

Group Helps People Pay to Spay (and Neuter)

Rabbit group raises money for spay/neuter assistance fund

Seven tanks of gas. One month's pricey electric bill. A top of the line MP3 player. That's about what \$282 will get you. Or, if you live in Virginia, you could find yourself using that money to get your rabbit spayed. According to Susan Wong's research, the average bunny spay surgery in Maryland costs \$174 compared to Virginia's \$282, while neuter surgeries will set you back \$143 in Maryland and \$210 in Virginia. Veterinarians who charge more than \$300 aren't included in Wong's figures; she's found that some vets charge up to \$400.

Wong is the president of Friends of Rabbits/House Rabbit Sanctuary, an all-volunteer rabbit group

in the Washington, D.C., area that recently raised \$14,000—including \$7,000 in matching funds from an anonymous donor—to create a spay/neuter fund that helps local low-income residents get their bunnies sterilized. The organization solicited donations and sold ribbon magnets (designed by vice president Patti Henningsen) that bore the group's name and a spay/neuter message.

The high cost of spay/neuter for rabbits was just one of the reasons the organization created the fund;

they also wanted to raise community awareness. "It got started with my observation that people don't realize that rabbits need to be spayed or neutered just like cats and dogs; [unsterilized] rabbits have the same kind of behavior problems," says Wong.

Sterilized rabbits may enjoy better health, too; neutered males can have a longer life expectancy, and spayed females have a greatly reduced risk of reproductive cancers.

Even before starting the fund, Friends of Rabbits/House Rabbit Sanctuary was already spreading the word about responsible rabbit care. The group visits schools, educates the public at pet supply stores, places booths at events like veterinary office fairs and animal welfare conferences, and maintains www.friendsofrabbits.org.

While making the rounds at events, if a member of the group encounters someone who can't afford to have his rabbit sterilized, she'll first gather some vital stats to find out where he lives and deter-



Susan Wong shows off a family-size rabbit.

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mine whether his income places him or his family below the poverty line.

Next, she'll suggest a vet. Participants in the assistance program are required to choose from a list of recommended (and affordable) vets maintained by Friends of Rabbits/House Rabbit Sanctuary. "Not all veterinarians are exotic veterinarians, and even if they say they can help you with your rabbit, it's not necessarily something that they're familiar enough with for doing the surgery," says Wong. "You want to make sure that your rabbit's taken care of by someone who really knows rabbits."

After an individual's eligibility is established and a convenient vet office is located, the organization aims to provide that person a rebate ranging from \$25 to \$100, depending on their location, the sex of the animal, and other spay/neuter assistance programs for which the owner may be eligible. Because rates for surgeries are, on average, higher in Virginia than in Maryland, the group will offer greater rebates to Virginia residents, says Wong.

Pet owner payments for a portion of the bill are an important part of the process, says Wong, especially for those

who may have gotten their rabbits for free. "It's always good for [people] to put some of their own money into the animals, because then they really do feel like they have that responsibility and that understanding that the animal's not going to be free the rest of his life," she says.

The next step for the organization is getting the word out. Wong says that in addition to informing the public, the group will contact animal shelters to tell them about the program. They'll also let veterinarians know that their participation won't cost them a penny—or, if they don't work with rabbits, that they can direct clients with rabbits to the group. Wong hopes that local vets will contact the group if they'd like to be added to its list.

For such a busy organization, the \$14,000 in funds will go quickly, says Wong; she plans to stress to the group's members that she'll need their continued support to replenish it. Wong emphasizes the importance of sustaining such programs for pet owners: "[Some] rescue groups are so into just saving the animals," she says. "Then they forget that the key to saving the animal is helping the human." —*Katina Antoniadou*