

Best Friends taught me that saying and it is so true! I print off copies of the forum archives (<http://www.bestfriends.com/archives/forums/pediatric.html>) and the spay/neuter info from their online Resource Library (<http://www.bestfriends.com/nomorehomelesspets/pdf/juvenilespayneuter.pdf>) and have used it to share with the vets and public alike.

There are also videos on the subject. For rescuers and the public I like to loan out American Humane Association's (AHA) A Case for Early Neutering, available at http://www.americanhumane.org/site/PageServer?pagename=pb_animals_spay_neuter.

And for veterinary staff use, I keep a copy of Early-age Neutering: A Practical Guide for Veterinarians: <http://169.237.113.35/FMPro?-db=products.fp5&-format=detail.htm&-lay=cgi&-sortfield=name&-sortorder=descend&category=video&-max=20&-recid=33003&-token.0=39797&-find=>. This can be lent out or shown at an all-staff meeting.

The best part has been that as one vet got on board and we were able to move forward with 100% neuter before adoption (nba), the other vets started seeing the already-fixed babies in their post-adoption check-ups! It helped normalize the procedure when the vets saw the babies were healthy and grew up to be fine cats and dogs. Also, I think there was a bit of peer competition going on, "Well, geez, if Dr Walker down the street got MY patient's business, maybe I should start offering this service, as well!"

A little shock value goes a long way

Comment from Jessica:

We made a poster and put it up at our local pet stores. It created shock waves and we got more requests for spay neuter help at that time than any other time.

The poster which was high quality, good enough for stores to put in their window. It read as follows:

A picture of an adorable, 8 week old kitten. The heading above her read, "In four months she could be having kittens of her own," and below her read, "And in six more months, her kittens could be having kittens."

It was a hit and scared the daylights out of many people who said they had no idea how fast cats could reproduce. Hard to believe that, but what matters is that it worked.

Cats have actually been frequently documented to get pregnant at only four months of age. This especially happens in the more temperate regions. I live in a warm area where it is frighteningly common.

In other words, if the gestation period is 8-9 weeks, and the kitten in the photo is 8 weeks, then she'd be eligible to get pregnant in 8 weeks (at 4 months) and have a litter born in another 8 weeks--at only 6 months of age!

Our first poster also got lots of positive results. It had a picture of a cat and the heading said, "Because fixing one cat means many more lives will be spared from ending up in our shelters or living on the streets." Below it read, "Please fix your pet and any stray you are feeding."

And of course, both had our group's contact info, so people knew who to call with their good intentions to get their animals fixed, even if they couldn't afford it.

Huge Blowout Sale—This Month Only!

Comment from a member:

Our little organization offers the same spay/neuter subsidies year-round. But our calls go way up when we create a sense of urgency with "time-sensitive offers." After all, everyone loves a sale, most of all low income people--which is the demographic we want to offer our assistance to.

So, we like to hit the, "Hurry! Prices this low won't last!" angle pretty hard--and the public has REALLY responded, even driving from up to 2 counties away to bring their animals in for spay/neuter.

We'll offer the same subsidies we always do, except we'll call it a sale or special event, and put flyers around town, and put out a news release, etc. A clever or catchy name is a must. For example, a friend thought up the, "Queens for a Day," event, where only female cats would be fixed. Or the, "Father's Day...NOT!!" day, when only males were fixed.

We noted that people, who could have afforded to have the procedures done all along, finally got it together enough to actually bring their animal in for surgery. We're talking fully mature, had been makin' babies a long time, priority patients. Their people just couldn't resist the feeling that they were getting a bargain. And of course, the majority of callers actually did need the help. Either way, it was a segment of the population--or rather, OVERpopulation--that our usual efforts weren't grabbing.

For inspiration, we look to the success that the Doris Day Animal Foundation (www.ddaf.org) has had with their Spay Day USA campaign to promote spay/neuter in February. Of course, we fanatics all know that any day is a good day for more spay/neuter. Still, picking a time to promote as a unified force really gets the nation to take notice!

Every year we work with other groups to help put on a Spay Day USA event (www.spayoregon.org), during which we are FLOODED with calls; this year we were able to help over 800 cats in one month--3 times our usual workload! The best part of all was the post-event lull. The other groups also reported that their phone lines were unexpectedly quiet for months after that spay/neuter blitz. The ultimate test will be if the euthanasia rates for the area are lower at the end of the year. Then we'll really celebrate--and start planning our NEXT campaign!

What does SNIPPITS stand for?

