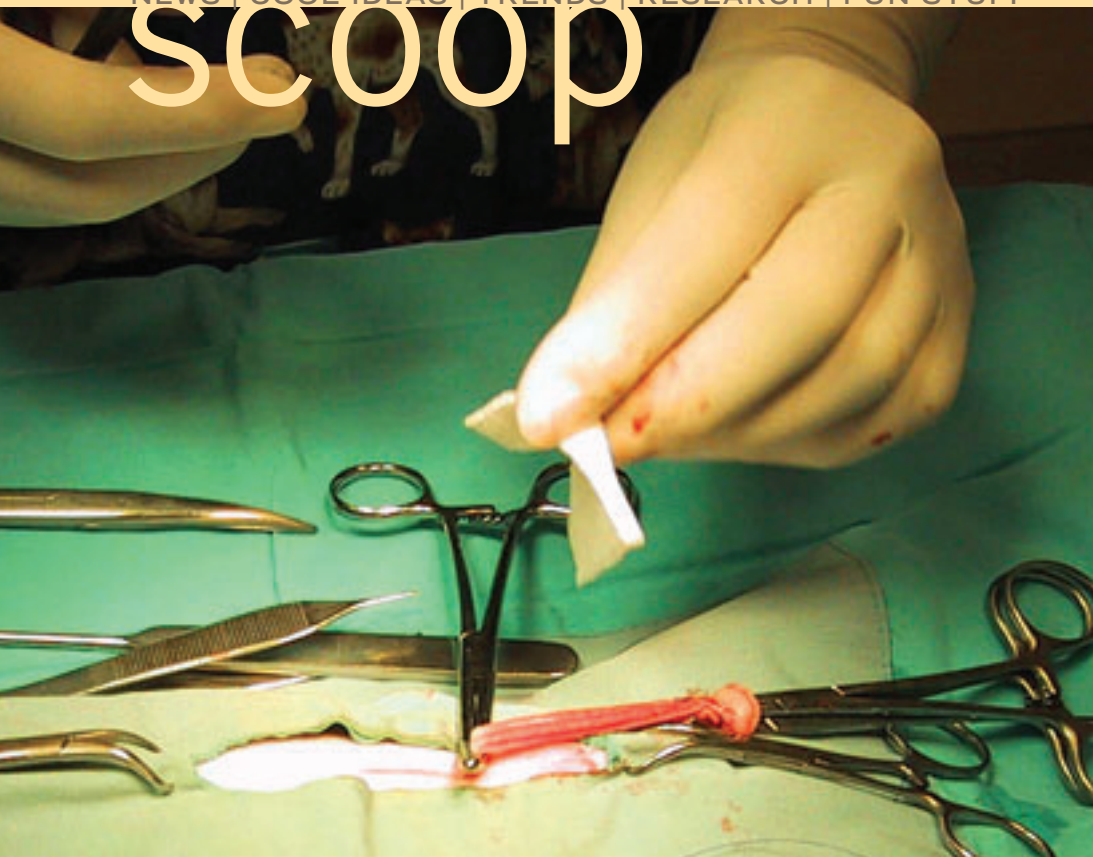


scoop



CARRIE ALLAN/PHSUS

No Such Thing as a Free Spay?

The Harbor Humane Society raises funds for spay/neuter assistance through dog license check-off program

Given all of today's fine print, disclaimers, and "terms and conditions," it's rare to find a service or product that's actually *free*—no hidden charges, no strings attached. That's probably why some people have a hard time believing Heidi Yates when she tells them their pets can be spayed and neutered at no cost.

What might sound too good to be true is both good *and* true for many pet owners in Yates's community of Ottawa County, Michigan. Thanks to the HERO Project, a fundraising program started by the Harbor Humane Society in West Olive, low-income residents can get their animals sterilized free of charge—"whether it's a Chihuahua female or a male Great Dane," says Yates, the organization's development director.

Money for the spay/neuter fund wasn't collected through a silent auction or a telethon or a targeted mailing to humane society mem-

bers; it was raised through a special donation option on county dog license forms. Inspired by a similar initiative in Maricopa County, Arizona, the fundraising check-off program came to life after Yates worked with the county treasurer to submit a proposal to Ottawa County commissioners, who unanimously approved the idea.

By the end of July, HERO (which stands for Help Everyone Reduce Overpopulation) had collected more than \$19,000 to distribute for spay/neuter assistance, says Yates. Harbor Humane staff hope the fund will greatly reduce both the number of homeless animals in the community and the number of animals euthanized for space, she says.

Before its launch last November, the project got a boost from an anonymous donor who wanted to designate a portion of her estate to spay/neuter efforts. Her \$10,000

bequest was set up as a dollar-for-dollar match for citizens' donations.

