



Humane Ohio: Operation FELIX "MASH" Spay/Neuter Clinic



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Humane Ohio: Operation FELIX Spay/Neuter Clinic

Starting up a MASH-style spay/neuter clinic



Operation FELIX (Feline Education and Love Instead of Extermination) was started as a no-cost spay/neuter program altering an average of 70 cats each month. To qualify for the service, clients had to provide proof of federal assistance or live in certain low-to-moderate income areas. Operation FELIX also spayed and neutered stray cats whose caretakers were located anywhere in Lucas County, OH.

This profile details how Humane Ohio was able to get Operation FELIX started. In 2006, Humane Ohio and the Operation FELIX program became a Humane Alliance model clinic. The clinic now rents its own space, is open five days a week, and is designed to perform 8,000 cat and dog spay/neuter surgeries a year.

Stats

- Humane Ohio launched its first Operation FELIX clinic with 82 surgeries.
- In their first year, they sterilized 808 cats.
- By 2004, they were exceeding their surgery goals.
- By the end of 2005, after which the organization began its transition to a stationary clinic, the monthly Operation FELIX clinics were sterilizing up to 2,000 cats per year.

How Cool is That?

At ASPCA® National Outreach, we're especially impressed by:

- The Community Development Block Grant that Humane Ohio received for Operation FELIX
- Humane Ohio's successful targeting and outreach to low-income pet owners
- Humane Ohio's relationships with local vocational high schools and vet tech programs

Adopt or Adapt

You can readily adapt portions of Operation Felix's operations to serve your organization. If you are interested in reaching a low-income audience, exploring new marketing approaches, or looking for new funding sources, check out the of this program.

Humane Ohio: Operation FELIX Spay/Neuter Clinic

MASH-style surgical clinic for no-cost spay/neuter



Humane Ohio's Operation FELIX program initially focused on reducing the unwanted stray cat population in Lucas County (the greater Toledo area, population 460,000). Humane Ohio ran MASH-style clinics at Stautzenberger College's Vet Tech program. Clinics were also held at animal career vocational schools.

To qualify for the service, clients were required to provide proof of federal assistance or live in certain low-to-moderate income areas (census tracts identified by the county as low-income). Operation FELIX also spayed and neutered stray cats whose caretakers were located anywhere in Lucas County.

In 2006, Humane Ohio began the transition to a Humane Alliance model clinic designed to perform 8,000 surgeries a year. Humane Ohio now offers affordable and accessible spaying and neutering to six surrounding counties. They intend to expand out to a 90 mile radius by using a transport van.

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Who They Are and What They Do

Humane Ohio Greater Toledo and its partners
Aimee St. Arnaud, Director - Humane Ohio

The Operation FELIX program answered a need in the Greater Toledo area to address the overpopulation of owned and stray cats. Except for cruelty statutes, cats are not addressed under Ohio law. In Lucas County, no one agency was responsible for stray cats. A few private, non-profit humane groups took in strays when space permitted, but these groups were overburdened with calls.

Local humane groups realized that cat overpopulation was a community problem requiring a community-wide solution. The common goal was fewer stray and unwanted cats for those who love cats— and for those who don't! Humane Ohio's Operation FELIX program met this goal in a humane and effective way by reaching out to caretakers of strays and to owners who could not otherwise afford the spay/neuter surgery.

Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

All the activities of a startup spay/neuter program proceed from two critical prerequisite tasks:

- Identify the need in your community.
- With a core group of key decision-makers, decide what you will do to meet this need. See more about these tasks below, in [Step by Step](#).

People

In your planning stages, you will need to build a small group of key decision-makers who will lead the group and who work well together. See more about this group below, in [Step by Step](#).

- Even though Operation FELIX was a collaboration among several groups, a steering committee of only five people oversaw the program.
- An advisory committee to the steering committee had representatives from each humane group and provided input and feedback from these groups

Operating the spay-neuter program required the following staff and volunteers:

- Scheduling coordinator (part-time, via phone)

Clients call a cell phone to make reservations. The phone coordinator determines if the person qualifies and if so, gives them pertinent details on when they will be scheduled. If they do not qualify, they are referred to low-cost programs. If the person is calling about feral/unowned cats, the message is passed along to the feral cat coordinator to schedule trapping.

- Unowned/feral cat coordinator (part-time)
 - The coordinator returned calls to people needing help getting unowned/feral cats fixed.
 - She had traps available for loan, helped educate and mediate neighbor situations with cats, taught people how to use the traps, or provided trapping herself the night before the clinic if people were unable.
 - She held all ferals in one location the night before and brought them to the clinic in the morning. She held the cats 1-2 days after the clinics before returning them to their colonies.
 - She also kept statistics on the number of unowned/feral cats altered and estimated how many more needed to be done in each colony or location.

