

San Francisco's Small Animal Adoption and Spay/Neuter Program

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When we think of an animal shelter we usually think of a place for dogs and cats. It may be surprising to know that San Francisco Animal Care and Control (SFACC) impounds over four thousand "other" animals annually.

Since its inception in 1989, more than 51,000 of these others have passed through SFACC's doors, and in this last fiscal year, we took in more "others" than dogs. These others, whom we call small animals, include rabbits, rats, guinea pigs, hamsters, mice, birds, chickens and other fowl, iguanas and other reptiles.

A few decades ago these animals were rarely brought into, accepted by or placed for adoption by most animal shelters. Shelters were not equipped with the special requirements, equipment and knowledge needed to properly house and care for these animals. Most facilities were overwhelmed by pet overpopulation and completely inundated by staggering numbers of unwanted dogs and cats. Now, with the growing interest in these animals for companions and with information on proper and humane care readily available, animal shelters are beginning to accommodate them.

Small mammals, birds, fowl and reptiles arrive at our door daily. Most are surrendered, but many are strays as well. The vast majority of these animals were originally purchased at pet stores, where small animals are bred and marketed by the thousands as "pocket pets." Far from receiving humane care, they are kept in small cages, crowded in with others and without proper food, water, bedding, shelter or companionship. They are considered merchandise to be sold as playthings for children or ornaments to watch in a cage.

Conditions in breeding facilities for rodents, rabbits, birds and reptiles are often worse than puppy mills and far less accountable to regulatory agencies. Whether from a huge supplier or a backyard breeder, the animals in pet stores are normally vic-

tims of mass production. As thousands arrive at pet stores, thousands more die in transport. Pet stores also breed their own animals, in huge tanks, piling them together for snake food, and placing some in separate tanks or cages for sale as pets.

The reasons most rodents are surrendered to our shelter include: children losing interest, they were classroom pets and the school year is over, they were bred for snake food, and, my personal favorite, they were sold a male and female pair at the store and now they have too many! Occasionally, a behavior issue may have developed, such as fear biting, which is no surprise since little or no education is given in pet stores about these animals' specific needs for gentle handling, socialization and activity, space and housing, health and nutrition, or an understanding of commitment.

SFACC is the open-door animal shelter for San Francisco and the only facility accepting animals other than dogs and cats. In order to decrease the number of small animals euthanized, the SFACC decided years ago to build an active, progressive adoption program for small mammals, birds, fowl and select reptiles. Knowing that birth control is an integral part of the success of an adoption program, our veterinarian, Dr. Bing Dilts, set out to learn to spay and neuter the small mammals, species by species. Dr. Jeff Bryan of Irving Street Veterinary Hospital instructed Dr. Bing on these delicate surgeries and now she routinely performs four to six surgeries per week.

Many private veterinarians perform these surgeries, as well, but at a cost that is too expensive for most people. We receive calls regularly from guardians asking where they can find low cost spay/neuter for their rabbit or rodent. Fortunately, there are a couple of low-cost clinics within an hour's drive of San Francisco.

We currently spay and neuter rabbits, rats, male guinea pigs and some male mice. To date, Dr. Bing has operated on 165 rab-



Top: SFACC volunteer Yuri, cares for a spayed female rabbit. Bottom: Sabrina, a SFACC volunteer for two years, shows off Sprout.

All photos: Leslie Kornblatt, Sabrina Simmons and Sarah Krummel

bits, 95 rats, 59 guinea pigs and one mouse. At this writing, she is continuing her education to add female guinea pigs. The health benefits to the animals are numerous, including the elimination of uterine, ovarian and testicular cancer, and a great reduction in mammary tumors. Behavioral benefits include decreased marking and general “mellowing out.” Neutered male rats, for instance, make great partners for females. And, recently, because a male mouse was neutered, he was able to go to a new home with the female pal he had come in with.

Dr. Bing plans to lecture on these surgical techniques at the next California Animal Control Director’s Conference in April, 2002. She encourages shelter vets to follow our example: “I would encourage any shelter veterinarian who does dog and cat spays and neuters to try these surgeries on small mammals. Once you get used to handling the tissue and the techniques, it is really no more difficult than a cat spay.”

Our adoption rates have increased steadily since we began the small animal spay/neuter program, rising from about 20% to 40%. Adopters are more likely to adopt two animals, so that each animal will have others for companionship. We also find scores of homes with adopters who already have a resident animal and can now add a new animal to their family without the risk of reproducing. When an animal shelter or rescue



foundation finds homes for small mammals that are spayed and neutered, they send a vital message to the public – that preventing births is basic to responsible animal care. As more and more people gain knowledge and awareness about small animals, a global message is spread: that all companion animals deserve equal status in our society.

Many resources for the rescue, care, adoption, and husbandry of small animals may be found on the Internet. A superb example is the House Rabbit Society (www.rabbit.org), whose mission is clearly to rescue and adopt, prevent breeding and provide comprehensive education on every aspect of rabbit care. We urge people to look for organizations with similar standards for education on other species. Many small animal clubs and groups promote breeding, so please screen your sources carefully. To get started, we will be glad to furnish readers with our own Small Animal Checklists, which provide a capsulated guide on housing, diet, health, socialization and costs. Please e-mail melissa_flower@ci.sf.ca.us for more information.

Melissa Flower has been the coordinator of volunteer and community affairs programs at San Francisco Animal Care and Control since 1990, shortly after its inception. Her involvement in helping small animals gain visibility began after she learned how many were pouring into shelters and how little attention they received compared with dogs and cats. Melissa has sought to broaden awareness of these animals by expanding ACC’s network of informed volunteers and educational resources.

