The Pets for Life (PFL) program of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) reaches out to people and pets in under-served communities to extend free animal care resources, services, and information. By addressing the critical lack of accessible, affordable pet care and general wellness information in specific communities, PFL helps animals by empowering the people who care for them. The PFL model incorporates strategic door-to-door outreach, builds a consistent community presence, and uses an extensive follow-up process.

The HSUS currently operates direct care PFL programs in Atlanta, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In Fall 2012, the PFL/PetSmart Charities® Mentorship Grant was created to teach 10 local animal welfare organizations how to implement the PFL approach in their communities and to add PFL style community outreach to their overall organizational work. Grant recipients applied and adhered to the PFL philosophy in order to elevate pet wellness and achieve spay/neuter surgeries within an under-served audience—an audience typically unaware of spay/neuter benefits or unable to afford the surgery. In addition to data from these 14 markets, this report includes data, when available, from all markets that have worked with The HSUS since 2010 to incorporate direct community outreach into their approaches.

The PFL philosophy encourages a focus on humans along with their companion pets. Through this approach, organizations can build strong relationships and trust within a segment of the pet-owning population that has largely gone untouched by animal service providers. Furthermore, by offering resources and information with respect and understanding, the human-animal bond is elevated, quality of life is improved, and ultimately, community suffering and overpopulation is reduced. Bridging this gap is necessary, both to reach people and pets most often in need, and to create long-term, sustainable change.
Through the reach of the PFL program and the PFL/PetSmart Charities Mentorship Grant, data from most regions of the U.S. has been collected. The data demonstrates that regardless of socioeconomic status and variations in culture, people undoubtedly love their pets. When supplied with accurate information and a positive connection, people find it easier to make the healthiest decisions for their pets, including spay/neuter.

In 2011, *Pets for Life: A New Community Understanding* was released with data collected from community outreach events held across the country in 2010 and 2011. The following report expands on that information by incorporating findings based on additional data collected from comprehensive community outreach in under-served communities through 2013. The information included was collected at community outreach events and also from daily outreach in the community, an important addition to this report.

As the program has evolved over the last several years, many lessons have been learned and appropriate adjustments and enhancements have been implemented. Data collected for over 34,000 pets and their 27,000 owners has confirmed that community outreach is a necessary component to achieve transformational change. The following information is key to a successful and sustainable outreach program.

**OBJECTIVES BASED ON LEARNING:**
- Conduct in-depth community assessment to determine area of focus
- Adhere to consistent and strategic door-to-door outreach in the area of focus
- Focus on building strong relationships with clients
- Use comprehensive planning and tracking database tool
- Implement thorough client follow-up process
“Clarisse took months to open the door for us, and in fact, used to slam the door on us, but one day opened the door and greeted us through tears and a hug. She told us that her husband had recently died, and that the dog, Starr, had been his. Clarisse had been looking for our information because she knew that we might be able to help her. She’s since had her dog spayed through the program and has become a great advocate and friend to our outreach team.” —JILL KLINE, WISCONSIN HUMANE SOCIETY

METHODOLOGY: QUALITY AND FOCUSED QUANTITY

The PFL program approach defines the process of how outreach teams reach people with unaltered pets and achieve high-value spay/neuter surgeries (for pets who would not be spayed or neutered without this type of program). An essential component of PFL is building relationships with an audience of pet owners, most of whom have had little interaction with animal service providers. For those who have interacted, the experience has been largely negative or without a real connection. Spay/neuter is a priority, but comprehensive pet wellness, understanding of the human condition, and seeing how these are linked are also important.

When trust is built and compassion is extended beyond the pet, spay/neuter surgeries come more easily. Personal, consistent community outreach is the only path to reach people who will not seek out spay/neuter services or are unable to afford or access veterinary care on their own.

Outreach workers on the streets in communities of focus, knocking on doors, shaking hands, and meeting people results in high-value spay/neuters and relationships that allow information sharing on general pet wellness. The program thrives on quality and focused quantity.

