



MADDIE'S SPAY-NEUTER PROJECT IN NEVADA

Project Overview and Outcome Analysis

- 6 July, 2011 -

Summary

Maddie's Spay-Neuter Project in Nevada operated from February 2008 – December 2009 in six program counties (Washoe, Carson, Lyon, Douglas, Churchill, Elko) across northern Nevada. Project collaborators included 32 private practice veterinary hospitals, one spay-neuter clinic, and 10 municipal and rescue animal sheltering organizations. Over the course of the project, 4,334 surgeries were subsidized, most in Washoe County, and most after program eligibility criteria were expanded in October 2008 to include Medicaid and food stamps recipients. In 2009, Maddie's Funded surgeries accounted for approximately 20% of all funded spay-neuter surgeries in the program area. In comparison to average baseline (2006 and 2007) levels, euthanasias of healthy and treatable animals declined by nearly 60% by the end of the program period, and euthanasias of all animals declined by approximately 50%. Washoe County was the primary driver of this overall trend, but it also tended to be mirrored in the smaller counties, though relative decreases were much smaller. Examination of data suggested that a > 10 % increase in adoptions, a small decrease in intakes, and a modest increase in Washoe County shelter holding capacity collectively accounted for the decline in euthanasias. In terms of the underlying causality of these changes, we believe that Maddie's funded surgeries had a direct and substantive impact by allowing for small reductions in shelter intake during a period during which Nevada was experiencing national-highs in foreclosure and unemployment rates. Additionally, the Maddie's program, in conjunction with other programs, was felt to have increased public awareness of the shelter adoption option and the urgency of the no-kill mission. It should also be noted that the full impacts of the program may not occur within the time period reported herein, but will manifest after sufficient demographic time lags. Overall, the program was successful in advancing its explicit goals, and functioned effectively on an inter-organizational level. Lessons learned include the need to experiment with optimizing client eligibility criteria, and the need for proactive, ongoing communication between program administrators, participating veterinary hospitals, and collaborating shelters.

Program Overview

Maddie's Spay / Neuter (S/N) Project in Nevada operated from Feb 2008 – December 2009 in six counties (Washoe, Carson, Lyon, Churchill, Douglas, and Elko) that collectively represented over 90% of the population of northern Nevada. Veterinary Services were provided by 32 private practice veterinary hospitals and one low-cost clinic, most of which remained with the program throughout its duration. Six animal control shelters and four no-kill shelters provided data to the project (one of these, Nevada Humane Society, began the program as a traditional shelter and transitioned to no-kill status during the project). Demand for program services grew steadily throughout the first year, and remained high throughout the second year. A total of 4334 surgeries were subsidized by the program, comprising approximately 13% of all spay / neuter (S/N) surgeries performed in the program area in 2008-2009 (20% in 2009).

In October 2008, Maddie's Fund approved broadening the original client qualifying criterion (Medicaid beneficiary) to include beneficiaries of the Medicare or the NV food stamps program. Demand for program services increased substantially in the immediate aftermath of this change.

Two additional related projects were conducted in conjunction with Maddie's Spay-Neuter Project in Nevada. The first was completion of a public opinion survey (conducted by the University of Nevada's Center for Research Design and Analysis) investigating attitudes about veterinary care, spaying and neutering, animal shelters, and Maddie's Fund. The second project was the "Pets-Love-Vets" campaign, and follow-up evaluation with area veterinarians. Results of these projects have been provided to Maddie's Fund in the form of previously submitted sub-project reports, and released to the public and to program partners.

It is useful to note that Maddie's S/N Project in Nevada was operational during a period of worsening economic conditions, particularly in Nevada, which experienced foreclosure and unemployment rates that significantly exceeded national averages. Although not quantified, it seems likely that this downturn was responsible for many pet surrenders that might not otherwise have occurred. This likelihood provides sociological context that may be useful in interpreting the results of this project.

With regard to Maddie's S/N Project in Nevada, 2006 and 2007 are defined as baseline years (prior to implementation of the program), 2008 is the initial (partial) program year, and 2009 is the final program year.

Financials

Whole-project financials are summarized in an appended spreadsheet (Appendix 1). Total administrative costs were \$57,348.22, approximately \$1,330 less than the originally budgeted amount. The bulk of this funding was used to provide salary support for a program administrator, whose duties included liaison with service providers, processing surgery reimbursements, and gathering required reporting from program collaborators.

Smaller amounts were devoted to accounting services, publicity, printing, and web site development and maintenance. Total costs for surgeries was \$365,440, which significantly exceeded the originally budgeted projection due to high demand for program services in 2009. Supplementary funding was provided on three occasions by Maddie's Fund to cover over-budget costs for spay-neuter subsidies in 2009.

