



## Help Fix ME: State of Maine's Spay/Neuter Program

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Compiled by ASPCA® and PetSmart Charities® and distributed to the field, September 2007. Visit the ASPCA® National Outreach website for animal welfare professionals: [www.ASPCApro.org](http://www.ASPCApro.org).

## Help Fix ME

*The State of Maine's spay/neuter program*



Help Fix ME is a voucher program that enables low-income Maine residents to obtain spay/neuter surgery for their pets at deeply discounted rates. The program is administered by the state and funded by a variety of revenue sources.

Spay Maine, a coalition of animal shelters, rescue groups, animal control officers, and animal welfare advocates, got the program passed through the state legislature. They monitor its implementation and work to secure ongoing funding

### Stats

- 20-25 animal welfare organizations throughout the state make up the coalition and support its efforts.
- 75 percent of the state's veterinarians participate in the program.
- Each year, Spay Maine returns to the legislature to secure more mechanisms for funding and to secure the mechanisms currently in place.

### How Cool is That?

Help Fix ME is a terrific example of a program that exists because an "ordinary" citizen saw a need and found a solution that was already working well for the same problem in another area. We're delighted to profile this true grassroots organization.

### Adopt or Adapt

Susan Hall, one of Spay Maine's founders, got the idea for the program when she learned about a very successful state-funded program in New Hampshire. She also investigated another program in New Jersey. She adapted what she saw to Maine's specific situation, and now Maine too has a very successful program. She provides some great suggestions for how to adapt Maine's model for the needs and funding opportunities of other states.

## Help Fix ME

Spay Maine is a coalition of Maine's animal shelters, rescue groups, animal control officers, and animal welfare advocates who are working together to decrease animal shelter intakes and euthanasia.

Spay Maine works to secure funding for Maine's state-wide spay/neuter program called Help Fix ME. This program is designed to assist low-income pet owners with spaying/neutering their pets.

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### Who They Are and What They Do

Spay Maine

Susan Hall and Sharon Secovich, Founders and Coordinators

The Help Fix ME program provides direct assistance to low-income Maine residents, enabling them to obtain greatly reduced rates on spay/neuter surgeries for their companion animals. The program puts the cost of the surgery within the reach of very low income people. The voucher recipient pays only \$10 for a cat spay with a rabies vaccine and \$20 for a dog spay with a rabies vaccine.

### Ingredients and Prep Work

#### People

Susan Hall and Sharon Secovich are both volunteers who represent the Spay Maine coalition, which comprises 20-25 animal organizations. The two each spend approximately 80-120 hours annually coordinating the program and making presentations to the state legislature to secure funding each year.

#### Time Line

Sue and Sharon began building the Spay Maine coalition in 2002. The Help Fix ME program actually started in August 2004. Much of the work in those two years was phone calls, e-mails, and face-to-face meetings to build the coalition, obtain buy-in from key stakeholders, and prepare and shepherd the legislation through the Maine legislature.

### Step by Step

#### 1. Define the concept

A small group of people got together and decided that Maine needed a state-wide spay/neuter program. Initially, Sue was the person who learned about a similar program in New Hampshire, Maine's neighbor to the west. New Hampshire is similar to Maine in culture and population, although Maine has more poverty.

Sue learned about the tremendous successes that New Hampshire has seen — the state saw amazing decreases in shelter intakes as well as euthanasia rates. After Sue learned about the program in New Hampshire, she began planning for a similar initiative in Maine.

#### 2. Build a grassroots coalition

- Sue began the process of building the coalition in January 2002. Her first step was to set up a meeting with her state veterinary medical association. She then presented information at a

few shelters and with an animal advocacy group. After a few of these meetings, a core group of three people came together (one person has since moved out of state).

