

INVESTING IN SPAY/NEUTER

*An analysis of the community-wide economic
value of cat/dog spay/neuter*

Presented by:

Taos Feral Feline Friends



A Message from Our President and Founder

Taos Feral Feline Friends (TFFF) began as a non-profit cat shelter in 2004. The first residents at our shelter were cats scheduled for euthanasia that I rescued from the community shelter. When our facility quickly reached capacity, I realized that animal shelters alone could not adequately protect animals or the community from overpopulation.

I became a spay/neuter advocate. TFFF began offering free spay/neuter for pet cat adoptions and free Trap, Neuter and Return (TNR) for feral cats. In 2023, we formed a Spay/Neuter Services division and founded a veterinary clinic providing free spay/neuter for all cats and dogs in Taos County.

However, in many communities across New Mexico, there is little or no access to affordable spay/neuter. Commercial veterinary clinics charge hundreds of dollars for each spay/neuter and compound that with vaccination charges. Many households cannot afford such expenses even for just one animal, much less for an entire litter. The result: unwanted litters of animals thrust into the community, each requiring a lifetime of care, an expensive long-term obligation. The cost of this care diminishes community financial resources for vital human needs: education, child care, health care, starting or growing a business, etc.

This report is intended to offer a simple, factual financial rationale for investing in spay/neuter. It is designed for lawmakers, executive decision-makers and business persons who are not committed animal advocates, who view potential spay/neuter investments as competing with funding for many other community priorities. Nonetheless, I hope it will also enlighten animal welfare workers and volunteers by offering them an unemotional argument to supplement their discussions with spay/neuter donors and funders.

The Affordable Spay/Neuter Act, effective in 2020 but expiring July 1, 2026, is a critical source of spay/neuter funding in New Mexico, supporting dozens of programs across the state. We urge the NM legislature to renew the legislation. We also encourage NM county and municipal government leaders to expand their investment in spay/neuter.

I think you'll be surprised how the numbers turned out! Investing in spay/neuter is more than good animal welfare... it's a fantastic investment in human welfare.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Leanne Mitchell'.

Leanne Mitchell, President and Founder
Taos Feral Feline Friends

BACKGROUND

Cat/dog overpopulation is a serious problem throughout New Mexico. Safety protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic forced local veterinary clinics to slash available appointments. People often just chose to stay home during the pandemic. Cat/dog spay/neuter was deferred, unintentionally triggering litter after litter of excess births, many of which became homeless strays. In Taos County, the community animal shelter was so overwhelmed they non-renewed their town and county contracts and ultimately closed their doors. No community shelter served Taos for over two years.

Increased funding for spay/neuter is the only investment that can humanely and effectively address cat/dog overpopulation and prevent disastrous outcomes such as shelter closures.

OVERVIEW

This report will determine the investment return expected from paying for spay/neuter surgery (the investment) and achieving a reduction in future animal care expenses (the payback). In this construct, the investor is a donor, grantor, business or government-entity providing the money and the payback is earned by the community in which the service occurs. Note that it doesn't matter whether a new litter is retained by the owner, adopted out to others in the community or abandoned to an animal shelter – the community-wide costs of care for the litter are unaffected.

The analysis does not attempt to prescribe an economic value to the lives of cats and dogs. It does not estimate the economic benefit that a guard or guide dog provides, nor the emotional benefits derived from pet ownership. The former only occurs in a minority of situations and the latter is intangible. It also does not estimate the additional community costs resulting from cat/dog overpopulation such as increased animal bite injuries, increased needs for animal control personnel and equipment and increased demands for constructing or expanding animal shelter facilities. To summarize, the analysis focuses strictly on the direct cost of spay/neuter vs. the direct cost of future animal care.

The analysis requires several assumptions. Each assumption is based upon credible public and private data sources. Each selected assumption has been explicitly adjusted to guarantee that the computations produce results well below realistic expectations. Following the summary of results, the sources and rationale for each assumption will be discussed.