Publicity

Publicity efforts during 2008 occurred primarily in conjunction with two milestones: 1) the launch of the program in February - March, and 2) the broadening of client eligibility criteria in October - November. Additional efforts were made to publicize the key findings of the Maddie's-funded public opinion survey in September. Our specific publicity program in 2008 included the following elements:

- Creation of a dedicated web site, www.maddieinnevada.org, which was linked to a number of other animal shelter and animal welfare sites around the program area (February)
- A flyer distribution campaign. In addition to posting flyers at dozens of laundromats, food banks, thrift stores, pet stores, grocery stores, and benefits administrative offices around the greater Reno area, flyers were also provided to animal control shelters and officers in each of the outlying program counties. Flyers were periodically updated and re-distributed.
- Distribution of press releases to publicize:
 - Program launch (March)
 - Public opinion survey findings (September)
 - Expansion of program eligibility criteria (October)These releases generated several interviews and articles (see below) and were also picked up by local pet – blogging outlets.
- Print articles and advertisements, including:
 - Two ads in the Pet Section of the Reno Gazette-Journal (RGJ) (March)
 - Article in RGJ Neighbors section (April)
 - Articles in Lahonton Valley News and the Elko Daily Press (April)
 - RGJ Neighbors section front page (September)
 - Four paid ads in RGJ (October and November)
 - Four articles in “Mostly Dogs”, an RGJ animal blog (throughout 2008)
 - “PetFolio” magazine (April/May, and December/January)
- On-air interviews or news stories related to the program, including:
 - News stories on NBC and ABC Reno affiliates regarding program launch (March)
 - “Face the State” interview with Bill Brown, KTVN Reno CBS affiliate (April)
 - Coverage on KENV TV in Elko (April)
 - KOH radio (August and September)
 - News stories on NBC, CBS, and ABC Reno affiliates regarding expansion of program eligibility criteria (Oct / Nov)

- Program mentions at least 5 times on KTVN (CBS) Pet of the Week program on Tuesday mornings

In addition to these active marketing efforts, we developed and maintained an ongoing low-cost effort to publicize the program using passive marketing approaches. Elements of this program in 2008 included:

- Frequent updates of the program website
- Operation of pet information hotlines operated by the SPCA of Northern Nevada and the Nevada Humane Society
- Periodic re-distribution of updated program flyers to a variety of locations where they were likely to be seen by potential clients (animal control shelters, animal control officers, laundromats, welfare offices, thrift stores, etc.).

By the beginning of 2009, program utilization consistently exceeded our targets, and therefore publicity efforts during 2009 were more modest. They involved:

- Periodically updating the program web site
- Periodically updating and re-distributing flyers within Washoe and Carson Counties
- Encouraging our points of contact in outlying program counties to re-distribute flyers
- Ensuring that telephone help lines operated by the SPCA of Northern Nevada and the Nevada Humane Society properly disseminated program information
- Distributing program information at all SPCA of Northern Nevada events
- Occasional print advertisements in Petfolio Magazine
- A press release issued by SPCA of Northern Nevada in March 2009 to feature renewal of program funding for year 2, which was reproduced in the Reno Gazette-Journal

The central role of Maddie's Fund in supporting the S/N project was acknowledged by Tom Jacobs (Executive Director, SPCA of Northern Nevada) during the following television appearances / interviews:

- Meet the State with Bill Brown (Ch 2, CBS, 4 airings in April)
- Pet of the Week segment (Ch 2, CBS, April)

Maddie's Fund was also prominently acknowledged in the SPCA of Northern Nevada print newsletter, Spring 2009, with a circulation of ~ 4,000 copies

Most of the 2009 publicity efforts occurred during the early part of the year, and are detailed more fully in the 2009 Semi-Annual Report. An exception to this general pattern is that in November, we informed all shelter partners that the program would be ending soon, and a final flyer distribution effort was subsequently undertaken.

Finally, the provisional results of the program were highlighted in the SPCA of NN telethon (March 13, 2011), along with acknowledgement of Maddie's Fund.

All publicity activities described above were compliant with the Maddie's Recognition Plan provided by Maddie's Fund. Most notably, appropriate recognition text was reproduced on:

- SPCA of Northern Nevada website (www.spcanevada.org)
- Maddie's S/N Project in Nevada website (www.maddieinnevada.org)
- Print flyers (~ 2000, distributed throughout program area)

Although difficult to quantify directly, we estimate that more than 2/3 of the individuals that utilized the program in 2009 learned of the service through one of the low-cost publicity mechanisms (website, telephone helpline, or flyers). The only drawback of these low-cost marketing strategies is that a period of several months is required for knowledge of the service to diffuse throughout communities and become well established.

Upon acceptance of this final report and analysis by Maddie's Fund, the SPCA will issue a final press release highlighting the positive impacts of the program and acknowledging Maddie's Fund's role in funding the program.

