

PetFix

northeast ohio

A Mobile Spay/Neuter Clinic



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PetFix Northeast Ohio



This independent mobile spay/neuter clinic makes low-cost, high-quality surgeries easily accessible to:

- low-income owners
- feral cat caregivers
- agencies offering cats and dogs for adoption within a nine-county region

Stats

In its first two years, the PetFix clinic performed just under 5,000 surgeries, averaging 19 surgeries per day, 2-3 days per week.

How Cool is That?

We're impressed with the way the PetFix founders:

- Jumped in and took the lead, bringing to the forefront the need for more spay/neuter resources in the region
- Used regional conferences to raise awareness, foster communication among area groups and build support for the clinic
- Developed the PetFix Partners Program, enabling humane societies, rescues, and animal controls to target those populations creating localized pet overpopulation problems
- Continues to seek creative solutions to the unique challenges associated with running an independent mobile clinic

Adopt or Adapt

While stationary clinics with transport, such as those using the Humane Alliance model, offer a much more cost-effective approach to solving the pet overpopulation problem, there are situations where the flexibility of a mobile clinic is desirable. It's important to note, however, that operating a small, independent mobile program presents unique staffing and funding challenges. This profile offers an honest look at the ups and downs of one organization's experience developing and maintaining such a program.



Who They Are and What They Do

PetFix Northeast Ohio

Timotha Sullivan, founding President
 Kate Theobald, Program Coordinator

PetFix Northeast Ohio was incorporated in November, 2004, as a nonprofit organization with the mission of ending pet overpopulation by educating the public about the importance of spay/neuter and by making low-cost spay/neuter surgeries easily accessible to those who cannot afford full fees. Since January of 2006, PetFix has traveled throughout northeast Ohio bringing affordable spay/neuter surgeries to low-income owners, feral cat caregivers, and agencies offering cats and dogs for adoption. In its first two years, PetFix surgeons performed just under 5,000 surgeries.

Here's how the program works:

At approximately 8am, the 33' state-of-the-art surgery on wheels rolls into town and sets up in a safe convenient location. Throughout the morning and early afternoon, a licensed veterinarian, assisted by a registered veterinary technician and experienced veterinary assistant, alters cats and dogs, including ferals and juveniles 8 weeks of age or weighing a minimum of 2 pounds.

All animals not previously inoculated are required to receive rabies shots. Feral cats may, at the request of the caregiver, receive the FVRCP modified live vaccine. No other services are provided.

Each animal receives a brief physical examination to determine whether it is healthy enough for surgery. At discharge, clients are informed of any medical condition noticed during the exam and encouraged to take the animal to a local veterinary clinic.

Animals are discharged late in the afternoon. Clients are given detailed post-op instructions along with an emergency number to call and a list of private practice veterinarians in the area who have agreed to see PetFix clients in the event of complications. PetFix agrees to pay any expenses incurred as a direct result of surgery. The client is responsible for any other costs.

About the PetFix Partners:

At the heart of the program are the PetFix Partners - humane societies, rescues, dog wardens and animal control agencies that schedule the mobile clinic, secure a safe and convenient location, advertise surgery dates, qualify and schedule clients, and collect fees.

Shelter animals, owned animals and feral cats are scheduled and fees are charged according to the following point system:

Cat Neuter	1 pt.	\$25
Cat Spay	2 pts.	\$35
Feral Cat	2 pts.	\$30
Dog Neuter under 50#	2 pts.	\$35
Dog Spay under 50#	3 pts.	\$55

Dog Neuter over 50#	4 pts.	\$45
Dog Spay over 50#	4 pts.	\$65
Rabies vaccine		\$6
FVRCP vaccine		\$2

Partners are instructed in advance regarding the total number of points they may schedule (generally 38 for an all cat day, 51 for an all dog day and 50 for a mixed day). There is a minimum fee of \$600 to bring the clinic in for a day. Partners may pass PetFix fees on to clients or they may raise their own funds to further subsidize the PetFix fees. Partners may not charge more.

Owners must show proof that they receive or are eligible to receive public assistance. Caregivers for feral cats do not have to show proof of need. Feral cats have their ears notched to prevent re-capture.

Ingredients and Prep Work

According to co-founder Timotha Sullivan, starting an independent mobile spay/neuter program requires the following people, funds, and lead time.