- Transport drivers (volunteer)

The Operation FELIX program offered a free service to those who did not have transportation to clinics. The drivers received maps and directions to the different locations and transported cats to and from individual houses.

- The drivers could use their own car or the Operation FELIX mini-van. The coordinator tried to schedule cats in the same area to make it easier for the driver. Cats were picked up the morning of the clinic and transported back the same day.
- Drivers generally volunteered, but if necessary, they were sometimes given a small stipend.
- Humane Ohio checked driving records of transport drivers. They were carried under Humane Ohio's car insurance.
- Vets
 - Vets volunteered to perform the surgeries at the monthly Saturday clinics.
 - They also provided valuable feedback on improving the clinics and getting new vets involved.
- Vet techs
 - At each clinic, four or five vet techs volunteered their time to help with giving the anesthesia, prepping, post-op, and recovery. Their expertise was crucial.
 - Because clinics were held at Stautzenberger College, many students from the college's Vet Tech Program also participated to get hands on experience as part of their humane hour requirements.
 - The Operation FELIX coordinator also talked to first and second year students about homeless pets and why the program was needed.

Up-front Costs and Startup Funding

Costs were \$50,000 for Year One.

- Most of the funds paid for necessary equipment such as traps and all disposable supplies for a full year.
- Two part-time coordinators each were paid \$7,500 to get the program up and running.

Of this, \$15,000 was funded through a Community Development Block Grant and \$10,000 from Toledo City Council discretionary funds. \$25,000 was provided as matching funds from a private donor.

The budget for Year two was \$30,000. Funding came from private individual donations, from the Toledo Animal Shelter who became a humane partner in the second year, Toledo City Council discretionary funds, and a grant from Kenneth A. Scott Charitable Trust.

Time Line

It took six months of planning from the time the idea was developed to the time of the first clinic. Humane Ohio did a trial run of 13 cats before the first major clinic (with 82 cats!) to work out any problems.

- Allow time to get key players on board. For the Operation FELIX program, the groups had to gain support of individual vets. They then took their plan to the local Veterinary Medical Association to have their board vote on supporting the program. This took some time.
- The same was true of getting the vet tech program to allow use of their space.
- You will also use planning time to figure out what supplies are needed and order them, set dates for the clinics, solicit volunteers, and set up written protocols and policies.

Step by Step

1. Do a needs assessment of your community to find out what already exists and what is lacking.

This doesn't need to be a huge, scary undertaking:

- Look at what the biggest problems are in a community and what services and programs already exist to address them.
- Look at what the gaps are and what is still needed. That will help determine what type of program to start.

In Toledo's case, an independent citizen study on animal issues identified stray cats as the number one animal problem countywide.

2. Determine the kind of program that will work in your community.

The MASH-style program worked for Toledo because the city didn't have an existing spay/neuter clinic. Also, veterinarians did not want stray cats and cats with unknown medical histories coming to their clinics. The vets were willing to come to a location to volunteer their services, which is how the MASH idea developed.

3. Research similar organizations.

Find out what worked for them and what didn't. Learn from their experiences so that you don't suffer the same growing pains.

- Visit the organizations in person, if possible.
- Ask if they will share their forms and protocols.

- [Operation Catnip](#) has a great manual called Idealism in Action. It's packed with useful information.
- The [Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon](#) also has materials available through their web site.
- The [Feral Cat Spay/Neuter Project](#) shared their medical protocols.
- The [Homeless Cat Management Team](#) in Pittsburgh shared protocols and attended the first clinic to assist.
- Reviewing these forms and protocols can help you get organized, and help you think of key issues before they arise: How will you handle emergencies? Medical complications? Unexpected deaths?

4. Gather your core group of key-decision makers.

Remember that the larger the group, the more difficult it is to get consensus.

Humane Ohio found that having a small steering committee with an advisory committee of representatives from humane organizations worked well, both for the Operation FELIX program and its advisors.

The advisors could continue to run the day to day operations of their organizations. They did not have to concentrate on the intricate details of the spay/neuter program, but being on the advisory committee still gave them a voice. Humane Ohio was the ideal group to coordinate the program because they don't adopt or house animals and they focus on spay/neuter.

5. Get the right people in the right positions in your program.

- Have a respected and dedicated medical advisor who can help you determine the best protocols and supplies to use.
The Operation FELIX program had a vet who gave advice and a lead tech who played a crucial role in the clinics, helping decide on best practices, what equipment to use, and overseeing the medical end of the clinic.
- Even volunteers, though they are not paid, can make or break your program. The Operation FELIX volunteers donated labor, made financial and in-kind donations, recruited other volunteers, and were great public relations for the program.