- Sue estimates that she and Sharon spent 6 months traveling the state and presenting the idea to the local groups.
  - To find out what animal welfare groups existed in Maine, she first obtained a list of animal shelters from the state of Maine department of agriculture. She called the shelters, rescues, animal controls, and other groups and asked to meet with them. Typically, at these meetings 15-20 people would be present and each person would represent a separate group.
  - At this stage, Spay Maine did not ask these groups to do anything, to provide money, nothing. Rather the goal was to obtain the various groups' support to have a state-wide coalition that would push for and maintain an extensive spay/neuter program for low-income individuals.
  - During this period Sue also presented the idea to Maine's Animal Welfare Advisory Council. This group advises the Commissioner of Agriculture and the Director of the Animal Welfare Program about animal welfare issues in the state.
- Sue obtained buy-in from the Maine Veterinary Medical Association, which has really embraced the concept. Sue presented the idea to the MVMA executive board and highlighted the results from New Hampshire.
  - She presented before and after data from New Hampshire for shelter intakes and euthanasia rates. She emphasized that New Hampshire is very similar to Maine in terms of population and culture. Her message was — if it was successful in New Hampshire, then it will be successful in Maine.
  - She also presented Maine euthanasia and intake rates to emphasize where Maine was at the time and that there was a need for a state-wide program. As a result of this early buy-in, 75% of vet hospitals throughout Maine currently participate in Help Fix ME.

### 3. Lobby the state legislature and create the actual program

- The core members of the new Spay Maine coalition asked for support of the various animal welfare groups and asked these groups to lobby the state legislature. (They continue to do this each time Spay Maine needs to approach the state to get more funding.)
- In the coalition's lobbying efforts, they highlighted cost savings in impoundment costs that the state could receive if they began the Help Fix ME program. To do this, they presented the cost savings that New Hampshire obtained through their program; New Hampshire has found that for every \$1 spent on their program, they save \$3.15 in impoundment costs.
- When an issue comes up where Susan and Sharon feel that Spay Maine needs to lobby the state legislature, such as securing funding for the next year, they make many phone calls to the individual members of the Spay Maine coalition and ask them to call their local legislators. Sue emphasizes that phone calls work much better than email to motivate people. Sue says that the state legislators do call back their local constituents.
- The Help Fix ME program started in August 2004. Sue and her colleague helped create forms and vouchers for the program, and created its logo.
- After the program began, Sue and Sharon organized several publicity efforts.
  - They did advertising through radio and television ads to promote a check-off on state income tax forms for people to support the program. State tax forms for personal income include a checkbox for people to donate a small amount of money to Help Fix ME.
  - Additionally, the program's founders called local shelters to get information about the program on the shelters' web sites and newsletters.

#### 4. Monitor the program and secure ongoing state funding

This is an ongoing process. The founders are constantly trying to obtain more funding for the program because demand for spay/neuter services has been very high.

As implemented, the Help Fix ME program works like this:

- A person seeking spay/neuter surgery for a companion animal calls an 800 telephone number to ask for a voucher.
- The state administrator screens the applicant to ensure that the applicant qualifies as low-income. If approved, the applicant sends in an application and makes a co-payment to the state administrator (\$10 for a cat and \$20 for a dog).
- The state then sends the applicant a voucher to present to a vet who participates in the Help Fix ME program.
- The vet performs the surgery and then sends the voucher to the state, which reimburses the vet for the surgery.

## Results

### The Numbers

The current budget of the Help Fix ME program is \$185,000, all of which is used for spay/neuter services for pets of low-income residents of Maine. Spay Maine would like to have \$200,000 of funding secured and dedicated for Help Fix ME.

The program currently relies on the following sources of funding:

- Pet store fees—\$60,000-66,000. The program gets \$25 for each unaltered dog and cat sold out of a pet shop.
- Pet food distribution fees—\$100,000 (the program's largest source of revenue). Maine charges pet food companies a distribution fee for each flavor of pet food sold to retailers. Sue was able to lobby to increase the fee charged to pet food companies, and these fees go into the Animal Welfare Program. Of these funds, \$100,000 are earmarked for Help Fix ME. Sue feels that this is a good source of funding and other people seeking to replicate Help Fix ME should find out whether their state assesses such a fee, which you can do at this website: <http://www.aafco.org/SummaryOfFeedLegislation/tabid/85/Default.aspx>
- Check-off boxes on individual tax returns—\$25,000. This is a voluntary source of funding and not that reliable. This check-off box is hidden in the tax form. According to Sue Hall, other animal welfare groups seeking to emulate Help Fix ME should consider this as a funding source only if they are willing to work every tax season to publicize the check-off.
- Surcharges on dog licenses—The programs in New Hampshire and New Jersey were funded by \$2 surcharges on dog licenses. Spay Maine founders decided to emulate this idea and sought to get the dog license fee increased. Sue said it wasn't politically feasible to get the entire license fee dedicated to spay/neuter as some of the fee income was earmarked for animal abuse investigations.

