

Spay/Neuter PROGRESS REPORT

ALEKSANDRA PIKALOVA / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

How U.S. cities are fighting the pet overpopulation problem with this crucial tool.

By Meredith Wargo

The statistics are heartbreaking. Every year, millions of animals end up in shelters throughout the United States, where an estimated 3 to 4 million dogs and cats are euthanized. More disheartening is that 90 percent of these animals are considered adoptable. The needless killing of healthy or treatable shelter animals remains a real and enduring problem.

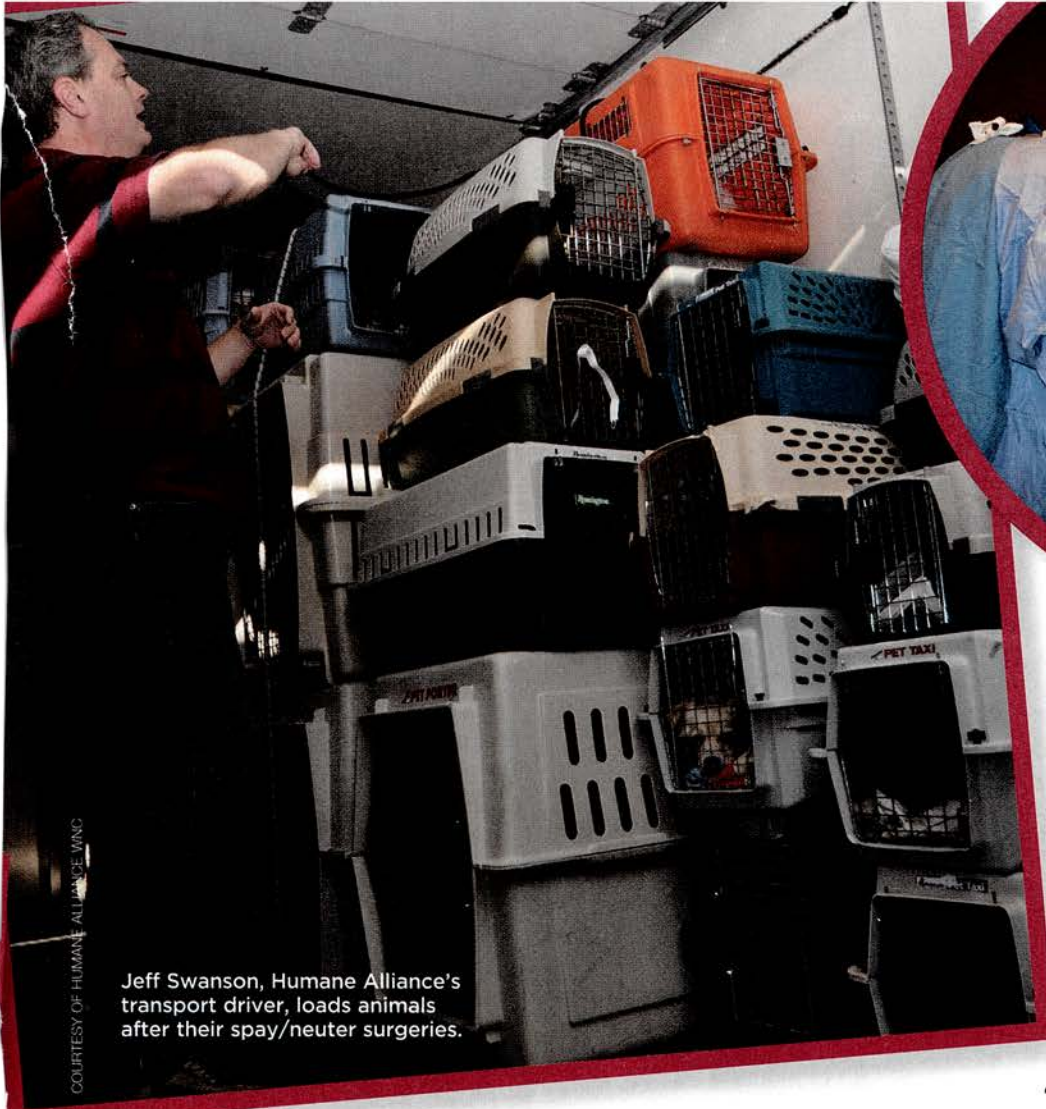
“We can’t adopt our way of out of shelter overpopulation,” says Peter Marsh, attorney/activist and co-founder of Solutions to Overpopulation of Pets, a nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing pet overpopulation in New Hampshire. “The best way to reduce shelter intake rates is through targeted spay/neuter programs.”