“Carlos is a Camden resident who cautiously approached our van one evening while we were returning pets to their owners. He said, ‘I saw you this morning taking the dogs, but now that I see you are bringing them back, I know you are OK.’ He had several cats and dogs that needed assistance with spay/neuter and vaccines, plus he took care of many community cats. He was known on his block as an ‘animal guy’. With our help, he was able to have every one of his indoor and outdoor animals fixed and vaccinated, and he soon began telling his neighbors about us. Next thing we knew, we were introduced to a woman with several chihuahuas, all inbred and continuing to breed. Since she only spoke Spanish, Carlos was our translator. She was so happy to find help for her dogs, and we fixed every one of them for her. Carlos now calls us if he finds a new neighborhood cat coming to his yard rather than having multiple litters this summer, he only saw one litter on his entire block. Carlos volunteered at our June 8th outreach event and was a great spay/neuter advocate, especially for the Spanish-speaking community.” —CHRISTIE ROGÉRO, ANIMAL WELFARE ASSOCIATION

OUTREACH STRATEGY

Community outreach is the foundation of the PFL approach; everything is centered around creating a visible, consistent presence in the community. For this reason, identifying and committing to an area of focus is necessary. Through the community assessment process, workers in PFL markets identify a segment of their community where the program is to be implemented. In the day-to-day outreach in these neighborhoods, 96% of the pets met are unaltered.
Pertinent information is first gathered for the market, then narrowed down to a zip code or two. Although poverty is not the only indicator, on average, 33% of the population in PFL focus areas live below the poverty level. Some of the other information gathered and considered is crime statistics, education levels, availability of animal services, and access to big box retailers. Next, outreach workers physically explore and get to know the area, identifying a specific area where door-to-door work begins.

From there, the work happens organically and grows from the inside out while maintaining focus, which is paramount to success. Alternatively, spreading the work too thin means not building strong relationships and losing all that comes with them, missing or overlooking community advocates, drifting from strategy, and inevitably not bringing about the societal and cultural shift needed for sustainability.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH EVENTS

Nothing replaces building a consistent presence through door-to-door outreach, but one of the tools also employed is holding community outreach events within the area of focus. These events offer free vaccinations and are publicized only by distributing flyers and talking directly with people in the community of focus. This approach to promoting the events draws hundreds of people and pets out from the target community, within a few short hours on a Saturday. These events also provide the opportunity to build goodwill in the community.

Due to targeted marketing and convenience of venues within the community, we reach the right audience. On average, 78% of pets in attendance are unaltered, compared to 96% of the pets we meet door-to-door and on the streets in the community. At events, every attendee is engaged on spay/neuter in a very open and positive way. On average, around half of the unaltered pets sign up for spay/neuter the day of the event. For those who do not, information is collected and owners are later engaged by phone and through home visits, generating even more sign-ups for spay/neuter. The community outreach events are a very useful tool, but to see maximum benefit, follow-up and more in-depth engagement beyond that day must take place.

THOROUGH FOLLOW-UP PROCESS LEADS TO HIGHER SPAY/NEUTER COMPLETION RATES

Outreach teams employ a specific, detailed process to gain spay/neuter completions. The PFL approach assumes that once a client says “yes” to spay/neuter, the responsibility is on the organization’s team to ensure the surgery is completed. This requires a shift in attitude and a rigid follow-up process with all clients that must be adhered to at all times. Many spay/neuter programs struggle with surgery compliance, yet when the responsibility is shifted away from the client, completion rates increase significantly.

A “yes” to spay/neuter kicks off the PFL spay/neuter process and is bound by the transfer of a voucher that resembles the shape and size of a U.S. dollar. The organization information and value of the appointment package of services is listed on the voucher. Vouchers are a concrete representation of what the client is receiving and a visual way for them to share information on spay/neuter with others in their community—they represent a client saying “yes” to spay/neuter and create the understanding that the pet will be provided a free veterinarian appointment that includes the surgery as well as rabies and parvo/distemper vaccinations. Most clients are very proud to receive something so valuable and appreciate what is being offered.
“We meet clients the morning of their pet’s surgery at the spay/neuter clinic and it never fails when they see us ... they tell us how nervous they are and how glad they are that we are there. So many of these pets would have never been spayed/neutered had we not built a strong relationship with the clients using our follow-up process. Fear can paralyze anyone, even when someone is appreciative and excited for the opportunity. Through the consistent contact we have with our clients, we’ve seen over and over again: trust replaced fear.”—ASHLEY MUTC, PFL PHILADELPHIA MANAGER

Adhering to this process, markets implementing the PFL approach have an 89% spay/neuter completion rate overall. Two primary benefits of this focus on customer service and high completion rates are:

[1] People and their pets do not fall through the cracks and stronger relationships are built with the clients. This results in clients spreading the word to their family, friends, and neighbors about the positive experience. It creates a conversation about spay/neuter within a community that previously had little to no familiarity with the issue. This is extremely important in obtaining sustainable change.

[2] Spay/neuter providers can depend on the surgeries scheduled to actually show up and therefore are more likely to continue providing services (and even increase capacity as the number grows).

