

As the song goes, "It was a very good year."

The Montana Spay/Neuter Task Force Nine Years and 28,421 Dogs and Cats Later

By Jeanne Athowe

It was nearly the night before Christmas when the Montana Spay Neuter Task Force counted up its "gifts" for the year and realized that a lot of money had been saved, funds that could now be used carefully for 2006. The reason? The small, all volunteer group has been so successful over the past nine years that Montana city and tribal councils and county commissions are now convinced of the financial savings and the ethical and community benefits of reducing pet overpopulation and its attendant problems. These leaders are now committing funds to solve the problem at its source, the uncontrolled breeding of community pets.

A total of 4,603 Montana pets were spayed or neutered in 2005 in nineteen Task Force model community pet care assistance events. Each event was created with help and guidance from the Task Force. In all but one community, city, tribal councils and/or county commissions funded all or part of the cost of the surgeries. Community volunteers of all ages organized and carried out these events, backing the professional teams of Montana veterinary surgeons and technicians.

These communities were participating in the Montana Task Force Phase II program following one or more Phase I events in which the Task Force, at the invitation of local officials and working with local volunteers, helped create a community pet care event. The centerpiece of each pet care event was a no-cost, demonstration spay/neuter assistance clinic. Since November 1996, the Task Force has helped create 54 Phase I events and provided 20,733 surgeries. The Task Force mission is to help a community address a community problem – pet overpopulation and its attendant problems. In learning the solution, a community takes ownership and is empowered – ready for Phase II events.

Phase II events have provided 7,688 spay and neuter surgeries since 2003.

OUTCOMES

Statistics tracked by the Task Force after visits to communities where records are kept demonstrate the impact of the Task Force model program. The Wolf Point City Pound, the only dog shelter on Fort Peck reservation where the Task Force created four Phase I events from 1998 through 2002, reports a reduction in dogs impounded of 82 percent and 73 percent reduction in dogs destroyed. Billings Animal Shelter, taking in cats and dogs from the city and Yellowstone County, demonstrates the impact of two spay/neuter events, an unusually brief Phase I and II with a drop of 16 percent in animals taken in and 24 percent in animals destroyed. Cost savings to the community was approximately \$139,000 for the year after these events. During the four



years in which the Task Force visited the Crow Nation, there was a decline in dog bites of 65 percent.

Inquiries from around the state, nation and overseas arrive weekly at the Task Force. A number have come to visit Task Force events where they've discovered that their involvement provides a hands-on education about compassion for animals and the importance of spay/neuter. Said one volunteer, "It is not just a 'procedure' but a meaningful experience."

WHY SHOULD COMMUNITIES HELP FUND SPAY/NEUTER ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS?

Dog bites are the number one cause of injury to children in the United States. Almost 80 percent of those bites are delivered by intact male dogs, a large percentage of which are tethered and unsocialized. The cycle of violence, recognized by researchers, demonstrates the tie between animal abuse/child abuse/domestic/violence. Animals

casually acquired risk being casually treated, leading to pet overpopulation and cruelty and the official killing of homeless, unwanted pets. As Task Force Board members Sandy Newton and Ellen King Rodgers point out, recent studies indicate that the companionship of animals is almost a biologic need for humans, as is the need to recreate, socialize, dance, and enjoy the arts, all of which are supported with community funds in most communities.



THE MONTANA SPAY/NEUTER TASK FORCE

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Teaching Montana that every community can solve its pet over-population problems with education, sterilization, and local volunteer involvement.



See page 23 for information about Latham's new film:

Reaching Out: The Spay/Neuter Challenge

Examples from the Montana Spay/Neuter Task Force demonstrating successful strategies for overcoming resistance to spaying and neutering domestic animals.