



Sacramento Area Animal Coalition: Spay Day USA



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Sacramento Area Animal Coalition (SAAC) Spay Day USA

Hosting "the world's largest single day Spay Day event"



Every February, the Sacramento Area Animal Coalition (SAAC) hosts "the world's largest single day Spay Day event" during which up to 1,000 dogs and cats are altered, vaccinated and micro-chipped. This is accomplished through the joint efforts of a dozen partnering agencies, 10-15 sponsors, and 15-20 veterinary clinics, including the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

Stats

Before recruiting the UC Davis vet school, SAAC's Spay Day event reached 150 animals. In 2005, the third year of UC Davis's association with the event, the number of animals altered climbed to 1,000.

How Cool is That?

Addressing the big problem of pet overpopulation requires thinking big. SAAC's annual Spay Day event pulls together animal agencies, vet clinics, the vet school, and volunteers to target low-income pet owners, and everyone wins.

In particular, involving the University of California, Davis School of Veterinary Medicine provides the ultimate win-win-win:

- SAAC is fortunate for the donated services of veterinary professionals, and lots of vet students, enabling them to alter large numbers of animals onsite. In addition, the school's large veterinary surgical facility provides excellent working conditions for this intensive project.
- Its association with a prestigious veterinary school makes the event more attractive to vets and sponsors.
- UC Davis has received a great deal of positive press and has benefited from having a major service event that brings together students and faculty. Spay Day has become a source of pride for the entire university, not just the vet school.

Adopt or Adapt

Not everybody has so many willing veterinary clinics and a vet school with a premier surgical facility in their community. But SAAC's success in recruiting so much veterinary involvement shows the value of identifying connections that can result in powerful and mutually beneficial alliances. In addition, SAAC offers expertise and a wealth of materials for planning and successfully implementing a large-scale spay/neuter event.

SAAC Spay Day USA: The Whole Story

The Sacramento Area Animal Coalition (SAAC) was founded in 1999 to eliminate companion animal overpopulation in the Sacramento area through aggressive spay-neuter efforts, humane education, community outreach, and networking.

Every February, SAAC hosts “the world’s largest Spay Day” during which up to 1,000 dogs and cats are altered, vaccinated and micro-chipped. This is accomplished through the joint efforts of a dozen partnering agencies, 10-15 sponsors, and 15-20 veterinary clinics, including the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.



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Who They Are and What They Do

Sacramento Area Animal Coalition
Jennifer Fearing, Founder

Jennifer Fearing co-founded the Sacramento Area Animal Coalition (SAAC) in 1999 to coordinate the disparate efforts of local shelters and rescue groups around the issue of companion animal overpopulation. Today the group collaborates with local, statewide, and national humane organizations; animal control agencies; breed-specific and all-breed rescues; and veterinary groups.

SAAC focuses on targeted spay/neuter programs and humane education. SAAC is also a resource organization for area rescue groups, independent rescuers, and shelters, providing assistance and volunteer referral. According to their website, “anything we can do to call attention to the pet overpopulation problem is within our purview.”

In 1999, Fearing was asked to spearhead a small February Spay Day (30-40 animals) hosted by the Sacramento SPCA, a member of the coalition. That event was the genesis for “the world’s largest Spay Day.” At first the event grew slowly. By 2002, 40 animals had become 150. Then, in 2003, Fearing secured the participation of the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

Fearing, a graduate of UC Davis and member of its alumni association board of directors, approached Jan Ilkiw, Associate Dean for Instruction at the veterinary school. Fearing suggested that joining in the Spay Day effort would give the university a chance to see the vet school’s new surgical facility operate at capacity. Participating would also garner some very valuable PR by involving students in a massive service project aimed at helping animals of low-income families.

Dean Ilkiw made it happen. Because the surgical facility has such large boarding space, it was possible to check in 150 dogs the night before the Spay Day so that surgeries could begin at 6 AM. Areas of the facility usually used to treat large animals, were converted into cat neuter and recovery areas.

