



10-1-2007

Penn Vet's Shelter Animal Medicine Program Fuels Dramatic Increase in Homeless Pet Survival

Nancy West
University of Pennsylvania

Dr. Michael Moyer, V'90, director of Penn Vet's Shelter Animal Medicine program, with a young patient at PAWS. Photo by John Donges.

Penn Vet's Shelter Animal Medicine Program Fuels Dramatic Increase in Homeless Pet Survival

BY NANCY WEST

Homeless dogs and cats in Philadelphia have a better chance of surviving these days, thanks to the Shelter Animal Medicine (SAM) program and the collaboration between the School and the Philadelphia Animal Care and Control Association (PACCA). PACCA is the city of Philadelphia's contracted animal control shelter, taking in almost 30,000 animals each year. The Philadelphia Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) is a donor-funded division of PACCA.

"The key to saving the lives of homeless pets is spaying/neutering in a timely fashion," said Michael R. Moyer, V'90, Rosenthal Director of Shelter Animal Medicine at Penn Vet. "The sooner we neuter a pet, the sooner it can be adopted, which makes room for another incoming animal and thereby, saves a life."

The number of homeless pets being spayed/neutered and ultimately saved has increased dramatically at PAWS, with the help of Penn Vet students completing the SAM rotation, as well as a per diem veterinarian and a cohort of

pro bono veterinarians. This year, the number of spays/neuters performed each month has averaged 650, a phenomenal increase from only 35 per month in 2004, prior to the collaboration. Currently, students perform about 20 percent of these procedures.

As a result of the increased number of spays/neuters, the percentage of homeless pets being saved has more than quadrupled, from 11 percent in 2004 to 53 percent in 2006. In the first year of Penn Vet's SAM program, soft tissue surgical students neutered or spayed more than 1,250 animals, greatly increasing their chances of being adopted. Dr. Moyer credits PAWS' excellent leadership and the partnership with Penn Vet for this success.

Equally important, adoptions are on the rise, reported Dr. Moyer. "More people are choosing to rescue shelter animals, not because they can't afford to buy a purebred, but because they are learning to see adoption as an option that saves lives," he said.

Educating Students

While helping to address the city's pet overpopulation problem, students are mastering surgical techniques and learning about primary care and behavior as part of their rotation through the two-week Shelter Animal Medicine elective.

The students provide expanded service to the community by seeing about 200 animals per month for primary care and behavior issues. This represents a tenfold increase over past years when the shelter's staff veterinarian, dedicated to performing spays/neuters, rarely had time to see animals for primary care. Recently, a vaccine clinic drew 170 pet owners in one day even though it was unadvertised.



Photo by Sabina Louise Pierce.

Students learn about the behavioral aspects of sheltering from residents in Penn Vet's Section of Behavior who visit PAWS weekly. "Our goal is to teach students to recognize common behavioral problems and mismatches between



Photo by John Donges.

Students prepare animals for spaying/neutering at the PAWS facility in Philadelphia.

owner/adopter expectations and the realities of the pets in the shelter," noted Dr. Moyer, who hopes to have Penn Vet's other specialty services participate in the SAM program in the future. "The shelter provides a great educational opportunity for the students to see animals and situations similar to what they will see in their first day of practice."

A growing interest in shelter animal medicine as a career choice is reflected in the number of students opting to take the elective. Sixty-eight out of 105 students in the Class of 2008 will complete the SAM rotation. This includes about 90 percent of the students majoring in small animal medicine. "Over the past 10 years or so, the number of veterinarians working full time in shelters has increased," observed Dr. Moyer. "It has become a more professionally focused field, requiring veterinarians who bring business acumen to the table as well as the desire to save animals."

Looking Ahead

Future plans for the program include obtaining funding for the establishment of an internship/residency in shelter animal medicine as well as a residency in forensic veterinary pathology, which would be the first of its kind in the

country. "With an urban campus and large caseload, we are uniquely positioned to establish a residency of this nature," emphasized Dr. Moyer. "Forensic veterinary pathologists could provide consultative services for investigation of animal cruelty and toxicities. This would ultimately have a direct human benefit since a growing body of evidence links abuse of animals to abuse of humans."

Dr. Moyer also hopes to expand services to the community, obtain research grants, provide continuing education training in pediatric spays and neuters, and build a body of knowledge that will enable Penn Vet to serve as a national resource for shelter animal medicine.

Volunteers Needed

In addition to a world-class shelter animal medicine faculty and collaboration with the city shelter, the continued success of the program requires a sustainable and substantial effort from pro bono veterinarians who are willing to make a commitment to saving animal lives while contributing to the education of Penn Vet students. If you are interested in volunteering at the shelter, contact Daisha Pierce at 215-520-6465 or dpierce@phillypaws.org. 🐾



Photo by Sabina Louise Pierce.