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Conferences

Spreading the Spay/Neuter Message

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NMHP Conference emphasizes the importance of sterilization.

By Jennifer Hayes, Best Friends staff

Animal welfare advocates recognize the importance of spreading the spay/neuter message in the effort to end pet overpopulation. However, how is that best accomplished? This issue was addressed by several speakers during the No More Homeless Pets Conference.

Shelters and rescues can not adopt their way out of pet overpopulation according to Holly Sizemore of [No More Homeless Pets in Utah](#). The state with the highest pet rehoming rate is only 12 adoptions per 1,000 people. That is "only about 1/10 of the reproductive capacity of intact dogs and cats, so that just shows you the ovaries are working harder than we can adopt." Additionally, there would need to be 44 times more shelters and sanctuaries than there are currently, caring for 11 million cats and dogs at a cost of about \$22 billion.



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Therefore, spay/neuter programs are essential to ending pet overpopulation.

Laws mandating sterilization at the time of adoption have proven to be far more successful than refundable deposits. In Utah alone there are hundreds of thousands of dollars sitting in a fund; unclaimed \$50 deposits from people who never sterilized their pets after adopting. However, after California enacted mandatory spay/neuter at adoption, shelter intake dropped 10% within five years, despite an 8.2% human population growth.

Subsidy programs for spay/neuter programs are also needed. Between 1983-1993, prior to subsidies in New Hampshire, euthanasia rates remained fairly stable, but in the six years following funding, the killing in their shelters dropped by an amazing 77%.

A staggering 80% of kittens and puppies are born to pets who have had at least one litter prior to being fixed; less than 20% are from females who are intact for their whole lives. Animal welfare advocates must overcome myths, cultural barriers, and even procrastination to get people to fix their pets prior to that first litter and since the majority of the public already spays or neuters their pets through their veterinarians, it is vital to target underserved populations, providing free and low-cost services.

Spreading the word

Public education is necessary, but how do we get the message out?

Ledy VanKavage, Esq., Senior Director of Legal Training and Legislation for the [ASPCA](#), noted that shelters and rescues tend to over saturate the public with reasons to fix pets; health and behavior issues, animals being killed at the shelter, safety, good for the community, saves money, and more. With today's busy lifestyles, she commented such messages will not stick, "We need something that is succinct, something that will resonate; we need good stories."



VanKavage drafted [Anna's Law](#) in Illinois following the attack and killing of a woman by stray dogs. To help prevent a reoccurrence, a Pet Population Control Fund was introduced, which would be paid for by an extra \$10 fee for intact pets when licensing, as well as fines for dogs biting, running at large, or deemed vicious. The legislation was successful because they marketed it with a story people could relate to, the nurse/wife/mother who died because of free-roaming dogs, emphasizing the need for reduced pet populations for public safety. Not only did it become law, but it currently raises approximately \$500,000 annually for spay and neuter services.

Various other states have enacted similar programs, including New Jersey. Since implementation, they have experienced a 29% reduction in animal impounds and 10% decrease in euthanasia.

Other creative funding for spay/neuter subsidies can be generated

A coalition of kindness to animals caught in the pet trade.

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Other creative funding for spay/neuter subsidies can be generated through animal friendly license plates, rabies surcharges, and income tax check-offs.

“Every dollar that goes into the New Hampshire spay/neuter program saves taxpayers \$3.15,” noted VanKavage, who emphasized the timing is good to approach legislators now, as this is a wise financial, as well as humane, solution.

Be creative

Focus on how spaying and neutering pets will benefit the guardian. While some people altruistically fix their pets, she commented that “self interest is the biggest reason that people get their animals sterilized.” In messaging the public, it is important to appeal to people’s desire to terminate undesirable behavioral issues such as yowling, spraying, and attempts to escape, which are associated with intact animals.