Spay-Neuter Statistics

Detailed S/N activity and expenditures are detailed in Appendices 2-4. Because regular monthly reporting by veterinarians did not begin until March 2008 (or later in some cases), data corrections were applied to reported non-Maddie's surgeries for 2008 to create an annual equivalent for comparative purposes, as specified in Appendix 3.

Appendix 5 summarizes all S/N surgeries in the program area, both during the program years and for the average of the two baseline years (2006 – 2007). Examination of this table and Figure 1 suggest that private client surgeries rose from the baseline period to 2008. However, private client surgeries did decline between 2008 and 2009 (particularly cat surgeries), a period when economic conditions were quickly deteriorating, and during which reporting (under the Maddie's program requirements) was relatively standardized. During this same period, cat procedures declined more than dog procedures, another intuitively realistic finding.

A notable pattern that can be discerned in Figure 1 is the substantial increase in surgeries (especially cat surgeries) in 2008 that were subsidized by programs other than the Maddie's project. This jump coincides with the substantially increased activity of the Nevada Humane Society's public clinic. Additionally, worsening economic conditions created a greater sense of urgency for S/N assistance, and several smaller programs were either created or expanded in response to this perceived need.

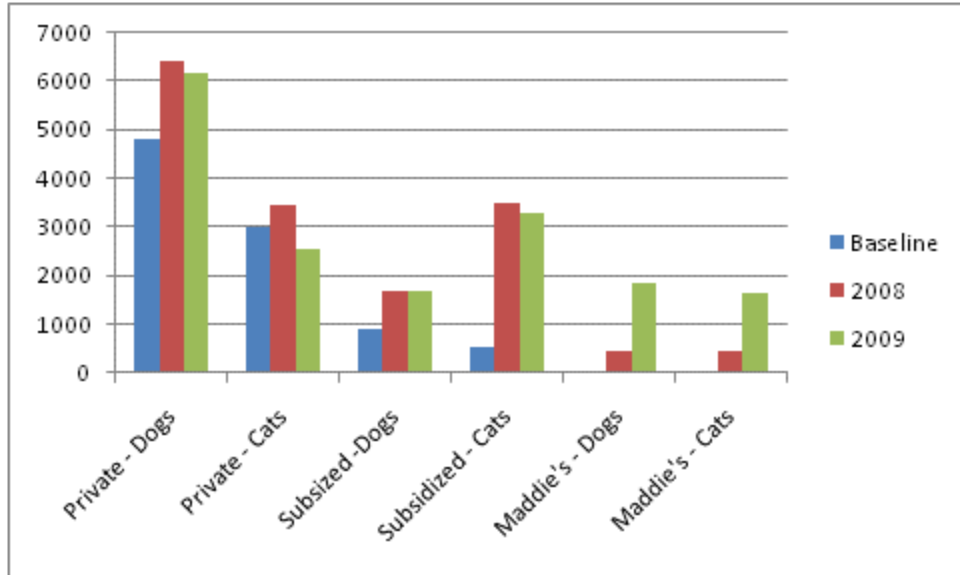


Figure 1. Summary of S/N activity during baseline and project periods. "Subsidized" surgeries exclude Maddie's - funded surgeries.

A net increase of 1207 overall S/N surgeries between 2008 and 2009 (see Appendix 5) was entirely attributable to the Maddie's program, since both private surgeries and other subsidized surgeries declined modestly over this same period. Overall, in 2009, subsidized surgeries (Maddie's plus other programs) comprised as much as 49% of all S/N surgeries in the program area. Because not all practicing veterinarians in the program area were participants in the data collection effort, the true proportion was somewhat lower, but we have estimated that participating veterinarians provided approximately 75% of the private S/N surgeries within the program area.

Follow-up Veterinarian Survey

Between November 2009 and January 2010, the program administrator systematically solicited feedback from veterinary hospitals participating in the Maddie's program about their experiences as service providers. The large majority expressed strong satisfaction with, and in many cases gratitude for, the program. Complaints of any sort were expressed by only 5 of 20 clinics from which responses were received, and these were in all cases related to relatively minor procedural matters.

Shelter Statistics

Deaths of healthy and treatable shelter dogs and cats, and of all shelter dogs and cats, declined substantially during the program period, as shown in Figures 2 – 5 and detailed in Appendix 6. Washoe County was the primary driver of this overall trend, which also tended to occur (though less pronouncedly) in other program counties. Euthanasias of healthy and treatable animals declined from 6,314 to 1,537 (~75%), during the reporting period, and total euthanasias declined from 8,357 to 3,445 (~60%). If baseline years (2006 – 2007) are averaged, these declines were about 60% and 50%, respectively.

