



Richmond SPCA: Spay/Neuter Campaign



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Addressing pet overpopulation on all fronts



Since pet overpopulation is the most significant factor leading to euthanasia of healthy homeless animals, the Richmond SPCA included aggressive spay/neuter programs in their 1999 Strategic Plan to create a humane community.

In 2003, having constructed an in-house spay/neuter clinic, the organization targeted those populations most at risk for contributing to shelter intake, researched the factors keeping those populations from being altered, and pledged to perform a minimum of 9,000 surgeries a year for a minimum of three years, nearly half of them for free.

In fiscal year 2006, the Richmond SPCA altered over 11,000 animals and CEO Robin Starr announced that no healthy homeless animal had died in Richmond that year.

Stats

In the 2006 fiscal year:

11,017 surgeries were performed

6,138 cats

4,879 dogs

4,880 performed for free for qualified owners and feral cat caregivers

3,873 performed at low cost

2,264 performed on shelter animals

How Cool is That?

We're impressed with the way the Richmond SPCA targeted its program to specific populations identified as directly responsible for shelter intake. We're also impressed with the creative communications plan that brought the targeted populations in the door.

Adopt or Adapt

Implementing a low- or no-cost spay/neuter program is a major undertaking, but reducing pet overpopulation is probably the most important you can do to end the killing of healthy homeless animals and extensive resources are identified in this profile to help you get started.

Spay/Neuter Campaign: The Whole Story

Before they could end the killing of healthy homeless cats and dogs in the city, Richmond SPCA leaders had to find humane ways to manage the constant flow of animals coming into shelters. Getting at the source of the problem by dramatically reducing the city's homeless pet population through aggressive spay/neuter was an essential component of the organization's 1999 Strategic Plan.

An in-house clinic, providing low- and no-cost, high quality surgeries to the public was opened in 2003 and a campaign was launched to perform 9,000 surgeries a year for three years. In the organization's 2006 fiscal year, veterinarians performed 11,017 surgeries. In 2007, The Richmond SPCA renewed its spay/neuter campaign for another three years with an annual goal of at least 11,000 surgeries.



According to Richmond SPCA CEO Robin Starr, aggressive, targeted spay/neuter was the most important factor in ending the killing of healthy homeless animals in Richmond by 2006.

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How the Program Works

The Richmond SPCA Spay/Neuter Clinic offers free surgeries to residents living in the city and surrounding counties who show proof that they are receiving government assistance or have an annual household income of less than \$30,000. Free surgeries are also offered to full time college students not living at home, owners of pit bulls and strong pit bull mixes and feral cat caregivers. Free rabies vaccinations are included. Free transportation is provided to those who have no other way of getting their animals to the clinic.

Surgeries are available to all residents without qualification at the following low fees:

- cat neuter \$20
- cat spay \$30
- dog neuter \$40
- dog spay \$50
- rabies vaccination \$8

Additional vaccinations are available at modest fees on the day of surgery only.

Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

An in-house clinic.

Before the opening of the Robins-Starr Humane Center in 2003, the Richmond SPCA's public spay/neuter effort was limited to altering all shelter animals before adoption and vouchers offered to owners and caregivers enabling them to receive low-cost surgeries at participating private clinics. According to Starr, the board recognized the need for much more effective and aggressive programs and included plans for an in-house clinic in the \$10 million capital campaign to create a new facility. Starr acknowledges that a spay/neuter program as extensive as the one they now operate would be virtually impossible without an in-house clinic serving both shelter animals and the public at large.

Timeline

From 1999, when the Strategic Plan was adopted, it took three years to get the spay/neuter clinic built and staffed and the program launched. It took three more years to reach the point where no healthy homeless animals died in the city.

Step by Step

Here are the steps the Richmond SPCA took to develop their spay/neuter programs.

1. Research, research, research.

Before launching the 2003 spay/neuter campaign pledging to perform 9,000 surgeries a year for three years, Richmond SPCA staff members did extensive research to determine which animals in the city were most at risk for contributing to the pet overpopulation problem.

