



# FreeFix for Prince George's Pets

Project #  
15-032

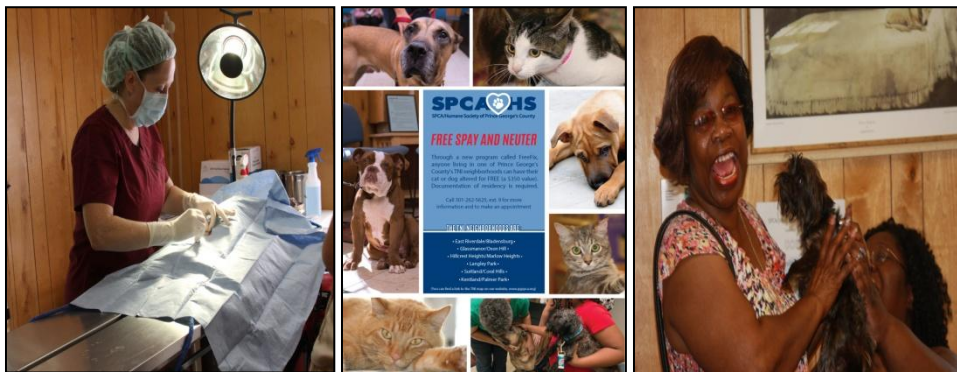
County: Prince George's County

Number of Cats Spayed:	50	Number of Dogs Spayed:	49
Number of Cats Neutered:	24	Number of Dogs Neutered:	55

Amount Received: \$20,000	Amount Remaining (to be returned to MDA): \$0
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## Project Synopsis:

The FreeFix program targeted low-income pet owners in six designated neighborhoods (East Riverdale/Bladensburg, Langley Park, Hillcrest Heights/Marlow Heights, Glassmanor/Oxon Hill, Suitland/Coral Hills, and Kentland/Palmer Park). The project provided free surgery to 178 pets.



## Project Description:

Founded 40 years ago, the SPCA/Humane Society of Prince George's County (PGSPCA) is an all-volunteer 501(c)3 nonprofit organization dedicated to animal welfare. We have three main objectives: to reduce pet overpopulation; to prevent animal cruelty, neglect, and suffering; and to promote animal-friendly public policy.

In 2001, we opened the area's first low-cost spay/neuter clinic and we've altered over 20,000 animals, many at no charge (because even our lowest prices are still a barrier for some pet owners). In an effort to reach more pet owners and to impact whole communities, we agreed to collaborate with Prince George's County government's Transforming Neighborhoods Initiative (TNI). The county's TNI program focuses on uplifting six specific neighborhoods (see list above) facing significant economic, health, public safety and educational challenges. Statistically, the pets in these neighborhoods are at higher risk and so FreeFix provides free surgeries (and rabies vaccines) for these pets. Depending on the mix of dogs and cats altered, we planned to alter as many as 192 animals under the MD Spay and Neuter Grant.

## Summary of Approach:

Our spay/neuter clinic currently operates for special events only and instead of full-time staff, we utilize contracted veterinarians and veterinary technicians. We were already running quarterly spay/neuter events for the pets of low-income County residents, who qualified for free surgeries by income levels or as recipients of public assistance. Those surgery events were already filled to capacity, so to accommodate the newly targeted group of FreeFix clients (who qualified for free spay/neuter by residing in a TNI neighborhood), we needed to



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schedule a new monthly event. Finding a skilled surgeon who could commit to a monthly event was not easy; as a result, the start of our project was delayed.

While searching for the right veterinarian to partner on this project, we designed and distributed advertising mailers through the USPS EveryDoorDirectMail (EDDM) service. Through EDDM, we were able to reach every household in three of the targeted TNI communities. We also distributed fliers through the TNI teams, our various business and media partners, and our volunteers. We also promoted FreeFix online and ran ads in the Pennysaver. The response was immediate: residents began calling the first week and have not stopped. We have a running waitlist for FreeFix surgeries and in 2017, we plan to do another EDDM campaign for the remaining three communities.