Spaying is a surgical procedure that removes the ovaries and uterus of a female pet; neutering removes the testicles of male animals. By performing these procedures, fewer unwanted litters are born, resulting in a reduction of the number of homeless pets killed.

PHOTO COURTESY OF EMANCIPEPET



Emancipet vet tech Morgan and her 1-year-old terrier mix, Junie B.



COURTESY OF HUMANE ALLIANCE WNC

Jeff Swanson, Humane Alliance's transport driver, loads animals after their spay/neuter surgeries.



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Homeless pets are everywhere

Sadly, New Hampshire isn't the only state facing this endemic problem. Homeless pets abound in every community — large and small, urban and rural.

Although the number of homeless animals varies by state, the majority of animals who are euthanized in shelters are the offspring of accidental litters.

"Nationally, the No. 1 driver of shelter intake is accidental litters," says Amy Mills, chief executive officer of Emancipet, a nonprofit provider of low-cost spay/neuter clinics in Austin, Texas.

"That means the owners of the pet that had the puppies or kittens had an intention to get them spayed but said they couldn't afford it or hadn't gotten to it yet."

Armed with this knowledge, Emancipet took to the streets of Central Texas to offer affordable and

STOP is leading by example. With collaboration from New Hampshire's veterinary community and local humane groups, STOP spearheaded a legislative campaign in 1994 for a state-funded spay/neuter program for residents on fixed incomes.

"Our research showed that a disproportionate number of shelter admissions were coming from people who live below the poverty line," Marsh says. "By taking a new look at

conventional wisdom, we created a publicly funded program that targets low-income pet owners for whom the cost of spaying and neutering is beyond their means."

New Hampshire's statewide program is funded by a \$2 surcharge on all dog license fees. The money goes into a fund that provides subsidies for sterilizing the pets of low-income families, enabling the pet owners to pay for the surgeries at a fraction of the cost.

SPAY/NEUTER'S IMPACT IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

<p>(1993) 11,494</p>	}	<p>Number of animal deaths by euthanasia</p>	}	<p>30%</p>	}	<p>Fewer animals euthanized in shelters after 1 month of STOP's subsidized sterilization program</p>	}	<p>0</p>	}	<p>Since 2000, number of dogs and cats euthanized in New Hampshire to make room for more homeless pets</p>
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ABUNDANT RESOURCES

As the spay/neuter movement continues to grow, so does the availability of resources. Today, many initiatives provide low-cost, quality spay/neuter services throughout the country, including:

➔ **SpayUSA** is a free nationwide referral service that includes more than 2,000 spay/neuter clinics and 5,000 veterinarians in 28 states. Contact SpayUSA toll-free at 800-248-SPAY (7729) or visit www.spayusa.org

➔ **Low-Cost Spay/Neuter Provider Database** was created through a partnership between the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and PetSmart Charities. Searchable by zip code, the database provides information on low cost or free spay-and-neuter resources. Visit www.aspca.org/pet-care/spayneuter for more information.

➔ **The ASPCA Mobile Spay/Neuter Clinic** offers free or low-cost spay/neuter surgery for financially needy dog and cat owners in New York City with proof of public assistance. Contact their hotline at 877-SPAY-NYC for a listing of dates and locations throughout New York's five boroughs.

➔ **Friends of Animals Spay and Neuter Certificate Information** provides pet owners the option to purchase low-cost spay/neuter certificates that can be used at participating Friends of Animals' veterinary hospitals. Contact Friends of Animals toll-free at 800-321-7387 or visit www.friendsofanimals.org



COURTESY OF MAYORS ALLIANCE FOR NYC'S ANIMALS

accessible spay/neuter services to communities in the surrounding area.

"We discovered that people were hungry for this service even though they hadn't been actively seeking it," Mills says. "It was a game-changing moment for us and confirmed that owners will do the right thing for their pets if given the opportunity."