Using their own data and data collected from Richmond Animal Care & Control, they traced the majority of the problem to unaltered dogs running at large in low income neighborhoods and free-roaming cats. They also identified full-time college students living on their own as a source of unaltered animals as well as owners of pit bulls and pit bull mixes. The information gathered enabled them to target their programs to those animals most likely to reproduce unchecked.

2. They determined how many animals they would have to alter to reach equilibrium.

Since the Richmond SPCA goal was to eliminate the need to kill healthy homeless animals, they set out to create equilibrium between the number of animals needing homes across the city and the number of homes available.

A widely circulated theory holds that, just as major diseases like smallpox and polio were brought under control when 70% of the population was vaccinated against them, equilibrium will be achieved when 70% of the animals in a given geographical area are altered. Using that theory and applying animal population figures gathered from the Virginia Veterinary Medical Association, as well as research gathered about other clinics in the city doing spay/neuter surgeries, the Richmond SPCA staff calculated that they would have to perform a minimum of 9,000 surgeries per year for a minimum of three years. That became the goal of the first phase of the program. At the end of that campaign, the Richmond SPCA was able to announce that no healthy homeless animal had died in the city.

3. They researched best practices and developed the infrastructure to maximize their effectiveness.

According to Richmond SPCA Director of Veterinary Medicine, Dr. Angela Ivey, Humane Alliance provided much of the direction for equipping the clinic and establishing protocols and procedures for everything from making appointments to discharging patients. While not everything applied, Dr. Ivey said, the information was very useful and could be easily adapted for the Richmond program. To learn more about the Humane Alliance and the extensive on-line resources they provide, go to www.humanealliance.org.

4. They raised funds to support the program.

In 2003, when the three year spay/neuter initiative was developed, a funding campaign was launched to raise the \$1.2 million in operating funds needed to bring the plan to reality. According to Richmond SPCA Chief Operating Officer Tamsen Kingry, the intent was to raise the funds from a combination of foundations, major donors and other supporters; however a full-scale fundraising appeal to the organization's entire universe of donors was not required thanks to the strong positive response from foundations and major contributors.

5. They hired sufficient staff to meet the goal and a highly qualified veterinarian to head up the program.

Having calculated that they would have to perform an average of 50 surgeries per day, five days a week, the Richmond SPCA assembled the highly qualified staff to get the job done. The clinic is staffed, Monday through Friday, with 2 surgeons, 2 certified veterinary technicians, 2 assistants, 1 person monitoring recovery, 1 person cleaning packs, 1 person processing paperwork, and 1 floater who assists with recovery and carries patients from station to station.

Dr. Ivey was hired in November, 2004, just after the launch of the three-year plan, to perform surgeries, oversee the staff and make sure that targets were being met. A graduate of the Auburn School of Veterinary Medicine, Dr. Ivey brought to the job 20 years of experience in private practice, much of it running her own clinic. Recognized by her colleagues as an overachiever, Dr. Ivey operates the clinic just like a private practice. She emphasizes that there are no differences in the quality of supplies or equipment and no corners are cut.

According to Dr. Ivey, support staff, and particularly veterinary technicians, are key to a successful high volume clinic. "We offer 80% of the salaries they would get in private practice for half the hours," she explains, "but the best benefit is that this is a great place to work." According to Dr. Ivey, there has been virtually no turnover in key positions.

6. They made it easy to take advantage of the program.

Appointments for spay/neuter surgeries are made by phone. The Richmond SPCA maintains a dedicated spay/neuter helpline staffed Monday through Friday by full-time person with part-time back-up. Free transport is provided for those who qualify for free surgeries and have no other way of getting their animals to the clinic.

The helpline number is widely publicized. Information is readily available on the organization's user-friendly website. Potential clients can download medical consent forms and bring them with them the day of surgery or pick them up at the clinic either beforehand or the day of surgery. If someone other than the owner or caregiver is bringing the animal or the animal is being picked up through the clinic's free transport program, the forms are mailed. Those who do not qualify for free surgeries can pay with cash, money order, credit card or a Richmond SPCA gift card. Checks are not accepted. Instructions for trapping feral cats and caring for animals after their surgeries as well as vaccination recommendations are also on the website.

