



Bill Mitchell, a veterinarian at Bristow Veterinary Hospital in Oklahoma, helps combat pet overpopulation by devoting part of each Thursday in his clinic to doing low-cost spay/neuter surgeries for low-income families.

MAKING Spay/Neuter AN INSIDE JOB

Low-cost clinics within clinics combat overpopulation

BY JAMES HETTINGER

Los Angeles has the glitz and glamour of Hollywood, Universal Studios, and the Lakers.

Oklahoma has oil wells, more man-made lakes than any other state, and Sooners football.

So maybe it's not a fair fight in the bling department.

But Laura Beth Heisen has identified something Oklahoma's got that Los Angeles needs: low-cost spay/neuter surgeries performed by local veterinarians in their clinics.

Heisen chaired the Los Angeles Spay/Neuter Advisory Committee, a panel the city council appointed after passing a law in 2008 that requires cats and dogs in the city to be spayed or neutered after the age of 4 months. The committee sought to figure out how to minimize the law's potential adverse impact on low-income people.

Some of her colleagues focused on getting the city animal services department to provide more spay/neuter, Heisen says, but that struck her as a futile approach.

"No matter what you do, the department does not have enough money to provide anywhere near the number of spays and neuters that need to be done in order to make a dent in the overpopulation," she says. "And there is no animal control jurisdiction in the universe that has enough money to do that. Yet, it needs to be done. We have a mandatory spay/neuter ordinance, and even if we didn't, just the

sheer magnitude of the overpopulation means that we need to be providing a lot more spay/neuters than we are."

Los Angeles has a pet overpopulation problem for the same reason that other regions do, Heisen says. It boils down to mathematics: There are too many unsterilized pets and not enough veterinarians offering affordable spay/neuter surgeries. Low-income Los Angeles residents want to get their pets fixed, she insists—pointing to the large turnout for a recent spay/neuter van program in South L.A.—but they simply can't afford it.

Heisen recalls thinking there must be a way to convince local vets that they could benefit by providing spay/neuter surgeries for low-income people and feral cats. But she says when she brought that topic up in her committee, she got "14 blank stares," and she had no answer, either.

While researching, Heisen stumbled upon a possible solution halfway across the country. The Oklahoma Spay Network had started the In-Clinic Clinics program, which recruits private veterinarians in rural southeastern Oklahoma to do high-volume, low-cost spay/neuter surgeries for low-income pet owners.

The model differs by community, but essentially works like this: Veterinary clinics agree to devote a portion of the week to doing low-cost spay/neuter surgeries for residents

who meet income eligibility requirements. A local shelter or humane organization helps coordinate the appointments and, if needed, can provide support personnel for tasks such as check-in and walking animals to and from their cages.

The program allows families earning \$35,000 or less to get a dog spayed or neutered for \$45 and a cat for \$35—compared to regular-price surgeries in Oklahoma that generally run \$100 per dog and \$65-\$75 per cat, according to Ruth Steinberger, a coordinator for the network.

For Los Angeles, Heisen has rechristened the proposal the Neighborhood Neuter program because it involves local veterinarians serving their community. The idea stalled for about a year because L.A. Animal Services was searching for a new general manager, Heisen says, but she plans to push for it anew now that a new manager has taken office.

Heisen touts Neighborhood Neuter as a win all around. The community gets additional spay/neuter surgeries performed without the expense of building and equipping a separate spay/neuter clinic or operating a mobile unit. Veterinarians can turn a modest profit for working a relatively short time. The program is flexible enough that vets can run the low-cost clinic on a Sunday or schedule the low-cost surgeries to fill gaps in their regular surgery schedule during the week.

By enforcing the income restrictions, the program prevents the “cannibalism” of the low-cost clients eating into the veterinarian’s regular client base, Heisen says; the low-cost clinic serves “the people who couldn’t afford it otherwise” and would never become regular clients. Everyone gets good publicity for helping address pet overpopulation.

While many communities with subsidized spay/neuter programs don’t worry too much about ensuring their clients are truly low-income—believing that it’s more important for

the surgeries to get done, even if it means some occasional fudging by those who really could afford it—the Oklahoma program does due diligence on this front. Organizers ask clients to be prepared to show proof of income, such as a pay stub or tax statement, Steinberger explains. It’s important to make sure the applicants truly qualify, she adds, because veterinarians won’t participate if they believe they’re undercutting themselves by offering cut-rate services to people who could afford to pay regular prices. “If they feel like they’re shafting themselves, they’re not gonna keep the program going.”

And the program also provides an outlet for humane-minded volunteers who might not want to work in a shelter. “If you’ve got an active humane community, there will be some people with a higher level of skills who want to do this,” Heisen says. “There are so many people who want to make a dent in saving shelter animals, but don’t have the emotional strength to go inside a shelter.”

It’s OK in Oklahoma

What Heisen wants for L.A. is already up and running in several Oklahoma towns.

Claremore, Okla., a city of around 32,000 north of Tulsa, passed an ordinance in 2009 requiring city residents to spay or neuter their pets or obtain a \$120 permit to keep the animals intact.

“When we passed the spay/neuter ordinance, we didn’t want to penalize anybody if they couldn’t afford it,” explains Jennifer Cummings, the city’s animal control supervisor. Officials mulled the idea of having Spay Oklahoma, a non-profit that runs a Tulsa-based low-cost clinic, bring its mobile unit to Claremore occasionally. The mobile clinic had visited Claremore before the ordinance passed and done about 100 surgeries in a day, Cummings recalls. But Brady Robbins, a veterinarian at the Ark Animal Hospital in Claremore who also works for Spay Oklahoma, offered to do low-cost spay/neuter surgeries once a week in his practice.

