



The Pet Rescue Foundation

Shelter Management Issues

Mobile spay/neuter clinics

THE BEST TOOL FOR THE JOB?

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COST ANALYSIS OF MOBILE SURGERIES

THE BEST TOOL FOR THE JOB?

They're big and beautiful and everybody wants one; the super duper mobile spay/neuter clinic, fully loaded with anesthesia machine, generator, stainless steel cages, surgery light, air conditioner, awning and custom logo. Price tag for the vehicle: \$100,000.00. Add the medical equipment and a full complement of staff including doctor, veterinary technician, and driver, include gas and insurance, operate five days a week and you get an annual operating budget in the \$300,000 range. Is this the best way to neuter a cat?

One thing is certain. Everyone wants to radically increase the number of spay/neuter surgeries currently being performed, and to include feral cats, neighborhood cats and cats and dogs in under-served neighborhoods. But before you go out and buy a mobile clinic, consider some other options. An argument can be made that the alternatives are more effective, more fun and more productive in the long haul.

With your \$300,000.00 you could:

1. Underwrite private practitioners
2. Set up a vanpool
3. Establish an all-volunteer shuttle
4. Advertise, Advertise, Advertise
5. Create MASH units

1. Underwrite your local private practitioners. It's not a new idea, but if you want the most bang for your buck, this could be the way to go. You don't have to build a clinic or buy one. You don't have to recruit veterinarians which these days are as rare as gold. You don't have to hire additional staff, worry about maintenance and upkeep or try to find places to park. Best of all, by including private practitioners, you broaden the safety net

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of care for the community's cats and dogs, generate good will in the veterinary community, and bring this important segment of animal caregivers further under the animal welfare umbrella.

- One possible scenario: Consider starting with a program for cats only because for many communities, cats are the biggest problem. You can alter them easier than dogs (and thus in greater numbers), and they're cheaper to "fix". OK, forget the vouchers. To spend your \$300,000, offer all the local doctors in your community (try to get a clean sweep) \$30.00 for all cat surgeries, payable until the number of surgeries hits 10,000. (Or, break it down to \$20 for male cats, \$40 for females. Keep in mind that even with this assistance, the participating doctor is making a contribution out of his/her own pocket of anywhere from \$15 to \$50 per surgery). Give all the participating veterinarians a standard invoice for billing; pay within 30 days. Charge the public \$10.00.
- Considerations: You'll help some people who can afford to pay full price and who were planning to do the surgery anyway. But that's OK because in addition to doing the surgeries, the idea of this plan is to do a big public awareness/education campaign around the community-wide goal of 10,000 surgeries. And if they wish, the vets can put the squeeze on high rollers for an added donation to the cause.
- Publicity: Put together a major publicity campaign that will cost nothing out of pocket. Since this is a community-wide effort that includes all segments of the animal care-giving community, enlist the assistance of the mayor, the board of supervisors, the editorial staff of your newspaper, and the electronic media. Line up businesses with veterinarians and ask for matching funds; for each surgery the doctor performs, the business matches it with a \$30 donation to the sponsoring organization. Include the veterinarians and businesses in the publicity. Ask for donations from the public. Get local celebrities involved. With money coming in, you may be able to drive the number of surgeries up to 20,000 or cover your initial \$300,000 cost.

2. Set up a vanpool to service an existing high volume, low cost spay/neuter clinic.

Cost is only one reason pets don't get altered. Research conducted by students at Stanford University demonstrated that in the Bay Area, inconvenience is a bigger factor than cost. People simply don't want to take the time to collect the animal, drive him to the clinic, and pick him up. In some cities, it may be an hour's drive to get to the one clinic in town; and the caregivers may not have a car. Bingo! A vanpool can solve the problem. Again, there is no clinic to buy or build, no veterinarian to find. One staff person can drive, schedule, and do community outreach (at \$30,000 per year). A van can be equipped and outfitted for \$40,000. Add \$10,000 for gas, insurance and upkeep on the vehicle. Subtract your \$80,000 from \$300,000. Put your \$220,000 in the bank to buy more vehicles next year.

- One possible scenario: Paint a van in orange tabby stripes or calico colors. (Or paint it with a Red Cross and kittens-whatever works for you). Install a sound-system to play show tunes from the musical, "Cats." Target five under-served neighborhoods in your

community. Set up an established route in each of the five neighborhoods that will be consistent for one month. Pick up cats along the route from 6:30 am to 8:00 am (people can just come out in front of their house when they hear the music like they do for the ice cream truck). Collect fees for surgery. Drop the cats back off from 4:30-6:00 p.m. Do spay/neuter education as you go.