The computations are based on the cost of providing two surgeries: one male and one female cat or dog. However, for determining the reduction in births, only the female spay is considered. Ignoring the impact of male neuter is an example of biasing the returns lower.

The annual rates of return are determined for a few different scenarios: spay/neuter performed at a lower cost non-profit clinic vs. a commercial clinic, animal care costs with no inflation vs. 2.5% annual inflation and two alternate models of reproduction.

COMPUTATION DETAILS							
		Litter Model A			***Litter Model B***		
		No Cost Inflation			***No Cost Inflation***		
		\$625 per animal per year			***\$625 per animal per year***		
		Lives	Non-Profit	Commercial	Lives	Non-Profit	Commercial
	YEAR	Reduced	Vet Clinic	Vet Clinic	Reduced	Vet Clinic	Vet Clinic
Surgery Cost 1 Male & 1 Female>			-\$350	-\$740		-\$350	-\$740
Annual Animal Care Savings>							
	1	2	\$1,250	\$1,250	4	\$2,500	\$2,500
	2	4	\$2,500	\$2,500	4	\$2,500	\$2,500
	3	6	\$3,750	\$3,750	4	\$2,500	\$2,500
	4	8	\$5,000	\$5,000	4	\$2,500	\$2,500
	5	10	\$6,250	\$6,250	4	\$2,500	\$2,500
	6	12	\$7,500	\$7,500	4	\$2,500	\$2,500
	7	14	\$8,750	\$8,750	4	\$2,500	\$2,500
	8	16	\$10,000	\$10,000	4	\$2,500	\$2,500
	9	18	\$11,250	\$11,250	4	\$2,500	\$2,500
	10	20	\$12,500	\$12,500	4	\$2,500	\$2,500
Total Care Cost Savings>			\$68,750	\$68,750		\$25,000	\$25,000
Annual Investment Return>			439%	239%		714%	338%
		Litter Model A			***Litter Model B***		
		2.5% Annual Cost Inflation			***2.5% Annual Cost Inflation***		
		\$625 per animal per year			***\$625 per animal per year***		
		Lives	Non-Profit	Commercial	Lives	Non-Profit	Commercial
	YEAR	Reduced	Vet Clinic	Vet Clinic	Reduced	Vet Clinic	Vet Clinic
Surgery Cost 1 Male & 1 Female>			-\$350	-\$740		-\$350	-\$740
Annual Animal Care Savings>							
	1	2	\$1,281	\$1,281	4	\$2,563	\$2,563
	2	4	\$2,627	\$2,627	4	\$2,627	\$2,627
	3	6	\$4,038	\$4,038	4	\$2,692	\$2,692
	4	8	\$5,519	\$5,519	4	\$2,760	\$2,760
	5	10	\$7,071	\$7,071	4	\$2,829	\$2,829
	6	12	\$8,698	\$8,698	4	\$2,899	\$2,899
	7	14	\$10,401	\$10,401	4	\$2,972	\$2,972
	8	16	\$12,184	\$12,184	4	\$3,046	\$3,046
	9	18	\$14,050	\$14,050	4	\$3,122	\$3,122
	10	20	\$16,001	\$16,001	4	\$3,200	\$3,200
Total Care Cost Savings>			\$81,870	\$81,870		\$28,709	\$28,709
Annual Investment Return>			452%	248%		735%	349%

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Spay/Neuter at a Non-Profit Clinic Minimum Return: 439% per year

Spay/Neuter at a Commercial Clinic Minimum Return: 239% per year

DISCUSSION OF ASSUMPTIONS

Spay/Neuter Surgery Costs: For 1 male plus 1 female surgery, the computations assume \$350 for non-profit vs. \$740 for commercial clinics.

Sources: The TFFF clinic in El Prado averaged about \$150 per surgery in 2024. \$175 per animal is assumed herein. According to a recent report on the Vety.com website, commercial clinic spay/neuter charges range from \$200 to \$400 for male cats, from \$300 to \$500 for female cats, The average midpoint cost for 1 male and 1 female is \$700. Dogs range from \$200 to \$500 for males and from \$250 to \$650 for females. The average midpoint cost for 1 male and 1 female is \$800. Based on TFFF clinic data, approximately 60% of the surgeries were cat; 40% dog. Reflecting these weights, the average commercial costs of spay/neuter for 1 male and 1 female is \$740.