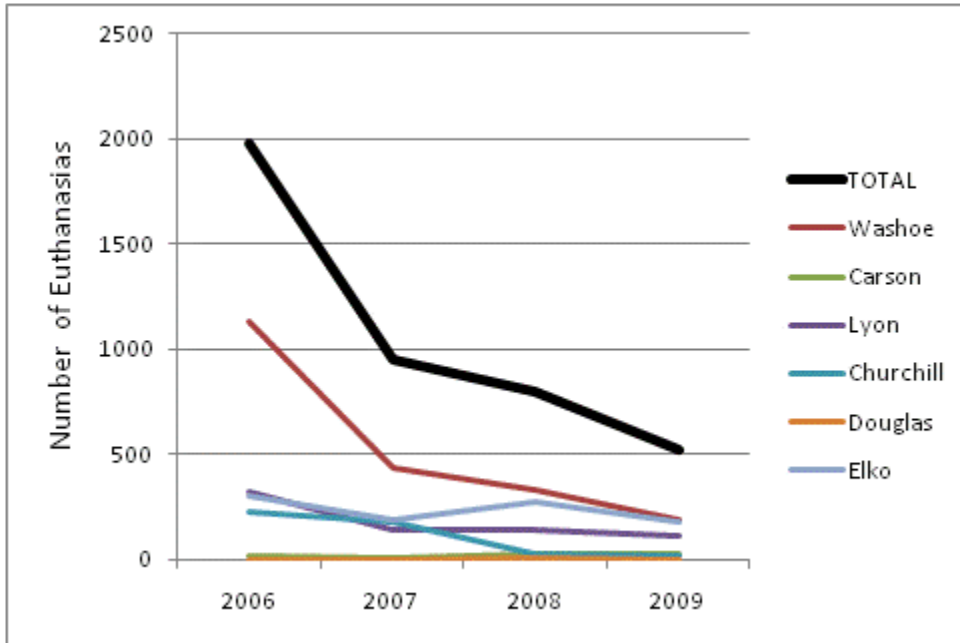


Figure 2. Deaths of healthy and treatable dogs in program counties, 2006 – 2009.

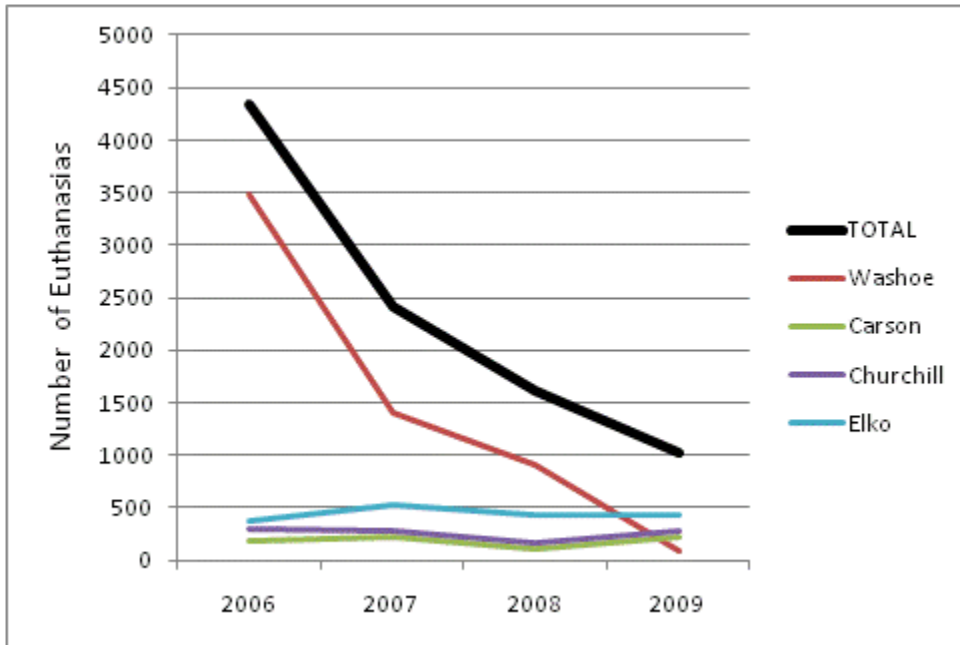


Figure 3. Deaths of healthy and treatable cats in program counties, 2006 – 2009.