- **Publicity:** Here's where you have fun and get a ton of publicity for your organization and the importance of spay/neuter. With great visuals and an unusual idea, you're bound to bring out all the TV stations and newspapers; and it won't cost you a dime! And you get one of the key advantages of mobile clinics; advertising! With your cat van driving city streets for an hour and a half twice a day, people will definitely get the message.
- **A vanpool currently in service:** Dallas' Spay-Neuter Assistance Program (SNAP) implemented a vanpool last March. A full-time coordinator sets up the sites and does spay/neuter education. The Ford Econoline van (\$19,000) goes to three fixed parking lot sites each week: animal control on Wednesdays and a different shelter on Thursday and Saturdays. Animals are admitted on a first come, first serve basis and payment is made at time of drop-off (there is no extra cost for the shuttle service). Depending on size, the number of dogs and cats per van ranges from 15 to 20. The van is outfitted with different sized vari kennels that are strapped down with bunge cords for animal transport. The shuttled in animals are the first ones admitted for surgery. The shuttle takes the animals back to the parking lots between 3-4 pm. One van driver is a volunteer, one is the program coordinator and one is the Clinic Manager. As the program gets known in the community, the plan is to run the van 5 days per week and ultimately add more vehicles.

3. Set up an all volunteer shuttle program to service an existing high volume spay neuter clinic. Here's a system that's effective and costs practically nothing. You will need a program coordinator (\$20,000-30,000) and that's it. Put out an all points bulletin for volunteers to pick up cats, deliver them to the clinic and take them back home. An all-volunteer program can get anywhere from 2,000-4,000 cats and dogs in for surgery per year. To make things interesting, you could set up a "bounty" system with rewards for the volunteers who bring in the most cats.

- **Recruitment:** The goal here is to recruit specifically for the job of volunteer driver. This campaign is well suited for radio public service announcements (free) or listings in daily/weekly newspapers. Your own membership would be a good audience to target (advertisements in internal publications, web site). And use your current volunteer base to help recruit by posting flyers on telephone polls, laundromats, community bulletin boards, employer newsletters and bulletin boards.
- **A volunteer shuttle program currently in service:** This is the current model used by The San Francisco SPCA for their Feral Fix Program. A core group of about 70 volunteer Cat Assistance Team (CAT) members gets referrals from The SF/SPCA Feral Fix Hotline to help trap and pick up feral cats for surgery. The volunteers use

traps provided by The SF/SPCA: they use their own cars to pick up and return the cats. No appointments are required. Doctors do surgeries 5 days a week and fit the incoming cats into their daily schedule. Cats must be in by 8 am for surgery and picked up after 4 pm. As many as 200 cats per month are brought in by CAT team members.

4. Put the focus on advertising. One way to increase spay/neuter surgeries is to focus exclusively on zippy promotions or advertising campaigns that create a buzz. No muss or fuss here but you can spend some big bucks.

- Low Cost Promotions; possible scenarios: Spending lots of money isn't a requirement. Try something like this. Get local businesses to donate coupons for food, products or entertainment (for all or a percentage of the cost). Then, "Bring your pet in for surgery, get a free video and pizza!" "Get your pet fixed and get a free Pokemon!" "Spay/neuter your cat or dog and get a free ticket to the baseball game!" "A free furbie!" Whatever. You should get a ton of free publicity in the process.
- Big Time Advertising: It's probably not feasible to try to saturate the market with radio, print, outdoor (billboards, bus cards) and TV. A major campaign like this could go through your \$300,000 budget in a month, even with pro bono help and some free ad space. One way to go is to saturate a narrow target market, for example, multiple ads in the neighborhood newspaper. But perhaps the best way to go is to spend your money in just one venue but make it stand out. One humane organization is planning a TV commercial which depicts cats and dogs "doing it" all over town. A few well placed, funny/creative/provocative ads can generate the buzz that gets people talking about spay/neuter (and the nerve of your organization).

5. Set up MASH units in different parts of town. Instead of having a clinic on wheels, periodically put your doctor and his/her staff on wheels. As with a mobile clinic, this could be a way to get to under-served neighborhoods where the need is great.

- One possible scenario: Look for a shopping center storefront or office space for rent in your target neighborhood. See if the landlord will let you use it as a temporary clinic for a few days or a week at no cost (obviously the property would have to look nice and be in good condition). Check with the local regulatory agency to see if there are any special requirements for a temporary operation like this. Purchase a mobile medical set-up (actually, spay/neuter equipment is quite easy to transport) as well as a few office pieces that are attractive and professional (a few chairs, some nice pictures and so on).
- Publicity: Make the neighborhood clinics a notable event. Give them a catchy name. On Saturdays and Sundays, hand out a few freebies (animal shaped balloons or whatever). Call the neighborhood newspapers. Blitz neighborhood stores, businesses and bulletin boards with flyers and announcements. Send a few volunteers door to door to place announcements in mail slots, screen doors and on car windshields.

- A MASH unit currently in service: The Western Montana Spay/Neuter Task Force travels to the far-flung small towns and Indian reservations of Montana in a \$5,500 vehicle loaded with 6 surgical tables, 3 anesthesia machines, 20 spay packs and other assorted spay/neuter equipment. Surgeries are primarily performed in Community Centers and Fire Halls but they've also been done in places like horse arenas with no running water. Some doctors are Montana veterinarians; others are from other states or other countries. (All must have a license to practice in Montana unless they operate on the state's sovereign Indian reservations.) The honorarium for doctors is \$200 per day. The rest of the staff including vet techs, are volunteer. The events generally last from one to nine days. (The most surgeries done at one 9-day event: 1,540). Since November of 1996, the Western Montana Spay Neuter Task Force has held 21 events, spent \$85,000 and performed 5,500 surgeries. The goal of these events is to draw a community and its resources together to solve a problem and own the solution.

