



Houston SNAP Mobile Clinic: Spay/Neuter



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SNAP Houston Mobile Clinic



SNAP's Houston Mobile Clinic was the first FREE spay/neuter clinic on wheels in the United States. With a passion to reduce the number of animals euthanized in Houston, SNAP brings their services directly to the communities most in need of their assistance. Spaying and neutering, vaccines and licenses are free to those with proof of low-income status.

Stats

- In 2004, the Houston Mobile Clinic spayed and neutered 4,439 animals.
- Since 1997, they have spayed and neutered 28,809 animals.
- Between the efforts of the Mobile clinic and a low-cost clinic, animal controls in the City of Houston and Harris County have seen a 16% drop in intake and a 24.1% drop in euthanasia.

How Cool is That?

We're impressed with the 'to the streets' approach of this program. SNAP understands which neighborhoods the animals are coming from and is making an impact by traveling directly to the source.

Adopt or Adapt

You could use this profile to start a new program or adjust an existing one. In either case, target your audience carefully for the greatest impact. Starting with one neighborhood or section of your city can provide you with valuable data.

SNAP's Houston Mobile Clinic: The Whole Story

Launched in 1994, the SNAP Mobile Clinic now operates four days a week, offering free services to owners and caregivers in low income neighborhoods throughout the 700 sq. mile Greater Houston Metropolitan area. The mobile clinic also offers other vaccinations as well as worming and flea preventative at reduced cost. City residents who have their cats and dogs altered at the mobile clinic receive FREE Houston City licenses for their pets for the year in which the surgery is performed. Clients must show proof of low-income status.



[Who They Are and What They Do](#)

[Ingredients and Prep Work](#)

[Step by Step](#)

[Results](#)

[Some Words of Wisdom](#)

Who They Are and What They Do

SNAP (Spay Neuter Assistance Program)

Sean Hawkins, Founder and CEO

In 1993, humane societies and animal controls in the Greater Houston Metropolitan Area were euthanizing 100,000 animals a year. County and city statistics indicated that the bulk of the animals entering the overcrowded shelters were coming from low-income neighborhoods, where breeding was out of control and there were no private veterinary clinics. SNAP founder Sean Hawkins felt the time had come to "turn off the faucet" and begin focusing on reducing the number of animals coming into the shelters. An initial program through which volunteer veterinarians performed free surgeries for animals of the indigent at the Houston Animal Control facility was abandoned in favor of the mobile clinic when it was discovered that those who most needed the help had no way to transport their animals.

Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

- A clear understanding of the need.
- A plan that directly addresses that need
- A strong relationship with the veterinary community
- Strong relationships within the community to be served

People

Launching a program like this requires passionate people who are willing to work very hard.

SNAP's Houston Mobile Clinic employs:

- 1 community outreach director
- 1 clinic manager (who also drives the van)
- 1 veterinarian FTE (12 veterinarians in rotation)
- 1 veterinary technician (who also drive the van)

Volunteers perform such tasks as promotion within the communities, handling paperwork, cleaning instruments, and making surgical packs.

Up-front Costs and Startup Funding

Adequate funding is a must. Even though the SNAP Mobile Clinic is providing a free service, the quality is equal to that provided by high-end veterinary clinics - and that means not cutting corners.

The \$159,000 van was purchased and outfitted by Les Alexander, owner of the Houston Rockets, who saw the marketing potential of having the vehicle emblazoned with the team logo.

Operating costs run approximately \$300,000 per year. The first operating grant came from the Bureau of Animal Regulation and Care (BARC). BARC still provides approximately 10% of the funding and supplies the Rabies vaccines. Harris County Animal Control contributes about 10%. An additional 8% comes from the State of Texas through the animal friendly license plate. The remainder is raised through grants from private foundations, individual donations and fund raising events. Volunteers staff beverage booths at several community festivals throughout the year, raising \$10,000 or more per event. An annual gala raises over \$350,000.

Time Line

The Houston Mobile Clinic started operation in 1994, but it took until 1995, when secure funding was first established, for the program to begin running full time and at capacity.

Step by Step

1. Determine which neighborhoods are sending most animals to area shelters.

Animal Control and area humane societies should have these figures.

2. Take your story to the neighborhoods.

SNAP recommends getting out into the community well before the clinic is scheduled to begin operation, holding one-on-one discussions with neighborhood leaders and residents to gain their support for the program. According to Hawkins, "You can send fliers and run PSA's all you want, but you have to show up at the Well Baby Clinic and the Community Association meeting. You have to have face time in the community."