Comment from BJ:

Our group has designed a flyer that explains a little bit about the latest phase of our Spay it Forward program. Phase II is dubbed the Spay/Neuter Initiative Program for Pit Bulls--or SNIPPITS for short!

We just got word that PitBull Rescue Central (www.pbrc.org) will be helping us with some of the funding!

We are a very small group in the California Central Valley and in just 9 months we have raised enough money to provide over 80 surgeries for low-income families; thanks to another grant we will be able to continue the original program through this year.

The link (<http://www.loveofanimals.org/dynapage/display?PageID=499>) to our website (www.loveofanimals.org) will tell you about the Spay it Forward program.

Peer pressure? We prefer to call it peer encouragement

Comment from Cinder:

Our high volume, spay/neuter nonprofit has been around a few years, and we keep track of where recipients heard about us.

Earlier on, almost everyone had heard about us from a shelter. Which means we were only getting calls from the folks who were already educated about spay/neuter, and also about animal rescue, and were familiar with their humane society or animal control, and knew they could count on them to know their spay/neuter options.

As a little time passed (maybe a year), we built a strong reputation for responsiveness, quick payment, professionalism and dependability with the over 100 veterinary clinics statewide we send low income recipients to (we pay up front for the surgeries, and vets really like that). As a result, community members

in true need started contacting us after being referred by vet clinics who were familiar with us. What a win-win situation; the clinic still gets the business, subsidized by us, and the animal gets fixed! Clinics refer both existing clients, and also random, "How much does a spay cost?" calls when it's obvious the response is too high for the caller's budget.

After a couple of years of being as visible as possible in the community, we starting seeing way more people making initial contact after hearing about us from a friend, co-worker, family member or simply, "word of mouth." Many times, one person from a trailer park, apartment complex, family or rural community had a good experience working with us, and then passed out our contact info to everyone else who also needed help and hadn't known where to turn. That really makes us happy and feel good that 'targeted marketing' is happening almost effortlessly on our part.

Because to generalize, people with strapped budgets tend to associate with others in the same boat-- which means that we can be pretty sure that they all really need the help and aren't just giving their number out to all their rich, bargain-hunting friends!

But there's a deeper element to it that we've noticed. And that is that sometimes, spay/neuter just wasn't on an individual's radar before the people close to them starting doing 'the right thing' by having their own animals fixed. It's one thing to be preached at by a 'crazy cat lady' or an 'animal rights know-it-all.' It's quite another when our friends and loved ones model a new and desirable behavior. Then they can see for themselves that, "Grandma's dog got neutered and he didn't get fat....and maybe my dog will stop peeing everywhere if he gets neutered, too."

And sometimes people learn by doing. If what they've 'done' previously is let their animals breed, and it seemed normal because that's what everyone else, did, too.....then a new behavior pattern can work as a chain reaction, with a ripple effect. Which is why we work on changing the minds that can be changed, knowing that others who had been resistant will follow once they see this sterilization thing isn't so bad, after all.

Member Comments

Comment from Mary about spay/neuter--it's personal:

I teach an offenders program every month. This is a class for people in our community who have received citations for animal ordinance violations. Usually things such as failure to restrain or obtain rabies vaccination, but sometimes we do have neglect/cruelty people. These are the folks that the Judge thinks it will be better to educate them than to fine.

Amber's comments about men & their dog's testicles made me chuckle. I've known about that issue for a while. One thing that I specifically put in my class when discussing spay/neuter is "blue balls." Most men blush or giggle when they see it up on the screen—but they all know what I'm talking about. All male mammals, when they reach advanced sexual arousal but do not have an orgasm, suffer pain in their testicles. It is the physiology of the male mammal. I (very respectfully, but very bluntly) explain this to the class, reminding them that the dog or cat cannot go take a cold shower, they cannot go watch a movie or read a magazine. If they will not neuter their dog for no other reason than to prevent this, that's fine with me. I also tell them that all male animals have to do to reach this point of suffering is to smell a female in heat. Usually they understand that and look at it in a new light.

Comment from Susan:

I live in rural Stanislaus County in the central valley of California. After 5 years of doing cat rescue and various spay/neuter projects, I finally realized that it takes only a relatively small number of breeding cats and dogs to undo the efforts of spay/neutering a large number of animals. Every project I was involved in was easily undone by the pet owners who wouldn't voluntarily fix their pets.