People

At least one veterinarian, committed to the project, with solid spay/neuter experience and/or the time and willingness to learn about focused spay/neuter programs, particularly in a mobile setting. A good reputation within the local veterinary community is a plus.

- A leader respected and trusted within the animal welfare community and the community at large.
- Someone with solid fundraising and non-profit management experience.
- Someone with a strong financial background to establish appropriate financial policies and procedures.
- Ongoing operation of the program requires all of the above plus the following key staff members:
 - One or more licensed veterinarians and registered veterinary technicians with impeccable skills, a commitment to solving the pet overpopulation problem, the flexibility to travel to a number of different communities each week, and the ability to work in close proximity with other staff members. Some experience with shelter medicine is a real plus.
 - One or more veterinary assistants with strong animal-handling skills, equally strong people skills, and the ability to drive and maintain the vehicle.
 - A program coordinator with extraordinary ability to handle complex scheduling and tricky staffing issues.

Up front costs and start-up funding

The PetFix 33' mobile clinic, fully equipped, was purchased as a demo from LaBoit, Inc. of Columbus, OH (www.laboit.com) for \$170,000. According to Sullivan, PetFix raised an additional \$60,000 to cover contingencies and insure that they'd be able to make it through the uncertainties of the first few months on the road.

Timeline

- May 2004: Fix Rattle & Roll regional spay/neuter conference held to assess regional need
- November 2004: PetFix incorporated
- February 2005:

- Application filed for 501(c)3 designation
- Fundraising campaign undertaken
- Program details developed
- March 2005: Fix Rattle & Roll II regional spay/neuter conference held to outline proposed PetFix program and assess potential participation
- October 2005: 501(c)3 designation received
- November 2005: Fully equipped vehicle delivered
- January 2006: Surgeries begun

Step by Step

1. Learn about the pet overpopulation problem and explore the various approaches to solving it.

Sullivan, who had previously served as executive director of a small humane society, spent two years researching pet overpopulation and various spay/neuter options. In addition to attending several national conferences, she visited Humane Alliance and poured through publications such as:

- Mobile Spay-Neuter Clinic Operations, published by Best Friends Animal Society (www.bestfriends.org) and
- the Guidebook to Mobile Spay/Neuter Clinics published by Spay/USA (www.spayusa.org).

She strongly recommends exploring these resources as well as the ASPCApro website (www.ASPCApro.org) to get as much detailed information as possible about all types of spay/neuter programs before moving forward.

2. Get the right kind of expertise involved.

According to Sullivan, this is absolutely essential. "If you're the instigator, you have to be honest about what you can and cannot do," she says. Sullivan had no medical background so it was important to get veterinarians involved right from the start. Two experienced and respected area veterinarians, Dr. Sarah Kirk and Dr. Megan Volpe, joined with Sullivan to establish PetFix. David Reddrop, a retired businessman with strong financial management skills was the first addition to the PetFix board.

Early in the planning process, the PetFix leadership formed an Advisory Board consisting of the dog wardens and humane society directors from each of the counties in the region. While this group now seldom meets, Sullivan says, the members were invaluable sources of information as the program was being developed.

Lesson learned: According to Sullivan, inviting area dog wardens and representatives from each county's humane society to join the Advisory Board helped establish PetFix as an independent organization, tied to no one but there to help all.

3. Identify and research the area you plan to serve.

According to Sullivan, one of the first tasks was defining the region. After doing extensive research using U.S. Census Ohio Quick Facts (quickfacts.census.gov/) and applying pet population formulas from the 2002 American Veterinary Medical Association U.S. Pet Ownership and Demographics Sourcebook, the PetFix leadership chose to include nine northeast Ohio counties. In addition to population and geography, the leadership took into account the fact that these nine counties comprised the viewing areas of Cleveland's three major television stations, creating a logical target market.

Using the sources listed above, the leaders determined that the region included approximately 193,000 pets living in poverty, plus an estimated free-roaming cat population of 860,000 for a total targeted animal population of over 1 million, not including shelter animals. They then researched

available spay/neuter resources, confirming conventional wisdom that there were not enough low-cost options to meet the demand.

