



## WORKING WITH PRIVATE PRACTICE VETERINARIANS: A SHELTER DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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*Getting along with local veterinarians is essential if we are to address the pet overpopulation problems that are facing us across the nation. Outlined below are some of the methods the Humane Society of Chilton County employs in working with veterinarians to achieve the goal of reducing the numbers of unwanted animals in Chilton County, Alabama.*

### **Background**

The Humane Society of Chilton County is a rural central Alabama county. The shelter has been in operation for seventeen years and was, and still is struggling to stay afloat under the massive weight of unwanted and stray animals. The county is comprised of 699 square miles, has a human population of 40,000, with many minorities. The median household income is only \$14,000 annually. The high school dropout rate is above average, and generally the population is poor and uneducated. They do, however, own many, many animals! This has posed a great challenge for our Humane Society. We had to convince people in the community to spay/neuter their pets, and we had to make it affordable for everyone.

Our low cost Spay/Neuter Assistance Program (SNAP) was initially set up five years ago with a small grant. We wanted to keep the program simple and affordable; however, it also had to be acceptable to the veterinarians. There are six veterinarians in our county although only four are involved in small animal practice. Each was approached individually about the program, and the fees were set so the vets would be compensated equitably. The animal caregiver/owner would pay \$25 for a cat spay/neuter or \$40 for a dog spay/neuter. The grant funds would then match that and the veterinarian would receive \$50 and \$80 respectively. The program would be financially restricted to people with a household income of \$25,000 or less a year. All of the vets agreed to this and they were satisfied with the fees. Working with the veterinarians to set the fees and start the program enabled us to “educate” them on why this was needed in our community.

Many people who work in the animal welfare field complain that they have difficulty getting along with their local veterinarians. Most of these concerns can be addressed, and a friendly, professional rapport can be established with you and your veterinarians.

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Veterinarians are people who decided to get involved in the welfare of animals mainly because, they too, love animals. It is not fair for some people to accuse veterinarians of being money hungry. In fact, veterinarians are compassionate, hard working professionals who care about animals. So let's walk a mile in their shoes.

### **Walking a Mile in Their Shoes**

Veterinarians are deluged with requests for free or low cost services. Many of these requests come from non-profit animal organizations, and many more come from the public. A local veterinarian who is truly a humanitarian gets numerous requests from the public each week. For instance, last week a woman came in with her dog that had been hit by a car. She had no money, and could not leave a post-dated check. This veterinarian saw the dog, set a broken leg, and just decided to write off the expense. He told me that this is the most difficult part of his job. He wants to help the animal, but so many times the client cannot pay. If he refuses to see the animal, he appears to be cold hearted and callous, he feels that people do not understand that he is put in this position frequently.

Animal welfare organizations also ask for low cost or no cost services. Veterinarians know that there is a pet overpopulation problem, most want to help. But many veterinarians feel it is just not fair to expect them to discount their fees to such a point that they are losing money. This too can be worked out. Building a strong line of communication with the veterinarians is the first step.

Maddie's Fund's philosophy of honesty, integrity and mutual respect among all animal welfare groups and veterinarians is key to the success of any program. Further, all groups should agree to carry on cordial, professional relations without personal attacks or recriminations. This philosophy will work in any situation and groups who have not made the first steps toward this goal should begin the process by reaching out to the veterinarians in their area.

### **Reaching Out**

**One-on-one.** One way to do this is to schedule an appointment with each vet, or better yet, call and ask the doctor to lunch. Sit down and openly discuss what you and your group are trying to achieve. Be honest, be sincere, and be ready with a plan.

This plan should include the specifics of the program that you want to start. If it is a spay/neuter program, set it up in such a way that the veterinarian gets compensated at a reasonable level for their services. Explain what this program would accomplish. For instance, in Chilton County, because of five years of the SNAP program, over 1,200 fewer animals are being surrendered, thereby reducing the euthanasia rate by 25%. We did face some opposition from some of the veterinarians when we wanted to remove the financial restrictions of the program so that it would be open to everyone regardless of income. But when it was emphatically explained that this would mean that fewer animals would be killed, they really understood, and they all agreed to the new program.

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**Negotiate.** In north Alabama, when some veterinarians decided that they would do low cost spay/neuter for qualified people they insisted that the animal would have to have the whole series of vaccinations before the surgery. This, of course, drove the cost up and many low-income people could not afford the added expense. The local non-profit spay/neuter group decided to use some of their resources to pay for the additional expense of the vaccines. In this way the low-income people could afford the surgery for their pet, the veterinarian was happy because the animal was receiving the needed and proper vaccinations, and the spay/neuter group had worked the problem out without alienating the veterinarians.

**Seek advice.** Although many veterinarians do have some idea of what animal shelters do, many do not know what we face with small budgets, under paid staff, too many animals and not enough space. Many times the only animals that the doctors see from the shelter are the sick ones. This sometimes leaves the veterinarians to think that the shelter personnel are haphazardly caring for these animals. This is another opportunity to reach out to them. We actively bring health problems that we encounter in the shelter to the vets and enlist their help in solving the problem. Ask them what can be done to insure the health of the animals. Should you vaccinate all animals coming in? What about quarantine areas? Should you test for heartworms or feline leukemia? Veterinarians want to help, and this may just be the opportunity that you need to start building that rapport. Be sure, however, to follow their advice!

**Provide program updates.** Keeping the veterinarians informed about the progress of the programs they are participating in will help you build bridges. The veterinarians here help our Humane Society with animals that are confiscated in cruelty cases, animals that are injured and animals that have bitten someone and pose a threat to the public. We always make a point of letting the doctors know how the cruelty case turned out, or whether the injured animal was reunited with the owner. It is important to keep them informed. Let them know how many surgeries were done and how that had impacted the numbers of animals being surrendered to the shelter. Did the suggestions that the veterinarian gave to help insure the health of the shelter animals work? Let them know! Share your ideas with them and listen to their concerns. If there is problem ask how you can resolve it, sometimes all it takes is showing that you are willing to work with them. Ask for their advice and then use it!

**Don't forget the thanks.** And most importantly thank them. During the holiday season, drop off a basket of fruit, homemade brownies or a favorite beverage. Send thank you notes periodically. Take the doctors out to lunch occasionally (this will also give you time to discuss ideas or problems). The more the veterinarians learn about you, your group, and your goals the more willing they will be to help. Working together we can make a difference!

**About the author:** Lynne Fridley is Director of the Humane Society of Chilton County in Clanton, Alabama and President of the Alabama Humane Federation. Lynne has been involved in animal welfare for over twenty-one years, starting at the Shelby County

Humane Society as a kennel attendant in 1980. Lynne has worked to build a statewide coalition of animal control and animal welfare organizations in Alabama, and took on the formidable task of applying for a Maddie's Fund grant. She enlisted the support of the Alabama Veterinary Medical Association, and on July 1, 2001 Maddie's Big Fix for Alabama was launched.