

Updating the Plan: The Second Generation L-E-S Strategy

By Peter Marsh

American shelters have finally turned the tide in our century-long struggle against pet overpopulation. Only 30 years ago, one family dog and cat in five lost his or her life in a shelter every year. Now it's one in twenty.

Our mission, however, isn't to reduce overpopulation. It's to end it. But how can we get any further ahead when most of us are already working flat out, running only on adrenaline much of the time?

The answer lies in working smarter, not harder. Part of working smart is to build on the work of comrades of the heart who have come before us. Most of their progress came from the dramatic increase in pet sterilization rates driven by an aggressive Legislation–Education–Sterilization strategy. To go further, however, we need to create a Second Generation LES program that builds on past successes and all that we have learned in recent years.

I. Updating legislation: Using revenue from a new generation of differential licensing surcharges to establish proactive programs

Desperation drove shelters to the LES strategy. The tide of homeless and abandoned animals rose relentlessly until by 1970 more than 20% of the household dog and cat populations entered shelters every year. Shelters recognized that they couldn't stem



this flood alone and turned to legislators for help.

Neutering incentives became a staple of the LES program in the form of licensing surcharges or “differentials” for intact pets. By now, the fairness and effectiveness of differential licensing fees is widely accepted. But two changes must be made to update these laws.

First, the amount of the surcharge – about \$10 on average – is now too low. It needs to be increased to reflect the true costs shouldered by taxpayers in controlling and impounding intact pets. Recent studies have consistently shown that while intact pets make up an increasingly smaller minority of household pets, they still account for about two-thirds of all animal control expenses. This comes out to be about \$35.00 a year for each intact dog compared to about \$11.00 a year for each sterilized one. Licensing surcharges should be increased to about \$25.00 to reflect the public expenses caused by intact pets, a type of user fee.

The second change that needs to be made is to earmark the revenue from differential license surcharges to pay for programs to curb overpopulation, not to just deposit it in the public treasury, as we have in the past. Using the money raised through differentials to pay for solutions multiplies their impact. The most effective programs use the revenue from differentials to pro-

vide neutering subsidies to low-income pet guardians, like a program in New Jersey. This reaches two major sources of pet overbreeding at the same time – those who can afford to have their pets neutered (but won't) and those who want to but can't afford it. This way those who won't neuter their pets at least help those who can't. Even at the low rate that people now license their dogs, a \$10 increase in the differential licensing fee would generate enough revenue to fully fund a neutering assistance program for low-income families.

II. Updating education: Developing community education coalitions

The educational message of the original LES program could be easily summarized: “The Problem is Pet Overpopulation. The Solution is Spay/Neuter.” It has been remarkably effective. By 1990, more than 60% of all dogs kept by Americans and more than 80% of their cats had been sterilized. Only 20 years earlier, only 10% of each had been.

As with legislation, the most effective way to take advantage of the success of the LES educational program is to build upon it. Both the message and the targets of future educational initiatives need to be updated, however, to take into account the changes that have taken place in the last 30 years and the findings from recent research.

By now, the critical issue for many pet caretakers is not **WHETHER** to neuter their pets but **WHEN**. Recent surveys have consistently found that upwards of 85% of all household cat litters are not planned. Fully a third of these accidental litters are “oops” litters that could have been avoided if the pet's guardian realized how early cats become sexually mature. Moving beyond the traditional “Prevent A Litter” campaigns

to incorporate a “Prevent A First Litter” message should become a top priority of our spay/neuter community outreach initiatives.

We must also update our spay/neuter educational programs to take into account the changing profile of pets now entering shelters. The success of birth reduction programs has meant that relinquished pets have come to make up an increasing share of shelter admissions, especially for dogs. Recent research has shown that intact pets make up a disproportionately high percentage of the adult cats and dogs who are surrendered to shelters, often due to troublesome behaviors resulting from their intact status. Updated community educational programs need to be broadened beyond their traditional emphasis on the health benefits of sterilization to emphasize the behavioral benefits, too.

Just as the content of our education programs must be updated, our approach must, too. We need to get the message to pet owners that behavioral problems are often correctable. Recent relinquishment studies are greatly encouraging because they show that behavioral issues and other risk factors that lead to relinquishment can often be solved.

We need to broaden the sources of our educational message as well as the message itself. It is unrealistic to expect many shelters to be able to provide ongoing behavioral counseling to all pet caretakers in the community and by the time a pet reaches a shelter, it is often too late.

Veterinarians are well suited and well situated to help provide timely behavioral counseling programs. Their participation is critical to other important components of our updated community education campaign, such as the “Kittens Have Kittens”

campaign and counseling pet caregivers about the importance of providing permanent identification for their pets as an essential part of responsible pet care. The ultimate success of our educational efforts will depend on more effectively engaging community veterinarians in our work so that they use their skills and training to take a leading role in ending shelter overpopulation, as they have with all other epidemic-scale threats to companion animals.

