ORANGE COUNTY
NORTH CAROLINA

MEMO

To: Animal Services Advisory Board

From: Bob Marotto, Director, Animal Services
Sarah Fallin, Program Coordinator, Animal Services

Date: June 14, 2013

Re: Qualifying Income Levels for the Community Spay/Neuter Fund

Despite an increase in the advertising budget for the Community Spay/Neuter Fund last year, the number of surgeries performed and vouchers issued did not reflect the growth we had expected or seen in the previous years. This flattening did not occur in the population receiving public assistance and qualifying for a free surgery, but in the vouchers that were issued to those paying a $20 co-pay, a population that qualifies based on income requirements alone. [1]

Given this fact, staff discussed the possibility of increasing the income criteria to more closely align with the income eligibility requirements of the NC Spay/Neuter Reimbursement Program. Those requirements allow reimbursement to local governments for assistance to households that make under 300 percent of the federal poverty threshold.[2] In contrast, the current guidelines for income qualification used by AnimalKind and Animal Services are less than half of the federal poverty level.[3]

The idea of increasing these income requirements either to a median point or to 300 percent seemed attractive to staff originally, but further investigation has shown some cause for concern and a need for more research and input. The concerns identified are as follows:

a) public perception over qualifying households that are well above the poverty level
b) the possibility of competing with local veterinarians for services
c) the possibility of swamping the program with too much demand

[1] The number of citizens redeeming vouchers based on public assistance qualification continued to grow in 2012.
[2] The complete federal guideline criteria can be found at http://familiesusa.org/resources/tools-for-advocates/guides/federal-poverty-guidelines.html.
[3] AnimalKind's income eligibility criteria vary based on household size and are up to 147.95% of the federal poverty level. A listing of their qualifying incomes can be found at www.animalkind.org.

d) straying from the original mission of *targeted* spay/neuter[4]

It is important to note that a and b have the possibility of upsetting the support and positive backing that the county's program has always had and wishes to maintain. But most important to the equation is d. The goal of the county's Community Spay/Neuter Program is to target intact (or reproductive) animals belonging to county residents in order to reduce shelter intake numbers, the costs of animal services, and ultimately the use of euthanasia as a means for population control.

At this time, there is not sufficient data that would indicate that income criteria alone is causing the decrease or flattening of voucher numbers. There is reason to believe that county residetts who qualify under existing criteria may not currently be aware of the program and that the community is not yet saturated.

Therefore, both AnimalKind and Animal Services staff are trying some alternative approaches to reaching this demographic. AnimalKind is experimenting with door hangers and targeting neighborhoods. Animal Services is using new advertising mediums and is targeting zip code areas using direct mail. In addition, the department is collecting data and generating statistics and mapped analyses of areas producing heavy volumes of animal intakes and litters intakes so that more targeted outreach can occur in those areas.

A final observation is that cats remain an ongoing challenge in our own community as well as within other communities (as indicated not least by a perennial "kitten season"). Effective strategies for targeting cats owned by residents who qualify for subsidized spay and neuter may be one of the largest challenges the county faces in managing pet overpopulation as we move forward. It is staff's hope that this will be a major concern of the work they do with the Animal Services Advisory Board in the next stage of strategic plan for managing pet overpopulation.

In conclusion, while income criteria is an important factor in the population that receives vouchers and qualifies for assistance from Animal Services, staff now believe that increasing current guidelines at this point would be premature and that changing other variables involved in outreach makes more sense in the present. After such changes have been made and data has been evaluated for the coming periods, staff feels there will be more sound basis and knowledge upon which to consider income criteria changes as a means to increase targeted spay/neuter numbers in the community.

Cc: Michael Talbert, Assistant County Manager
Beth Livingstone, Executive Director, AnimalKind
Hilary Green, Interim Executive Director, AnimalKind

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[4] Targeted spay/neuter is defined as a spay or neuter that, without assistance, would not otherwise be done.