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City ends free spay, neutering for pets

By Rick Orlov and George B. Sanchez, Staff Writers
Posted: 03/13/2009 10:27:44 PM PDT

Blaming dwindling city funds, the Department of Animal Services says it will no longer issue certificates for free and discounted spay and neuter surgeries - just months after officials required Los Angeles pet owners to fix their pets.

Veterinarians and pet owners said the decision will not only hit pet owners in the pocketbook, but also affect the general community by triggering a surge in the feral cat population.

"Animal Services is not immune to the current economic downturn," General Manager Ed Boks said in a statement released this week announcing the end of the program.

Animal Services stopped distributing \$30 and \$70 coupons for free and discounted spay and neutering services on Tuesday.

"It will affect a lot of people," said Dr. Adel Fahmy at the Devonshire Animal Hospital in Chatsworth. "We will see a lot of feral cats in the streets and more and more of them."

The Devonshire Animal Hospital performs up to eight spay or neuters a day, Fahmy said, and the majority are paid for with coupons.

The move to suspend issuing the coupons comes just five months after a mandatory ordinance went into effect citywide that requires all pet owners to spay and neuter cats and dogs after the age of four months. There are a few exemptions for breeders and others.

The idea was to decrease the number of abandoned animals and thus reduce the number that had to be euthanized.

Ed Muzika, an animal activist

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who has a blog, animalwatch.blogspot.com, said he is worried that the latest action will hurt efforts to enforce the ordinance.

"The new law took effect in October and now they're pulling the certificates," Muzika said. "It will make it incredibly difficult, particularly during a recession, for people to pay for a spay or neuter of their pet."

Animal Services aims to make \$150,000 in cuts to help balance this year's city budget, which still faces a \$17 million shortfall.

"Every department is being asked to consider severe budget cuts - cuts that may amount to as much as 30 percent before the ongoing fiscal year 2010 budget process is over," read Boks' statement.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is scheduled to release his proposed spending plan in late April, in which he will have to deal with a \$450 million shortfall. The current budget is \$7.1 billion, with Animal Services scheduled to receive \$21.1 million. Earlier this year, the mayor instructed departments to make 3 percent cuts to balance the budget.

Boks said the City Council reduced the budget by a total of \$300,000 and that he has had to make the reductions in the spay-neuter certificate program to maintain staffing at shelters.

"Since we cannot afford to lay any employees off and our attrition rate is very low, our only recourse is to make up the remaining deficit through another reduction in our spay/neuter coupon and mobile program," Boks said.

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Boks said the department will honor all coupons that have been issued, but was instructing shelters and others to halt distributions by Tuesday.

Lisa Levell, a veterinary technician at Cozycroft Pet Hospital in Chatsworth, was surprised to hear the coupon distribution has been halted.

"It's really important for people with no income or now especially with people who lost their jobs," Levell said. "Almost all pet owners that come from the pound have a coupon for surgeries."

The pet hospital had encouraged pet owners to pick up coupons for the surgeries, Levell said.

The cuts come even as the department has seen an upsurge in animals in its shelter.

During the 2007-2008 fiscal year, the department issued 22,000 \$30 discount coupons and 12,000 \$70 coupons, said Linda Barth, assistant general manager for animal services. About 65 percent of the coupons, were used, Barth said.

"The coupons are supposed to be redeemed within 90 days and then we have to get billed by the vets and there's a lag in billing of 30 to 60 days," she said.

Coupons issued in October and redeemed in December are now being processed for payment, Barth said.

Since the coupon-to-payment time can be lengthy, the city is just now starting to see a rise in coupon use, Barth said.

"Demand is very high. Every single month since July, we get calls by the third week of the month saying people need more coupons," Barth said.

Boks warned that the department does not know how much it will be able to spend in the coming fiscal year - which begins July 1 - for spay-neuter services.

"The department maximizes every opportunity to express the importance of spay-neuter programs to reduce pet overpopulation," Boks said.

To try to help the city, Daniel Guss of the Stand Foundation is setting up a \$5,000 grant to help offset the cost of spay-neuter, inoculation and microchipping of large dogs. Guss said the program is focused on South Los Angeles and is in response to the city cutting its voucher program. Guss said more information will be available in the coming week on his Web site, www.standfoundation.org.

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