We held our first FreeFix spay/neuter event in August 2015 and we've held regular events at least once a month, sometimes more frequently. We've altered over 250 animals at these events in the last year, 178 of them funded under the MD State Spay/Neuter Grant (before it was fully expended). Potential clients call our main number and leave a message asking about our free and low-cost spay/neuter options. A volunteer calls them back and asks a series of questions to determine if they are qualified for free surgery on the basis of low income, receiving public assistance, or living in a TNI neighborhood. Those meeting the FreeFix criteria are scheduled for the next available FreeFix date. The others who qualify for free surgery are scheduled for one of our quarterly events. We refer those who don't qualify to other providers of low-cost surgery, or they may choose to pay our low fees (if we have room for them in our schedule). Our volunteers gather all the needed information about the pet, then instruct the pet owner about when and where to bring their pet, and about fasting the night before. The owners also receive a reminder call the night before the surgery date.

On the day of the surgery, all pets are checked in between 7:30am and 8:30am. If we have no-shows, we try to fill those spots by calling clients on a standby list. Rabies shots are included with the free surgery, but clients can also choose to purchase other services (such as distemper shots, ear cleaning, nail trims, or microchipping). Surgeries are performed throughout the day while volunteers prepare the invoices, rabies tags and certificates, and receipts. Owners pick up their animals from about 4:30pm to 5:30pm and receive full discharge instructions plus information on where to call if they have questions or need help. The cost of each qualifying FreeFix surgery is charged to the grant.

### **Accomplishments:**

We have altered 178 animals (74 cats and 104 dogs) with the help of the MD Spay and Neuter Grant. Many of the animals we treated had already produced offspring, so we know that by altering them we have prevented future litters. But beyond controlling pet overpopulation, we've found the FreeFix program has provided an opportunity for almost door-to-door outreach. Many of these pets do not receive regular veterinary care, and in the process of altering them we were able to provide other needed services that make them healthier and happier. In some cases, we diagnosed other conditions and concerns that required attention. We're able to reach out to the owners with information on how they can better care for their pets. So we're making these animals lives better, and that's no small thing.

We were thrilled to start a new monthly surgery event under this project, because holding monthly events allows us to be more responsive to immediate needs. In the past, we might encounter a needy client whose pet needed surgery right away. Because our events were only quarterly, we wouldn't be able to help. Now, our next spay/neuter event is never more than a few weeks out.

Most importantly, our FreeFix program is still going. We are committed to continuing the FreeFix project, funding the surgeries from our own treasury as we seek additional grant sources. We currently have the capacity to perform up to 600 surgeries a year, so we will continue to work on funding. Because of the project's word-of-mouth, we still get hundreds of calls a month and have committed not to turn people away. If we can't schedule them into our events, we refer them to other free programs or to low-cost providers.



**Lessons Learned:**

We are not new to low-cost spay/neuter, so we knew to expect some issues. Some of the animals we saw were in poor health. They lacked regular veterinary care and many had health conditions that complicated surgery. Some of the pets who came in were unsocialized and fractious, making surgery more risky for our staff and volunteers. It was always a struggle to get as many cats in as dogs, and we want to be equally effective for both species. All this comes with the territory and is more evidence that these programs (and the outreach accompanying them) are needed and so important.

But we were unprepared for how many clients would just cavalierly not show for their appointments, even after receiving reminder calls the night before. Each surgery day after check-in, we'd call the clients who had not shown up to ask if they were still coming. Overwhelmingly, those who missed appointments tended to seem quite careless and indifferent about it. They'd ask for another appointment without apologizing or offering an explanation, or they'd give a very silly explanation. We're going to keep trying to find ways to combat this, from emphasizing to clients the importance of showing up to perhaps charging a booking deposit that can be refunded when they show up. And because one of the most oft-cited legitimate reasons for missed appointments is a lack of reliable transportation, we plan to explore offering transport from specific drop points in the TNI neighborhoods.

**Attachments:**

FreeFix15.pdf

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