That year, more than 650 animals were altered. In each succeeding year, nearly 1,000 animals have been altered. Participating veterinary clinics and UC Davis have indeed received a great deal of positive press. And UC Davis has benefited from having a major service event that brings together students and faculty. The university chancellor told Fearing that Spay Day has become a source of pride, not just for the vet school but for the entire university.

Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

- A school of veterinary medicine

- A strong working relationship with the local veterinary community
- Access to dozens of “lay” volunteers
- Strong leadership willing to work very long hours on the project

People

Fearing acts as the unpaid co-chair of Spay Day, overseeing publicity, sponsorship, appointment scheduling and food/t-shirts. Co-chair Liz Rowley, RVT recruits and works with veterinary clinics to set schedules, coordinates medical supplies and manages volunteers.

Volunteers serve in the following committee chairmanships: publicity, appointment scheduling, veterinarian recruitment, medical supplies, food & drink. Some of these are one-person committees.

Appointment scheduling requires approximately 40 volunteers.

On the day of the event, there are approximately 300 volunteers at UC Davis and 5-20 volunteers at each of the other participating clinics. Only volunteers who are veterinary professionals or vet students handle the animals. In addition, there are one or two volunteers at each site to handle food and drink and hospitality. A volunteer PR person handles news crews to make sure the story is told correctly.

Be sure to check out the SAAC documents on our website that provide detailed roles and responsibilities for key assignments on the Spay Day team.

Up-front Costs and Startup Funding

- Spay Day costs approximately \$30,000 per year, or \$30 per animal, including insurance costs of \$3,000 a year.
- Funding comes from a combination of cash sponsorships from national and local animal welfare agencies and client co pays.
- Supplies are obtained free or at drastically reduced costs through sponsorships.

Timeline

Planning each Spay Day event begins months in advance. According to Fearing and her 2006 Spay Day team, an ideal timeline in which funds, key roles, volunteers, and supplies are in place when they are needed would look like this:

- 7-8 months: Fundraising begins.
- 6 months: Individuals who will take charge of major tasks – PR, fundraising, recruiting clinics, procuring supplies, scheduling appointments, etc. are identified.
- 3 months: Requests for participating vets and clinics go out.
- 2 months: Vet techs, schedulers, and other volunteers are recruited.
- 6 weeks: Promoting the event to the public begins.
- 5 weeks: The list of participating clinics and vets is finalized. Scheduling of appointments begins and continues for about 3 weeks.

Step by Step

1. Develop a partnership with veterinary community.

SAAC developed a partnership with the California Veterinary Medical Association that provided the organization with a mailing list of all members in the area. A letter, signed by Fearing and the president of the association, was sent out recruiting participating clinics. The letter debunked reasons why a clinic owner might not want to participate. SAAC also worked with the Sacramento Valley

Veterinary Medical Association to recruit veterinarians and learn what Spay Day practices makes veterinarians more willing to volunteer.

2. Look for opportunities to engage major players.

- Fearing first saw the new surgical facility at UC Davis on a tour during a visit to discuss the veterinary school's then-use of shelter animals for training that resulted in euthanasia (sometimes called pound seizure). During her visit, she saw the school's impressive, new surgical facility and realized what a boon it could be to Spay Day. She also was aware that "service" was a part of the school's mission. She approached Dean Ilkiw to pitch the advantages to UC Davis of getting involved in the Spay Day program. "Getting UC Davis involved was huge," Fearing said.
- In addition to the space and medical staff that came with the partnership, UC Davis is the largest purchaser of veterinary supplies in Northern California. Having them involved enabled SAAC to negotiate better deals from medical manufacturers and suppliers.
- Finally, a significant number of Northern California veterinarians graduated from UC Davis. Having the school involved made the event more appealing to those veterinarians.

Fearing also spent approximately two years wooing the Sacramento Valley Veterinary Association. "We wanted them to feel like we weren't asking too much of them and know that we intended to recognize them for what would be charity work on their part," Fearing said. The goal was to make the veterinarians full partners in the service-oriented venture.

