



Subsidized > Janna Schurer
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KELLY PHIPPS (CANINE ACTION PROJECT)

spay-neuter clinics ... worth the cost?

In some northern and First Nations communities in Saskatchewan, packs of free-roaming dogs are harassing schoolchildren, foraging through garbage and becoming a hazard on the roads.

These semi-feral dogs can also be dangerous: the most recent report shows that 86 per cent of dog attacks occur in rural, remote and indigenous communities. Most of these incidences involve more than one dog (1).

Why do these attacks still happen? Dog populations become large because population management is complex, potentially expensive, and quite frankly, not a priority in many communities. For northern and remote communities, access to veterinary care may be limited or non-existent, and in southern communities, cost and distance are also barriers.

For some cultural groups, surgically altering animals is considered disrespectful and unacceptable. Several communities have opted to use "dog shoot days" — a hotly debated method of controlling dog populations. Proponents say they are inexpensive and practical, but for others, they are inhumane, emotionally unpalatable and only a short-term fix.

Subsidized spay-neuter clinics are a potential solution, but they're also contentious. Some clinicians believe that providing free or reduced-cost services steals away business, or that it isn't fair to other low-income clients who pay the full amount for veterinary care.

In my experience, most people who make use of subsidized clinics have never visited a veterinarian with their pet, and based on reports from the U.S., offering a temporary low-cost clinic appears to increase future use of veterinary services(2). Certainly the cost of running a single clinic that can require up to \$15,000 in supplies is an important



consideration in assessing the sustainability of subsidized care.

So what are the short- and long-term effects of offering low cost clinics in rural Saskatchewan? A joint initiative between the Canine Action Project (CAP) and the Battle River Treaty 6 Health Region is hoping to shed light on this question.

Over the past year, they have hosted community meetings, made door-to-door visits to count the number of dogs, consulted elders, collected dog blood and fecal samples, conducted surveys and hosted two low-cost spay/neuter clinics. All of these activities were done with the support of local veterinarians, researchers and animal rescue groups, and student volunteers from the Western College of Veterinary Medicine and the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Technology. Their preliminary results showed that parasite levels, reports of dog packs, and dog bite incidents all dropped in the past year.

But to really understand the long-term effects, we need to continue monitoring changes in each community's dog population

demographics, the incidence of infectious disease in canine populations, and the incidence of dog bites and zoonotic diseases in the human population.

Other positive changes may be more difficult to quantify. Spay/neuter clinics provide an opportunity to educate clients, improve the health and welfare of canine populations and to enhance public health. But communities are unique and dynamic, so what works in one locale may not work in another. Long-term success is dependent on acceptance, uptake and what happens in the community after the spay/neuter clinic has wrapped up.

If you're interested in seeing the impact of these spay-neuter clinics firsthand, the Canine Action Project is recruiting veterinarians, animal health technicians and dog handlers for upcoming clinics that are scheduled for April 25-27, May 23-25 and July 4-7. Please email cap@mcnet.ca for more information.

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2. Frank J, Carlisle-Frank P. "Analysis of programs to reduce overpopulation of companion animals: Do adoption and low-cost spay/neuter programs merely cause substitution of sources?" *Ecological Economics*. 2007;62:740-6.