Some of the topics discussed in this article may have associated legal and tax implications. Therefore, you should consult with your legal and tax advisers before implementing any of the ideas or programs discussed.

WEIGHING IN ON MOBILE CLINICS

Are mobile clinics over-rated or is there a real need to get them on the road?

Maddie's Fund Veterinary Consultant Laurie Peek, DVM thinks there's definitely a place for them. "In spread out rural areas where there aren't many small animal practitioners, mobile clinics can be a great way to reach more isolated individuals and their pets".

They can also work in urban areas. "The city of Houston is 700 square mile - that's bigger than Los Angeles," says Sean Hawkins, Director of Houston's Spay-Neuter Assistance Program (SNAP). "When we started our program, there was just one low-cost clinic. So many people lived so far away, they couldn't get there, especially the low-income folks. The mobile clinic enables us to target specific areas that have limited access to low cost services." Hawkins continues, " I will say that for large urban areas like Houston, a mobile clinic will never solve the problem - it simply can't do the volume." Since the mobile clinic started in 1992, Hawkins has built a second stationary spay/neuter clinic, which performs 15,000 surgeries per year: the mobile performs 4,000.

Before going mobile, Hawkins tried a coupon referral program with private practitioners "Although the doctors stuck to the prices for the surgery, they started adding additional costs to the bill for things like office visits, vaccinations and so on. It just got to the point where we wanted to control our own costs and services."

But there are some great models involving local practitioners.

Florida's Broward County is home to 1.4 million residents living in cities like Hollywood, Ft. Lauderdale, Pompano Beach and Boca Raton. There are no stationary

low cost spay/neuter clinics in the county, but a mobile clinic (Mobile Animal Services and Help) performs about 2,500 surgeries per year. On the other hand, the Pet Aid League is doing about 10,000 surgeries annually with the help of 22 local doctors.

This program does not work with vouchers. The veterinarians have all agreed to provide spay/neuter surgery for fees of \$24 for male cats, \$32 for female cats and \$39-\$89 for dogs. Each doctor submits a schedule to the Pet Aid League for the number of low cost surgeries they can perform per week. Appointments are scheduled by the PAL, matching up the clients with their closest participating veterinarian.

Advertising draws a large share of PAL's clients. PAL has been placing big signs non-stop on the backs of 30-40 buses for the last four years at a cost of \$15,000 per year. The remaining clients come in from local animal shelter referrals, word of mouth or repeat business. The annual operating budget for the Pet Aid League and its three staff members is \$140,000.

"It works well all the way around," says Pet Aid League Director Carol Stork. "The veterinarians work with us providing low cost spay/neuter surgery and they benefit by our referrals of potential new clients. If they only do 9-10 surgeries a week, that's potentially 750 new clients per year." And the rest of the 200 plus doctors in the county don't mind the program; in fact, some send over referrals. "The secret to our success? We've managed to keep it simple."

A Final Word

There's no question; mobile spay/neuter clinics can play a role in reducing pet overpopulation. But before deciding to buy one, consider a few key issues:

1. Are there existing community clinics/services that could be more fully utilized?
2. What impact will a mobile clinic have on community veterinary relationships?
3. How much of the problem will it solve?
4. Are there other options that are easier, quicker, cheaper and just as effective?

[See page 7 for a cost-analysis of mobile surgeries.]**

COST ANALYSIS OF MOBILE SURGERIES

(Budget: Operating costs for one year full-time)

Vehicle

Purchase	\$75,000- \$100,000
Equipment (autoclave, cages, surgical packs etc)	\$30,000-\$100,000
Vehicle subtotal	\$105,000-\$200,000
Amortize vehicle and equipment over 4 years = per year	\$26,000 - \$50,000

Salaries

Veterinarian	\$50,000 -\$80,000
Vet Tech	\$20,000 -\$40,000
Coordinator	\$20,000 -\$35,000
Assistant/driver	\$15-000 -\$25,000
Taxes/benefits	\$40-000 - \$55,000
Salaries subtotal	\$145,000 -\$235,000

Running Costs

Medical supplies (surgical, medications, equipment)	\$15,000 -\$30,000
Vehicle Upkeep (gas, maintenance, cleaning supplies, insurance)	\$10,000-\$20,000
Promotion	\$4,000-\$10,000
Miscellaneous (phone, overhead, admin, copy, accounting-25%)	\$50,000-\$75,000
Operating Subtotal	\$224,000-\$370,000
Amortization	\$26,000-\$50,000

TOTAL ANNUAL OPERATING COSTS: \$265,000-\$440,000

At 2,000 s/n surgeries, the average cost per surgery would be... \$125.00 - \$210.00

At 4,000 s/n surgeries, the average cost per surgery would be... \$62.00- \$105.00

At 6,000 s/n surgeries, the average cost per surgery would be... \$42.00 - \$70.00