3. Prepare for the Spay Day USA event, lining up participating clinics and staff, and determining the services provided to the animals.

For SAAC, Spay Day USA preparation included the following:

- The event takes place on a Sunday in February.
- Only healthy owned pets between 16 weeks and five years of age are eligible. Animals who are pregnant, sick, feral or obese animals are screened out by appointment schedulers and given vouchers instead. Veterinarians are free to refuse surgery to any scheduled animals who they feel are high risk for a day like Spay Day (e.g., no blood tests).
- Spay Day fees were \$10 for cats and \$15 for dogs but have just been raised to \$15 for cats and \$20 for dogs. Services include physical examination, surgery, vaccinations, ear and eye cleaning, treatment for mites, nail trim and micro-chipping.
- Up to twenty-five clinics have participated. UC Davis is by far the largest, but one other clinic alters nearly 100 animals. Most clinics can handle approximately 40 animals a day. Some handle as few as 15 or 20.
- Larger clinics use their own staffs. The smaller clinics may bring in additional people (recruited by SAAC) for the day.
- Only professional medical staff handle animals. At UC Davis, first and second year students serve as "guardians" greeting patients at entry and staying with them through surgery and discharge. Third and fourth year students scrub in and assist with surgeries.
- Most participating clinics handle their own post-surgery emergencies. In addition, SAAC sets aside \$1,000 to handle any emergencies that occur within the first 72 hours. One local emergency clinic is designated and given a list of clients so SAAC can be involved in any life-threatening situations.
- Clinics order their own supplies using a special account so they can obtain SAAC-negotiated Spay Day discounts.

4. Publicize the upcoming event.

- The event is publicized through fliers in English and Spanish, the SAAC website, press releases, and pre-event coverage on all local television stations. Word of mouth has now become a major factor.
- The event is targeted to low-income owners, who are instructed to call a hotline and leave a phone number. When their call is returned, clients are asked if their family income is less than \$35,000. If they answer yes, they can bring their animals. They do not have to show proof.

5. Use volunteers to monitor the hotline and schedule surgeries.

- Approximately 100 volunteers are recruited to handle all non-medical aspects of the program, from answering the hotline and making appointments to entering data on the day of the event, and serving as runners between clinics.
- Volunteers monitor the hotline and schedule appointments using a specially designed database (cleverly called Eunuch). The system automatically brings up the nearest clinic with availability.

Results

The Numbers

According to Fearing, there is little good data collection in the Sacramento area, so it is impossible to say what effect Spay Day has had on shelter intake. Fearing reports that the Sacramento City Shelter, which does keep good records, has seen a decline in their numbers; however, she adds, it is difficult to determine how much of that is directly related to Spay Day. "Pet overpopulation in the area has gone down, even in the face of double-digit human population growth," Fearing said, "but it is not clear what impact Spay Day has had on this pleasant trend."

Critical Factors

- Fearing's active involvement as a member of the UC Davis alumni association
- An understanding that veterinarians as business people are not obligated to be philanthropic, and a willingness to offer the veterinarians recognition for the philanthropy they do provide
- Developing a computer system to handle registrations
- Being able to recruit lots and lots of volunteers

Thinking Outside the Box

- When trying to establish new relationships with potential suppliers, Fearing and other SAAC representatives paid an entry fee to gain access to the hall of the Wild West Veterinary Conference where most of the companies who manufactured the products they'd need for Spay Day were exhibiting. During class periods, when the vendors were not busy, Fearing and crew went from booth to booth presenting information about Spay Day, asking for product donations, and offering sponsor recognition. "In one day, we talked to more people than we'd have reached in weeks of calling," Fearing said. "And we got to put a friendly face to the ask. We were so successful that we used to joke to vendors who were on the fence that they surely did not want to be the first to say no.... It worked every time!"
- Because Rowley purchased supplies year-round for one of the larger participating clinics, she used her leverage to obtain free or discounted product from companies she dealt with regularly.
- In return for requiring that every animal altered at Spay Day be micro-chipped, AVID gave SAAC a very good deal on the chips and included lifetime registration.