Many pet owners will do only the bare minimum that is required by law for their pets. This was demonstrated over and over again in our county-run vaccine clinics. A package deal is offered that gives all shots, a microchip, a dog license and a spay/neuter voucher, all for \$50. Even with this offer, less than 20% of the pet owners were taking the deal. However, they were buying the 2 things required by law: the rabies shot and the dog license for an unaltered dog.

We decided that pet owners should be required to participate in solving pet overpopulation. We started a coalition, and to cut a long story short, a year and a half later we were able to get a Pet Overpopulation Ordinance passed here--the first of its kind in the central valley.

Unaltered dogs licenses are now \$100. And anyone selling puppies or kittens must have a \$100 litter permit, and the permit number must be displayed in any advertisement for sale. Also, anyone feeding feral or barn cats must have an ongoing Trap-Neuter-Return effort. Fines are not waived if the pet owner relinquishes or loses the animal. Fines and increased fee differentials fund more spay/neuter vouchers.

Even though this ordinance does not become effective until August 11th, the effect on pet owners was immediate. The very next vaccine clinic saw 50% of the pet owners take the package deal with the spay/neuter voucher. This is more than double the rate before the ordinance passed.

Unlike laws that impose strict penalties for owning intact animals, but don't offer a viable way for truly poor people to get their pets fixed, this legislation sets our community up for success by offering low cost spay/neuter options for those in need.

I really feel that too much time and effort is put into bribing and cajoling pet owners to spay/neuter. Since only unfixed pets can add to the pet population, the owners should be required by law to contribute to solving pet overpopulation.

My least favorite phrase is "Please spay or neuter your pets." "Please" just doesn't cut it anymore. If we wait for people to become educated or convinced, we will wait decades, while millions more cats and dogs are put down in our shelters. The phrase should now become something like "Neuter or spay, or pay."

Comment from Emma about merchandise, merchandise, merchandise:

If I may comment on a comment, saying that "shelters kill" animals really is an insult to the brave people who work in open admission shelters. They have to deal with the reality of cleaning up the mess (companion animal overpopulation) that they did nothing to create, and probably much to combat, as many shelters are the leaders in low-cost spay/neuter programs. It fosters the persistence of the stigma that some people still attach to shelters.

It also does nothing to further the kind of community-wide cooperation that is needed amongst shelters, vets, and private adoption groups to address the interrelated issues of lack of effective spay/neuter programs, and overpopulation.

Comment from Diane about the cost of spay/neuter:

I couldn't agree more with Barb; cost is the biggest hurdle in the effort to provide spay/neuter care.

We have found a vet who comes to our shelter and performs high volume surgeries at a price that works out to about \$26.00 per animal. She also does pediatric spay/neuter, which is a huge blessing. Unfortunately, she lives two hours away and only comes two or three times a month. We have contacted all of the many local vets and asked if they could give us any time at all, even a few hours a month. Only one hospital responded and they will give us time when they have light schedules; so far they have yet to call us. So, we have decided to follow the lead of the Humane Alliance (www.humanealliance.org) in South Carolina and hire a full time vet and set up a full time clinic which will pay for itself. It is a scary proposition, but we feel it must be done. Now, how do we find a vet?

Closing comments from forum moderator:

Thank you to the many members who sent in questions and comments for this week's forum! In response to Diane's closing question about finding a vet, there have been forum weeks entitled, "Getting Vets Involved," at <http://www.bestfriends.com/archives/forums/021604vets.html>, "Working with Vets," at <http://www.bestfriends.com/archives/forums/vets.html>, and the challenge of finding a good spay/neuter vet has also been addressed at <http://www.bestfriends.com/archives/forums/mobilevan.html>.

Transcripts from this and all other forum weeks are made available to all at <http://www.bestfriends.com/nomorehomelesspets/weeklyforum/forumarchives.cfm>. Meanwhile, those of you who joined the forum midweek can view the complete transcripts right away at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NMHP/>.

Also, several members wrote in hoping for a copy of the poster about how young cats can come of reproductive age that Jessica shared with us earlier this week. Below is Jessica's response:

"I wish I had the original to send, but we don't know what we did with it! We've had several different ones made over time. Anyone can use the idea or modify it. Posters are not that difficult to make and well worth the money. Tell people to find a Kinko's in their area to tell them step by step on how to do it. Posters in pet stores, where the feeders buy their food, is a great way to get the spay/neuter message out. Many people still do not have computers. Rescue groups have lots of posters advertising adoptions; what about a poster that could help prevent many of those lives? Get them out there, and good luck to all!"

As always, thank you for being part of the forum, and for everything you do for the animals!

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Kindness to animals builds a better world for all of us.