Lesson learned: According to Sullivan, serving the entire region proved both difficult and ineffective. Veterinarians and technicians resented the long drives and, by attempting to serve so many communities, the PetFix clinic diluted its effectiveness – failing to do enough surgeries in any one place to have any real impact. Eventually, the PetFix leadership determined that it would make more sense to provide more surgery days to a few communities within the region. By selecting the communities, in part, based on the drive time for key medical staff, the leadership was able to reduce staff stress. Service areas within the region are adjusted based on the development of other spay/neuter resources and the hiring of new PetFix staff.

4. Involve the animal welfare and veterinary communities in your planning.



Having determined that a need existed on paper, the PetFix leadership decided to consult those most familiar with the problem. In May of 2004, PetFix hosted Fix, Rattle & Roll, a day-long conference of over 60 humane society and rescue representatives, dog wardens, private veterinarians and potential funders. The conference was presented with the support of the ASPCA, Best Friends Animal Society, PetSmart Charities, and Humane Ohio.

In the morning, representatives from Spay Virginia, No More Homeless Pets in Utah and the Operation FELIX MASH program in northwestern Ohio discussed a variety of regional approaches to reducing pet overpopulation. In the afternoon, Bert Troughton from the ASPCA facilitated a wide-ranging discussion during which those working in the trenches had the opportunity to present their views about the kinds of spay/neuter resources that would make their jobs easier.

The conference produced the following conclusions:

- Pet overpopulation is a significant problem throughout the region.
- Cost and transportation are the two major obstacles preventing people from having their animals altered.
- Success will come much more quickly through an independent initiative that supports and augments the efforts of already overworked humane societies, rescues, animal control groups and veterinarians.

Lesson learned: According to Sullivan, Fix, Rattle & Roll was successful because the conversation was limited to spay/neuter, enabling representatives from agencies with very different philosophies to sit down together and discuss a topic on which they all basically agreed.

5. Define your mission and incorporate.

Having established the need and determined that a new, independent, organization would be required to get the job done, the leadership incorporated PetFix Northeast Ohio. They defined the organization's mission as "ending pet overpopulation by educating the public about the importance of spay/neuter and by making low-cost spay/neuter surgeries easily accessible to those who cannot afford full fees."

Lesson learned: According to Sullivan, limiting the mission to spay/neuter has kept PetFix from being lured away by other compelling animal welfare needs. Staying focused on their mission has also enabled all animal welfare agencies, regardless of such potentially divisive issues as euthanasia policies, to take advantage of the service.

6. Apply for your 501 (c) (3) non-profit designation.

While the application forms are readily available at www.irs.gov (form 1023), Sullivan strongly recommends having an experienced attorney or accountant help with their preparation. Even with professional help, however, Sullivan cautions that getting your letter of approval can take time. It took an agonizing 8 months for PetFix to be approved even though there were no issues with the application. "It seems to be a question of what desk you land on and what else is going on in the department," Sullivan said.

7. Decide how you will implement your mission.

Before settling on a mobile clinic, the PetFix leadership studied three models in depth – the SpayJax voucher program, the Humane Alliance stationary clinic with transport, and the SNAP Houston mobile clinic.

- A mobile clinic was ultimately selected for the following reasons:
- Ability to pinpoint geographic areas of greatest need and target the human populations generating most of the region's pet overpopulation problems.
- Ability to use the vehicle as a dramatic mobile billboard, promoting spay/neuter and responsible pet ownership throughout the region.
- Ability to keep animals close to home and interact with owners/caregivers for maximum educational impact.

Lesson learned: While a mobile does achieve all of those results, the trade-off can be high. Read on.

8. Determine the audiences you will serve and the services you will provide. Set your program goals.

The PetFix leadership chose to limit services to spay/neuter surgeries and rabies vaccinations. They limited the audience to qualified low-income owners, feral cat caregivers and agencies offering cats and dogs for adoption. The plan was to have the clinic on the road 4 days a week, 50 weeks a year, performing an average of 24 surgeries per day for an annual total of 5,000 surgeries.

Lessons learned: According to Sullivan, achieving the goals turned out to be much more difficult than anticipated. "It's important to realize that your surgeons might not have the spay/neuter experience to do as many surgeries in a day as you'd like, and, while you want them to become more proficient, the most important thing is the safety of each animal that comes into the clinic. Sometimes you have to be willing to celebrate the surgeries you've done rather than focusing on the numbers."