Since its founding in 1999, Emancipet has grown from a single mobile unit to a network of three permanent clinics and two mobile clinics serving seven Texas counties. Annually, the organization performs 22,000 spay/neuter surgeries, of which 40 percent are provided at no cost to pet owners.

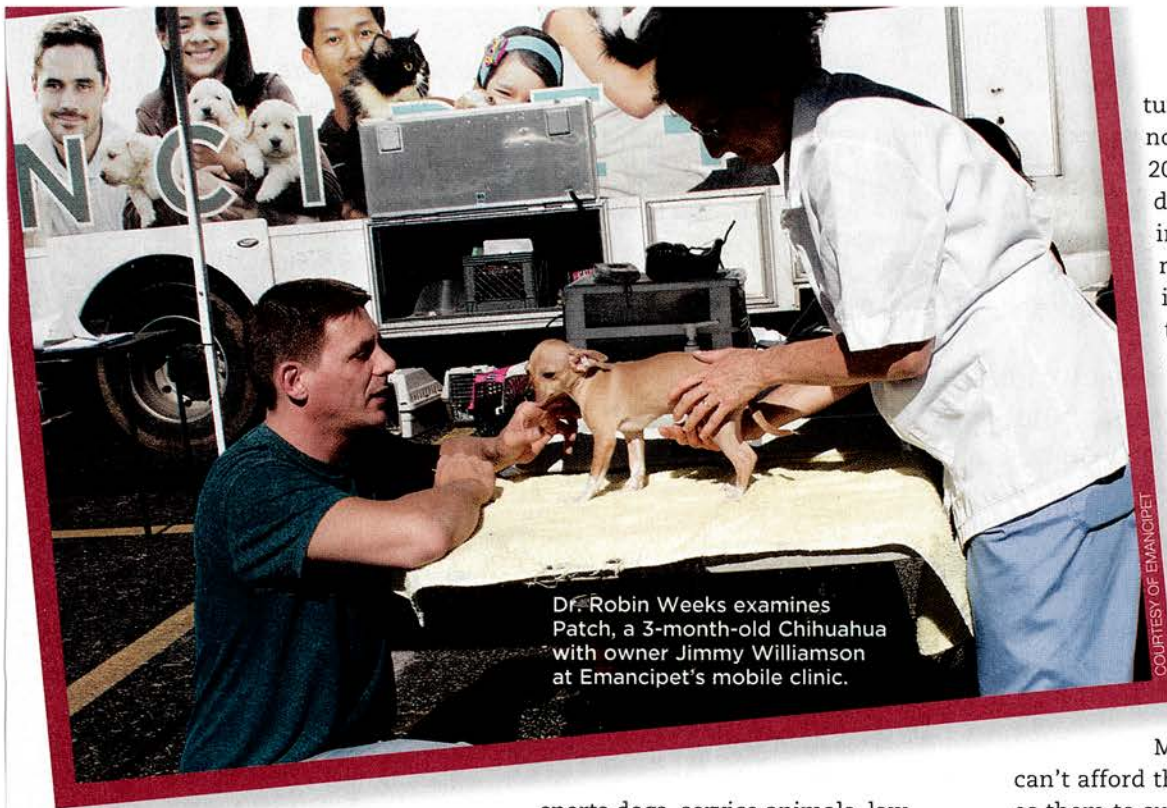
Emancipet's efforts have also contributed to helping the City of Austin reach no-kill status in 2011. This milestone achievement was reached in part by Ellen Jefferson, DVM, who originally founded Emancipet. In 2008, Jefferson left Emancipet to join Austin Pets Alive!, a nonprofit organization dedicated to rescuing and adopting out animals from Austin's municipal shelter. Under Jefferson's leadership, Austin maintains a 90 percent save rate for all animals who enter Austin's shelters, despite a steady increase of human population in the area every year.

"By helping avoid unwanted litters, Emancipet contributes to making Austin one of the safest cities in the U.S. for animals," Mills says.

Mandatory spay/neuter laws

Not everybody agrees that providing affordable and accessible spay/neuter services is the key to reducing shelter pet overpopulation. Some policymakers and groups advocate mandatory spay/neuter laws for pet owners as the solution.