The use of humor can also generate buzz. The [Kentucky Humane Society SNIP Clinic’s](#) successful campaign included an advertisement picturing a dog with the caption, “Cause humping your leg just doesn’t do it for me anymore.” The ensuing media coverage generated 500 calls in the first week.

Some innovative suggestions from the workshop included:

- Promote special events, use a holiday, or if there is none make one up.
- Offer a small discount or coupon with an expiration date and it will create a sense of urgency.
- Provide transport services to and from the clinic from central locations. If your organization is small and can not afford a vehicle, she suggested renting a van.
- Call the free advertisements listed in the paper offering to accept the puppies and kittens into your adoption program, if they will fix the parents.
- Have someone the community trusts deliver the message, such as ministers.
- Work with human agencies that offer services to low income individuals.
- Offer incentives such as free microchips, gift certificates, or free rabies vaccinations.
- Speak to your audience and use pop culture references. Multiple organizations have used Hooters for Neuters successfully and the [Downtown Dog Rescue](#) did a Pimp Your Pit event where they could get their bullies “customized.”

However, it is also important to keep options open.

Outside the paradigm

Karen Green, a former Best Friends employee, now works with [Alliance for Contraception in Cats and Dogs](#) (ACC&D) and their goal is “to extend the reach of our existing programs by advancing methods of non-surgical sterilization.” They wish to affect those animals who are often overlooked worldwide, including feral cats and street dogs.



She stated that “Spay/neuter has become the mantra of animal welfare.” While successful, she noted that it is not a perfect procedure - surgeries take time and require specialized equipment, veterinarians, and finances and since it is invasive, always carries a risk. However, currently it is the sole method of pet population control.

ACC&D wants to provide a safe, permanent, one treatment, and affordable alternative that still provides the behavioral and health benefits of surgical spay/neuter. They are not trying to replace surgery, but offer the animal welfare community an additional tool to address pet overpopulation.

However, the target audience is low-income individuals, and development of new drugs can cost hundreds of millions of dollars, so most pharmaceutical companies are not interested in advancing alternate methods.

Therefore public demand needs to be created for a non-surgical method of sterilization, a concept which has simply not occurred to most people.

[Found Animals](#) has partnered with ACC&D and recently announced [The Michelson Prize](#); \$50 million in grants and a \$25 million prize for the development of “single dose, non-surgical sterilant for male and female cats and dogs.” Because the funds are being distributed by those involved in animal welfare, there will be humane requirements for any animal testing.

Not only will the grant provide much needed funding for research and development, but it is also bringing the topic into the mainstream media and introducing the idea to the public. To help broaden demand, the ACC&D has developed the [Organizational Partners Program](#) which seeks endorsements.

“We use those letters of support to demonstrate the demand and the need for these products,” noted Green. But knowing that animal welfare advocates are busy, and still wanting to obtain their goal of 100 organizations by the end of 2008, they make it as easy as possible and offer prewritten letters and incentives for groups to submit their letters and logo by December 12.

Green encourages the animal welfare community to continue to spread the word. “We are the people that care the most about this happening, so it’s got to be us that make this happen.”

HOW YOU CAN HELP:

1. Join the [Spay/Neuter Fever! community](#) on the Best Friends Network.
2. Check out successful spay/neuter media campaigns on the [Humane Alliance website](#).
3. [Sign up](#) to receive the ACC&D e-newsletter for up-to-date developments in alternative spay/neuter methods and have your groups sign up as [Organizational Partners](#).
4. Be a part of Best Friends' efforts to save companion animals and please make an [online donation](#). It is through contributions like yours that Best Friends is able to work toward the day when there will be No More Homeless Pets.

For more information:

- [No More Homeless Pets in Utah](#)
- [Alliance for Contraception in Cats and Dogs](#)
- [Press Release: \\$75 Million Offered for Single Dose Sterilization of Cats and Dogs](#)
- [Five Saves Lives Campaign](#)

[Click here to check out the highlights from the 2008 No More Homeless Pets Conference!](#)

Photo credit: taken by Jennifer Hayes

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