Local shelters have reported anecdotally that they don't have as many kittens coming in as they had in the past. Spay Maine believes it will take 3-5 years of the program being in place before the coalition will have hard data to present on reductions in shelter admissions and euthanasia in Maine.

### Challenges

The demand for vouchers is really high, and funding for the program runs out before the end of each year. Sue feels that while the real need for access to low-cost spay/neuter services is very great, they may need to be more restrictive with the vouchers or find more funding sources.

Susan and Sharon are trying to address this issue by seeking more funding for the program. They are working to get a diversion of a portion of the pet food distribution fee that is currently going into the

state's general fund. Additionally, they are working with private groups to raise money for the program.

## Critical Factors

Sue Hall recommends cites the following factors in creating a successful state-supported program:

- Get vets on your side early in the game. They are key supporters both in getting legislation for a program like this, and for implementing the program when it's adopted by the legislature.
- You will be more successful if you are able to get your grassroots allies to show up at the legislature at key times. Don't ask them to show up all the time, just when they are most needed. Send the coalition members short, specific emails that tell them exactly what they need to do. Make it easy for your grassroots groups to participate and stay involved. Send the groups thank you emails when appropriate.
- Even beyond email messages, Sue Hall recommends that you call people personally to get them to show up at hearings. "Get commitments, and ask these individuals to call you if they will be unable to make the hearing so that you can fill their seat with someone else. This way they know how important it is for them to show up when they say they will."

## Thinking Outside the Box

Help Fix ME is a terrific example of a program that exists because an "ordinary" citizen saw a need and found a solution that was already working well for the same problem in another area.

## Some Words of Wisdom

- Look toward other similar programs in other states, such as New Hampshire, New Jersey, and Maine, and learn what you can from their efforts. Delaware also has a new program that looks very promising.
- Sue says that getting the program off the ground was not challenging. What is hard is securing funding for the program. She says that this is an ongoing battle.
- You need to build a broad coalition throughout the state before you present to your state legislature. Build a coalition among animal shelters; feral groups; breed groups; vets; animal control officers. Your goal is to make presentations to the state legislature in legislature rooms that are overflowing with your supporters!
- In the early stages building your state-wide coalition, Sue recommends that you have in-person meetings with groups that you want to join the coalition, rather than try to get people's commitment through email. It is important to make face-to-face connections. She believes this personal connection will give you greater success in securing firm commitments and allegiance to the coalition.
- Encourage the various animal welfare groups to work together.
- Sue knows of other similar programs across the country but she notes one difference between what Spay Maine has done and what others have done: Some other programs tried to get funding before they set up their programs and figured out all the details. Sue says that it is better to have your program clearly conceptualized and configured and then move to gather funding.
- Sue says that it is necessary to have a group of dedicated people follow through the initiative from the formation of the program to its implementation.
- Each state will have its own funding sources—you need to figure out what works for your state.
- Make sure that the state funding you secure is dedicated to your program and in writing.
- Another idea for funding—put in a fee assessed when each animal receives a rabies shot. Sue tried to get this in place for Maine but the vets fought the idea. Delaware was able to pass

legislation for this rabies surcharge by working with the veterinary community and legislating a tax credit for spays and neuters done under their new program.

- Above all, Sue says, GO FOR IT! Try not to be afraid of the challenges that may be involved in building the coalition and creating the spay/neuter program. However, she also recommends that you don't rush into this kind of project. Progress gradually. Initially the effort will look overwhelming, but if you plan your approach systematically and proceed one step at a time, you will be less overwhelmed.

## Your Next Step

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.

## Help Fix ME: Thumbnail Sketch

Spay Maine

Susan Hall and Sharon Secovich, Founders

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The organization comprises 20-25 animal welfare groups, including shelters, rescues, animal control departments, and other animal-welfare organizations.

Spay Maine sponsored the legislation that created Help Fix ME, a state-funded and operated voucher program for low-cost spay-neuter services.



### Staff

Spay Maine has no paid staff. Two volunteers monitor the program and work to secure funding.

### Operating Budget

Any costs incurred in Spay Maine's work are paid out-of-pocket by its members.

### Business Type

Nonprofit organization