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**SPAY AND NEUTER PROCESS**

[1] Voucher issued: Gift certificate type vouchers, about the same size as a dollar bill and including the cost of the spay/neuter package, are utilized so clients have something tangible and know the value of the free service being provided

[2] Client is called within 24–48 hours of receiving the voucher

[3] Client is called 24–48 hours before the scheduled appointment

[4] If the surgery is scheduled more than a week out from the time the voucher is issued, the client is called every week until the surgery

[5] Client is called within 24 hours after the surgery is completed

[6] If at any time the client cannot be reached by phone, an in-person follow-up visit is made with the client
“It has certainly been a learning process. The best part has been seeing those initial touches from last year make the decision to spay/neuter now. It really shows how the program works and the fact that it takes time to build the momentum and become a vehicle for social change.”—MONICA WYLIE, THE HUMANE SOCIETY FOR TACOMA & PIERCE COUNTY

Although extremely important, the PFL program’s success is not measured solely by the number of pets who are sterilized. Some of the most critical work is building a positive reputation and consistent presence in the community where the people realize they can rely on the PFL team for a variety of information and services.

PFL teams have implemented systems to track an immediate and ongoing follow-up process for clients who say yes to spay/neuter, clients who need more engagement on spay/neuter, and clients who need assistance with wellness care. Clients are always given the opportunity to ask questions and to make decisions at their own pace. All contact is documented through a comprehensive database tool so no one falls through the cracks and engagement is ongoing.

DATA COLLECTION
Through daily outreach in the community and at outreach events, specific and consistent data is gathered from clients about themselves and each of their pets. The information collected provides insight needed to ensure:

[1] The community is being served effectively
[2] The methodology is successfully implemented
[3] An audience not traditionally represented in national or local statistics is highlighted

The data collected through the PFL approach allows animal welfare teams to view their work and audience from a removed (from street level), quantitative perspective. Most PFL clients have never taken their pets to see a veterinarian, nor have they ever called or visited the local shelter or animal control for any reason. Such findings reveal a great deal about clients and their pets, helping animal welfare teams work more effectively in reaching and relating to this largely untouched audience.

Organized, consistent data collection greatly supports building long-term relationships with pet owners in the area of focus. To record details of the relationship building, PFL created a database specific to this philosophy—one about the growth and evolution of a client relationship and how the PFL connection shifts the hearts and minds of these pet owners. The database provides a place to track successes, the ability to identify trends, and most importantly, aids groups in their day-to-day work.
WHAT WE KNOW

In over 20 markets across the United States since 2010, outreach teams have hit the streets and started their quest to meet over 34,000 cats, dogs, and even a few rabbits in their PFL areas of focus. On average, outreach workers connect several times each month with well over 500 pet owners, a combination of new and repeat clients. Since the start of the program, over 27,000 pet owners have had at least one — and usually multiple — interactions with the teams.

Overall, fewer cats than dogs were served in the PFL communities. This is primarily due to the large numbers of pets met at community outreach events, which are less conducive to serving cats because they are held mostly outdoors and require people to stand in line for an extended period of time. Although varying somewhat across all markets, those with higher percentages of cats served had more resources to serve community-owned and free-roaming cats (such as partnerships with Trap Neuter Return (TNR) specific groups) and a greater capacity to provide transportation for the pets to spay/neuter surgery. Additionally, many clients did not immediately reveal or claim ownership of free-roaming cats, so additional time was needed to build trust and identify the caretaker. Programs reach a higher ratio of cats the longer they operate in each community.

Outreach teams meet a strong majority of unaltered pets in under-served neighborhoods. The incidence rate of unaltered pets is 87% overall, meaning that nearly 9 in 10 cats and dogs are unaltered at the time of the first meeting.

Outreach teams collectively engaged people with well over 9,000 toy breed and over 5,000 pitbull type dogs. The prevalence of toy breed dogs comes as a surprise to many animal welfare organizations but is consistently found in PFL communities. This fact is important to keep in mind when teams consider sharing information about topics such as puppy mills and adoption, as well as when they work to dispel myths about pet companionship. Regardless of the species or breed they have, most people have not had access to quality wellness information and care resources for their pets.

A strong majority of pets in PFL communities have not seen a veterinarian before meeting the PFL outreach teams. This is due to the lack of access to affordable veterinary services, not a lack of interest or care from the people. Most of the areas of focus do not have veterinary offices and the closest ones are miles away and unreachable by these pet owners. The distance that must be traveled to receive veterinary care and the lack of engagement with pet owners in PFL communities have created a social norm of not having a personal relationship with a veterinarian.
As mentioned previously, the PFL program uses a thorough follow-up process once a client says “yes” to spay/neuter. The percentage of unaltered pets being signed up for spay/neuter is an important indicator for the teams as they are reminded that they need to consistently engage clients who haven’t yet said “yes”. They can see over time how frequent contact with clients can move them along the spectrum from a seemingly definitive “no” on spay/neuter to a “yes”. Although the rate can fluctuate, it consistently hovers around 75%.