3. Take your story to city and county governments.

Arm yourself with figures regarding the cost of rounding up, impounding, euthanizing, and disposing of cats and dogs and demonstrate that government can do better by investing in your spay/neuter program.

4. Be proactive in dealing with the veterinary community.

SNAP representatives took the first step, attending veterinary society meetings to outline their plans and explain that their service would be targeted at those who would not normally be seeking veterinary care for their animals.

5. Determine where you will take the van: Get to know the neighborhoods you plan to serve.

Look for places that residents know well and where they feel comfortable. SNAP began by taking the van to multi-service centers where residents came for welfare, health benefits, food stamps etc.

They now also take the van to outlets with name recognition such as supermarkets, Wal-Mart, PetSmart and PETCO stores. If you want to attract low-income clients from outside the area, (the Houston clinic reports that 30% of their clients on any give day come from outside the neighborhood) look for places with good highway access.

6. Find a place to park the van.

Houston's Bureau of Animal Regulation and Care (BARC) allows SNAP to park the van on their property.

7. Determine how you will qualify clients.

Clients qualify for the services of the Houston Mobile Clinic by showing proof of participation in one of the following programs: Food Stamps, TANF, WIC, Medicaid, Harris County Hospital gold Card, SSI, SSD, AIDS Foundation Houston, Major VA Disability or Section 8 Housing.

8. Determine how you will market the service.

SNAP sends weekly public service announcements to the neighborhood and city papers, as well as radio stations. Every month, they print 5,000 bilingual fliers giving basic information about how to access the clinic and a calendar of upcoming locations. Fliers are mailed or delivered to humane societies, animal controls, multi-service centers and other locations frequented by potential clients. Much of the marketing is now done by residents who know the value of the service and promote it to others.

9. Determine how many animals you can do in a day.

The Houston Mobile Clinic has cage space for 24 animals. Cages have removable partitions to accommodate large dogs. Depending on the number of large dogs that show up, the number surgeries varies. In 2003, the daily average was 22.5.

10. Determine whether you will require appointments.

The Houston Mobile Clinic accepts animals on a first-come first-served basis. Animal intake begins at 7:45 am, but some clients arrive as early as 5:30 am.

11. Take a look at existing vans to determine the configuration you want.

The original SNAP van cost \$159,000. An identical van, fully equipped, would now cost just under \$200,000.

12. Secure a major donor to purchase and equip the van.

13. Determine how you will raise the money for operating.

Results

The Numbers

SNAP's Houston Mobile Clinic last year performed 4,439 surgeries. Since 1997, the Mobile Clinic has performed a total of 28,809 surgeries. A SNAP low-cost stationary clinic, serving low-income families who do not qualify for the free services of the mobile, did an additional 73,771 surgeries.

In that time, the City of Houston and Harris County animal controls have seen a 16% drop in intake and a 24.1% drop in euthanasia, in spite of a growing human population.

Critical Factors

- A good plan for dealing with a real problem.
- Decision to target low income neighborhoods - based on data showing that most of the cats and dogs entering the county's animal controls were coming from those neighborhoods.
- A positive relationship with the veterinary community. SNAP established a Medical Advisory Board made up of prominent local veterinarians. The board president was a veterinarian. SNAP leadership told the veterinary community their plans before beginning operation. They kept

their word about focusing on low-income families and not treating sick or injured animals. Right from the start, the quality of medical care was equal or superior to that being offered in private clinics.

- A deep understanding of the culture of Houston's low-income neighborhoods enabling SNAP to identify people of influence and present them with compelling reasons to support the program.
- The ability to enlist the support of major donors such as Houston Rockets owner Les Alexander and Fund for Animals founder Cleveland Amory.
- Independence from any single animal welfare organization or animal control so they can work with them all.

Thinking Outside the Box

- In 1993, the idea of a mobile spay/neuter van was totally new.
- SNAP takes animals on a first-come-first-served basis. According to SNAP Community Program Manager Susan Lamb, not scheduling appointments means one less staff person. It is impossible to predict the No Show rate so you have to overbook...then, if everyone does show up, you end up with more animals than you can safely handle. First-come-first-served puts the burden on the people who are receiving the free service.
- SNAP launched the Spayed Club several years ago, members of which pledge \$20 - \$50 a month to sponsor one surgery for a dog or cat in a low income neighborhood. Members receive a lapel pin and regular updates on animals helped through the program. Supporters can join on-line, and pledges can be automatically charged to a credit card each month.

