



Pets ALIVE: Spay/Neuter Clinic

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Pets ALIVE Spay/Neuter Clinic

Low-cost spay/neuter clinic with transport program



Pets ALIVE is a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter clinic that serves 15 counties in south-central Indiana. Their clinic and its transport program are modeled on the [Humane Alliance](#) program, which ASPCA® National Outreach also profiled.

Stats

- Over 7,350 sterilizations in first 10 months of operation in 2005
- 15 counties served
- 16 participating organizations

How Cool is That?

We at ASPCA® National Outreach are especially impressed by the following aspects of Pets ALIVE's story:

- Their ability to look at the big picture of animal overpopulation in their region and to identify the scope of service needed to have a significant impact on reducing this population
- Their diligence in searching for a successful model for their program rather than taking the time to reinvent the wheel
- Their willingness to adapt their plans to stay true to their mission
- Their use of community assessments and statistics to gauge the success of their program and to plan for the future

Adopt or Adapt

If you think a program like this might be appropriate in your community, a good place to start is with the information available at the [Humane Alliance website](#).

Pets ALIVE: The Whole Story

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[Who They Are And What They Do](#)
[Ingredients and Prep Work](#)
[Step by Step](#)
[Results](#)
[Some Words of Wisdom](#)
[Pets ALIVE: Thumbnail Sketch](#)



Who They Are and What They Do

Pets ALIVE Spay/Neuter Clinic, Bloomington, IN
Karla Kamstra and Katrina Sturgeon, Cofounders

Pets ALIVE is a nonprofit organization dedicated to ending pet overpopulation in south-central Indiana. They operate a clinic that provides low-cost spay/neuter services for cats and dogs. Pets ALIVE opened its doors in March 2005, and by year-end had performed over 7,350 sterilizations.

Cofounders Karla Kamstra and Katrina Sturgeon and their board of directors did extensive research to determine how best to achieve their goal of ending pet homelessness in their area. Ultimately, their research led them to Humane Alliance of Asheville, NC, which became the model for the Pets ALIVE spay/neuter clinic and transport program.

In addition to operating their own clinic and animal transport program, Humane Alliance offers planning materials, training, and onsite assistance to organizations that want to implement the Humane Alliance model. Pets ALIVE wanted to use this model not only because of these resources but also because the Humane Alliance service population in the greater Asheville area is similar to the population that Pets ALIVE serves in Indiana.

To learn more about Humane Alliance, you can read the ASPCA® National Outreach profile of this innovative organization or [visit the Humane Alliance website](#).

Note: ASPCA® National Outreach profiled Pets Alive in 2006. Karla Kamstra, then President, provided a wealth of information and insight about their spay/neuter program. Karla is now Regional Program Manager for PetSmart Charities®. Beth Baade-Hicks is Pets ALIVE's current Executive Director.

Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

Ask the right questions to define your mission. Karla Kamstra says that the question that defined the Pets ALIVE mission and goals was "What needs to be done to reduce the rate of animal euthanasia in our community?" This question, rather than "What can we do...?", encouraged them to look for solutions with greater immediate impact on the problem.

Assemble a small, working board with a passion for your mission. In addition to caring passionately about your mission, board members will need to think both strategically and practically about reaching your goals. The four original Pets ALIVE board members each took responsibility for a specific area of their mission.

People

The Pets ALIVE clinic has the following paid staff:

- Veterinarian
- Registered veterinary technician
- Veterinary assistants (4)
- Transport program coordinator
- Clinic operations director
- Development director
- Office manager
- Bookkeeper

All positions are full-time, with the exception of the bookkeeper, who is part-time, and the vet assistants, some of whom are part-time.

From the initial research, Pets ALIVE determined that they would not be able to use vets from local practices to perform surgeries in the volume needed to be successful. Instead, they hired a full-time vet. Also, due to employment and OSHA regulations and the specific skills needed for clinic duties, they have not been able to use volunteers as much as they'd originally hoped. They do use volunteers for community outreach and some office work.