Annual Cost of Animal Care: \$625 per animal

Sources: According to Rover.com, “the world’s largest online marketplace for loving pet care”, a survey of 1000 pet owners in 2025 for its sixth annual *True Cost of Pet Parenthood Report*. They report a range of \$1150 to \$4420 annually for dogs and \$750 to \$2750 annually for cats. This includes food, shelter, toys, cat litter, vet visits and boarding. Assume the bottom end of each range and that feral cats only require 50% of the cat bottom value. Then, the average annual care cost per animal is \$865 (40% of \$1150 for dogs plus 48% of \$750 for pet cats plus 12% of \$375 for feral cats; weights are from the inception-to-date animal distribution of the TFFF clinic). However, the cost of living in NM is roughly 8% below the national average, reducing the estimated annual cost for New Mexico to \$795 per year. To provide a further safety margin, only \$625 per animal per year is assumed.

Lifespan: 10 years lifespan

Sources: According to Montoya et al., published in the journal, *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, dogs live on average from 6.7 to 15.5 years, depending on breed. The midpoint average is 11.1 years. Cats live 12.3 to 16.9 years with the midpoint average being 14.6 years. Per TFFF estimates, feral cats live about three years. Based on 80% pets and 20% ferals, the average cat lifespan is 12.2 years. To ensure an understatement, only 10 years average life is assumed and no benefit of spay/neuter beyond ten years is considered.

Reproduction: Litter Model A supposes that each female spay prevents a single litter consisting of one male and one viable female and each newborn female produces just one identical litter of one male and one female. Litter Model B supposes that each female spay eliminates exactly one litter of four with no consideration of further litters created by the original animal or its offspring. Both models assume both a male and female are sterilized. Both models ignore any potential reduction in future births due to the male neuter.

Sources: Per VCA and Banfield Hospital clinical studies, average litter size is 5.3 for dogs and 5.0 for cats. Adjusted for infant deaths, the surviving litter size is 4.5 for dogs and 3.9 for cats. Using a 60% cat/40% dog assumption, the average surviving litter size is 4.1. Cats can produce three litters each year; dogs can produce two. To provide a margin of safety, only one litter per year is assumed herein. In Model A, litter size is 2 and each female can only produce one litter. In Model B, litter size is 4 but no additional litters are assumed.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Annual returns of 439% for non-profit spay/neuter and 239% for commercial spay/neuter understate the actual financial benefits of spay/neuter due to the use of minimizing assumptions throughout the computations.
2. Spay/neuter produces large returns regardless of whether performed at a non-profit or commercial clinic. Voucher programs, in which a commercial clinic is paid by a third party, can be confidently used in localities that do not have a non-profit clinic.
3. Spay/neuter produces large returns even assuming no inflation in animal care costs.
4. Due to the huge investment returns, spay/neuter programs that offer the broadest access to spay/neuter are preferred over those limiting access. For example, free programs are preferred over co-pay programs. Programs without income qualifications are preferred over those with limits. Programs that offer consistent hours/days of operation are preferred over sporadic 'visiting veterinarian' programs.
5. Feral cat reproduction, if left unchecked, can negate the benefits of pet cat spay/neuter. Trap, Neuter and Return (TNR) for feral cats is universally regarded as the best humane treatment for feral cats. Since trapping usually requires the cooperation of non-owner volunteers, spay/neuter programs should facilitate TNR by lending out traps for free and offering walk-in appointments.
6. Instead of financial benefits, animal shelters primarily offer their communities humane benefits. Effective spay/neuter programs lower shelter intakes. Shelter costs and overcrowding decline and better humane outcomes result. In the present crisis of cat/dog over-population, spay/neuter funding should be emphasized over shelter funding.