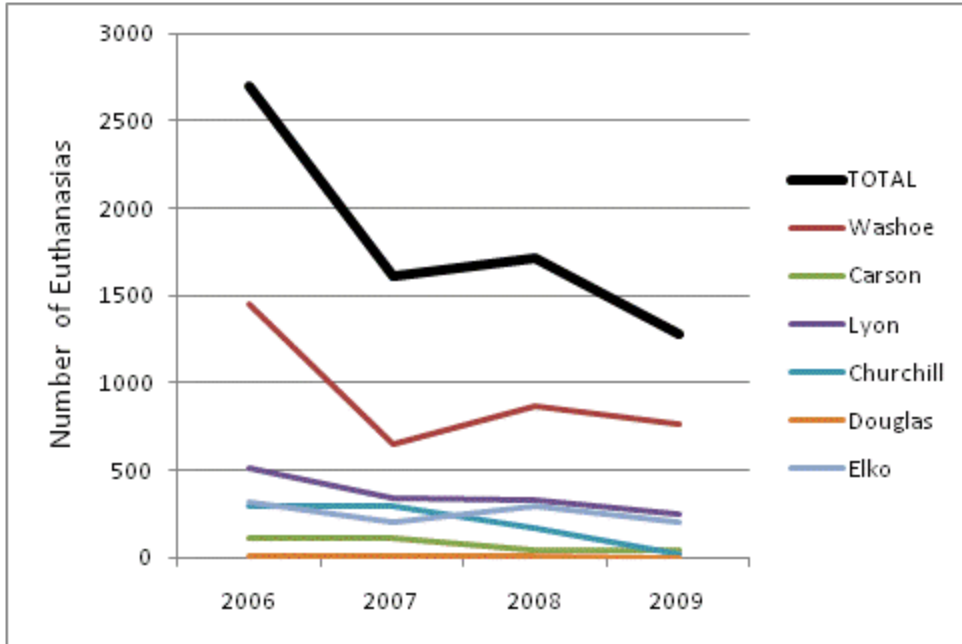


Figure 4. Deaths of all dogs in program counties, 2006 – 2009.

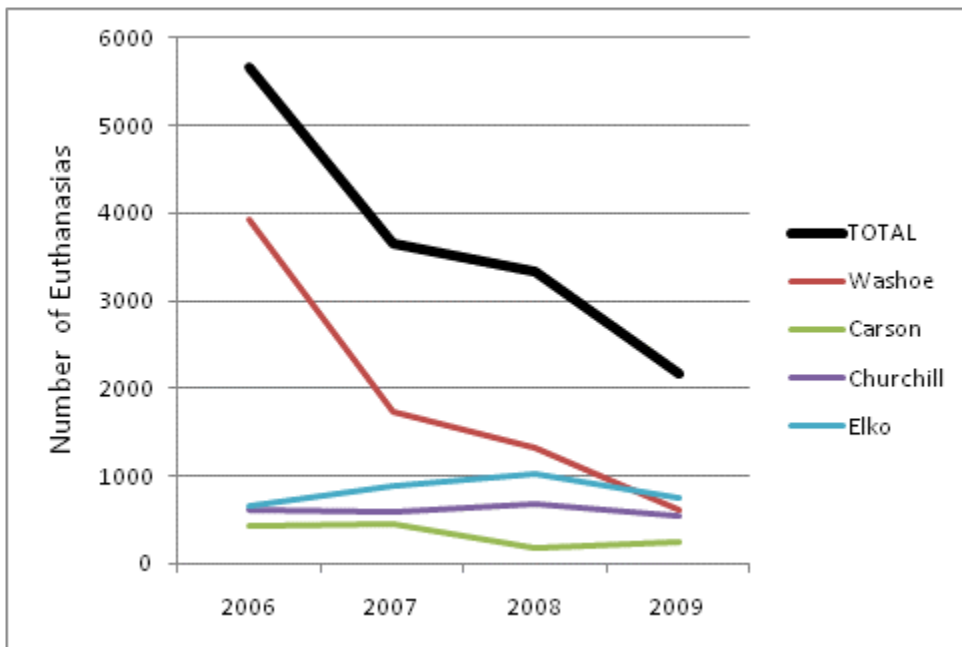


Figure 5. Deaths of all cats in program counties, 2006 – 2009.

Assigning or inferring causality for these trends with a high degree of assurance is problematic, given the number of uncontrolled factors at play. These may have included (but were not limited to) human population growth, economic conditions, variations in the accuracy of data reporting, and substantial changes in the operating model and priorities of Washoe County Regional Animal Services (WCRAS; formerly Reno Animal Services) and the Nevada Humane Society (NHS) in Washoe County. The remainder of

this section will provide additional context and information that may aid in interpreting causality, but it should be stressed that regardless of interpretational complexity, a substantial reduction in shelter deaths occurred over the Maddie’s program period, particularly in Washoe County.

Ultimately, shelter deaths are a function of the interplay among animal intake rates, adoption rates, reclamation rates, and temporal changes in the holding capacity of the shelter system. As shown in Figures 6 – 7, dog and cat intake rates during the 2006 – 2009 period were relatively stable in all program counties, though by 2009 intake rates in Washoe County were modestly lower than during the baseline period high point (i.e. 2007) (see also Appendix 6).

It appears therefore that a small reduction in animal intakes may have contributed to lowering the number of shelter deaths, but was insufficient to primarily account for it. It is notable that shelter intakes did not increase during the reporting period, given the trend towards increasing economic hardship during this same period. For instance, unsubstantiated reports from Las Vegas suggest that animal surrenders to the local shelter system increased substantially during the same time frame.