Up-front Costs and Startup Funding

Initial funding for the spay/neuter clinic came from a year-long capital campaign. Pets ALIVE also researched and applied for grants. To support their campaign, the board prepared a 25-page business profile that presented their mission and goals. They also prepared a budget to show how the funds would be used. The business profile and budget proved valuable for both donor appeals and grant applications.

Timeline

The Pets ALIVE board created a timeline for their project that was very helpful in keeping them focused. They began their brainstorming, research, and planning in 2002. They launched their capital campaign in January of 2004, and opened their doors in March, 2005.

In that 14-month period, they established and achieved the following milestones:

- January 2004: launched capital campaign and major fund raising; researched grant applications; sponsored dinner for local vets with an outside facilitator to introduce the program, address vets' concerns, and obtain feedback and buy-in from the veterinary community
- May 2004: eliminated an adoption center from the original project scope to focus all resources solely on the spay/neuter clinic
- June 2004: recruited medical staff through word of mouth
- August 2004: finalized budget, submitted grant proposal, and located building for the clinic
- September 2004: researched the counties to target and set the date for the transport workshop
- October 2004: renovated the building that now houses the clinic
- November 2004: hired staff veterinarian; held a day-long transport workshop for organizations considering participation in the transport program
- January 2005: continued renovations; held a vet open house and set up their vet referral service

- February 2005: hired more staff; began training; performed some trial surgeries
- March 2005: doors opened; 63 surgeries performed on the first day

Step by Step

The Pets ALIVE board generally followed the process outlined by Humane Alliance for setting up a low-cost spay/neuter clinic and transport program. For detailed information about this process, you can read the ASPCA® National Outreach profile of Humane Alliance.

For Pets ALIVE, certain steps in the process were critically important:

1. Create a business plan and initial budget that you can share with potential funders, and then start your fundraising.

The business plan defined the parameters of the program and the steps they intended to take to implement it. The budget showed the costs anticipated for both startup and operation.

Karla Kamstra says that doing a business plan is helpful not only in obtaining funding, but also for you. The better you understand the task ahead of you, the more prepared you'll be to meet its challenges. Some important topics to cover:

- Program mission, goals, and scope
- Timeline and milestones
- Expenses
- Revenue and revenue sources, such as fees, donations, grants, etc. once the program is launched

2. Establish a marketing plan, and begin to implement it as soon as possible.

Pets ALIVE has some recommendations for marketing a spay/neuter clinic:

- Consider the audiences you need to reach: animal welfare organizations, vets, pet owners.
- Identify the best media for each audience, e.g. mailings, Yellow Pages listings, ads in local newspaper, flyers, etc. Some suggestions from Pets ALIVE:
- Establish close contact with the local papers in your service area. Although print ads in the papers might be too expensive, press releases and feature articles won't cost you a thing. Pets ALIVE also runs a daily classified ad in the Pets sections of their local paper.
- Send out a "flyer blitz" in your target neighborhoods to advertise the clinic and to advertise any special events, such as Spay Day. Volunteers can play a key role in this activity.
- Consider placing radio ads, public service announcements, and a Weather Channel scrolling ad to announce your opening.
- Leverage word of mouth. Pets ALIVE has found word-of-mouth advertising to be one of their best marketing tools. Encourage pet owners who come to the clinic to spread the word, and encourage your transporting organizations to ask the pet owners they see to spread the word.
- Create a website, or a listing on a local or regional website, such as a chamber of commerce or local government website. At a minimum, include basic information about your program, contact information, hours of operation, and directions. You want to make it as easy as possible for people to find you.
- Define a schedule of when, where, and how to market your program. For example, the deadline for a Yellow Pages listing may be months in advance of the phonebook publication. You'll want to be listed in the current phonebook when you open for business.

3. Recruit medical staff.

Your veterinarian will be your most important hire. Once on board, your vet can assist with the following tasks:

- Develop the patient protocol you'll follow; Humane Alliance and SNAP (<http://www.snapus.org>) both offer protocols you can start from.
- Provide valuable input on the design and setup of the clinic space.
- Participate in hiring and training other staff.

