



St. Francis pet clinic now offers care at the SWAG Center

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When a neighborhood chihuahua popped out eight puppies, Carmen Matos couldn't resist — she picked out a tan beauty and named her Gigi.

Gigi will not follow the same path as the dog that birthed her thanks to a new program by the St. Francis Pet Care clinic and the SWAG Resource Center.

The clinic, which treats the pets of low-income residents at its downtown Gainesville facility, now treats pets of residents from the many apartment complexes in the vicinity of Southwest 20th Avenue west of Interstate 75 on one Saturday morning a month.

To be accepted into the program, cats and dogs must be, or get, neutered or spayed. That cost is covered along with vaccinations, flea treatment, microchipping and other care.

"It's a blessing to have them here because if it wasn't for them some of the dogs would be sick and getting other dogs sick," said Matos, who lives in Majestic Oaks. "The mama had eight of them. They told (the owner) you have to fix the mama, too. There are too many animals out there. We love them but we can't support them."

The SWAG center's parking lot was filled with leashed dogs, cats in carriers and their people Saturday morning as pet owners from the area brought them in for treatment and to pick up some food.

Volunteer veterinarians, vet techs and general helpers manned tables outside and inside the resource center to examine pets, vaccinate them, clip their nails and tend to other routine needs.

Volunteer Chris Machen, wife of former University of Florida President Bernie Machen, had to explain to a woman who wanted vaccinations for her dog, which her boyfriend wanted to use for breeding, that she must first have the dog neutered.

“The spay/neuter is the big thing because we can’t have anymore puppies. Think about it — we’ll be here in a month,” Machen told the woman.

St. Francis Pet Care was founded in 2007 by Machen and veterinarians Dale Kaplan-Stein and Natalie Isaza, a UF professor. They organized a crew of volunteers to treat animals weekly at the St. Francis House homeless shelter on South Main Street and now operate out of a nearby building.

Amber Emanuel, a lecturer in the University of Florida’s Department of Health Education and Behavior, said the SWAG expansion grew out of a survey of animals that ended up in the county shelter. The southwest area was a hotspot.

So Emanuel brought together the St. Francis clinic and the Southwest Advocacy Group — SWAG — to have a monthly pet day at the resource center. Emanuel said various grants, including one from Gainesville’s Wagmore Foundation, offset costs.

“We came out to the neighborhood as part of the research project and interviewed people to see what they wanted. One of the things they talked about was basic vet care. I knew that is what St. Francis does,” Emanuel said. “We have a whole year of this basically paid for. We got some money from Wagmore to do spay/neuters and we got money from the national Cold Noses Foundation for everything else.”

SWAG Resource Center manager Amanda Elliott said the clinic has been a welcome addition to the services offered in association with SWAG center, which itself was created by volunteers several years ago.

Tanya Rodstrom lives in the neighborhood and brought Lala, a chihuahua/Jack Russell terrier mix, to the clinic for the first time.

“We come a lot to SWAG and they told me about it, so I’m taking advantage of it,” Rodstrom said. “I want her to get fixed. I want her vaccinated. I want her fleas treated. I want her healthy.”