Regarding services, Sullivan says there is constant pressure to add wellness services – both on the grounds that you have one chance at some of these animals and should do as much as possible for them and on the grounds that you can subsidize the costs of your surgeries by selling other services and products. According to Sullivan, the PetFix leadership sees the merit in these arguments but believes that the mission of PetFix is to end pet overpopulation and the best way to do that is to perform as many spay/neuter surgeries as possible. Taking any time to do other things in a small mobile clinic seriously jeopardizes the mission.

9. Vet your program with potential clients.

Once the program had been developed, the PetFix leadership decided to make sure they were on the right track by unveiling the plan to potential PetFix Partners. On March 18, 2005, PetFix hosted its second day-long regional spay/neuter conference – Fix, Rattle & Roll II: Let's Roll. Once again, the ASPCA, Best Friends Animal Society and PetSmart Charities sponsored and Bert Troughton served as facilitator. Susan Lamb, Community Program Manager for the well-established SNAP Houston mobile program gave the keynote address after which the PetFix leadership presented details of the PetFix program. In the afternoon, attendees were invited to critique the program and encouraged to indicate whether and to what extent they might participate as PetFix Partners.

Lesson learned: In addition to providing the PetFix leadership with valuable information and building up-front support for the program, the Fix, Rattle & Roll conferences fostered cooperation among area groups and inspired others to start their own spay/neuter programs.

10 Build your budget and raise start-up funds.

The start-up budget for PetFix was \$230,000: \$170,000 to purchase and equip the vehicle and \$60,000 in initial operating funds. According to Sullivan, \$175,000 came from foundation grants while \$55,000 was raised through individual approaches to major donors.

Lesson learned: Sullivan advises that it's much easier to raise money for a launch than it is to raise operating dollars. She therefore recommends raising as much as possible up-front.

11. Purchase your vehicle.

While there are several reputable companies that manufacture or retrofit spay/neuter vehicles, the PetFix leadership elected to purchase an existing demo from LaBoit, Inc. in Columbus, OH. "We liked the fact that we could see what we were getting, and we also liked that it was manufactured in our own state," Sullivan said.

Lesson learned: According to Sullivan, the vehicle has performed very well. However, she recommends spending time in mobile clinics that are up and running before making a purchase. "There are some really creative uses of space out there," she says. "I wish we'd spent a little more time exploring them. Every inch counts when you're trying to alter as many animals as possible."

12. Develop your staffing model and hire your staff.



According to Sullivan, staffing has been the major challenge since Day One. "We've tried several models and still aren't sure we've gotten it right" she explains. The PetFix Board initially hired a Director of Veterinary Services to be in charge of the clinic and handle most of the surgery. When that person decided she missed being in private practice, the leadership decided to go with part-time surgeons and hire a Registered Technician as the Clinic Manager. She too was lured back into private practice.

PetFix is currently staffed with three part-time surgeons and two part-time techs. According to Sullivan, the part-time veterinarians and technicians are all highly qualified, work well together, and are doing an excellent job. She adds, however, that, since PetFix is not the primary job for any of them, circumstances at their "real" jobs could force them to leave at any time. With the current shortage of veterinarians and technicians and the added challenges of working in a mobile spay/neuter clinic, that puts PetFix in a perennially precarious position.

In late 2007, a Program Coordinator was hired to work 30 hours a week handling all scheduling and billing and serving as the liaison between the PetFix Partners and the medical teams. Fundraising and outreach are handled by the board president. According to Sullivan, this model is working very well.

Lesson learned: Sullivan strongly advises having at least some experience in shelter medicine within your clinic staff. "Private practice and shelter medicine have different mind-sets," she says. "It's nice to have someone who can bridge the gap between the Partners, who may simply be trying to get as many animals as possible altered so they can get them into homes and free up cage space, and the surgeon, who is much more concerned with quality control."

13. Develop your policies and procedures.

According to Sullivan, this is an ongoing process. While the leadership is always interested in new techniques that might increase efficiency on the van, Board veterinarians with very high standards have the final say on all issues of protocol.

