

## Understanding the Need: Sentir Animal's Sterilization Campaigns – Sierra

### Abstract

Colombia is not the exception to the serious problem of cat and dog overpopulation. On the contrary, the reality in cities and rural areas is critical. Official free or low-cost sterilization programs are scarce and non-governmental institutions can't offer much either.

Asociación Sentir Animal was founded in 2005 in Cali, Colombia, with the objective of executing legal actions that would impact the lives of thousands of animals as well as working to establish the rights of all animals. However, resources are stretched thin, with about 20 volunteers spending limited time and funds rescuing and sterilizing abandoned and mistreated cats and dogs: the product of overpopulation. Immediate needs make it difficult to execute legal actions and policy solutions.

### The sterilization campaigns program

The sterilization program was established in 2008. Its aim is to sterilize dogs and cats on a large scale in the poorest and most remote populations of Valle del Cauca and in Cali city. Colombia is divided into 6 socioeconomic levels: 1 is the poorest and 6 is the richest. According to an article published in a national newspaper, 53% of Colombian homes have a dog. Cali is the capital of Valle del Cauca and has 2.3 million inhabitants, of which approximately 80% belong to socioeconomic levels 1, 2 and 3. Sentir Animal's sterilization campaigns were designed to target dogs and cats belonging to socioeconomic levels 1, 2 and 3 in this region.

Each and every campaign starts with a person from a specific community ("villaje" or neighborhood) contacting Sentir Animal's campaigns coordinator. The coordinator assigns a date and explains the technical requirements for the surgery room and the waiting room. The person organizing the campaign also receives promotion posters. On the assigned date, the veterinarian and assistants arrive with the surgery table and other equipment and materials. The assistant in charge hands out numbers to the public and starts the registration, completing clinical histories and labeling each animal with his/her name and number. Each owner is given written post-surgical recommendations and educational flyers. Each animal is taken to the preparation station where he/she is anesthetized and prepped for surgery. After surgery, animals are placed in a recovery room until they are awake enough to return home.

Our goal in 2010 is to serve around 3,000 and to sterilize a minimum of 2,000 dogs and cats. This difference is due to the fact that some animals receive care other than sterilization. Patients with different pathologies are seen totally free and some animals in awful conditions are taken care of.

### The sterilization campaigns in numbers

The sterilization campaign team consists of one veterinarian and two assistants. The fee for each surgery depends on the socioeconomic level of each person and ranges from \$6 to \$13 (U.S.). Currently, an average of 40 surgeries are performed during each campaign day. Canines make up 65% of the number of total surgeries. The remaining 35% are cats. This is an indicator that most Colombian homes own dogs as companion animals. Notably, of the dogs brought in for sterilization, 83% are female while only 17% are male. However, 78% of cats brought for surgery are male. This is a clear indication of the Colombian population's willingness to castrate male cats but resistance to castrate male dogs. This is due primarily to a sexist culture that identifies more with dogs than cats. Convincing the owner of a male dog to castrate his dog is difficult, even if the owner is a woman. Sentir Animal is convinced that the evolution toward chemical castration with EsterilSol™ will allow many more male dogs to be sterilized in the campaigns, saving time and money and reducing post-surgical complications.

For Sentir Animal, it is very important to be consistent and to put values into action whenever there is a public event. This includes sterilization campaigns. Serving vegan food means that no animal has to be killed to justify helping another one.

Because we target the poorest pet owners, it is very common to receive animals with illnesses ranging from common conditions (sexual transmission illnesses and mammary tumors) to ectropion or tear gland prolapse. Many of our clients have no ability to pay; Sentir Animal's policy is never to leave a sick animal or a poor person's animal unattended. When possible, other treatments or surgeries are performed during campaigns. If performing the surgery or the treatment is not possible at the time, it is scheduled at a veterinary clinic, even if this means taking the animal to the city and fostering or boarding until treatment. Many of these expenses are covered completely by Sentir Animal. Sterilization is also provided at no cost when owners cannot pay the reduced rates.

