

Reducing barriers and building relationships

Harbor Humane Society_MI_Jel Self-Aulgur_CEO

An Introduction to Harbor Humane's Wellness Programs

Harbor Humane's low-cost spay/neuter clinics, community vaccine clinics, intake diversion veterinary care, and other community programs consistently reach pet owners who want to do right by their pets, but face significant financial and systemic barriers to accessing veterinary care. At Harbor Humane, community wellness programming has enabled us to connect with pet owners in moments of uncertainty and offer meaningful, effective support. We work with owners to provide solutions that keep pets healthy, prevent unnecessary litters, and reduce shelter surrenders. We also work to ensure that our clinics and programs are as simple and efficient as possible by hosting drive-through-style clinics, utilizing waitlists, and limiting eligibility restrictions to help as many pets as possible while curtailing workload. Through our drive-thru vaccine clinics, low-cost spay/neuter clinics, and veterinary appointments when an owner's only option to get their pet the care they need is surrendering to shelter, we have found that affordable, welcoming, and accessible services lead to increased participation, more trusting relationships, and a community that is empowered to care for their pets in the ways they've always hoped to.

While Harbor Humane hosts monthly low-cost vaccine clinics at our facility, it's important that we recognize that our location is not always accessible to those who need our services most. To address this, we partner with a local social service organization to host additional vaccine clinics on their property in an area that is more centrally located, accessible via public transportation, and already trusted by the community. Staff at our partner organization assist clients with pets in making arrangements to attend clinics, provide "vouchers" for unhoused and low-income clients to receive free basic services, and help connect pet owners with Harbor Humane for additional support. This partnership has significantly expanded our reach to provide affordable preventative care in our community, especially in underserved and marginalized populations. This outreach has reinforced what we know to be true: pet owners experiencing hardship are deeply bonded to their pets and are doing everything in their power to care for them. Without our support, veterinary expenses often leave owners struggling to provide medical care for an animal they love.

To reach the most vulnerable pet owners, our team sets up a monthly booth at a local church that offers essential services to individuals who are unhoused or living in poverty. We bring pet food and supplies, provide education and resources on vaccines and spay

and neuter, and work to eliminate barriers to accessing our programs. Every new conversation starts with a warm introduction and learning about a person's beloved pets. One of the most effective tools we have found to build relationships with pet owners in our community is simply asking, "*What does your pet need right now?*". By meeting people where they are – both literally and figuratively – we assist countless families on their path to stability while making sure that their pets are healthy and don't have to be left behind.

Tips and Tricks for Hosting Community Clinics

Reduce barriers wherever possible

- Keep pricing transparent and affordable
- Avoid unnecessary paperwork and utilize a simple registration process
- Consider literacy levels and languages spoken within your service area to ensure that all patients can access services and provide informed consent
- Offer walk-up options when feasible! Appointment-free clinics can reduce administrative workload and appeal to more pet owners

Use clear, repeated communication to advertise

- Share reminders through multiple channels (email, social media, flyers, community partners, radio, etc.) to reach as many pet owners as possible
- Use plain language and visual aids that support low-literacy and ESL pet owners
- Communicate clinic details with local human service providers so they can connect clients to your programs (local community mental health or public health agencies are often a strong starting point)

Plan clinics for flow and flexibility

- Develop a clear logistical plan for clinic access (walk-up, drive-through, appointment-based, etc.) and consider the path that both pets and owners will take
- Assign defined roles to staff and volunteers and plan for absences
- Anticipate a demand that exceeds your capacity (*'clinic is full'* sign, advertise future clinics, etc.) and prepare resources for owners whose pets cannot be served
- Build in buffer time for logistical challenges and protocols for medical issues
- Consider data entry and recordkeeping needs when designing intake forms

Create relationships and build community

- Treat every interaction as relationship-building, not transactional
- Have a plan if welfare concerns arise. Prioritize clear, empathetic communication with owners and be prepared to provide resources and/or follow-up

- Recognize that pets are often a primary source of stability and emotional support. It is often easy to make connections through understanding the human-animal bond, and this rapport can strengthen both program engagement and patient outcomes

What Worked & What Didn't

What Worked

- Offering multiple access points
- Framing services as community support rather than charity
- Building trust through consistency and follow-up
- Pairing medical care with supplies and education
- Offering preventative care and vaccines during spay/neuter procedures
- Providing payment plans to reduce financial hardship and economic euthanasia
- Implementing surcharges for commonly encountered conditions during spay/neuter clinics (hernia repair, cryptorchid pets, dogs over 75 lbs)
- Educating pet owners on alternative local spay/neuter resources to manage a long waitlist by promoting these organizations as allies, not competition

What Didn't Work

- Assuming pet owners are aware of services or will seek them out without proactive outreach through multiple outlets
- Overly rigid appointment or eligibility systems
- Underestimating transportation barriers and time constraints on pet owners
- Relying solely on email for communication – many clients may require phone calls, text messages, or communication through a case worker
- Hosting off-site clinics without visiting the location in advance
- Not being adequately prepared for all possible weather conditions
- Failing to secure photo/video consent and release forms, which can limit future outreach and marketing efforts

Street Vet Program Insights

While Harbor Humane does not operate a designated street veterinary program, we do facilitate mobile vaccine clinics and relationship-based outreach throughout the community. Outreach conversations occur organically in community gathering spaces, and visits to individual dwellings or locations of pet owners who are not traditionally housed are arranged on a case-by-case basis to overcome transportation or mobility barriers.

Unsheltered individuals are reached primarily at locations where they already receive support, such as social service organizations and churches. We bring pet food and supplies to meet immediate needs and connect owners to veterinary services through informal, trauma-informed conversations. Harbor Humane also partners with a local service provider that operates a street outreach team. When these team members encounter unhoused individuals with pets, they can distribute vouchers for free rabies and distemper vaccines at our community clinics and refer owners to us for additional support.

The services provided at Harbor Humane's Community Vaccine Clinics include:

For Dogs:

- Rabies, DHPP, Bordetella vaccines
- Heartworm testing
- Microchipping
- Heartworm prevention
- Flea and tick prevention

For Cats:

- Rabies and FVRCP vaccines
- Microchipping
- Heartworm prevention
- Flea and tick prevention

Additional Support:

- Assistance accessing low-cost veterinary or financial resources
- Payment plans or waivers for vaccines, prevention, and spay/neuter
- Counseling and education on the medical needs of pets

Key Lessons Learned:

- All services should be low barrier with clear and simple eligibility requirements
- When services cannot be provided, share referrals and alternative resources
- Challenge assumptions about who uses services and how they access them

- Prioritize patient stress reduction and safety through thoughtful clinic logistics, readily available handling tools, and a plan for waste management
- Be flexible in communication methods, including through caseworkers if needed
- Outreach is most effective when it is collaborative, not prescriptive or punitive
- Community clinics are only successful and sustainable when the veterinary staff, organizers, and volunteers behind them feel supported, valued, and recognized