

Spay/Neuter: Finding a Solution that Really Works



You know there's a pet overpopulation problem in your community. You also know that accessible, affordable spay/neuter services are a crucial tool to address the problem.

And you know that you're committed to making a difference for the animals in your community. So where do you go from here?

To have maximum impact on animal overpopulation, you'll want to match the unmet needs in your community with a spay/neuter program that has the elements to address those needs. You'll also have to reach the human population whose animals will benefit from your services.

First, Take a Deep Breath ...

You may feel ready to make a difference today. But some upfront information gathering and analysis will save you time, money, and a lot of effort – and will ultimately save more animal lives. Here's why:

- **Time:** With the right program, you can address the sources of pet overpopulation. If your program doesn't address the circumstances that are driving overpopulation in your community, or doesn't target the right human population, impact will be slow in coming, if it does at all.
- **Money:** You want to spend money where it counts, and your research helps identify what counts. A misdirected program can quickly run into financial roadblocks:
 - It may be hard to attract funding because you can't make a strong case for your program.
 - You may have to charge more for your services than your target population can afford.
 - Your volume may be too low to sustain your operation.
- **Effort:** You'll be working hard no matter what. Why not put all your hard work into the right program for the right audience?

The process outlined below guides you through completing the groundwork that will enable you to successfully implement the spay/neuter program your community really needs.

- [1. Find Out What's Happening – and What's NOT Happening -- Today](#)
- [2. Discuss, and Ask More Questions](#)
- [3. Choose Your Path](#)
- [4. Get the Word Out](#)
- [5. Chart Your Progress](#)
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1. Find Out What's Happening – and What's NOT Happening -- Today

Begin your information gathering by finding out what spay/neuter services are available in your community right now.

A great way to do this is to schedule a meeting in which all the humane groups in your community meet in an open forum:

- Invite shelters, rescue groups, feral-cat caretakers, and concerned individuals. (Searching on Petfinder.com is an easy way to get a list of rescue groups that serve your community.)
- Invite the local animal-control departments.
- Consider including local veterinarians who may be sympathetic to your cause.

To make your meeting time as productive as possible:

- Invite the attendees personally. At that time, ask them if they'll fill out a brief questionnaire about their organization and its services.

You can compile the information to present at the meeting (while keeping individual responses anonymous). Attendees are usually very interested in what others in their community are doing for animals. Consider providing this information as a handout. You can download a sample survey that you can customize from our website.

- Send all attendees the meeting agenda. Our website has a sample agenda to customize.
- Use the meeting to gather additional specifics about what is offered in the community, particularly in terms of spay/neuter services in place today, and the involvement of private-practice veterinarians in these services.

You can download a checklist from our website to help you cover these issues and record the responses. Responses to your survey may contain much of this information. You can poll the group to fill in any missing data.

- Find someone who will agree to be "scribe" for the meeting so that you'll have detailed notes on what transpired.
- If you are not comfortable facilitating a group, consider asking someone who has experience with running meetings to take this role.

If a Community Meeting isn't Possible

In some communities, groups initially may be polarized around spay/neuter issues. Tensions may exist between humane groups, or between these groups and local vets or animal control. You may decide that gathering everyone together isn't a good idea, at least to start.

If that's the case, you can meet individually with groups to gather information and "take the temperature" of the community on spay/neuter issues.

- Use the questionnaire and checklist to structure your meeting time with each group or individual. Again, you may want to bring along a good note-taker.
- After the meeting, follow up with an e-mail, note, or phone call to thank those you met for their participation.

2. Discuss, and Ask More Questions

Open-minded discussion among the stakeholders in your community and thoughtful analysis of what you heard can help you zero in on the spay/neuter services that will have the most impact.

At the meeting, be sure to:

- Listen to what services already exist and what the attendees perceive to be outstanding needs.
- Stick to your agenda, and make sure that you allow time for attendees to raise any spay/neuter issues that weren't on your agenda.
- If appropriate, agree on follow-up tasks and a timeline for completion of the tasks.

After the meeting, follow up personally with all attendees to thank them for their participation.

Next, it's time to consider what you heard. Here are some more questions to help you make sense of the information you collected:

- Who makes up the population that is not served by the spay/neuter services in place today?

The three most commonly underserved animal populations are pets of low-income owners, shelter/rescue animals, and ferals. Is this true in your community? Why are they not served, or not adequately served?