Cats are brought in between 7:30 and 8:30 am and dogs between 8:00 and 9:00 am. Clients are discharged in the late afternoon with detailed going home instructions. In the event of a post-operative emergency, the client can call the clinic during business hours. If an emergency occurs after hours, the client may take the animal to a private clinic; however clients sign a waiver agreeing that the Richmond SPCA may not be held liable for the charges. If necessary, the animal will be seen at the clinic the next day.

7. They developed an aggressive communications plan.

The Richmond SPCA's research indicated that cost was the major factor keeping the targeted populations from having their animals altered. As a result, they built their communications plan around one message – Free Spay/Neuter.

"We didn't focus on health benefits or pet overpopulation," Kingry explained. "While these issues are very important and we used them when talking to donors, we recognized that they were not motivators for our target audience. We knew that letting them know it was free would bring them in the door."

The comprehensive communications plan included billboards (on donated space in target neighborhoods), bus ads, cable and network television spots, and print ads. The organization also incorporated guerilla marketing techniques, such as posters distributed by staff members and volunteers to Laundromats, markets, and other locations as well as door hangers placed in pre-identified neighborhoods. A notice went out to area organizations announcing the free program and offering to send speakers to explain it.

Messages were short and catchy and often used humor. Starr tells the story of some unexpected but very welcome publicity that came when a poster was inadvertently placed close to an area church. "The minister called in the television stations and held up the poster, talking at length about how outraged he was," Starr recalls. "We could never have paid for that kind of visibility."

According to Kingry, the communications plan increased call volume regarding spay/neuter by 300% necessitating the hiring of an additional person to answer the calls. There is no longer a need for a marketing campaign. Word of mouth keeps the program overbooked.

Results

In the 2006 fiscal year, the Richmond SPCA veterinary staff altered 11,017 animals (6,138 cats and 4,879 dogs). Of those surgeries:

- 4,880 were done for free for qualified pet owners and caregivers. This figure includes 907 feral cat surgeries.
- 3,873 were performed at low cost.
- 2,264 were performed on shelter animals.

According to Dr. Ivey, the Richmond SPCA has seen a noticeable shortening of the city's kitten season. "We used to start seeing volumes of kittens in March and April," she said. "Now that's been pushed back to mid or late June, a direct result of our free cat surgeries."

Critical Factors

Focusing on the mission

According to Dr. Ivey, the Richmond SPCA clinic focuses on spay/neuter and rabies vaccinations. While other basic treatments, such as parasite control and additional vaccinations, are available at deeply discounted rates on the day of surgery only, the clinic stays away from becoming a full-service veterinary clinic. "This is a one-time visit," Dr. Ivey explains. "We tell clients about conditions we observe that might need further treatment and direct them to private clinics, but we are never going to see these animals again unless they come into the shelter – and we work hard to make sure that doesn't happen."

Thinking Outside the Box

Because cats, and particularly feral cats, were identified as a major source of shelter intake, the Richmond SPCA developed proactive programs to deal with these populations. Traps are available for a nominal rental fee. Surgeries for feral cats are always free and, in addition to free rabies vaccinations, feral cats receive free treatment for internal and external parasites. Although feral cats may be scheduled at any time, two Mondays every month are designated feral cat days. In addition, to get ahead of the breeding season, surgeries are free for all cats, regardless of the income of the owner or caregiver, if they are scheduled for surgery in the months of January, February or March.

Spay Your Momma

According to Dr. Ivey, too many people allow their cats and dogs to have litters year after year, assuming that the shelter will just take in whatever they don't want to keep. In order to eliminate that source of pet overpopulation, the Richmond SPCA accepts puppies and kittens only if the owner or caregiver agrees to bring the momma in for surgery. In addition, Richmond SPCA staff members call those placing ads in the paper for free kittens or puppies offering to spay the mother for free.

How They Feel About What They Did

Everyone at the Richmond SPCA speaks of the spay/neuter program with pride. "Adoptions are wonderful," Dr. Ivey remarks, "but they are reactive. This is proactive."