While veterinarians are the most important partners in the needed education coalition, others are in a position to make great contributions, too. Pet behavioral experts and dog trainers must be enlisted to help with preventive and remedial programs. Breeders and pet shop owners must be part of the coalition, too, so they can help with microchipping initiatives and behavior training programs. One of the coalition's major goals should be to provide all new pet guardians in the community with a comprehensive, up-to-date package of information about proper companion animal care and local behavioral and neutering assistance programs.

The development of community coalitions is not only vital to the success of a community's outreach efforts, it's the only way to achieve a century-long goal: to transform small local humane groups into a community-wide Humane Society.

III. Updating sterilization: The enormous potential of targeted neutering assistance programs

Sterilization dominated the original LES strategy. While times now require a more comprehensive approach, as described above, sterilization programs still deserve to play a leading role. As with legislation

and education, the best way to maximize the impact of future sterilization programs is to build on earlier successes. In the same way and for the same reasons, we also need to update our approach to neutering programs.

The original LES program promoted the establishment of discount neutering clinics open to all pet owners, often subsidized with public funds. When pet sterilization rates were much lower, open access programs were necessary to popularize neutering. With the current high sterilization rates, however, more than 75 cents of every dollar spent on untargeted subsidies is wasted to help pay for sterilizations that would have been done without them.

To be effective, a neutering program must lead to animals being sterilized who would have remained intact without the program. Because they are not cost-effective, untargeted programs are prohibitively expensive.

Not only are untargeted programs expensive and ineffective, they understandably alienate veterinarians, who deserve to be our primary partners in this struggle. Experience across the country has shown that the veterinary community will actively support neutering assistance programs if subsidies are provided only to those who truly need them.

Two unavoidable facts placed a ceiling on the effectiveness of the combined education-and-discount-neutering strategy of the original LES program: sterilization procedures necessarily involve significant expense and low-income pet guardians usually cannot afford them without subsidies of 80% or more. As a result, fewer dogs and cats kept by low-income caretakers are now

sterilized. This is especially true for cats. A 1994 study found that cats living in low-income households were more than twice as likely to be sexually intact as those living in middle- and upper-income households.

It has become increasingly clear that our failure to develop affordable neutering programs for low-income households has put a brake on the effectiveness of first generation LES programs. The victims of pet overpopulation are increasingly from poor communities. In California, for instance, the shelter euthanasia rate in the 11 poorest counties in 1995 was almost three times higher than that of the 12 richest counties. In New Jersey, the disparity between rich and poor counties was even greater in 1998. Ending pet overpopulation will require making neutering procedures as affordable for low-income pet guardians as they now are for all other people.

The importance of establishing affordable and accessible neutering subsidy programs can be seen in the dramatic impact they have once they are established. In New Hampshire, the shelter euthanasia rate has dropped 75% in the first seven years after an affordable neutering assistance program was established for low-income families. As a result of this program, New Hampshire has now achieved the lowest state-wide shelter euthanasia rate in the country, less than 3.0 dogs and cats killed per thousand people.

Targeted neutering subsidy programs are so cost-effective that they are presently affordable in every part of the country. The total yearly cost of the New Hampshire low-income program has been less than 15 cents per resident, including all administrative costs. Taking into account the moderate cost of living there and the low poverty

rate, comparably effective programs can be established in any part of the country for 30 cents per person per year. Animal control, impoundment and sheltering costs typically cost taxpayers about \$3 per person every year, so a targeted neutering subsidy program could be established by reallocating about 10% of the amount now spent on reactive programs that impound and shelter the victims of overpopulation. Or, as mentioned earlier, the full cost of such a program could be paid for through a \$10 increase in the differential for intact dog licenses.

These programs are a good investment. They more than pay for themselves. Every dollar spent on the New Hampshire low-income program, for instance, has saved \$3.23 in reduced impoundment expenses.

Not only are proactive programs like this cost-effective, in the end they are our only hope to end pet overpopulation. Bitter experience has shown that we cannot adopt or build our way out of pet overpopulation. A system that continues to spend upwards of 95% of its resources on reactive programs is doomed to failure and frustration. On the other hand, effective preventive programs reverse this debilitating dynamic. Investing in proactive programs allows the increasing reallocation of resources to proactive programs, building momentum to the day when shelters will realize their century-long mission – to rescue and rehabilitate homeless animals and find a loving home for each and every one.

Peter Marsh
Solutions to Overpopulation of Pets
24 Montgomery Street
Concord, NH 03301
(603) 224-1877
February 26, 2002