Pets ALIVE found word-of-mouth recruiting to be highly successful. They have had very low staff turnover.

4. Establish a vet referral service.

With a good medical protocol, complications of surgery should be few. However, both the vet community and the general public are often very concerned about what happens if an animal experiences post-surgical problems at home, far from the clinic. Pets ALIVE provides a referral to a vet in the pet owner's community. If the animal needs treatment related to the surgery, Pets ALIVE pays for the treatment. This serves two purposes:

- It increases everyone's comfort level with transporting animals for surgery.
- It lays the groundwork for an ongoing relationship between the pet owner and a local vet. The overwhelming majority of animals seen at Pets ALIVE had never received any other veterinary care. Most animals will not need to see a vet for post-op problems, but the pet owner now has a recommendation and contact information for a vet in their community for routine vet care.

5. Collect data on the animals the clinic sees.

Pets ALIVE realized that collecting data is the only way they'll know whether they are reaching their target numbers and whether they are reaching the right population.

Meaningful statistics for a program like theirs include:

- Number of surgeries per day for cats and dogs
- Number of animals received from each organization in the transport program
- Number of animals from the targeted geographic areas
- Number of surgeries paid for with vouchers (if appropriate)
- The current cost per surgery of supplies, labor, and overhead (rent, utilities, etc.)

Pets ALIVE also uses a "disposition" spreadsheet available from the Humane Alliance website to collect statistics on the animals from each organization in the Pets ALIVE transport program. Gathering adoption and euthanasia numbers for each organization and comparing them to numbers for Pets ALIVE surgeries enables everyone to see where they are successful and where more work is needed.

Results

The Numbers

- Over 7,350 sterilizations in first 10 months of operation in 2005
- 15 counties served
- 16 participating organizations

The transport service provides 70% of the animals the clinic sees. The remaining 30% come from individual pet owners.

Critical Factors

- Having a small, passionate, and actively involved board that is willing to empower others to get needed tasks done
- Doing research to identify the needs of their community and the best way to respond effectively to those needs
- Using the model and resources available from Humane Alliance to avoid reinventing the wheel
- Educating and obtaining the support of the regional veterinary and animal-welfare communities early on in the process

Thinking Outside the Box

We at ASPCA® National Outreach are especially impressed by the following aspects of Pets ALIVE's story:

- Their ability to look at the big picture of animal overpopulation in their region and to identify the scope of service needed to have a significant impact on reducing this population
- Their diligence in searching for a successful model for their program rather than taking the time to reinvent the wheel
- Their willingness to adapt their plans to stay true to their mission (e.g., dropping their original plan for an adoption center with the spay/neuter clinic when it became obvious that doing both was not feasible)
- Their use of community assessments and statistics to gauge the success of their program and to plan for the future

Their Next Steps

Pets ALIVE is now planning to increase operations to add a second vet. They decided to do this for two reasons:

- The need for low-cost spay/neuter is still very great in south-central Indiana. They know they have not saturated their market.
- Expansion is necessary for the long-term financial health of the clinic. While they have kept supplies and labor costs in line, their fixed overhead costs are high. They chose their facility in part because it can easily accommodate a second surgical area. Adding a second vet will enable them to substantially increase the number of surgeries. This in turn reduces the cost of overhead per surgery, and enables the clinic to maintain its low fees while still covering its costs.

Pets ALIVE continually strives to ensure that they are reaching the population most in need of their services:

- They are working with the Monroe County Humane Society, which provides low-cost spay/neuter vouchers to people who need them, to make this population aware of the availability of the vouchers and of Pets ALIVE's low-cost services.
- They are encouraging and training the organizations in their transport program to do their own outreach to the target population.

Pets ALIVE wants to reach the population who, without their services, would be unable or unwilling to spay or neuter their pets. Although this is a small subset of the general population of pet owners, this group unfortunately makes a huge contribution to pet overpopulation.