Although the campaigns were not designed to receive abandoned and neglected animals, Sentir Animal's policy is never

to leave behind animals in bad conditions. Euthanasia has been performed in cases where homeless animals were suffering and could not be helped.

Each campaign includes educational outreach to hundreds of people. Flyers about sterilization are given away and explanations about the importance of sterilizing are given. This job is especially satisfying because we can see the cultural attitudes toward sterilizing cats and dogs has been improving in Cali, at least in socioeconomic levels 1, 2 and 3.

Excellence and efficiency are primary concerns when working in the physical, economic and logistical conditions in which campaigns take place. For this reason, we periodically hold meetings to improve our campaigns, answering questions and providing training. An important part of improving our campaigns is defining medical and administrative protocols that assure safety, an aseptic surgical environment, order and service. The ultimate goal is to be kind and warm to people and animals. Sentir Animal believes that people and animals must be treated with love, patience and equality.

Bringing these campaigns to life means a lot of work for the organization and also presents constant challenges and problems. Our greatest challenge is the constant need to raise funds. The approximate cost of one surgery is a minimum of \$12 (U.S.), while the average fee collected per animal is \$10 (U.S.). Resources to cover the difference must be found. This money usually comes from donations, but these are not constant and often are not enough to sustain the campaigns. At times, campaigns have been canceled or put on hold for this reason. One question is whether the fee per animal should be increased. It has been observed, though, that the target population is very sensitive to even small changes in the prices. If the association increased the price, people in socioeconomic levels 1 and 2 would no longer be able to pay for surgeries and we would fail to achieve the objective for which the campaigns were established.

Time is another challenge because often it is impossible to serve all animals that attend a campaign. Although the surgeon (Dr. Marcel Campanela) has great ability, often unsterilized animals are left in populations where we are not able to return. Chemical sterilization with EsterilSol would help take better advantage of time during the campaigns. We have established a maximum number of 40 surgeries per day due to the toll of high volumes on our veterinarians and assistants. A non-surgical method for females would be the best discovery ever! At this moment, there is no alternative: campaigns must continue and so we do our best to sterilize the maximum number of animals within our limitations.

Obviously, the conditions under which surgeries are performed are not ideal, especially from the medical and ergonomic point of view. This year, a surgery table was acquired. However, the table is big and it must be transported to each campaign site. The rest of the surgery room continues to be inadequate because of open spaces, poor light, lack of ventilation, dust and curious onlookers. A question that comes up, from the medical point of view, is whether surgeries should be performed under these conditions. The answer comes from a social point of view: either Sentir Animal keeps up with these campaigns in all corners of Valle del Cauca or animals continue dying and being tortured by the thousands.

Post-surgical care is also a risk for the health of the animals. In approximately 50% of the cases, the owners do not provide the minimum care to the animal. For example, if owners aren't paying attention to post-operative care, male dogs are predisposed to eat their stitches, opening up the surgery site. This keeps even more people from castrating their dogs. Female dogs and cats also eat their stitches. Also, many animals never receive antibiotics or analgesics after the surgery. When campaigns are held in the city, animals can receive immediate attention, but when they are held outside Cali, it is almost impossible to sew them up again. EsterilSol is a way to end this problem.

Sentir Animal's sterilization program is unique in Colombia, has great coverage and is more or less sustainable. The key to success is getting to neighborhoods or villages where people have an urgent need to sterilize their companion animals. These people could never have access to sterilization for their pets if Sentir Animal did not offer affordable prices within each community. Working with a person from the community to promote and organize each campaign is key to achieving success on a large scale.

It has been essential that we establish protocols and strict organization during each campaign and in support processes (inventory control, purchases and staff management). The expertise of the veterinarian is essential so that the scarce resources are used in the most efficient way.

Finally, for people to recommend the campaigns to others and for them to return with other pets, it is vital that they are treated kindly and without judgment, and that follow-up care is provided for their pets. (Our service includes monitoring each animal three days after surgery.) Sentir Animal faces numerous challenges but we will keep on working until there are no more homeless animals left in the world!