14. Line up post-operative emergency care.

Because the clinic moves on at the end of the day, PetFix won't operate in a community unless 24-hour coverage has been established with one or more area veterinarians, known as PetFix Providers. At discharge, PetFix clients are given a hotline number that is answered between 8am and 11pm by a member of the PetFix medical team. PetFix Provider clinics agree to see clients in the unlikely event of a post-operative emergency that cannot be handled by phone or that occurs when the hotline phone isn't staffed. PetFix agrees, ahead of time, to pay for any costs incurred as a direct result of surgical complications. Both the client and the Provider are instructed that any additional costs are the client's responsibility.

Lesson learned: Yes, you will get burned occasionally, but, with a mobile clinic, there really doesn't seem to be any alternative.

15 Schedule some shakedown days.

On December 14, 2005, the PetFix Clinic headed out for the first time. The hosting organization was prepared to be flexible about everything from the number of animals done to the length of the day. That first day went surprisingly well with 21 cat surgeries performed. Three additional shakedown days were held before formal launch in January of 2006.

Lesson learned: There's nothing like doing it on the van. One experienced veterinarian, very committed to spay/neuter, spent one day working in the mobile clinic and was surprised to find that she could not tolerate the tight conditions.

16. Set your operating budget and determine how you'll raise operating funds.

Anticipated 2008 expenses, based on a realistic 200 surgery days with an average of 20 surgeries per day for a total of 4,000 surgeries, are \$293,577. Compensation accounts for \$181,277 of that and direct program expenses account for an additional \$71,000.

It is anticipated that approximately half of the funds to cover expenses will come from fees. The rest will come from special events, mailed appeals, and grants.

Results

The Numbers

While the goal was to be on the road 4 days a week, 50 weeks a year, with an average of 24 surgeries a day for a total of 5,000 surgeries per year, it actually took two years to perform 5,000 surgeries. Staffing challenges limited the clinic to an average of 2.7 days a week, and daily surgery averages ranged from 16 the first month to 21.7 by the summer of 2007.

Critical Factors

PetFix would not have gotten on the road without:

- A small number of individuals willing to take full responsibility for the success of the program.
- A willingness, on the part of the leadership, to be flexible while remaining true to the mission. Sullivan recalls reluctantly acknowledging that covering nine counties was unrealistic with the staff available and agreeing to concentrate on providing more surgery days to fewer communities. Similarly, the Board has been forced to experiment with a variety of staffing models and to settle for fewer surgeries than originally planned.
- Board veterinarians who are committed to altering as many animals as possible while insisting on the highest standards of patient care.

Thinking Outside the Box

We're impressed with the PetFix leadership's:

- Use of conferences to bring humane societies, rescues and dog wardens together around a central issue – reducing the population of homeless animals in the region.
- Development of the PetFix Partners program, which offers the following significant advantages:
 - PetFix does not have to understand the dynamics in every community it serves.
 - Partners assume much of the responsibility for marketing and scheduling, allowing the PetFix Board and staff to concentrate on providing top-quality spay/neuter surgeries.
 - Partners can target the populations and neighborhoods that are generating the bulk of their intake or nuisance calls.
 - Partners develop relationships with their PetFix clients.
 - Partners have the chance to direct their PetFix clients to local veterinarians for routine veterinary care, thus strengthening those relationships.
 - Partners decide whether to raise funds to subsidize PetFix fees or pass the fees on to their clients.
 - Partners receive most of the credit for the program.

Next Steps

Although PetFix continues to wrestle with staffing issues, the leadership has worked hard to develop and implement specific projects that can best be handled by a mobile clinic.

- PetFix recently received foundation funding to conduct in-depth programs in two critical areas, the City of Cleveland and the rural Ashtabula County. In each case, PetFix will work hand-in-glove with other area organizations and private clinics to study the cat population, perform as many cat surgeries as possible in a one-year period, and attempt to assess the effect of the combined efforts of all active spay/neuter initiatives in reducing the free-roaming cat population in the target area.

In addition to reducing cat populations, PetFix hopes, through these projects, to encourage accurate and uniform record-keeping and foster communication among participating agencies.

- PetFix received a grant from the ASPCA to host Fix, Rattle & Roll III in January of 2008 to re-assess the state of spay/neuter in the region, encourage continued communication, and map strategies for developing enough accessible, affordable spay/neuter services to achieve equilibrium between the number of animals born and the region's capacity to care for them.