The completion rate is the rate at which scheduled spay/neuter appointments result in completed surgeries. This indicator is dynamic and monitored closely by the outreach teams. This process helps track how many surgeries are actually completed, as compared to how many appointments are made. It’s a significant metric because a “yes” to spay/neuter is only a success if the surgery is completed. After community outreach events, where hundreds of unaltered pets are met, teams experience a dip in their completion rate since many appointments are made but scheduled out over several weeks or more.

However, the most consistent completion rate by teams overall is 89%. This is an extremely significant number, considering that for many clients, spay/neuter is a new concept, personal transportation is often unreliable and challenging, many clinics are very far from the community of focus, and many clients have to wait weeks for appointments. All of these factors are reasons why employing the PFL spay/neuter follow-up process is imperative. Without continuous engagement of the clients and focusing on quality customer service, most surgeries would not happen.

The conversion rate is the percentage of unaltered pets met through PFL community outreach and subsequently spayed/neutered through the program. Two thirds of all unaltered pets healthy enough for surgery are spayed/neutered through the PFL program, consistently resulting in about 6 or 7 in every 10 pets being altered if the clients are consistently engaged by the outreach teams. For The HSUS markets where this methodology has been employed for two years or more, the conversion rate is 70% and above. With almost 90% of pets in under-served communities being unaltered, and with pet owners agreeing to spay or neuter 70% of those pets through the PFL program, the familiarity and comfort with spay/neuter dramatically increases and creates an entire societal shift in the community on this issue.

The conversion rates are mostly consistent, yet like completion rates, fall temporarily after community outreach events. The conversion rate is helpful information for the teams to track because they can feel confident that more than half of the unaltered pets they meet will be altered through the program.

One piece of the PFL approach that is still relatively new to most animal welfare organizations and often not understood as a necessary part of creating cultural shifts and achieving high-value spay/neuters is providing general wellness pet care and supplies in addition to free spay/neuter surgeries. Some clients need time to fully trust the outreach teams, and a small step in reaching that trust may be as simple as providing a leash and collar. Spay/neuter obviously prevents reproduction, which is a big-picture goal, but some dogs and cats simply need an indoor crate or scratching post to transition indoors with their families and immediately improve their quality of life, or a dose of flea/tick medication so that their owners don’t surrender them.
A total of 14 outreach teams that implemented the PFL approach in their markets were tracked closely on these services. In addition to the 16,376 spay/neuter surgeries provided in these markets, a minimum of 36,684 medications and/or supplies including vaccinations, microchips, dewormer, flea/tick treatment, antibiotics, collars, leashes, crates, and food were given to 23,300 pets, when needed, to increase wellness. The spay/neuter surgeries were achieved and tracked over a 15-month timeframe, from late 2012 through the end of 2013 for most markets, while the medications, services, and supplies were provided and tracked in just the calendar year of 2013. Completed spay/neuter surgeries and these other services are consistently increasing across all of the markets and have resulted in a significant improvement in overall wellness in the communities of focus.

If the organization is willing and able to transport a great number of animals, spay/neuter numbers as well as completion and conversion rates will increase. This is especially the case when the spay/neuter provider is not in the community of focus (most are not) and when transporting community cats.

The outreach teams in each market work with varying degrees of transport need, but regardless of the need they ensure that nearly all scheduled pets get to their appointments. However, many groups with lower completion rates express the need to provide transportation to more clients and have been working on plans to offer more transport services through staff assignments and volunteer programs. The organizations that provide transportation to a large number of clients mainly do so because their spay/neuter providers are a great distance from their area of focus.

Some level of transportation is needed in every market. Not only does it increase completion rates and make the follow-up process easier, it also serves as an additional incentive to provide for the clients who are at first opposed to spay/neuter. The work can be done successfully with minimal transportation provided, but having a transport component is strongly encouraged.