Some Words of Wisdom

What Worked

- Establishing a timeline and using it to keep on track throughout the project
- Using the Humane Alliance model and the materials, resources, and support Humane Alliance offers; Pets ALIVE recommends earmarking funds in your capital campaign for Humane Alliance support both during startup and later follow-up to fine-tune your operation
- Networking via word-of-mouth to find the right medical staff
- Budgeting very conservatively and monitoring cost control, especially with regard to inventory, to keep the cost per animal as low as possible
- Learning about OSHA codes and other regulations that affect their operation
- Obtaining the early buy-in to the program by vets and animal welfare groups, well before the clinic opened its doors, with events such as the vets' dinner and transport-program workshop
- Knowing their numbers; Karla says that while dealing with the financial side of operations "is never fun," it's absolutely necessary to both daily operations and to meeting their stated goal
- Ongoing education for Pets ALIVE staff and board members about spay/neuter; Karla Kamstra highly recommends attending the Southern Regional Spay/Neuter Leadership Conference, which provided a wealth of useful information to Pets ALIVE. In 2006, the conference was held in October in Memphis. The website is <http://www.spayneuterconference.org>.

What Didn't

Karla Kamstra cites some of what she calls "do-over moments" in the course of planning and implementation:

- Board members trying to manage facility renovations along with everything else they needed to do. Karla says that in retrospect, they should have found a volunteer with experience in this area to work with the clinic vet and manage the renovations.
- Not delegating soon enough to people with expertise. Ultimately, the board learned to create and empower ad hoc committees of experienced people to perform specific tasks, such as defining personnel policies. When the task is complete, the committee can disperse, which often makes it easier to recruit committee members. The Pets ALIVE board now has such committees for personnel, marketing, fundraising, and finance.
- Not having all staff trained before the clinic opened. A more manageable process would be to have staff start over a period of weeks before opening to allow enough time for training.
- Not having the scheduling software up and running before opening. Karla recommends allowing plenty of time to get the software installed and configured for your clinic and to get your staff trained to use it.
- Not including early operating expenses in the startup budget and capital campaign. Pets ALIVE was fortunate to have other donations coming in to cover payroll and other expenses before payments for the first surgeries began to arrive.
- Not marketing the clinic earlier. Marketing should be in place well before you open to help build and sustain the demand for services.

Be Prepared For

- Concern about the quality of care for transported animals. Early education of vets, animal welfare organizations, and the public about your medical protocol is vital to acceptance. Having materials to distribute that explain your protocol and how animals are handled during transport can help you effectively address the issues. A transport workshop for participating organizations can provide detailed information.

- Concern from local vets about competition from the clinic. The overwhelming majority of animals seen at Pets ALIVE had never received any other veterinary care. The clinic is not competing with vets. In fact, it potentially provides local vets with a new source of patients through its veterinarian referral program. Again, early outreach and education can significantly reduce this concern.

Tell Us What You Think

With the information we've provided, can you start a program like this one in your organization? [Click here](#) to send an email to ASPCA® National Outreach with your feedback and questions.

Pets ALIVE: Thumbnail Sketch

Pets ALIVE Spay/Neuter Clinic
6522 South Empire Road
Bloomington, IN 47401

812-824-1349

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<http://www.petsalivespayneuter.org>



Pets ALIVE is a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter clinic that serves 15 counties in south-central Indiana. Approximately 70% of their business comes from a transport program that includes 16 participating animal welfare organizations.

Staff

The Pets ALIVE clinic has the following paid staff:

- Veterinarian
- Registered veterinary technician
- Veterinary assistants (4)
- Transport program coordinator
- Clinic operations director
- Development director
- Office manager
- Bookkeeper

All positions are full-time, with the exception of the bookkeeper, who is part-time, and the vet assistants, some of whom are part-time.

Operating Budget

For the current year, \$675,000

Business Type

501(c) (3) nonprofit