Some Words of Wisdom

What Worked

The Fix, Rattle & Roll conferences and the successful and very visible launch of the PetFix mobile program served to jumpstart spay/neuter awareness in the area. Since PetFix began, one Humane Alliance model clinic has opened in the region and another is planned. Discussions are underway for several other initiatives. As these programs develop, the PetFix mobile clinic has the flexibility to focus on geographic areas where there are still no other good options.

What Didn't

- Attempting to cover a nine-county area. The travel was too hard on the staff, and PetFix wasn't able to spend enough time in any one community to have a significant impact.
- Staffing models that put major responsibility for the program in the hands of one person. When the director of Veterinary Services decided to go back into private practice, the Board was challenged to find surgeons willing and able to pick up the slack. Later, after it was decided to make the head Veterinary Technician the person with primary responsibility, and she too was lured back into private practice, the leadership was challenged to find veterinary technicians who could handle the program. In each case, surgery days were lost during the transition. PetFix is now operating with a lay person as Program Manager and a stable of part-time surgeons and technicians. The advantage is that, if a surgeon or technician decides to leave the program, the Board has to find a qualified veterinarian or technician to pick up a day or two rather than someone to take major responsibility for the program. According to Sullivan, this situation is still not ideal, but it seems to offer greater stability.

Be Prepared For

- The challenge of finding qualified surgeons and technicians interested in working on a spay/neuter mobile clinic. For some creative techniques, Sullivan recommends consulting Dr. Jim Weedon's *Strategies for Recruiting and Retaining Spay/Neuter Veterinarians*, available on the ASPCApro website (www.ASPCApro.org).

- The challenge of raising funds for a regional spay/neuter program. According to Sullivan, it's essential to find ways to raise money without cutting into the fundraising efforts of the very humane societies and rescues you exist to serve.

It took the PetFix leadership over a year to come up with a major event, completely different from anything any of the Partner groups were doing, and designed to bring an entire new audience to the table. For the past two years, PetFix has partnered with Nordstrom and John Roberts, a prominent hair studio and spa, to present Fixations, an over-the-top evening of personal pampering for women of all ages with mini-makeovers, polish changes, massage, tarot card readings, great food and signature drinks like the Meowy Wowy and the Dirty Muttini.

The Fixations event is marketed as a fashion and beauty event rather than an animal welfare event. It provides approximately 10% of the PetFix operating budget and brings new names to the database for annual appeals.

- The overall challenge of operating an independent mobile program focused only on spay/neuter. According to Sullivan, a small, independent organization like PetFix has no wiggle room when it comes to staffing or finances. "If we were attached to a humane society or wellness clinic," she says, "we could move staff around in the event of a resignation or raise funds for general clinic operation (often easier than raising funds specifically for spay/neuter)."

In spite of the challenges, Sullivan stresses her belief that there is a definite place for an independent mobile spay/neuter clinic as part of a greater regional effort that includes large stationary clinics.

Tell Us What You Think

With the information we've provided, can you start a program like this one in your organization? Send an email to ASPCA Community Outreach (outreach@aspcapro.org) with your feedback and questions.

PetFix Northeast Ohio: Thumbnail Sketch

PetFix Northeast Ohio
7343 Chagrin Road
Chagrin Falls, OH 44023
216.536.0930
petfix.neo@sbcglobal.net
www.petfixnortheastohio.org



PetFix Northeast Ohio is an independent mobile, low-cost, high quality spay/neuter clinic designed to make affordable surgeries accessible to low-income owners, feral cat caregivers, and agencies offering cats and dogs for adoption in a nine-county region.

Staff

A part-time paid Program Coordinator (30 hours per week), handles all of the logistics involved in keeping the clinic on the road. The on-board clinic staff consists of:

- one a licensed veterinarian
- one registered veterinary technician
- one trained veterinary assistant who also drives the van

All are part-time, employed on an as-needed basis.

Fundraising, marketing, financial management and other administrative tasks are handled by members of the Board of Trustees.

Operating Budget

\$293,577 for 2008 (assuming 4 days a week, 50 weeks a year, average 20 surgeries per day)

Business Type

501(c) (3) nonprofit