Some Words of Wisdom

Be Prepared For

- The challenge of figuring no-shows.

Richmond SPCA staff members call all clients to remind them the night before. Even so, they have about a 25% no-show rate. To avoid downtime, the clinic staff overbooks by that number. Having observed that the no-show problem was worse on Saturdays, they decided to open the clinic only on weekdays. According to Dr. Ivey, because feral trapping is such a challenge, 70 – 80 cats are usually scheduled for feral cat says, but often just 40 surgeries are performed.

- The need for more recovery cages that you might think.

Dr. Ivey found that her staff was limited in the number of surgeries they could perform by the number of recovery cages available. She solved the problem by purchasing mobile cages to accommodate the overflow.

- The challenge of finding a veterinarian interested in taking responsibility for the clinic.

Dr. Ivey cautions that there is a shortage of veterinarians nationwide and an even greater shortage of veterinarians interested in specializing in spay/neuter. She acknowledges that she originally came to the Richmond SPCA seeking a part time job that would let her keep her hand in after retirement. "I didn't own the mission at first," she recalls, "but I definitely do now." Dr. Ivey says she was initially attracted by the fact that there would be no after-hours emergencies and the fact that she would be dividing her time between spay/neuter surgeries and caring for shelter animals. "I don't take this home at the end of the day," she adds.

- Nay-sayers

Dr. Ivey has no patience with those who say something can't be done. She has a favorite quote: "He who says it cannot be done should never interrupt the person who is doing it." She also recommends countering nay-sayers with action rather than words. "Don't let anyone tell you you can't do it," she says. "Prove them wrong by your success."

Next Steps

In 2007, the Richmond SPCA launched a second three-year campaign with an annual goal of at least 11,000 surgeries. Kingry acknowledges that obtaining funding will be more challenging the second time around. Ongoing fund-raising plans are in development.

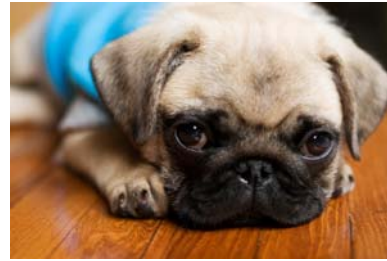
According to Kingry, the Richmond SPCA is researching computer software that will enable them to add an option for on-line surgery registration. Kingry notes that, being in a university town, many of their clients are students who are accustomed to communicating electronically.

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® National Outreach with your feedback.

Richmond SPCA: Thumbnail Sketch

Richmond SPCA
 Robin Starr: CEO
 2519 Hermitage Road
 Richmond, VA 23220
www.richmondspca.org



The Richmond SPCA is a No Kill humane society dedicated to the principle that every life is precious. Since 1999, the organization has worked to make Richmond one of the safest cities in the United States for homeless animals. In addition to adopting a new and progressive operating model that includes aggressive rehabilitation, adoption, spay/neuter, pet retention, and humane education programs, the Richmond SPCA developed a formal cooperative arrangement with the City of Richmond to create an environment in which all animals ending up in shelters would have a much stronger chance for survival. As a result, nearly 5,000 fewer homeless animals lost their lives citywide (Richmond SPCA and Richmond Animal Care & Control combined) in 2006 than in 1999 (a 77% reduction) and the live release rate in Richmond climbed from 46% to 76%.

The Richmond SPCA provides training and consultation as a partner in ASPCA® Mission: Orange™, a national initiative to train and support other cities across the country interested in becoming humane communities.

Stats

From Oct. 1, 2005 to Sept. 30, 2006, the Richmond SPCA:

- Saved the lives of 4,325 animals through adoption, re-homing and behavioral assistance programs.
- Rehabilitated approximately 2,300 sick and injured pets
- Achieved a citywide save rate of 76%, giving Richmond one of the lowest euthanasia rates in the country
- Spayed or neutered 11,017 animals in their on-site clinic
- Delivered 8,512 hours of humane education to area school children and 3,060 hours of adult education

Staff

43 full time. 43 part time
 175 active volunteers

Operating Budget

\$3.3million

Business Type

501(c) (3) nonprofit