In addition to having little or no engagement with the veterinary community, the PFL areas of focus uncovered pet owners that do not have a relationship with, or an awareness of, local shelter and/or animal control/care services. This is important information to know for many reasons:

- The people in under-served communities are viable candidates for adoption. Connecting with this audience on adoption has become an area of exploration for some markets.
- The “build it and they will come” approach will not reach this audience. Pet owners in under-served communities are not being reached by traditional and conventional marketing methods currently being used by most animal service providers.
- Using shelter and/or animal control statistics as the only measurement for a community’s success on companion animal issues is limited and misses a large segment of pets and pet owners.
**BENEFITS BEYOND MEASUREMENT**

Aside from the many trackable findings, other unmeasurable results stemmed from the relationships developed through this program. The domino effect includes significant social media communication, in-person visits between groups to help each other, basic relationship building among organizations, and connecting to community-wide groups that are traditionally not partners in animal welfare work. This remarkable networking and sharing of knowledge nationwide is proving to also have a positive impact on overall organizational best practices, such as better targeting of spay/neuter programs, opening adoptions to new audiences, and increasing pet retention resources and wellness care for families contacting the shelter about relinquishment.

“We started organizing visits to our local shelter for our clients and found they were overwhelmed and surprised by all the beautiful dogs and cats needing homes. Over and over our clients said they had no idea such good dogs and cats were waiting at the shelter. By providing our clients with transportation, assisting them through the adoption application and interview process and covering the adoption fee we have opened up a whole new world, that was never an option before, for our clients and for those pets in the shelter.” —RACHEL THOMPSON, PFL ATLANTA MANAGER

A strong majority (80%) of pets met were born within the area of focus, with more than half coming from family, friends, or neighbors. Many clients also took in pets found in their community or kept puppies and kittens from their own pet’s litters.

While PFL clients are more likely to have found their cats (38%) than their dogs (7%), dogs are more likely to come from family, friends, or a neighbor (62%) than cats (39%), and are also more likely to come from a breeder (dogs: 9%, cats: 1%).

With the large and easily accessible number of available pets in the neighborhood, most people have not gone elsewhere to find one. Many of the people met are natural “rescuers” and are “adopting” their pets using informal methods. Coupling this with the fact that the majority of people have not had contact with their local shelter presents an obvious opportunity to address both the supply and demand of pet overpopulation.
What we learned previously about people and pets in under-served communities through PFL and shared in the first findings report has been confirmed by even more people and pets in more cities in this report: removing financial barriers and creating access to pet information and wellness care is the key to improving the quality of life for millions of pets in our country, to keeping families intact, and to increasing spay/neuter rates. By empowering pet owners, this approach creates a familiarity with spay/neuter, develops new community norms, and truly focuses on human behavior, resulting in systemic impact and transformational change.

The findings contain valuable information for anyone working to improve companion animal health and welfare. For animal welfare organizations and advocates, by sharing the details of this work, it is our intention to influence a shift towards an understanding of how animal welfare issues fit within a complex set of human circumstances. It is essential to build trust and genuine relationships, as well as to make animal care resources and information far more accessible.

More proactive work is needed to prevent animal suffering and homelessness by taking a critical look at where the greatest need exists in our communities and making sure we are inclusive in our efforts. We should continue to strive for diversity in every aspect of our work and adjust our approach to meet the needs of an ever-changing society. As a field, we cannot ignore the story told with this data if we truly want to create more humane communities.

For veterinary professionals, animal service providers, and policy makers, it is our wish that these findings be used to inform a critical assessment of how services are provided and what barriers exist that prevent many people with pets from accessing basic animal health care.

“Peter was the first ‘neighborhood breeder’ that we encountered … with Peter we learned that just because we see what someone may call an inhumane way to keep a dog, the pets are still loved and cared for to the best of the owner’s ability. If you didn’t know better you’d think that Peter bred all of the dogs on his property. Many of the dogs were rescued off the street. Peter would feel bad any time he saw a stray roaming around. Even though he knew he had too many at home, he just couldn’t stand seeing a dog on the streets. A year after working with Peter, we are just beginning to inch him down the spectrum to begin to take better care of his pets and also lighten his load. Each time we visit Peter, we find tidbits of progression towards making Peter a part of our own team.”

—JACOB STROMAN, JEFFERSON SPCA

The lack of access has a profound impact on the well-being of a community, from public health and safety to taxpayer dollars that fund animal control and other initiatives set up to respond to community animal problems.

We hope the animal welfare field, the veterinary community, and other stakeholders will continue to find ways to work together to address these concerns and make use of new solutions that benefit all interests. To create long-term change, lessen suffering and reduce shelter intake, we must embrace a new perspective.

For more information on how to start your own community outreach program or implement pieces of this approach into your existing work, visit www.humanesociety.org/pfl-toolkit. The Pets for Life toolkit provides step-by-step information to guide you through the process.

— From Pets for Life, An In-Depth Community Understanding by The Humane Society of the United States