6. Determine interest from area vets.

Here are some questions Humane Ohio asked to find out how willing local vets were to participate:

- Would they volunteer their services?
- Would they want cats coming to their clinics or prefer to perform surgeries off site?
- Would they want to work on a weekend?
- How often could they be expected to participate?
- What would make them more likely to participate?
- How fast can the vets do a spay surgery?

For the Operation FELIX program, vets were willing to volunteer once a month on a Saturday at an off-site location. They also provided valuable feedback on improving the clinics and getting new vets involved.

Ultimately, 34 vets from 20 area practices volunteered their services in the monthly clinics. These vets looked forward to this regular contact with their colleagues at the clinics and became strong advocates of the program.

7. Determine how many surgeries you can do, and what supplies you will need to perform them.

- Involve your vets in setting goals for surgeries. Knowing how fast the vets are at surgery will provide you with realistic goals.
- Ask some of your key vets to help you make a list of the necessary equipment and supplies that you will need.

8. Obtain your supplies.

- Obtain some estimates on cost from different companies, such as Columbus Serum, Butler, and Pfizer.
- See how many things you can get donated. The Operation FELIX program was able to get drapes, gowns, and some containers donated through human hospitals.
- Send out a wish list with easily purchased items, such as Q-tips, cotton balls, bleach, paper towels, canned cat food, and hydrogen peroxide. The response to the Operation FELIX wish list resulted in the program not having to purchase any of those supplies for six months.

9. Set goals:

- The number of surgeries
- Your budget for these surgeries
- The time line for implementing your program

10. Raise the money.

Humane Ohio tapped a mixture of private and public sources for the Operation FELIX funding:

- A Community Development Block Grant (\$15,000)
- Toledo City Council discretionary funds (\$10,000)
- Matching funds from a private donor (\$25,000)
- The Toledo Animal Shelter, who became a humane partner in the second year
- A grant from Kenneth A. Scott Charitable Trust
- Numerous individual private donations and business donations

11. Start small!

- Consider a 'trial run' to see how your plans really work. Before its first major clinic, Humane Ohio ran trial clinic with only 13 cats.
- In the beginning, limit yourselves to the number of surgeries you are sure that your program can handle. There's always room to grow.

Results

The Numbers

Year 1:

- Cats sterilized: 808
 - Owned cats: 519
 - Stray/unowned cats: 289
- Vets participating: 31 representing 19 clinics (approximately 200 vet hours donated)

- Vet techs: 12
- Volunteers: 172

Critical Factors

- Doing research before beginning and taking the time to plan
It is much more fun to jump right in, but more important to cover all the bases first so that you can have success! If Operation FELIX had tried to take on too much at once, they would have lost support from humane groups, vets, other supporters, and the community.
- Support from the veterinary community
- Strong core group (vet techs, fund-raisers, coordinators)
- Setting up a system where many groups are involved in collaborative process but one neutral group coordinates the details of the program
- Targeting surgeries to low-income areas and to stray cats. This not only reached those truly in need, it also helped gain veterinary support for the program.

Thinking Outside the Box

Humane Ohio responded to the challenges of an ambitious mission with some very creative and effective ideas:

- Putting together a true community collaboration
The Operation FELIX program involved not only animal welfare organizations, but municipal government, schools, and neighborhoods. Working successfully with such diverse groups was key both to obtaining funding and to reaching the owners most in need of no-cost spay/neuter services for their cats.
- Working with the local vet tech school
Vet tech schools are wonderful partners for animal welfare groups. Stautzenberger's vet tech program allowed Humane Ohio to hold the Operation FELIX clinics on site, donated supplies, and stored all equipment in the building so Humane Ohio didn't have to move in and out every month. The students benefited from hands-on experience. They also learned first hand about the problems of homeless animals. Each year, Operation FELIX volunteers spoke with first and second year students about the importance of spay/neuter and responsible pet care. As an added bonus, Stautzenberger did fund raisers for the Operation FELIX program.
To learn if you have a vet tech school near you, visit <http://www.avma.org/>
- Working with vocational high schools.
They too can be great partners. There were two in the Toledo area and both allowed Humane Ohio to hold clinics on site. Both also allowed Operation FELIX volunteers to speak to students about animal welfare issues. Like the vet tech school, the vocational high schools did fund-raisers for Operation FELIX.
- Asking for a thank-you letter instead of payment
Owners unable to afford a financial donation for the surgery can write a thank-you letter. These letters provide tangible value: Humane Ohio includes them in grant applications and requests for funds.
- Using multi-language advertising
Having done their homework about the target owner population, Humane Ohio advertised the Operation FELIX program in English and Spanish.
- Sending a flyer with rent checks

The city housing authority agreed to include Operation FELIX flyers with rent checks to their government-subsidized housing rentals.

- Applying for - and getting! - a community development block grant

How They Feel About What They Did

Humane Ohio and its partners developed a model of collaboration between local organizations and are now able to share their experiences with other communities struggling with the same issues. They have helped Defiance County set up a clinic; they extended their services to shelters and rescues in surrounding counties; they coordinated a similar program in Columbus, OH.