The number of animals reclaimed by owners at municipal shelters during the reporting period appeared to have changed very little (not shown graphically, but see Appendix 6), and is thereby discounted as a substantial factor in decreasing shelter deaths.

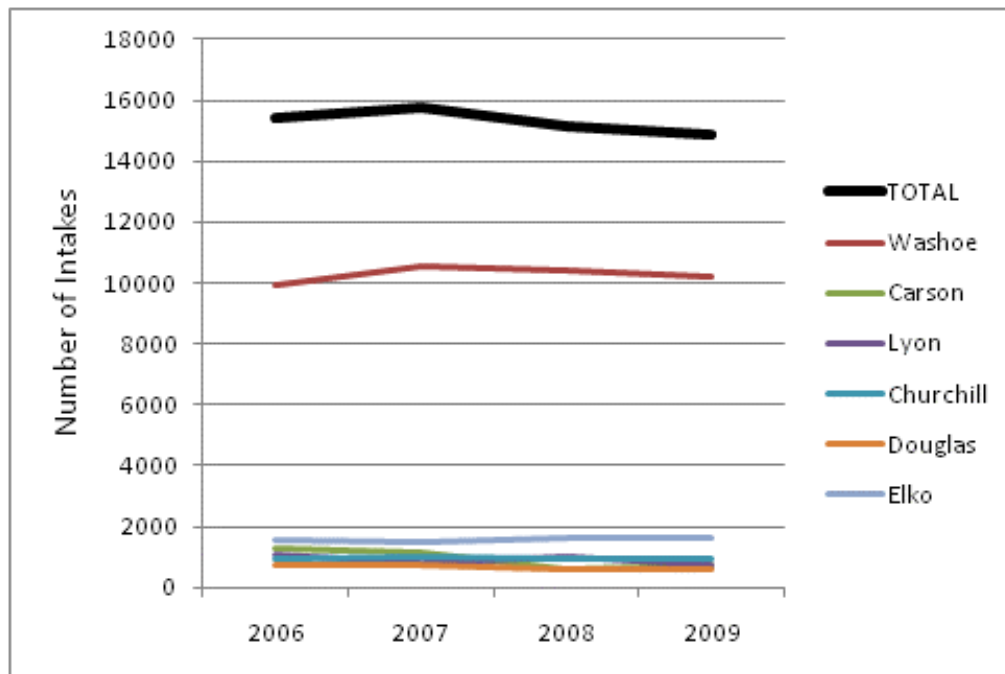


Figure 6. Total dog intakes, by county, for participating animal shelters.

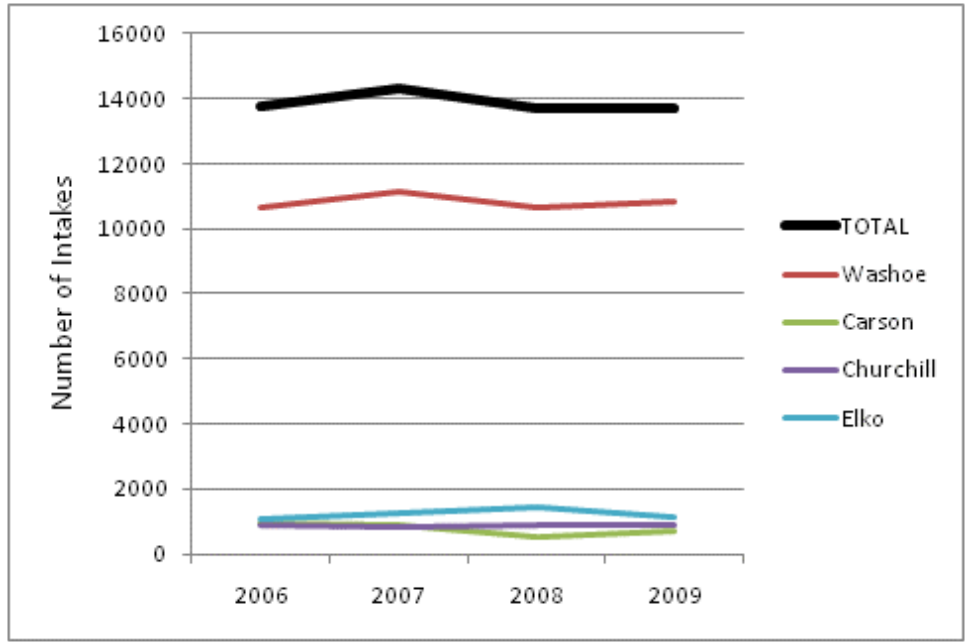


Figure 7. Total cat intakes, by county, for participating animal shelters.

Adoption rates increased substantially over the reporting period in Washoe County (Figures 8 – 9 and Appendix 6), though they remained fairly steady in other program counties. Numerically, increases in dog adoptions appear to account for most of the reduction in shelter deaths of dogs. Increases in cat adoptions, though substantial, accounted for a smaller proportion of the reduction in cat shelter deaths. This disparity was probably related to changes in the manner of handling and reporting on feral cats in the Washoe County municipal shelter system (see below).