How They Feel About What They Did

- According to Lamb, the results have gone way beyond the altering of some 28,809 animals. "We have learned that, if you do a little for them, they will do so much more," she explains. "We have raised the bar, and animals in our community are leading better lives. If we ceased to exist, we'd be back in the dark ages again."
- Houston Mobile Clinic clients have developed an understanding of the problems associated with constant breeding.
- Now that they have fewer animals, clients are more inclined and more financially able to provide the animals they do have with the basics of veterinary care - particularly vaccinations and pest prevention.
- Animals no longer infested with fleas and ticks are more welcome inside the house. In fact, Susan estimates that the number of full-time yard animals has been cut in half!
- Participants feel more comfortable bucking the peer pressure that encourages careless treatment of pets.
- The SNAP van doubles as a disaster response vehicle, providing temporary housing for animals dispossessed by fires, floods and other natural disasters. When human shelters are unable to take in animals, the mobile parks right outside, providing housing for pets close at hand.

Their Next Steps

Because the van has cages for 24 animals, there is a limit to the number of animals that can be surgically altered using the mobile clinic. In order to address the overpopulation problem even more aggressively, SNAP is partnering with PetSmart Charities to present a series of Neutersol Clinics. Initial plans call for sterilizing 5,000 male dogs FREE of charge. At the first Neuterpalooza event, they were able to neuter 75 dogs in one day at no cost to their owners. SNAP's plan is to set up monthly clinics in isolated, low income areas underserved by the veterinary community. "That's what we're excited about now", Lamb said. "We're ratcheting up the volume!"

Some Words of Wisdom

What Worked

- Focusing on the public health aspect
- Not talking down to clients, but, instead helping them think through the implications of their actions toward their animals.

Be Prepared For

- The "We've got bigger problems" syndrome. Community leaders who are passionate about such social issues as human overpopulation, drugs, teen pregnancy etc. will question your priorities, wondering why it's important to take care of the animals. SNAP successfully countered this attitude by agreeing that animal welfare is just one part of a much bigger issue and by focusing on the public health ramifications of flea-infested, non-vaccinated animals running at large.
- The "It's just a dog" syndrome. Peer pressure leads owners to treat their animals with indifference. The following arguments, presented in one-on-one conversations with owners, proved helpful.
 - Intact male dogs pick up the scent of every female dog within a mile radius. They are continually frustrated by their inability to get to those females.
 - A male dog could, if allowed, impregnate 10 to 15 dogs creating a population of street dogs that could pose a threat to the owner's family.
 - With fewer animals, an owner could afford to control fleas and ticks - a major issue in Houston.
 - Children are required to get vaccinations to keep themselves and the community safe from disease. The same goes for dogs and cats.
- Financial ups and downs. According to Lamb, the Houston Mobile Clinic was financially strapped for the first two years - living hand-to-mouth through bake sales and garage sales and money from their own pockets. It wasn't until 1995, when Cleveland Amory took the clinic under the wing of the Fund for Animals that they were able to operate at full capacity and demonstrate that they could make a difference. (This might not be as much of a problem for a group starting a clinic now. In 1993, it was an unproven idea. Foundations were not willing to invest. Mobile clinics have proven effective now in many areas, so foundations are more comfortable with making grants). In 2000, after Cleveland Amory died, the Fund for Animals withdrew its support. That led to new financial challenges. By then, however, SNAP had a track record and some good experience in fund raising.
- Staff turnover as you work to get the right people in the right positions.
- Difficult people. Often you can't avoid them or change them. You have to find a way to make it work. You have to be creative.

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 e-mail to ASPCA® National Outreach with your feedback.

SNAP: Thumbnail Sketch

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SNAP's mission is to stop the destruction of healthy dogs and cats by increasing the availability and use of animal sterilization services.

In 1994, SNAP launched the first mobile spay/neuter clinic in the country. The organization now operates mobile clinics in Houston, Albuquerque, Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Monterrey, Mexico; as well as stationary clinics in Houston and Morelia, Mexico, and a Wellness Clinic in Houston.



Staff

For the organization as a whole (as opposed to staff for the profiled program)

- 13 administrative staff
- 60 program staff in US facilities
- 11 program staff in Mexico facilities
- SNAP depends upon hundreds of volunteers to raise funds and work at the clinics

Operating Budget

- \$5.2 million for all SNAP programs
- \$300,000 for Houston Mobile Clinic

Business Type

501(c) (3) nonprofit