

Finding a fix for pet overpopulation

By Sarah A. Reid
Staff writer



VASS — Tink, a small brown Chihuahua, locked her back knees and pulled hard against the anesthesia mask covering its muzzle.

“No, no, no. You are OK,” Bunny Rabbitt, a veterinary technician said while holding the dog tightly to the mask.

Less than five minutes later, the feisty dog’s tongue popped out of its mouth, signaling the anesthesia had done its job. Rabbitt and Annette May, another member of the veterinary staff, flipped the dog over, quickly intubated it, clipped its nails, ran an electric razor over its pelvis and waited for the spay surgery to start.

While Rabbitt moved the dog into the operating room, a volunteer rapidly rubbed a green toothbrush against the teeth of the electric shaver, cleaning it for the next patient. Another volunteer wiped down a cage and stocked it with clean newspapers and blankets. May cleaned and restocked the prepping table.

Within minutes, Sophie Mae, a Pomeranian mix with a thick, curly orange coat, was nervously shuddering in May’s arms, waiting for her turn on the operating table.

Staff members at the Spay/Neuter Veterinary Clinic of the Sandhills work quickly.

Their mission is to provide subsidized spay and neuter surgeries to animal welfare groups and individuals who can't afford a veterinarian. Their goal is to reduce the number of pets that are killed while waiting to be adopted.

"There are a lot of people who want to do the right thing by their pets, but they just can't afford it," said Sandi Marts, an office manager at Yadkin Park Animal Hospital & Dental Clinic in Southern Pines.

Marts' office refers some of its patients to the clinic because it can provide services cheaper than the Southern Pines office.

Most veterinarians in the area either break even or lose money on spay and neutering surgeries, Marts said. The clinic she manages charges \$8 to \$115 for those surgeries, depending on the size of the animal and the type of surgery.

The clinic charges \$35 to neuter a cat and \$45 to spay a cat and for any canine surgery. Animals that do not have a rabies shot can get one for \$7.

It is \$20 to have a microchip implanted. No other services are offered.

But the clinic's clients don't seem to mind.

Before the office opened in December, staff members had a list of a couple of hundred people in a nine-county area who were interested in the reduced cost surgeries. That list has ballooned to 500, and the clinic is booked through March.

Al Carter, the director of animal operations for Moore County, said a pet owner calls him about every other day asking whether any veterinarians perform sterilization surgeries for less than \$100.

"It sure does brighten people up when you tell them there is a low-cost alternative in the county," he said.

The clinic works on an honor system. Pet owners are not asked to divulge their income, but they are asked whether they have a veterinarian and if that person could perform the surgery. If the pet owner can't afford the veterinarian's going rate, an appointment is made.

Deborah Wilson, president of the organization that subsidizes the surgeries, said she wants to make it easy for pet owners to get appointments.

"It's like health care," she said. "People aren't in there to abuse it. They really need the service."

Wilson is president of the 10-person Companion Animal Clinic of the Sandhills Foundation board. The nonprofit foundation funded the start-up costs for the clinic through private grants. It also pays the difference between the \$35 or \$45 fee and the cost of the surgery.

The clinic concept spun out of a 2004 meeting between some of the foundation's board members and area veterinarians. The veterinarians told Wilson the area needed two things: an emergency clinic and reduced-cost sterilization surgeries.

"We are going broke doing this," veterinarians told Wilson about performing affordable spay and neuter surgeries.

The board initially thought it could meet both needs in one clinic that offered sterilization during the day and emergency care at night.

"We were animal welfare people," Wilson said of the board. "It was hard not to say, 'What about health care. What about this?'"

Veterinarians narrowed the board's focus. They told Wilson it would be difficult to provide all of those services out of one clinic. They said veterinarians providing emergency care and sterilization surgeries had different needs and might bump heads.

So, the board started looking at spay and neuter clinics to learn how to set up one. In 2005, it organized itself as a nonprofit organization and started raising \$495,000 for the clinic's start-up costs.

In December 2007, the clinic started taking patients. Since then, more than 600 animals have been sterilized by the paid staffers.

Based on its research, the board knows the clinic must perform 25 surgeries a day to break even. On Tuesday, 30 surgeries were scheduled.

Once the clinic has been in operation for a year and the foundation can prove that it is reducing the number of animals sent to shelters, it plans on asking county governments to help fund the clinic, Wilson said.

The clinic serves pet owners in Cumberland, Hoke, Harnett, Moore, Chatham, Richmond, Randolph, Montgomery and Lee counties.

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