

Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico: Dramatic Impact, Lasting Change

There are many places around the world that struggle with pet overpopulation. Significant contributing factors are extreme poverty and lack of access to veterinary care, particularly teams trained in the High Quality, High Volume Spay/Neuter (HQHVSN) surgical specialty. To truly make a difference, these locations need not only immediate support to reduce their pet population but a plan for long-term, sustainable change. The Spayathon™ model, as piloted by Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico, provides both of these necessary elements, empowering localities to change their own circumstance for the better by quickly and dramatically reducing the numbers of intact animals, providing HQHVSN training to local veterinarians to increase their spay/neuter capacity, and leaving behind equipment and supplies necessary for establishment of permanent HQHVSN clinics to serve the population for years to come.

How did Spayathon™ come to be?

Puerto Rico's challenges are almost too numerous to mention: hundreds of thousands of street dogs and cats roaming freely; shelters under-resourced and overwhelmed; virtually no spay/neuter infrastructure; law enforcement uneducated about animal protection; municipal shelter euthanasia rates in excess of 95%; and minimal animal protection infrastructure in place, despite relatively robust animal protection laws. In 2015, the Humane Society of the United States decided to change this, and we announced a partnership with the government of Puerto Rico to transform animal welfare on the island. Since that time, we have launched several major animal welfare initiatives, including a training program for law enforcement, a humane education program, equine wellness support, and an initiative bringing the shelter medicine experts from the University of Florida Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program onto the island to assess its animal shelters and increase lifesaving.

Just as HSUS' efforts to support Puerto Rico were producing results, Hurricane Maria brought devastation to the island, decimating its infrastructure, claiming an unprecedented loss of life, and forcing many to flee. Often those leaving the island were forced to leave their pets behind, either because of severe restrictions imposed by airlines or because of an inability to find new housing that would accept them. A lucky few were taken into homes of people already struggling to rebuild; the remainder either were taken to already overwhelmed animal shelters or were absorbed into the massive stray animal population.

However, Maria also brought a silver lining: Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico. Thanks to its intensive animal welfare work on the island, HSUS was granted an Executive Order temporarily allowing outside veterinarians to practice on the island for the first time, to bring crisis relief to animals impacted by the storm. From the success of that initial agreement, a formal Memorandum of Understanding between the HSUS, the Government of Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rican Veterinary Association and the Puerto Rican Veterinary Board was adopted, allowing the HSUS to bring multiple teams of spay/neuter surgeons onto the island to help curb the massive and growing pet overpopulation crisis.

Overseen and coordinated by HSUS, Spayathon™ pairs teams of national and international high-quality, high-volume spay/neuter (HQHVSN) groups with local animal welfare organizations to run up to 8 spay/neuter/vaccination clinics simultaneously across the island, ensuring maximum opportunity for more than 30,000 pets to receive spay/neuter/vaccination services at no cost to the guardian/owner. In addition, Spayathon™ includes

specialized HQHVSN training for local veterinarians to dramatically increase the island's spay/neuter capacity for the future, and all surgical equipment and supplies used during Spayathon will be left behind to equip the island's first permanent spay/neuter clinics. Spayathon™ also presents a unique opportunity to collect thousands of data points on HQHVSN clinic participants and their pets, a circumstance that is being leveraged by academicians at the University of Florida.

How does Spayathon™ work?

Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico consists of dedicated surgical rounds, held in quarterly, or more frequent, intervals. During each round, as many as 8 clinics are held simultaneously across the island to provide spay/neuter/vaccination services for owned dogs and cats. Clinics typically function for 6-7 surgical days in a row, with setup and pack-up days before and after. Patients are offered free spay/neuter surgery, vaccinations (including rabies, distemper combination and, where appropriate, leptospirosis) and donated pet food, toys, treats and other items. In between formal rounds, mini-clinics are held to support targeted populations like community cats and animals cared for by rescue groups (those that are not intended for transport off the island).

Each clinic is overseen by a partnership between three entities: a surgical team, whose members are typically flown onto the island, which is responsible for ensuring quality animal care; a ground team, typically a Puerto Rican shelter or rescue group, which advertises the clinics, handles patient registration and provides other pet owner support; and an HSUS support team, which assists with clinic oversight and troubleshooting and ensures accurate data collection and reporting.

Primary oversight for all clinics is provided by the HSUS Spayathon™ leadership. This 4-person team serves as legal liaison with the government, veterinary board and veterinary association, oversees and approves clinic locations, secures all necessary funding for Spayathon™, contracts with and ensures grants for all surgical and ground teams, drafts all Spayathon™ paperwork, secures appropriate signage, provides logistical support for the purchase, transport and storage of all necessary surgical equipment and supplies, secures donations of vaccines, pet food and other items, oversees data collection efforts, and much more.

Who is involved in Spayathon?

There are 26 formal Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico coalition members: the HSUS, the Office of the Government of Puerto Rico, Junta Examinadora de Medicos Veterinarios de Puerto Rico, Colegio de Médicos Veterinarios de Puerto Rico, Maddie's Fund, GreaterGood.org, Rescue Bank, Banfield Foundation, PetSmart Charities, Petco Foundation, University of Florida Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program, Emancipet, ViDAS, Veterinarians for Puerto Rico, Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program at Cornell University, Helping Paws Across Borders, Humane Society of Puerto Rico, the Sato Project, the Puerto Rico Dog Fund, Friends of Culebra Animals, Wild at Heart Foundation, Our Big Fat Caribbean Rescue, Santuario de Animales San Francisco de Asís, Coalition for Animal Rescue, the 20/22 Act Society, and Best Friends Animal Society.