Their Next Steps

In 2005, Humane Ohio obtained its own building. The following year, they began the transition to a Humane Alliance model clinic.

The Humane Ohio goals for 2006 and beyond are:

- Develop an effective marketing program to reach their target audience of those with limited income, feral caregivers, and shelters and rescues. The plan will include print, radio, TV, and working with governmental and social service agencies.
- Increase surgery totals to 8,000 animals a year.
- Serve as a training facility for other programs wanting to learn how to start up high-volume clinics and for Ohio veterinarians wanting to learn high-volume surgical techniques.

Some Words of Wisdom

What Worked

- Involving many aspects of the community: vet tech school, high schools, vets, humane groups, city council
- Getting the right people in the right roles
- Starting small; not trying to do too much too soon
- Offering affordable and accessible surgeries to those in need
- Doing targeted outreach through door-to-door contacts, mailings, and working with neighborhood groups

An important benefit of reaching the right population is that this population continues the outreach on its own. Thanks to word of mouth advertising, the Operation FELIX program actually had a waiting list.

- Having a transport program

Many cat owners and caretakers in the target population do not have reliable transportation. Also, Humane Ohio found a majority of people don't have carriers for their cats. The trip to the clinic is the first time taking the cat out of the house because they don't go to a vet. The Operation FELIX drivers carried extra traps and carriers to safely transport the cats.

What Didn't

Aimee St. Arnaud says they learned not only from their successes, but also from some missteps:

- Thinking that they had to do everything for people, and that people wouldn't take any responsibility

"At first we provided transport for everyone because we didn't trust they would show up. In Year Two, we started asking if people could bring the cats themselves to our clinics and received a very positive response.

We had a very small no-show rate (only 3-4 per clinic out of a regular 30-40 owned cats scheduled). We still provided transportation for those in need, but having owners provide transport when they could lessened the burden on us."

- Making assumptions about why these owners didn't alter their cats

"We pre-judged people and thought they didn't care and weren't responsible pet owners. In fact, we have received an overwhelming positive response from people. They tell us how much they appreciate the service and that they wanted to do this before but couldn't afford it."

- Not asking for donations from owners

"It became very tiring and a financial burden to always be worried about funding.

While the Operation FELIX program still provided the service at no cost, we asked everyone for a donation of what they can afford. We found that most people will give \$10 - \$20.

If they could not give, we asked them for a letter of support on how the program helped them. We include those letters with grant applications and applications to potential funders."

- Not cross training people

"People move away, or move on. The program needs to be sustainable no matter who is in charge, but during our first year, the program was too reliant on just a few people.

Creating written job descriptions, making people team leaders, and dividing up tasks into smaller jobs has helped ensure the program can and will continue."

If They Could Do it Again, They Would...

- Ask more!
 - It took Humane Ohio until Year Two to realize that volunteers can bring a lot more than just coming to the clinic for three hours. They are willing to donate items from a wish list, recruit other volunteers, offer their professional services, and more.
 - Once Humane Ohio asked, they found a volunteer willing to purchase an autoclave and scale for them.
 - A volunteer at a Fortune 500 company produced a nine-minute video on the clinic that was worth \$10,000 in kind.
- Find ways to keep supplies on site rather than constantly transporting to and from a storage shed. That can be exhausting.
- Put together a how-to manual with job descriptions, policies, and protocols as they went. It is a lot harder to go back and recreate them later.

Be Prepared For

- Critics
 - Some people don't understand what you are doing or why.
 - Have FAQ sheets prepared that you can give out to the public. Give them to your volunteers so they can represent your program well when talking to others.
- Anything!
 - Sometimes you have to roll with the punches. You may have too many volunteers, or not enough. The same goes with cats!
 - You may run into a medical situation that you are not prepared for or a volunteer who is upset with a policy or procedure.

- Be flexible and remember why you are doing the clinics. It's all about the animals!

Tell Us What You Think

With the information we've provided, can you start a program like this one in your organization? [Click here](#) to send an email to ASPCA® National Outreach with your feedback and questions.

Humane Ohio: Thumbnail Sketch

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Humane Ohio Greater Toledo provides community education and sterilization programs for cats and dogs through collaborative efforts with shelters and rescue groups in the Greater Toledo area. Through its transport program for low-cost spay/neuter services, Humane Ohio reaches six counties in northwest Ohio and Michigan.

Staff

Full-time, paid employees:

- 3 veterinary technicians
- 1.5 full-time equivalent veterinarians (filled by 3 part-time vets)
- 1 operations director
- 1 clinic director

The position of executive director is unpaid.

Operating Budget

For 2007, \$360,000

Business Type

501(c) (3) nonprofit