FAQ: How can I support my spay/neuter program when we aren’t doing surgery?

Great question! Now is the perfect time to work on all of the activities your practice or shelter always thought would be nice but you didn’t have time for. A well-attended webinar, “Flattening the kitten curve while spay/neuter is on hold”, hosted by Maddie’s Fund on 4/15/20 addressed this very question, and gave five ways that shelters, community cat programs and spay/neuter clinics can hit the ground running when restrictions are relaxed.

1. Funding and support

Just because you aren’t currently operating doesn’t mean you can’t ask for monetary or material resources from your community, your donors, and granting organizations. Engage your community through social media outreach, virtual fund-raising events, spay-neuter pledges, and “kitten showers.” Reach out to your bigger donors, thank them, and see how they’re coping. Grants from many sheltering support organizations are available to help with COVID-related tasks- these applications can be easily written from home. Engage with your current network of foster parents and recruit more. Beef up your amazon wish list. Hannah Shaw, the “Kitten Lady,” recommends social media posts that explain the seriousness of the current situation, explain the impact of people’s help, contain a message of hope, and end with a call to action.

2. Helping neighborhood cats

During this down time, in addition to fundraising mentioned above, community cat programs can reach out to spay/neuter clinics and shelter spay/neuter programs, solidifying older relationships and seeking new ones. From the public, solicit donations of food to support colony caretakers, engage in practical physical improvements for cat colonies such as tidying the colony area, recruit groups like scouts or school kids to build attractive hide boxes, and take a colony census. For shelters and spay/neuter clinics, reaching out to your area community cat programs and making plans for what a return to surgery will look like can help everyone feel engaged and less anxious. Some colony managers have asked about the use of contraceptives until surgery can be performed; please see below for resources. Finally, for shelters and community cat programs, creating a GIS or mapping system to track all of the reports of found kittens can significantly increase the impact of TNR in your community, because it will allow you to target the most prolific locations later.

3. Staff training

Training your intake, dispatch, ACO and adoptions staff in best practices for intake diversion can significantly slow the surge of kittens into your shelter. The first lessons should be on how to help the public avoid kitten-napping when they stumble upon healthy kittens in their community. Education about the move to essential ACO services, including no longer picking up healthy stray animals is also essential.
Diversion cannot stop at simply saying “no” to concerned finders; resources must also be offered. These could include adding animals to lost reports, posting animals on social media for the finder, printing posters, driving by and scanning pets for microchips, aging and checking on kittens, and even returning healthy kittens to their feral moms. Other important shelter training sessions right now should include foster care support—with so many animals in foster, more than one person will be needed to coordinate. Finally, remote adoptions training for adoption staff and foster parents is great, so animals don’t need to come back into the shelter to leave your care.

4. Supplies

ACO vehicles, cat cages, restraint equipment, and cat traps all require maintenance and upkeep. With the volume of animals in many animal shelters low, now is the perfect time to vacuum out and completely disinfect the trucks, install portals into too-small cat cages, oil and clean restraint equipment, and weigh, label, and inventory all of your feral cat traps. If you are anticipating increasing the volume of trapping once surgery gets the go-ahead, now is also a good time to order more traps; Tomahawk has a 10% discount code (MCC2020) good for the rest of the year. This is also a great request for public donors who like to sponsor material objects.

5. Kittens

For truly orphaned, sick, or injured kittens, encouraging finders to become foster parents has been extremely successful for many shelters. The shelter should provide virtual training to the new foster through on-line videos and foster program counseling, as well as the milk, food, litter, and medical care that these kittens may require. Finding a tiny helpless creature is a powerful motivator to provide care; many of these new fosters will also be willing to foster again in the future. Second, even though most shelters aren’t performing surgery right now, kittens should still be placed for adoption around 8 weeks of age. Vouchers for neutering should be given to the new owners, and care should be taken to place only same-sex pairs when adopting two at a time. Neutering male cats before adoption is also provisionally allowed at this time.

Although we don’t know exactly what a future return to surgical capacity will look like, this pause in operations will not last forever. Some locations will likely start sooner than others; some may have to pause again if new waves of COVID-19 strike. This uncertainty is anxiety-provoking but doesn’t mean we can’t continue to communicate, make connections, and make plans. Your spay/neuter service is a great cause and your community wants to help you; now is a great time to show them how.

Resources:

Maddie’s Fund Webinar: https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_vHqz1kswQK WDnGkI455_hg?fbclid=IwAR1AwoOZCM0C5fA52fCrKvSJiwlasaHD4QHLYnw DsvPqQ5646E2RRbyy8

Megestrol Acetate FAQ from Cornell Shelter Medicine:
http://blogs.cornell.edu/cornellsheltermedicine/2020/04/16/faq-should-we-be-using-birth-control-for-cats-now-that-we-cant-spay-them/

Kitten Lady’s kitten care webinars: https://www.kittenlady.org/webinar