About 25,000 dog owners learned of that match through a county mailing that included both the annual license forms and a bright green flyer explaining the HERO Project. A blank line on the form allowed dog owners to fill in tax-deductible donations in the amount of their choice.

"We left it open-ended because we hoped that it would allow people to give more if they could choose their own amount as opposed to us suggesting an amount—and it worked," says Yates.

Harbor Humane also got the word out by issuing press releases, promoting the program on its website, including an item in its newsletter, and distributing brochures. As of late August, about 1,200 people had chosen to fill in that blank line and donate to the HERO Fund, raising about \$10,000 to be matched by the anonymous donor's funds.

So far, those funds have enabled Harbor Humane to distribute 93 spay/neuter vouchers to households with incomes at or below federal poverty guidelines. Applicants aren't required to show proof to qualify, but they must sign a sheet that details the guidelines. "We really are more about trying to get the animals spayed and neutered," says Yates. In addition to the surgery, the voucher includes feline leukemia tests for cats and heartworm tests for dogs; the certificates expire 30 days after issuance.

Finding veterinarians willing to provide those services was key; the shelter's medical director sent letters seeking participants and price information. To calculate community averages, the shelter asked vets to provide their fees for a dog, cat, puppy, and kitten, broken down by weight. Local veterinarians were glad to hear about the HERO Project, which has

served to strengthen relationships between the veterinary community and the shelter.

When a pet owner receives a voucher, she can take it to a participating vet's office or to the shelter's clinic. After the surgery, private vets send the shelter itemized bills—and often, something extra. “Nine times out of ten, if, say, the voucher was for \$150 and [the surgery] only costs \$135, they will donate that extra \$15 to the program,” says Yates. And so far, when the surgery cost has been greater than the voucher amount, the vets have absorbed the costs.

The program has been “extremely well received,” says Yates, but its future is uncertain. Staff are preparing a report that will detail the fund's success to the county, and they're aiming to increase the redemption

rate of the vouchers; of the 93 vouchers the shelter has issued, 75 have been redeemed.

Meanwhile, other shelters have contacted Harbor Humane to find out more about the HERO Project. “We're just a small little place between two resort towns,” says Yates, “and if we can get the message out and share what has worked and what hasn't for us, it would be huge.”

Because of its educational component, the mass mailing helped generate more than financial support. “It definitely has opened us up to 25,000 people that probably wouldn't have known about us,” says Yates.

News of the HERO Project has even reached the state capital. When a legislator proposed a similar program at the state level, Yates

was asked to testify. “I was met with such wonderful response from the senators,” she says. “One of the aides came up to me afterwards and he said, ‘Can you imagine if every county in just Michigan would [do] this program, how much of an impact that would be?’ ”

HERO has given Harbor Humane a concrete way to fight overpopulation locally, says Yates. “Wherever you go here, it seems like people are always saying, ‘I don't have enough money to have my animals fixed,’ and now we have the ammunition to say, ‘I've got a number you can call.’ ” —Katina Antoniadou

Heidi Yates is willing to talk to organizations interested in starting similar programs. Contact her at 616-399-2119, ext. 18, or development@harborhumane.org.

Where in the World Is *Animal Sheltering*?

Some read *Animal Sheltering* for inspiration, others for concrete ideas. And then there are those who peruse it on their way to naptime—like Bozo, the furry friend of subscriber Jen Walker in the photo at right.

From the redwood forests to the Gulf Stream waters, from Peru to France to Zambia to India to Singapore, ripped-out pages of this magazine appear on the walls and in the libraries of animal shelters, advocacy groups, veterinary clinics, and universities. Copies of our articles are included in the adoption kits, public education campaigns, and staff training manuals of local animal welfare organizations the world over. Profiles of programs started by you, our readers, motivate fellow animal protectionists to develop new adoption programs, start revenue-generating thrift stores, lobby for spay/neuter clinics, implement effective disease control measures, provide better housing for dogfighting victims, and campaign for stronger anti-cruelty laws.

Sometimes the magazine's effect on animals is even more direct. A volunteer at the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center



in Gonzales, Louisiana, successfully calmed the nerves of a rescued Katrina dog last year by softly reading to her from the pages of the latest issue.

Where in the world do you read *Animal Sheltering*? In the break room of your shelter between the morning cleaning and the afternoon feeding? Under a shade tree in your backyard after a long day of volunteering? At the beach or in a jungle so remote it's unknown to most of our readers? Please send your stories and photos to *Animal Sheltering* magazine/HSUS, 2100 L St., NW, Washington, DC 20037; asm@hsus.org. Your submission may be selected for publication in *Animal Sheltering* or on www.AnimalSheltering.org.