Cummings says the arrangement, which is unaffiliated with the Oklahoma Spay Network, is working well and has helped reduce the number of puppy and kitten litters arriving at the Claremore Animal Shelter. Clients sign up by bringing their payment and proof of income to the shelter. “We take care of all the paperwork, so it doesn’t inconvenience his clients or his staff,” she says. The program is more convenient for clients than having to schedule around the monthly visit of a mobile unit, she adds, and it doesn’t have the waiting list that they encounter at the clinic in Tulsa.

Robbins, who’s worked for Spay Oklahoma for about three years and done low-cost surgeries at his practice for more than a year, says he and his two technicians average about 40 surgeries on a low-income day, and have done as many as 58. Older, heavier dogs typically take 15 to 20 minutes, while smaller dogs get done in eight to 12 minutes, he estimates.



RUTH STEINBERGER

A dog awaits sterilization surgery at Bristow Veterinary Hospital in Oklahoma.

“High volume’s not for everybody. It really isn’t,” says Robbins. “I think that depends a little bit on who you are as a person, if you like that challenge.” Noting that he’s probably done 21,000 spay/neuter surgeries in the past three years between Spay Oklahoma and his clinic, Robbins says he’s gotten more efficient.

A key to success is a staff that works well together, including an anesthesia technician and someone with a strong back to move the animals on and off the surgery tables. The low-cost program “makes things a little more hectic for that day,” Robbins says, but solid organization can help handle the volume. His staff utilizes two tables and a system where they do surgery on one animal while the other is being anesthetized. The animals get a pre-anesthetic in their cages, then get sedated in a prep room before going into surgery.

It helps for the team members to remember they’re working toward the same goals—helping low-income people, reducing euthanasia, minimizing dog packs in rural areas, and cutting down on the number of pets dumped on the side of the road.

Asked if he worries about people fibbing about their income to take advantage of the program, Robbins says Cummings does a great job of screening people, and the vast majority of clients are honest and concerned about their pets. And even on those rare occasions when a client rolls up in a \$68,000 car, Robbins says he’s learned not to jump to conclusions: “I don’t judge people by what they look like, or what they’re wearing, or what they’re driving.”

Robbins says if you’re organized, you can break even or make a small profit by performing low-cost surgeries, though the income isn’t enough to sustain his entire practice.

The cost of a regular-price spay/neuter prevents some people from getting the surgery done, but Robbins says he’s also run into male clients whose attitude is, “You’re not neutering my dog. He’s got testicles for a reason!”

The low-cost clinic-within-a-clinic model “takes work on everybody’s part,” notes Steinberger, who’s also the director of outreach and education for Spay Oklahoma. “We have a lot of clients who have never been to a veterinarian before, so of course this is challenging. But we also know that we have more and more veterinarians who recognize that animals are suffering, and that they are deeply a part of the solution.”

Bill Mitchell of Bristow, Okla., is one of those veterinarians. He’s offered low-cost spay/neuter surgeries for several years through a variety of programs; he currently sets aside a half day on Thursdays for a project called Fix 5,000 at the Bristow Veterinary Hospital, located in a town between Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

Income screening is essential to make sure you’re not taking business away from other veterinarians, Mitchell says. He recalls that in past years, people would simply call a humane society and profess to have a certain income, then get scheduled for a low-cost appointment at his clinic. But he’d see people drive up in new cars with Great Danes, “and I’m

Resources

For information on the “quick spay” techniques developed by veterinarian W. Marvin Mackie, which can help veterinarians perform a high volume of low-cost surgeries, visit [youtube.com/user/DoctorMackie](https://www.youtube.com/user/DoctorMackie).

For further resources on high-volume spay/neuter, check out the videos at the resources section of the Humane Alliance website at humanealliance.org.

For information on The Humane Society of the United States’ Gulf Coast Spay/Neuter Campaign, including sample advertisements and research material, go to animalsheltering.org/spayneutercampaign.

doing surgeries for \$35. I just felt like I was being taken advantage of.”

Mitchell says his current low-cost program works well in part because of the help provided by the Oklahoma Alliance for Animals, a coalition of animal welfare groups. The alliance has secured grant money for people who can’t afford the low-income rate, advertises the clinic through local radio stations and free publications, handles the paperwork and record-keeping, and pays for an outside phone line to schedule appointments. “It doesn’t work for me if I’m tying up my office staff, my receptionist, tying up the computer program keeping records,” he notes.

A high volume of surgeries helps make the program financially viable, Mitchell says, noting that he can do five or six surgeries per hour. “So if I can set up 10 surgeries and get it done in two hours, that works out to a decent income for that day.”

He initially feared that he might lose business or undercut himself, but he’s found that his low-cost clients are generally not the same people as his regular clients. “If you can build up the volume and make it where it’s efficient time-wise for you ... it’s not a big income loss. It can be an income that you wouldn’t expect during a slow period.”

Heisen believes the model can work in a big city or rural town, with or without a law requiring spay/neuter. “This program is great for mandatory spay/neuter areas, to help people comply with the law, but isn’t really the bottom line getting enough spay/neuters to reduce the overpopulation? And looked at in that way, this program is needed everywhere.” **AS**