

This Plate's for the Animals

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
November 2015

Vehicle tag funds statewide spay and neuter programs



Homeless dogs and cats are a never-ending issue in communities across the United States. Just the feral cat numbers in Miami-Dade County alone are close to 500,000. Now imagine the numbers in a world *without* the current sterilization programs offered by our main shelters: the Humane Society of Greater Miami (HSGM) and Miami-Dade Animal Services (MDAS). That's one scary thought.

Public grant application records show that last year HSGM sterilized 6196 cats and 6464 dogs. In 2013, MDAS sterilized 5688 cats and 9840 dogs. Their free and low-cost programs, as well as other spay/neuter services throughout the state, are made possible and paid for in a number of different ways, including sales of the Florida Animal Friend (FAF) specialty license plates.

The nonprofit corporation Florida Animal Friend was created in 2005 by a joint task force consisting of the Florida Animal Control Agency, the Florida Veterinary Medical Association, and the Humane Society of the United States, with the mission to reduce, humanely, the numbers of stray and feral dogs and cats. Their slogan says it all: "Help 'fix' pet overpopulation."

FAF has a board of directors whose collective years of animal experience totals in the dizzying hundreds. They've served as veterinarians, animal control supervisors, shelter executives, animal cruelty investigators, veterinary educators, and pet advocates, and have held numerous positions within chapters of the Humane Society of the United States and other sheltering organizations.

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With each purchase and tag renewal of the FAF specialty plate, \$25 goes to the organization to help fund statewide pet sterilization and education programs. The plate can be purchased online, by mail, or in person at a tag agency or tax collector's office. Regular tag renewal or new plate fees must be paid in addition to the tax-deductible \$25 contribution, as well as a \$2 state fee. FAF distributes the money to deserving groups with sterilization programs in place through a grant process.

The idea of selling specialty plates to help fund spay/neuter services was brought before the Florida legislature back in 2004, as a bill sponsored by then state Sen. Nan Rich. Ever since, the plate has proved popular among car registrants. As posted on the FAF website, in 2014, 16,979 Florida Animal Friend plates were active; and although the numbers were slightly down from the previous year, FAF maintained its statewide ranking of No. 25. (In comparison, No. 1 with 88,805 active plates is the University of Florida; No. 2 is the Florida State plate at 62,033; No. 6 is Save the Manatees at 43,437; No. 18 is Salutes the Firefighters at 20,902; No. 28 is Miami Dolphins at 15,236; No. 70 is Support Our Troops at 3547; and No. 83 is Miami Marlins at 2263.)

By county, Miami-Dade ranks fourth in FAF plate registrations at 1127, behind Pinellas, Palm Beach, and Broward counties, respectively, as of August 2015.

With close to 17,000 active plates last year at \$25 a pop, FAF raised \$424,475. Additional donations were accepted and received, but according to Ember Patterson, associate account executive with Frankel Media Group, the marketing firm that represents FAF, "These are very minimal. We depend almost entirely on plate sales."

This money funds a multitude of sterilization programs throughout Florida, focusing on pets in low-income families, pit bulls, stray and feral cat TNR (trap-neuter-return) programs, and creating services in areas where none exist.

FAF chose 26 winners from grant applications in 2014 and, says Patterson, disseminated grant monies totaling \$600,000. Miami-Dade County Animal Services was one of those winners (and was also awarded a grant in 2009). This year, 30 applicants received \$580,000 in awards.

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The Humane Society of Greater Miami filled out the eight-page form, applied for the maximum grant amount of \$25,000, and was awarded that amount in 2015. Laurie Hoffman, executive director of HSGM, says they are honored and excited to be winners: "We try to apply every year that we're eligible," she says. "We'll use the funds for targeted spay/neuter surgeries, which is an existing program." HSGM was also awarded FAF grants in 2007 and 2009.

Patterson confirms that since starting to hand out grants statewide in 2006, FAF has awarded total grant funds of \$3,964,701 to 205 winners -- all from the sales of license plates.

Those animal organizations interested in applying for a FAF grant should go to www.floridaanimalfriend.org to read about eligibility and requirements. Application forms are on the site, as are all past winners' applications, which can be used as tools to fill out grant applications.

Applications are available starting January 1 and are due by April 1. Winners are announced in mid-August, and grant funds are released on August 15. All winners must file follow-up reports by September 1 of the following year.

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