

Intake at Southern Pines Animal Shelter has dropped substantially since the opening of a spay/neuter clinic four years ago. Veterinarian Alicia Hatch says many of the animals who enter the clinic have never seen a vet before.



High Volume, Low Cost, Big Impact

Spay/neuter clinic reduces intake at Mississippi shelter

BY JAMES HETTINGER

When staff from Southern Pines Animal Shelter's spay/neuter clinic in Hattiesburg, Miss., take part in local parades, it's not unusual for people in the crowd to exclaim, "Hey, spay/neuter clinic! Y'all fixed my dog!"

The local folks appreciate the high-volume, low-cost clinic that has done more than 23,000 surgeries since opening in July 2009, says Valerie Rachal, the shelter's research and development manager. "They brag about us," she says. "They tell their neighbors."

Rachal says the 3,500-square-foot free-standing clinic, located about five miles from the shelter, is the main reason why intake and euthanasia rates at Southern Pines have plummeted.

Annual shelter intake had crept up for several years, plateauing around 9,000 animals per year from about 2007 through 2010. Southern Pines officials began charting a new course after attending Animal Care Expo in 2008 and hearing a presentation about high-volume spay/neuter by the president of Humane Alliance,

a North Carolina-based nonprofit that has helped open more than 100 clinics around the country.

Humane Alliance offers training on everything from budgeting and floor plans to medical protocols and customer service. "We're teaching the processes that make it feasible to do 35 surgeries a day—or whatever the number may be—but to do those without compromising the way the animals are cared for," says Sarah Hess of Humane Alliance's National Spay/Neuter Response Team.

The training and technical assistance that Humane Alliance supplied—coupled with grants from PetSmart Charities, The HSUS, and a private donor—made the Southern Pines clinic possible, Rachal says.

Getting Results

About a year after it opened, the clinic's impact started to be felt. The shelter took in 6,477 animals in 2011 and 4,901 in 2012—a decrease of about 46 percent from the era before the clinic—and experienced a similar drop in euthanasias.

Aided by grant support, the clinic keeps its prices low for spay/neuter surgeries; they range from \$35 for a male cat to \$65 for a large female dog. The clinic also promotes itself through advertising and by staffing booths at community events. In addition to helping Southern Pines save on staff costs by doing tasks like laundry, clinic volunteers serve as ambassadors for spay/neuter when they're out in the community.

For pet owners in areas that contribute most significantly to the shelter's intake, the clinic makes spay/neuter surgeries available "for a donation." That targeted approach has proved popular, Rachal says. Using a grant from PetSmart Charities, the clinic recently targeted a rural county west of Hattiesburg, and so many pet owners took advantage of the offer that the funding that staff expected to last two years was gone after 14 months.

After a tornado tore through the center of Hattiesburg in February, staff took the

spay/neuter clinic van door-to-door in a hard-hit, low-income area, offering people pet food, toys, and other supplies. Rachal says staff saw an underserved area in dire need of spay/neuter services—and located only about a mile from the clinic. “It’s just not a part of town most of us usually drive through,” she says. Southern Pines hopes to get funding to return to the area next year and further develop relationships with the residents.

The Southern Pines staff has “been really great at reaching what a lot of us call the low-hanging fruit”—people who want to spay or neuter their pets and can afford low-cost services, says Amanda Arrington, director of The HSUS’s Pets for Life program. The challenge moving forward, she adds, will be to reach the tougher cases: people who have questions or concerns about spay/neuter, and those who will require the clinic to take the services to them.

“Even if it’s extremely low-cost or free, there are some pet owners that are never going to do it without that positive engagement, and without the relationship building and the trust building,” Arrington says.

Rachal concedes that Southern Pines has not yet changed the minds of pet own-



Technician Allison Smith shaves a female cat before surgery.

ers who are opposed to or just not interested in spay/neuter. The region has a rural mindset that considers it natural for animals to procreate, she notes. “Those are deeply held values and beliefs. It’ll be slow in changing those.”

Some local veterinarians have refused to support the clinic, claiming it has cut into their spay/neuter business. A group of about 30 vets attended a Southern Pines general membership meeting in December 2011 and tried to push through a motion to limit the clinic’s clientele to low-income people receiving federal assistance.

The clinic doesn’t screen for income, and Rachal says doing so would run contrary to the goal of reducing shelter intake. “We just really wouldn’t be spaying and neutering enough animals in our community to have an effect if we only focused on the lowest-income group.”

(The vets’ motion stalled, and Rachal says there have been no further protests.)

Arrington, who has visited Southern Pines and consulted with Rachal, says she’s impressed by the staff’s fortitude. “I give them so much credit for being committed to this mission, and it’s not been easy for them,” she says. In addition to the opposition to the clinic from veterinarians, in the past decade Southern Pines has also had to cope with Hurricane Katrina and an arson fire that gutted the shelter’s office.

Hess calls the statistics from Southern Pines “amazing,” particularly for a shelter in the Deep South. “It’s inspiring to see what they’re doing, and neat that ... we’ve helped them get their clinic open,” she says. “They did all the heavy lifting.”

Rachal describes the clinic as “a very happy place”—a clean, professionally run facility that’s pleasing its clients. “We’re doing exactly what we want to be doing. We want to be reducing our shelter intake and ending the euthanasia of healthy, adoptable pets from our community,” she says. “We’re clearly on track.” ■



“Our clients are very pleased. I can’t say all of our patients are,” laughs Valerie Rachal, research and development manager for Southern Pines.