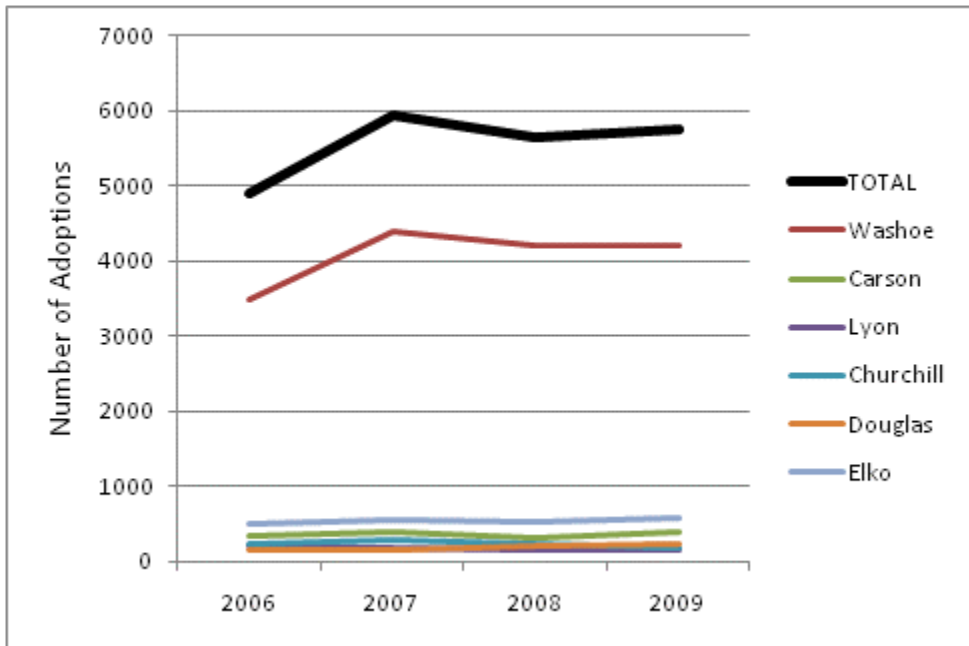


Figure 8. Total dog adoptions, by county, for participating animal shelters.

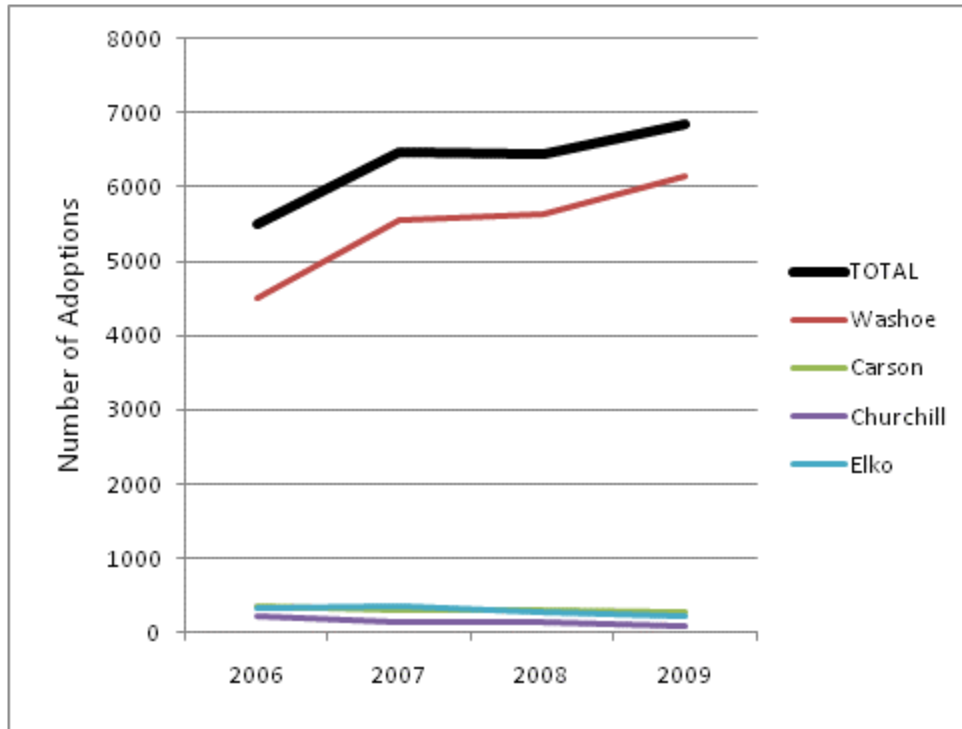


Figure 9. Total cat adoptions, by county, for participating animal shelters.

