STUDY: WHO IS USING NONPROFIT SPAY-NEUTER CLINICS?

Most pets seen at nonprofit spay-neuter clinics belong to low income families and do not regularly receive veterinary care

HARTLAND, VT (Sept. 17, 2018) – Free and discounted spay-neuter services and nonprofit sterilization clinics have been controversial because of a perception that they may draw clients away from local veterinary hospitals. A new study published Sept. 15 in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association found that most pets seen in nonprofit spay-neuter clinics belong to low-income families and do not receive regular veterinary care.

Poverty, lack of access to veterinary services, and transportation challenges combine to delay or prevent spaying and neutering of family pets. The resulting litters of puppies and kittens put tremendous strain on the resources of local animal welfare organizations. Because lack of sterilization usually goes hand in hand with a lack of veterinary care, including rabies vaccination, this represents a public health challenge as well.

In “Characteristics of clients and animals served by high-volume, stationary, nonprofit spay-neuter clinics,” researchers Sara C. White, DVM, MSc; Julie K. Levy, DVM, PhD, DACVIM, DABVP; and Janet M. Scarlett, DVM, MPH, PhD, examined the characteristics of pets and pet owners seeking services at nonprofit spay-neuter clinics across the country, in order to determine to what extent clients are being diverted from private practice veterinarians.

The study surveyed 3,768 owners of 2,154 dogs and 1,902 cats admitted to 22 nonprofit spay-neuter clinics across the United States in a nine-month period. Its findings were clear: Nonprofit spay-neuter clinics predominantly serve low-income clients and animals lacking regular veterinary care, in addition to animals from shelters and community cats.
“Nonprofit spay-neuter clinics offer their services to pets who would not be sterilized otherwise, whether by private practitioners, or by animal shelters prior to adoption,” said White, Executive Director, Spay ASAP Inc. “Without them, a vital component of reducing pet overpopulation, as well as of public health, would be lost.”

The study found most clients’ household income was below $30,000 annually. Most of their pets had not seen a veterinarian in the previous year, and a significant number of the animals over 4 months of age had never been vaccinated against rabies – 81 percent of cats, and 32 percent of dogs.

While some nonprofit spay-neuter clinics target their services on the basis of income, their primary goal is to spay or neuter animals who wouldn’t be sterilized otherwise, and which contribute the most to the burden in shelters.. For example, 64 percent of the clinics offered discounts to pit bull type dogs, and all offered discounts for feral cats.

In their report on the study, the authors speculated that basing access to spay-neuter services on an income verification process may seem invasive to the very clients most in need of services. Additionally, many are not able to document their income or need, other families don’t technically meet a definition of need but still struggle to afford basic care, and undocumented pet owners may hesitate to have their pets sterilized out of fears related to their immigration status. Verifying income and screening on the basis of need also create substantial administrative burdens, including cost and staffing, that many nonprofits cannot meet without adversely impacting the organization’s ability to serve its clients and patients.

Ultimately, it’s in everyone’s interest to ensure pets in the community are sterilized, and the cycle of reproduction is broken.

“There are more than 23 million dogs and cats in families with limited means to pay for veterinary care,” said Michael Blackwell, DVM, MPH, Director of the Program for Pet Health Equity, College of Social Work, at the University of Tennessee. “The lack of access to veterinary care results in prolonged illnesses and recovery, or relinquishment to the animal sheltering community, or worse yet, euthanasia, thus breaking the human-animal bond. These families need and deserve health care for all members, human and animal. Through better collaboration and attention to this national crisis, we can improve overall family health and wellbeing. Keeping families together builds healthier communities.”

Images and additional assets are available at www.millioncatchallenge.org/study