

SAN JOSE VOUCHER PROGRAM

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SUMMARY

A spay/neuter cat voucher program was implemented in October 1994 to reduce the number of stray cats entering the shelter from the City of San Jose. Stray cat intakes had been increasing 6% annually prior to the program. After 5 years San Jose has reduced their stray cat intakes at the Humane Society of Santa Clara Valley by 10%, and their surrendered cats by 32%. Cost from the beginning of the program has been just over \$400,000. Savings to the city from both fewer strays entering the shelter, and fewer cats picked up dead off the street, was over \$350,000 for CY99 alone. This result was achieved by neutering or spaying approximately 9% of the unaltered cats in the City. Current funding is \$65,000 annually, which provides a maintenance level of neutering 3% of the unaltered cats.

HISTORY

The City of San Jose began a voucher program to spay or neuter cats in October of 1994. After a slow start, the program took off dramatically in the spring of 1995 after several articles appeared in the newspaper.

In 1993, during a 1000 household random survey, it was discovered 41% of the known cat population in Santa Clara County are un-owned yet fed by someone. Overall, 10% of county households feed an average of 3.4 un-owned cats. In the rural areas of the county, 18% of households feed an average of 5.25 stray cats. Of the households feeding strays, 85% are feeding groups of 1-5 on doorsteps at home or at work. It is unknown how tame these cats are, how readily they can be picked up and taken to a veterinarian, or if they must be trapped. Citizens do not have a problem putting out a dish of food to feed a stray, but balk at the expense of altering the cats. This contributes to the problem

of additional kittens being born in back yards, and then taken to the shelter too wild, or too young to be placed.

The program was begun as a method to reduce the number of stray cats entering the shelter. Stray cats are the largest category of animals handled by the shelter. The bulk of them are euthanized for being sick or in poor condition, or for their wild behavior. The un-weaned offspring is the third highest category of euthanasias, encompassing over 2200 kittens this past year at the Humane Society of Santa Clara Valley.

RESULTS

Intakes of stray cats from San Jose had been increasing an average of 6% per year, every year since 1981. After two years and 8400 cats were altered, there was a 10% drop in the number of stray cats entering the shelter from the City of San Jose, while the surrounding cities had only a 1-% decrease. The City of San Jose surrendered cats also dropped 14.8%. The voucher program was the only change to animal services.

The 8400 cats altered in the first 2 years of the program comprise approximately 9% of the total unaltered cat population in San Jose. Unaltered cats are primarily stray/neighborhood/feral cats being fed by someone, but not claimed to be owned. Currently, it is estimated that 85% of these stray cats are not altered. Owned cats have an unaltered rate of 14%, including 6% too young to be altered.

After 5 years, we find an overall 10% reduction in San Jose stray cats at the shelter, plus a 32% decrease in surrendered cats. In actuality, surrendered cats could very well have been strays to begin with. If someone takes a cat or litter to the shelter and says they have been feeding it for several weeks, or they were born in their back yard, it will be classified as a surrender, rather than a stray. This categorization gives the cat the opportunity to be put up for adoption more quickly, instead of waiting the mandatory holding time to be reclaimed by an owner, prior to being put up for

adoption. The less time a cat spends at the shelter is the less chance it will pick up a virus from other cats and then be euthanized for being ill.

Costs savings have also been obtained in dead animal pick-ups on the street. There had been a 10% annual increase in dead cat pick up. By 1998 dead cat pickup had declined 15%.

COSTS AND SAVINGS

Veterinarians are currently paid \$20 for altering a female, \$10 for altering a male, and receive a \$5 co-payment from the client. Additional problems, such as pregnancy, which require more extensive surgery, call for a higher reimbursement rate. If the cat is presented prior to 6 months of age, and the female is not pregnant, there is no co-payment required. The City picks up the additional \$5 cost. The average payment to the participating veterinarians in 1999 was \$23.91 per cat. Unpaid volunteers handle the paperwork for the program.

San Jose has paid just over \$400,000 over the past 5 years for the voucher program. If stray cats had continued to increase at 6% per year, the 9394 stray cats in CY95 would have mushroomed to 11,851 stray cats in 1999. At \$103 average per cat handled in costs, the City has saved over \$351,000 in animal control costs in CY99 alone. Additional benefits are less dead animals to be picked up off the streets, and fewer animals euthanized simply for being too wild or too young to adopt.

San Jose altered 2800 cats in CY99. This is about 3% of the unaltered population of cats. This level is actually too low to continue further stray reductions at the shelter, and should be increased along with additional publicity to reach those who are feeding stray cats.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Public education that the vouchers are available is of paramount importance. Flyers and applications at local pet stores and participating veterinarian offices, as well as articles in the newspaper, helped San Jose achieve its dramatic drop in cats entering the shelter. The public desperately needs to be made aware of the reproductive cycle of a cat-they start cycling in January, with litters born in March and April, and most importantly, 6 months old kittens can and will get pregnant.

Additional considerations should be given to the availability of traps to catch cats too wild to be picked up by hand. One idea is to order in traps to be stocked at neighborhood community centers, and then loaned out to citizens. Citizens have been and will be happy to help your city reduce their stray cat population, but you need to help them do it. Everyone benefits from fewer stray cats:

1. Less cost to the city to handle them at the shelter, or pick up dead off the streets;
2. Less emotional cost to shelter workers who must euthanize them;
3. Increasing the value of cats by not having them so readily available as strays on your doorstep;
4. Altering one female stray cat prevents an average of 6 kittens per year being born and potentially handled by the shelter.

Further recommendation would be for a centralized processing office for the vouchers, with a part-time paid staff member to issue vouchers. Problems with vouchers being requested by non-city residents could be immediately rectified, rather than the current system of sending the request back with information on how to obtain vouchers from other sources. At this time, volunteers work approximately 4 hours per week to issue vouchers and perform billing functions in San Jose. A one-two day per week employee could handle the functions for the entire county.

Data needs to be kept by all agencies involved in order to track and document success of the program. The shelters will need to keep information on the number of stray vs. surrender cats and kittens handled and why they are euthanized. The voucher office will need to keep track of the number and type of vouchers handled, what part of the county they are going to, how many of the altered cats are feral, and whether or not the female was pregnant or nursing.

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