



'SNIP'ping' the Challenges of Over-pup-ulation

SNIP helps pet owners overcome financial challenges that lead to animals without homes and care.

Five years ago, Tom Kepp decided to 'snip' the pet overpopulation problem in the bud when he founded the Spay Neuter Initiative Program, or SNIP, in Collier County. For more than 20 years, Kepp had watched the adoption, rescue and shelter challenges and he saw the spay/neuter drive in a new light. "We can't adopt our way out of pet overpopulation," explained Kepp. "I saw a way to improve our services by reaching out, personally, to the areas of the most need."

Those areas are often where working, low-income families live, including Immokalee and other eastern Collier County communities. Working closely with Collier County Domestic Animal Services, Animal Control services and Gulfcoast Humane Society in Lee County, SNIP has been able to provide free and low-cost sterilization for low-income families in disadvantaged areas. Kepp had the idea to reach out to these communities and offer support.

"Everyone has spay/neuter programs. We have proven that if you go in the field, people want help. Most of the time, dogs are not spayed or neutered because the owners have no way to get their pets to the low-cost clinics. Many families have one vehicle and it is used to go to work every day," said Kepp. As SNIP is a 501c3 organization, they are able to offer free surgeries through donations.

From left: Veterinary technicians Cassie Coccia and Melanie Waite of Gulf Coast Humane Society

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"Some people cannot afford anything, and some can pay a portion of the surgical fee. Fortunately, we are creating more awareness to generate more donations," said Kepp.

SNIP offers spay and neuter foster programs for pregnant dogs and owner surrender, if needed.

Jennifer Galloway, executive director of Gulf Coast Humane Society (GCHS), has worked with SNIP for the past three years, offering services and staff to assist in the program. Each month, GCHS clinic manager Melanie Waite travels with Kepp early in the morning to meet pet owners and transfer their pets to the clinic for surgery.

"We meet at a shopping center at 7 a.m. and return with the dogs about 5 p.m. the same day. It's a gratifying experience to be able to help get these dogs spayed and neutered and keep them from having more puppies," said Waite.

Gulf Coast Humane Society provides a staff of several technicians and two veterinarians to provide services to approximately 25 dogs per month.

"We spay and neuter, give a rabies vaccination, and tattoo the dogs to indicate they have been sterilized," said Galloway.

The goal of SNIP is to end the euthanizing of dogs due to the pet overpopulation crisis. Perhaps no one knows the enormity of pet euthanization better than Darcy Andrade, director of Collier County Domestic Animal Services. She attributes a dramatic decline in dog deaths due to SNIP's services. Since SNIP's inception, the annual intake of dogs at Collier DAS decreased by 21 percent and DAS's euthanasia rates in dogs declined by 75 percent.

"We rely on their group to provide free and low-cost sterilization for animals in our community," said Andrade.

SNIP continues to expand its services. In 2016, SNIP spayed and neutered 320 dogs. In 2017, the number rose to 415 dogs. In the first three months of 2018, the program had already reached 157 surgeries.

Kepp is still an ambassador for adoption and rescue, however, he explains, "For every dog you adopt out, there are 20 more behind

it. ...The most effective and humane way of addressing the pet overpopulation crisis is through community spay/neuter programs combined with public awareness."

Kepp travels about 700 miles each month as he canvases the area for families and dogs that need his help. The first trip was a rough one for Kepp. He had to gain the trust of the community and the dog owners.

"Those first few trips, some people were not sure I would be bringing their dogs back. They were afraid I would just not return them or their dogs would not survive. I now have developed a good rapport with the community and they trust me. I get calls every day to add someone's name to the list. I get the address and go visit every one."

Learn more about SNIP on SnipCollier.org.

Gina Stancel is an avid animal lover who focuses her freelance photography and writing on animals and animal-related causes.

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