People opposed to mandatory spay/neuter laws believe they unfairly target the poor who, because of their financial inability to afford the surgeries, will be the primary targets for enforcement. They also believe the laws might make the public more hesitant to seek veterinary care for their pets because they



Dr. Robin Weeks examines Patch, a 3-month-old Chihuahua with owner Jimmy Williamson at Emancipet's mobile clinic.

COURTESY OF EMANCIPEP

are afraid of being fined for having an unsterilized pet.

It's a passionate topic among those involved in animal welfare, including state, city and local jurisdictions, veterinary associations, advocates and pet lovers. Most groups agree that something needs to be done to curb companion animal overpopulation. Where opinions differ is in how these changes should be implemented.

Over recent years, a number of states have attempted to pass mandatory spay/neuter legislation for owners. Most of the efforts have failed. The exception being Rhode Island, which requires the sterilization of all cats unless the caretaker has a breeding permit or a veterinarian deems the surgery would jeopardize the animal's health.

Where state legislation has been successful is in mandating animal shelters, pounds and rescue groups to sterilize any animal they transfer or adopt out. Currently, more than 30 states have such legislation. Most of these spay/neuter laws include language that excludes certain animals from mandatory sterilization, including those belonging to licensed breeders, show dogs, competitive

sports dogs, service animals, law enforcement dogs, research dogs, or search and rescue dogs.

Closer to home, though, several cities and municipalities have been successful in passing mandatory spay/neuter ordinances for owners within their communities.

Mandatory spay/neuter failure

Many will agree that mandatory spay/neuter laws start with good intentions, but there is no evidence to suggest they are effective in reducing shelter deaths. In some cases, the laws have had the reverse effect.

In 2008, Los Angeles passed legislation mandating all dogs and cats be spayed and neutered by 4 months of age. Pet owners in violation of the law would have to pay monetary fines as well as perform community service. Shortly after passing the ordinance, the city was unable to continue offering low-cost spay/neuter services because they ran out of funds due to the high demand. For the next four years, shelter intakes and shelter euthanasia in Los Angeles increased every year.

In 2011, the city implemented No-Kill Los Angeles, an initiative led by Best Friends Animal Society to

turn Los Angeles into a no-kill city by the year 2017. Instead of mandating certain laws, the initiative funds spay/neuter projects for families who can't afford to have their pets fixed and provides grants to coalition partners when they increase their adoption rates. Since launching NKLA, the number of deaths at city shelters has decreased by almost 50 percent.

"Mandatory spay/neuter laws are counterproductive,"

Marsh says. "If people can't afford the fines, it encourages them to surrender their pets to avoid the citation, which only perpetuates the overpopulation problem in shelters."

A study conducted by the Department of Veterinary Integrative Biosciences at Texas A&M University and published in *Preventive Veterinary Medicine* in January 2010 found that cost was the No. 1 reason people did not sterilize their pets. "If you pass spay/neuter laws in a community that doesn't have access to affordable care, it's not going to make any difference if people can't afford the procedure," Mills says. "It just makes having an unaltered animal illegal when it wasn't illegal before."

Reaching outside the box

There's an ancient Chinese proverb that states, "Give a man a fish; feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish; feed him for a lifetime." This saying suggests that education is of greater benefit than a one-off handout.

The position of many animal welfare groups is that community education and awareness — not more laws — will address the root problem of the animal overpopulation crisis. And it's this philosophy that many providers of low-cost spay/

WHY SPAY/NEUTER YOUR PET?



Aside from the fact that spay/neuter helps reduce pet overpopulation, here are 8 additional reasons to alter your pet:

Health

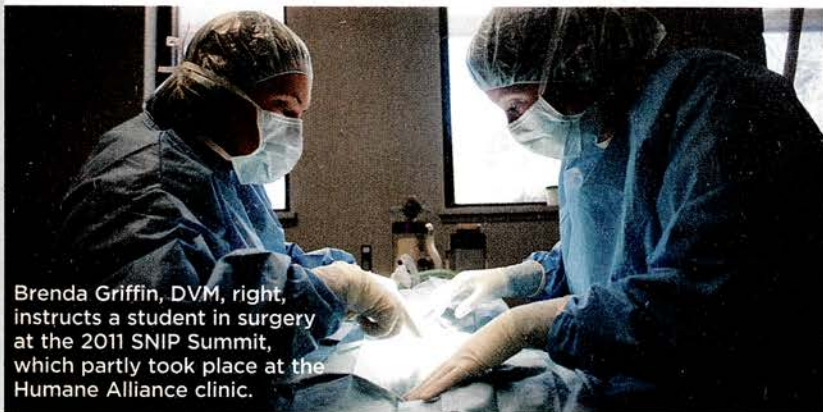
- ➔ Spaying eliminates the stress and discomfort of heat cycles.
- ➔ Neutering eliminates testicular cancer and prevents incidence of prostate disease if performed before 6 months of age.
- ➔ Spaying reduces the risk of mammary gland tumors and ovarian and uterine cancer, especially if done before the first heat cycle.
- ➔ Spayed/neutered animals live an average of two to three years longer than unaltered pets.

Behavior

- ➔ Altered pets are less likely to roam, which decreases the risk of getting hit by a car or contracting diseases.
- ➔ Spaying and neutering helps eliminate undesirable behaviors like spraying, marking and fighting.
- ➔ Neutering curbs bad behavior, including aggression, excessive barking and other hormone-related behaviors.

Financial concerns

- ➔ The cost to sterilize your cat or dog is less than the cost associated with providing adequate care for one litter.



Brenda Griffin, DVM, right, instructs a student in surgery at the 2011 SNIP Summit, which partly took place at the Humane Alliance clinic.

COURTESY OF HUMANE ALLIANCE WNC

neuter services are putting into practice. By launching training and mentoring programs that help other spay/neuter clinics increase their volume and expand their services, more people and more pets can be served.

"Although we started as a spay/neuter clinic in Asheville, our philosophy is to share our best practices as far and wide as possible," says Marianne Luft, associate director of the Humane Alliance of WNC, Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides low-cost sterilization throughout western North Carolina.

In 2006, the organization created the National Spay/Neuter Response Team, which is a strategic training program that helps other humane organizations establish self-sustaining clinics in their communities. "It's been a catalyst for, and strategy behind, a nationwide movement to execute our best defense against euthanasia, namely prevention by sterilization," Luft says.

To date, more than 130 Humane Alliance-mentored clinics have opened in 38 states and Canada. According to Luft, the clinics that have gone through their national training program are performing 1 million spay/neuter surgeries each year across the country. "By helping clinics learn to operate at their highest and best levels, they can become more impactful and sustainable within their communities," she says.

New York City is another shining example where collaboration and training have basically reversed the city's euthanasia numbers. Up until 2003, New York was euthanizing about 70 percent of their shelter animals due to low adoption rates. Led by President and Co-Founder Jane Hoffman, the Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals was formed and currently serves

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAYOR'S ALLIANCE FOR NYC'S ANIMALS

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as the sole umbrella organization for animal welfare throughout New York City.

The Alliance consists of 150 member nonprofit shelter and rescue groups within the area, including the Humane Society of New York and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "The majority of free or low-cost spay/neuter surgeries in New York City are performed by these two organizations," Hoffman says. "Ensuring the availability of free and low-cost spay/neuter services has

contributed to our success in reducing euthanasia."

Overall, the Mayor's Alliance has saved more than 250,000 animals since 2003. During that same time-frame, the city's euthanasia rates have plummeted from 32,000 deaths annually to about 6,000 in 2013. As a result, New York has the lowest rate of euthanasia per capita of any major U.S. city.

"This is a replicable model," Hoffman says. "By sharing our methods, shelters can copy elements of our program and customize it to

their own community. If we can do this in New York City, it can be done anywhere."

A hopeful future

As affordable spay/neuter services become more widespread, animal welfare groups are optimistic about their future role in helping homeless animals.

"When intake numbers are reduced, shelters have more resources to create programs that weren't possible when they were under a deluge of intakes," Marsh says. "Instead of spending their limited funds on euthanasia, they can focus on training and rehabilitating the animals in their care.

"I have no doubt we will achieve no-kill status in this country one day. It's inevitable. People aren't going to tolerate the needless suffering of animals much longer." RP

Meredith Wargo is an award-winning freelance writer and longtime animal advocate. She lives in Houston and shares her home with a menagerie of rescued animals, most of whom are special needs.