

# **White Paper**

## **Pet Overpopulation Issues: Spaying and Neutering**

### **Background**

Pet overpopulation continues to be a serious issue in the United States, despite decades of educational efforts designed to increase spaying and neutering. Eight million animals find themselves homeless each year, according to American Humane Association estimates. Approximately 3.7 million of these animals are euthanized (humanely killed.) These figures are only estimates and may not represent the true scope of the problem. Many of the nation's animal shelters are independent non-profit organizations and are not required to report adoption and spay/neuter statistics, making it difficult to obtain accurate statistics.

### **Spaying and Neutering Surgery**

Spaying is the surgical procedure used to sterilize female animals, while neutering is the procedure used to sterilize male animals. During spay surgery, a small incision is made in the abdominal wall, through which the uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tubes are removed. Neutering involves making small cuts over each testicle. The testes are removed through the openings and the spermatic ducts closed with surgical thread or laser. Spaying and neutering can be performed on animals as young as six weeks of age.

### **The Problem**

#### **Negative Attitudes**

Negative attitudes about sterilization play a part in the reluctance to spay or neuter a pet. Some people believe it is only natural for an animal to deliver a litter of puppies or kittens and think that the animal's health will be harmed if it does not produce at least one litter. This belief is untrue, and in fact, animals that are spayed or neutered have a reduced incidence of certain types of cancers, including mammary, testicular, and uterine cancers. Others apply their own religious beliefs to their animals and impose their personal opposition to birth control on their pets.

#### **Cost**

The cost of spaying and neutering prevents some animals from receiving the surgery. Fees vary considerably and tend to be much higher in urban areas. Typical sterilization fees range from \$40 to several hundred dollars. Fees to spay female animals are generally higher, as the sterilization surgery is more extensive for females. While many communities offer low-cost spaying and neutering, even lower cost surgery is more expensive than some segments of the population can bear. Faced with buying food for a week or spaying the family pet, some families have no choice but to forgo spaying or neutering.

#### **Access Issues**

Poor access to veterinary services lowers the spay/neuter rate, particularly in rural and isolated areas and in those areas that do not have local animal shelters or humane societies. Reluctance to travel to distant cities to obtain surgery and required follow-up care is an issue in these areas. Access issues can also be a problem in urban areas, where lack of transportation to outlying areas creates a barrier to obtaining veterinary services.

# Solutions

## Increased Funding for Spaying or Neutering

Increasing funding for spaying or neutering by humane and government groups will help remove the cost barrier. Reaching out to the community to develop relationships with businesses and individuals can help humane organizations reach fundraising goals in support of spaying and neutering. The creation of fundraising campaigns dedicated solely to spaying and neutering is the best way to ensure that services are not underfunded.

## Education

Although it's difficult to change entrenched attitudes regarding spaying and neutering, continuing educational efforts regarding the benefits of spaying and neutering (calmer disposition, lower cancer risk, no unwanted puppies or kittens) are an important part of the process necessary to reduce pet overpopulation.

A variety of educational efforts, including school and civic group presentations, online information, social media posts and campaigns, and advertisements in the media, help raise awareness of the issue. Providing information regarding the health benefits associated with the procedure, rather than focusing solely on the overpopulation angle, can be beneficial in convincing pet owners to obtain spay/neuter services. Educational programs and publicity campaigns should focus on the positive aspects of spaying and neutering and not attempt to shame pet owners who have not spayed or neutered their animals.

## Increased Access

Increasing access to spaying and neutering surgery, whether by extending surgery hours or providing mobile spay/neuter vehicles, is an important consideration in addressing the problem. When a visit to the veterinarian no longer requires a one- or two-hour drive, spay/neuter rates are likely to rise.

Offering basic medical services, including vaccines and exams, along with surgical services, can increase the use of mobile facilities and generate goodwill in the community. Operating satellite locations in underserved areas can be helpful in eliminating the access barrier, even if the clinics are only open a few days each week.

## Removing Obstacles

Removing obstacles to spay/neuter surgery, such as asking clients to provide household financial information or requiring multiple veterinary visits before the procedure, may increase the sterilization rate. Keeping the focus on the reduction of animal overpopulation, rather than on the creation of cumbersome rules and policies, will help ensure that pet owners feel comfortable making the decision to sterilize their pets.

Clear communication regarding policies concerning spay/neuter surgeries is also needed. Clients who are turned away from a clinic because the maximum number of surgeries has already been performed for the day are unlikely to return. Publicizing policies and making them readily available on the organization's website will help decrease disappointment.

## Summary

Pet overpopulation results in the deaths of millions of animals in the United States each year. Removing barriers to spaying and neutering by decreasing cost, increasing education and access, and removing obstacles will help ensure that every animal born is wanted and will become a valued addition to a household or family.