- For services that are in place, what are the barriers to using them?
Typical barriers include cost, transportation, convenience, complexity, and lack of awareness.
- If there are gaps in service, what specifically are those gaps?
For example, perhaps an existing subsidized spay/neuter program requires a co-pay that prevents extremely low-income pet owners from altering their animals. Most low-income programs have found that co-pays of up to \$10 - \$20 are generally affordable for their target audience, if these include all costs, such as pre-surgical immunizations and exams.

3. Choose Your Path

The particular mix of services and gaps in services should guide your decision about the kind of spay/neuter program your community needs. The first part of your decision may be deciding if a new program is even needed, or whether making better use of existing services is the best strategy:

- If a new program is the best way to increase spay/neuter of animals in the community, your next step will be to consider some proven models. Compare the characteristics of these programs to your community's circumstances. This will help you decide which program is most likely to be effective in your community. The Spay/Neuter area of our website has a comparison of the features of spay/neuter program models to get you started.
- If services exist but aren't used effectively, your next step will be to come up with strategies that enable the community to better use its resources for spay/neuter. Perhaps it's getting humane groups to work with a spay/neuter clinic or local vets to alter adoptable animals. Or it may be reducing or eliminating the co-payments in a voucher program.

Here are some examples of how your community's circumstances can match up with various spay/neuter initiatives:

- If you are lucky enough to have a veterinary or veterinary-technician school in the community, developing a partnership with the school is an option you'll want to explore.
- If your community has a voucher program, are recipients income-qualified? The vouchers are wasted if they are used toward surgeries that would have been done anyway. Also, lack of income-qualification and targeting of services are reasons that private-practice vets often give for not participating in voucher programs. (Everyone hears about the person who drove up in a Mercedes and presented a voucher to alter their pedigreed pet.)
- If you find that your community has no subsidized spay/neuter program for low-income pet owners, you may want to create one. Many forms of subsidy programs are in use around the country.
- If your community is very rural, the population may be too small to sustain a fixed spay/neuter clinic. (A human population base of 250,000 in your service area is recommended for a fixed spay/neuter clinic.) On the other hand, a mobile or MASH-style clinic may be quite feasible.

4. Get the Word Out

As part of your upfront analysis, you'll have identified the human populations in your community whom you need to reach with your services.

Knowing who you have to reach enables you to focus your marketing and outreach efforts. There are important reasons for targeting your message, such as:

- Using your marketing budget efficiently. When you have limited dollars to spend on advertising and other marketing, you'll want to make sure that you're getting the best return for that money.
- Respecting the concerns of your stakeholders. For example, if you are targeting low-income pet owners, private-practice vets may be concerned about advertising that seems to be directed to higher-income pet owners.

- Avoiding having to turn away the “wrong” audience. If pet owners must be income-qualified, you don’t want to attract people who will not qualify for the services. Nor do you want to use program resources to alter animals who would have been altered anyway.
- Mostly importantly: reaching the audience who really needs your services!

5. Chart Your Progress

There are many reasons to keep track of the numbers of animals and people whom your program serves. For example:

- You want to know whether your program is having a measurable impact on animal overpopulation. Reliable numbers can tell you whether you are accomplishing what you set out to do. If the program is falling short but you’ve kept good data, you can look at that data to identify problem areas and make adjustments.
- Good numbers help attract good funding. Your stats enable you to make a solid case for funding your program, especially if you are trying to obtain (or renew) public funding. Public officials are answerable to the public for the money they spend. Private donors also want to know that their donation is supporting a program that makes a difference.
- Your numbers help you plan your future. Good data can help you determine where to go next. For example, if your program tracks animals by zip code, you can decide whether you need to expand your service area into new zip codes or focus more intensively in specific communities or neighborhoods.

Recordkeeping doesn’t have to be complicated. Software programs, some very affordable, are available for animal-related services. [Humane Solution](#) is one such program. The [Petfinder website](#) provides a comparison of many of these software program. You can also use spreadsheet programs, such as Microsoft® Excel and FileMaker® Pro, to create simple files for collecting data.

6. Remember that You CAN Make a Difference

There’s a lot to think about when launching a spay/neuter initiative. But if you do some advance research, start small, and learn from other successful programs, you will have great success.

Don’t wait for someone else to do it. That someone is you!



(Photos of PAWS kitten © Maggie Swanson)