In addition, there are numerous other groups that have made direct contributions of various types to the success of Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico, including: ASPCA, Boehringer Ingelheim, LupinePet, Dechra Pharmaceuticals, Pet King Brands, Royal Canin, Chewy.com, Project Vets and Pet Food Centers of Evansville, Indiana. And of course, many other individuals and organizations have contributed their personal or staff time to join the surgical or ground teams that make Spayathon™ happen.

What are the primary goals of Spayathon™?

Traditional spay/neuter support models rely either on subsidizing existing veterinary offices to secure low-priced surgeries for the community or engaging a single HQHVSN team to periodically operate a free clinic in an underserved location. Spayathon™, on the other hand, has created a structure whereby as many as 8 separate HQHVSN clinics, some with as many as 20 trained surgeons operating daily, run simultaneously across the entire island for as many as 7 days straight, and those clinics reoccur on 4 separate occasions during a 12 month period. Thanks to this new model of delivery of services, by the time it wraps up its initial MOU in May of 2019, Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico will have:

- Altered and vaccinated at least 30,000 animals;
- Provided HQHVSN training for local Puerto Rican veterinarians and their support staff to increase local capacity;
- Left behind ample equipment to establish the island's first permanent HQHVSN clinics.

How Is Spayathon™ paid for?

When Spayathon™ for PR was conceived in the beginning of 2018, it had not been contemplated as part of the official fiscal year budgets of HSUS or any of the teams, which meant all funding had to be raised by HSUS independently, and quickly. To facilitate Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico, the HSUS team had to procure sufficient funding to cover purchase of all equipment and supplies and to provide grants to subsidize the participation of each of the surgical and ground teams. We also solicited donations of vaccines, medicine, dog food and other pet supplies, and secured training for local veterinarians. Thankfully, donor response to the Spayathon™ concept was so strong that all of the funding needed for Round 1 was raised in a period of weeks.

How does Spayathon™ ensure patient safety?

Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico relies heavily on cooperation from independent HQHVSN teams already operating in locations around the world. Each team selected for participation has a demonstrated record of success, and each has its own unique operational model, ranging from running well-appointed, permanent stateside HQHVSN clinics to operating temporary MASH-style clinics on a shoe-string budget in the most remote areas of the world. While Spayathon™ allows each of those teams to operate autonomously, we have put in place several elements designed to ensure that only “gold standard” surgical techniques and the highest level of professionalism are exercised, including:

- Hiring several veterinary experts to prepare surgical SOPs and oversee team operations;
- Purchasing all necessary surgical equipment and prohibiting use of lower quality substitutes for autoclaves and other devices;
- Mandating standardized surgical protocols, including anesthesia and drug protocols, and requiring tattooing of all sterilized animals;
- Preparing and mandating use of standardized surgical and data tracking forms.

What legal authorizations were necessary to create Spayathon™?

Puerto Rico law currently forbids outside veterinarians not expressly licensed in Puerto Rico from performing spays/neuters and other veterinary services. To overcome this obstacle, HSUS had to secure an Executive Order allowing us, for a limited time, to bring veterinarians who are duly accredited and licensed in another jurisdiction

onto the island to provide post-Maria disaster relief. That Executive Order must be renewed by the Governor every six months.

In addition, HSUS negotiated a formal Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rican Veterinary Association (Colegio de Médicos Veterinarios de Puerto Rico) and the Puerto Rican Veterinary Board (Junta Examinadora de Medicos Veterinarios de Puerto Rico) that allows us to bring HQHVSN teams onto the island between May 2018 and May 2019, laying the foundation for Spayathon™. Any additional veterinary support for Puerto Rico to be done after the May of 2019 will require a new MOU, plus additional renewals of the Executive Order.

Prior to each round, the HSUS provides proof of good standing for all non-Puerto Rican veterinarians participating in Spayathon™ to the Veterinary Board for issuance of temporary licenses.

How will the success of Spayathon™ be measured?

Collecting data surrounding the numbers of animals assisted during Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico has always been of paramount importance. Each surgical team is required to complete a data collection form tracking the number of surgeries performed, to allow us to determine exactly how many pets were served (over 25,000 animals have been altered and vaccinated to date) and assess surgical outcomes and complications (the mortality rate across all surgical teams is only 0.001%, despite the extreme challenges of post-disaster location, compromised patient base, etc.).

But we have not stopped there – we recognized early on that Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico presented an unprecedented opportunity for broader data analysis of tens of thousands of pets exposed to MASH-style HQHVSN services. Dr. Julie Levy of the University of Florida will lead an international research team to study the characteristics and outcomes of Spayathon™ patients in what promises to be the largest ever prospective study of its kind, examining vaccination status against zoonotic diseases like rabies and leptospirosis, reproductive history, and congenital reproductive anomalies. This study will also allow for an unparalleled analysis of the safety of large-scale island-wide spay-neuter campaigns.

This commitment to independent evaluation and full access to clinic operations for unbiased data collection and objective reporting is a testament to Spayathon™'s commitment to best practices, continuous improvement, and elevation of the field of animal welfare.

Spayathon™ for Puerto Rico has been a labor of love for each of the organizations who have so generously donated their time, resources and expertise. Thank you for your interest in this life-changing work, and we hope that you will find the resources we have created useful.

- Tara Loller, HSUS