In addition to these basic shelter metrics, other factors may be relevant in interpreting data and trends. Chief among these was a major restructuring of the animal control function with Washoe County, with the ultimate outcome being a organizational partnership between Washoe County Regional Animal Services (WCRAS) and the Nevada Humane Society (NHS) beginning in 2006. This transition ultimately involved several major management and policy changes before both organizations began to stabilize under their current management teams and operational doctrines. Particularly in 2006, neither organization was functioning optimally, and data collected during this baseline year may have been either anomalous or inaccurate. We regard 2007, therefore, as a more reliable and meaningful baseline year.

Other factors that may be relevant in data interpretation include the following:

- Prior to 2007, the “no-kill” goal in Washoe County was promoted primarily by the SPCA of Northern Nevada. Beginning in 2007 with management changes at the WCRAS / NHS facility, the no-kill imperative became a universally accepted policy goal. This transition created a new systemic emphasis on live-saving that may have influenced the incidence of shelter deaths in multiple ways.
- Prior to 2007, significant numbers of feral or semi-feral cats were euthanized in Washoe County’s municipal shelter system. Although efforts were made to separate this cat demographic in data collection, it is likely that subsequent changes in feral cat policy influenced observed data trends.
- With the opening of the combined WCRAS / NHS shelter in 2006, overall shelter holding capacity in Washoe County increased substantially. This increase in

average shelter population size may have modestly influenced observed trends, though the timing and duration of the influence is difficult to determine

Our assessment of project shelter data is that a substantial and real decline in shelter deaths occurred over the course of the baseline - project period, particularly in Washoe County. Smaller though not insignificant declines in euthanasias tended to occur in other program counties as well. Taking the more applicable baseline year (2007) as a starting point and the final project year (2009) as an end point, there was a decline of ~ 35% in total euthanasias (5,274 to 3,445), and a decline of ~ 55% in the number of euthanasias of healthy and treatable pets (3,374 to 1,537). These declines were most obviously attributable to an increase in adoptions, with an “assist” from modestly decreased shelter intake numbers and an increase in average shelter population size. It is of note that this positive result could have easily been reversed had shelter intakes increased substantially over the program period, as many predicted could happen given the serious economic downturn (accompanied by some of the nation’s highest foreclosure rates) that was in progress.

It is not possible to strictly determine the impact of the Maddie’s S/N program in isolation from other ongoing factors, but we consider it highly likely that the subsidization of thousands of surgeries played an important role in directly controlling the rate of shelter intake. Additionally, the indirect influence of programs like Maddie’s S/N Project in Nevada is, in our estimation, substantial and multi-faceted. Such programs and initiatives bring positive attention to the animal welfare community, encourage pet owners to practice more responsible pet ownership, pique interest in adoption of shelter animals, attract more capable employees and managers to shelter operations, and positively influence the lifesaving dynamic in myriad ways.

Finally, it should be stressed that the full demographic impact of increased S/N rates may not become apparent for several years. Shelter data from Washoe County are currently being collected as part of the Maddie’s Shelter Database project, and incorporating data from 2010 and beyond into this analysis may capture effects that are subject to substantial time lags.

Lessons and Observations on the Operation of S/N Programs

Based on our own experiences with the program, coupled with feedback received from participating veterinary clinics, we would offer the following comments:

- It is important that a program administrator maintain regular, proactive contact with key office staff from participating veterinary clinics. Developing this relationship prevents many problems from occurring, and simplifies the process of finding solutions when problems do occur.
- Providing a financial incentive for baseline data and offering substantial reimbursements for surgeries greatly facilitates the building of a coalition of private-practice service providers.

- Requiring that veterinarians complete their full data report (including non-Maddie's surgeries) each month as a pre-requisite for receiving reimbursement payments is effective and generally well-accepted.
- Many veterinarian's office are less technologically advanced than we originally expected. Provisions must be made for more traditional methods of communication and data submission.
- We strongly encourage any future S/N programs to include Medicare and Food Stamp recipients within the target clientele base. Limiting program services to Medicaid recipients excludes a large proportion of truly needy people, at least in Nevada.
- As for marketing the program, we found that the most effective (and cost-effective) approaches were to:
 - Build a dedicated program website that is search-optimized and linked to other animal welfare sites
 - Have program-area shelters agree to actively disseminate program information
- There is clearly a place for some paid advertising in marketing efforts, particularly in the early stages of a program, but the more passive methods listed above appear to be quite effective as long as sufficient time is available for awareness of the program to build.
- The relative costs and benefits of short-term high-impact S/N programs, as opposed to more sustained but less intensive programs, deserves further attention and analysis

Acknowledgements

The SPCA of Northern Nevada would like to explicitly state in this report our great appreciation to Maddie's Fund for its support of animal welfare efforts in our community, and our best wishes for continued success in all your many worthwhile undertakings.