

Spay-neuter clinics address pet health issues

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By Christina McKenzie



Young residents of Little Pine First Nation watch over a recovering patient during the community's spay-neuter clinic in May 2014. Photos: Kelly Phipps.

It's a Saturday morning in May, and my lab mates and I arrive early for the [Canine Action Project's](#) (CAP) spay-neuter clinic at the elementary school in Little Pine First Nation — a community about 80 kilometres northwest of North Battleford, Sask.

I'm helping out with the clinic, but I'm also here to collect dog poo. It's part of my summer research project — an investigation of internal parasites in high-risk populations of dogs that I'm working on with members of [Dr. Emily Jenkins'](#) lab at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine (WCVN).

We walk in to find the school's gym converted into a temporary veterinary surgery centre that's ready to go for the spay-neuter clinic — all except for some critical anesthesia equipment. Things have ground to a halt until CAP director Kelly Phipps sorts things out and returns from Lloydminster.

Just as we are about to give up and go off on an excrement-hunting expedition, there's a whirlwind of activity: Phipps, a high-energy blonde with an obvious passion for her work, has returned to the building and the clinic is back on track.

Phipps founded CAP a few years ago after realizing that the dog rescue group she was involved with wasn't helping to solve the root problems that lead to overpopulation.

After doing some research, Phipps realized that if she was going to help make a difference, she and other volunteers had to help the people first. “Education and community outreach are really big,” says Phipps, adding that these two factors ultimately determine the impact of clinics like the one in Little Pine.

While the majority of the volunteers remain at the clinic, a small group of us go out into the community for “round up.” CAP volunteers drive around the community to pick up dogs and obtain consent from their owners, many of whom would be unable to get their dogs to the clinic otherwise. This extra effort allows the organization to achieve their amazing success rates. In some areas CAP volunteers have been able to vaccinate, deworm and sterilize 89 per cent of the local dog population.

Round up is an experience and a half. Driving around the community and talking to local people opens my eyes to the magnitude of the issues involved with dog overpopulation and the realities of rural veterinary services.

CAP has been operating in the Battlefords area for two years and has held four spay-neuter clinics, so local people have really come to trust the organization and are very thankful for the offer of veterinary care. While most of the residents that we meet have a strong bond with their animals, many have logistical or fiscal problems that prevent them from taking their animals to the veterinarian.



CAP team members monitor their patients in the clinic’s temporary “recovery area.”

During our travels, we meet an old man who tells us about the battles that took place on his land 200 years ago and a little girl in sparkly pants who fearlessly helps us catch dogs twice her size.

But for me, the real treat is seeing the incredulous look on people’s faces when I ask if I can collect dog feces from their yard to test for parasites.

Once we have collected all of the dogs we can fit into the back of the trucks, we head back to the clinic where things are now running like a well-oiled machine. Veterinarians, veterinary technologists and vet students are among the clinic's crew. Although the fast-paced environment of these clinics is not always ideal for teaching, many volunteers are there to gain valuable technical experience and there's a great deal of peer-to-peer learning.

Some volunteers are pre-veterinary students who want to bulk up their applications while others are foreign-trained veterinarians who are brushing up on their skills before taking the Canadian licensing examination.

Kirby Spring is an animal health technologist-turned-pre-vet student. She attends clinics to keep her skills sharp: "I get to do hundreds of catheters in one weekend. It's like a crash course in veterinary surgery."

During the clinic, I get a chance to practise doing physical exams, placing catheters, giving injections and monitoring surgery under supervision— hands-on experience that I wouldn't get until later in my veterinary program.

While all this is going on, community members are observing the process and learning about dog husbandry, dog welfare, parasites and surgery. Second-year veterinary student Kristine Luck, who is also working in Jenkins' lab, gives tours to local children, explaining the clinic's different stations and describing the surgical procedures.

Community members help out in recovery by monitoring dogs that are waking up from anesthesia. Local residents are also integral to the process of setting up and taking down the clinic.

Reilly A. Checkosis, one of our Battle River Treaty 6 Health Centre representatives, views the clinics as a good, healthy thing for the communities because they help to educate owners on how to take responsibility for the care of their dogs. He views dogs on reserves "not as a health problem, but a health issue that can be solved."

During the weekend, the CAP team spays or neuters 72 animals — an impressive number considering we've only had two or three surgery tables operating at a time.

CAP is equipped to have four tables going at once, but the limiting factor is the number of veterinarians who are able to volunteer their time.



Local children watch a canine surgery during the CAP spay-neuter clinic at Little Pine First Nation in May 2014.

A couple of weeks after the spay-neuter clinic, I finish analyzing the fecal samples that I collected in Little Pine and return the data to the community. The data will help to better inform deworming policies and the public about what's lurking in their dogs' poo.

Surveillance like this is important in rural communities such as Little Pine because local dogs have the potential to come in contact with a wide variety of wildlife and domestic livestock. They can have high concentrations of parasites, some of which can be passed to humans and pose a public health threat.

It's been two years since Phipps was invited in to the First Nations communities surrounding the Battlefords, and since then, she has seen a drastic improvement in the number and welfare of dogs.

What's her ideal outcome for the clinics? "Community members continuing the educational outreach and monitoring of dog populations, maybe even having local people in charge of vaccinations and deworming."

View a series of digital stories that was produced by WCVN researchers in co-operation with members of the Battle River Treaty 6 Area and the Canine Action Project:

- [Healthy Dogs, Healthy Communities](#)
- [Man's Best Friend](#)
- [The Traditional Role of the Dog](#)
- [Who Let the Dogs Out?](#)

CAP welcomes volunteers, especially Canadian-licensed veterinarians. For more information, email medical@canineactionproject.com.

Christina McKenzie is a second-year veterinary student who was part of the WCVM's Undergraduate Summer Research and Leadership program in 2014. Christina's story is part of a series of articles written by WCVM summer research students.