How They Feel About What They Did

"It's been gratifying to see that so many people in our community who want to do the right thing. They just can't afford it. When you make it affordable, they take advantage of it," said Fearing. "We have something special here, and we're happy to share how we do it."

Some Words of Wisdom

What Worked

- Requiring that all animals altered at Spay Day be micro-chipped. In the 6 months following last year's event, 65 animals showed up at area shelters and were identified through their chips.
- Not requiring owners to show proof of low income. SAAC does require proof for their voucher program, but not for Spay Day. They feel it would be too cumbersome to ask for documentation in the midst of such an enormous event. They are not worried about the "couple of squeakers" who may take advantage of the program. An anonymous survey conducted each year bears out their belief that the vast majority of the Spay Day clients are low income. Participating veterinarians don't object to waiving proof on the big day.
- So much education going on. Since the animals seen at Spay Day are from low-income families who most often have not taken them for routine veterinary care, a number of unusual conditions are apt to present themselves. It's an unparalleled opportunity for the vet students to experience, in one day, situations that it would take months or years to encounter in practice.
- Repeat business for the participating veterinarians. According to Fearing, owners who had never taken their animals to a veterinarian frequently go back to the clinic where the spay/neuter surgery was performed to seek additional care for their animals. The fact that clients are assigned to clinics near their homes encourages this.

What Didn't

- Testing for heartworm, FIV etc. Testing proved logistically difficult. Some supplies that should have been refrigerated weren't and got ruined. Also, since SAAC knew they wouldn't see the animals again, there was no opportunity to follow-up a positive result. Fearing said, "We decided we needed to focus on our mission of spaying and neutering."
- Placing one giant order for all supplies and delivering them to the various clinics. It seemed like a good idea at first because of the ability to take advantage of quantity discounts, but delivering the supplies turned out to be a logistical and time-consuming nightmare. For example, one clinic failed to specify exactly the kind of needles they wanted and didn't realize they got the wrong kind until the day of before the event. It took an expensive last minute order to correct the situation. Now each clinic orders its own supplies using a special number provided by the supplier. When they order using the special number, they get a 25-30% discount. SAAC reimburses the clinics for their expenses; however, many clinics choose not to take the reimbursement. Those clinics received written recognition for their generosity. This new system has drastically reduced the workload. In addition, it's enabled SAAC to include more clinics in Spay Day.
- Hiring an event coordinator. The person was experienced but not invested. The SAAC volunteers worked just as hard.

Be Prepared For

- Communicating clear expectations for your volunteers. When the Spay Day event was small, lay volunteers had more of a hands-on experience. It was more of a "grassroots day to help the animals," said Fearing. Now that so many veterinary professionals are involved, the event is much more sophisticated. There is still a tremendous need for lay volunteers, but some volunteers were resentful that their duties aren't as much "fun" as in the past. SAAC has

worked to overcome this by giving volunteers daily updates and perks like t-shirts; by awarding prizes to the volunteers who schedule the most appointments; and by focusing on results the dramatic increase in the number of animals that can be done now that so many clinics are involved.

- Reminding yourself that there are only 24 hours in a day and 52 weeks in a year. Fearing said she vows, after each Spay Day, that she'll never do it again. Then, as the weeks go by, she forgets just how much work it is. "It's the best bang for the buck," Fearing said, "but be prepared for a big time commitment."

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.

SAAC Spay Day USA: Thumbnail Sketch

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SAAC was founded in 1999 to eliminate companion animal overpopulation in the Sacramento, CA, area through aggressive spay-neuter efforts, humane education, community outreach, and networking.

Staff

SAAC has an eight-person volunteer board of directors.

Operating Budget

- Spay Day costs approximately \$30,000 per year, or \$30 per animal, including insurance costs of \$3,000 a year.
- Funding comes from a combination of cash sponsorships from national and local animal welfare agencies and client co pays.

Business Type

501(c)(3) nonprofit organization