



This month, our continuing coverage of non-profits is about Big Sky CARES (Community Animal Resources & Education Services.) In 2019, St. Tammany Parish Animal Services open-intake shelter's overall save rate was 42% and only 30% for cats. This meant that 70% of cats coming into the shelter died there. That same year, CARES received a grant through Best Friends Animal Society from the Rachael Ray Foundation to formalize a community cat program with St. Tammany Parish Animal Services. The two organizations worked together to trap, sterilize, vaccinate and return unowned cats, rather than adding them to an over-crowded one-way shelter system. The parish-funded spay/neuter voucher program covered community cats at 100% with no copay. With an established community cat program, the live release rate for St. Tammany Animal Services is up to 95%! This is a HUGE success for St. Tammany Parish, our animals and the community as a whole.

CARES' mission is "changing the ways people think and feel about living with and caring for animals." The next step is to get the word out to other parishes and communities, update their leash laws and implement the same programs.

In 2018, I shared with you about Big Sky Ranch (BSR)/CATNIP (Care Advocacy and Treatment of Neglected and Indigent Pets) Foundation as part of my continuing coverage series about Louisiana heroes. They performed heroic animal rescues during and after the catastrophic Hurricane Harvey flooding in west Louisiana and east Texas. The organization was founded in 2012 by Dr. Catherine Wilbert and Sharon Schluter to spay and neuter free roaming, unowned cats and prevent unwanted litters by owned pets. Now

# **RAISING THE BAR**

**for Animal Care in Louisiana**

Story and photos by Donna Bush



## CARES SERVICES & PROGRAMS

### MEDICAL SERVICES

Low-cost spay/neuter • Emergency and Critical CaCre • Healthy start kitten/puppy packages • Preventative and basic care • Annual wellness checks and vaccinations • Microchips • X-ray and ultrasound • Laser therapy and acupuncture • Dental Cleaning, surgery and X-ray

### BIG SKY CARES PROGRAMS

- **Safe Housing Program**  
Provides housing for pets of domestic violence survivors.
- **Indigent Pet Program**  
Provides urgent medical care for owned and homeless animals in need.
- **Neonatal Critical Care and Kitten Socialization Program**  
Helps feral or sick kittens become healthy, socialized, adoptable pets.
- **Seniors for Seniors Pet Companion Program**  
Helps adopters who are 65 and older adopt an older cat (age 7 or older).
- **Barn Cat / Working Cat Program**  
Pairs suitable cats with families or farms that need a superstar mouser to live outdoors on their property.
- **Rescue Bank, an initiative of GreaterGood.org**  
Help distribute pet food donated by manufacturers and retailers to qualified animal welfare groups based on a national food bank model.

they have taken their mission a step further in their efforts to aid animals and people in Louisiana.

Big Sky CARES /CATNIP Foundation is the umbrella 501(c)3 non-profit animal welfare organization devoted to alternatives to euthanasia and lowering the number of animals entering shelters and dying there. A large part of this is their new low-cost community animal clinic and hospital.

In August of 2016, while performing many animal rescues in the wake of the devastating flooding of Southeast Louisiana, their dream of opening an affordable care clinic was born. Some of the hardest hit areas were also some of the most impoverished parishes in the State. They rescued approximately 300 animals from these highly impacted locations. After bringing them to the Ranch for medical evaluation, they found that only 1 of the 300 was spayed/neutered! This fact really brought home to them the desperate need for affordable spay/neuter and vet services. In working with the communities, they learned

that it wasn't that residents didn't want to spay/neuter and care for their pets; they simply couldn't afford it. It literally was the difference between food on the table or vet care. After the floods, they set up transport stations at truck stops in Tangipahoa and Livingston Parishes, where residents could meet them and drop off their cats for spay/neuter. BSR was bringing trailer loads of 50-75 cats to LSU Vet School for affordable care.

They spent the year following the floods writing grants to raise money for spays and neuters. As soon as word got out that vouchers were available, people flocked in to take advantage of the offer.

Louisiana is the third poorest state in the US. The lack of care for animals is a combination of poverty, lack of low-cost options and generational attitudes about animals. If your parents didn't spay/neuter pets or visit a vet annually, you're more likely to do the same. It truly is a case of "You don't know what you don't know."



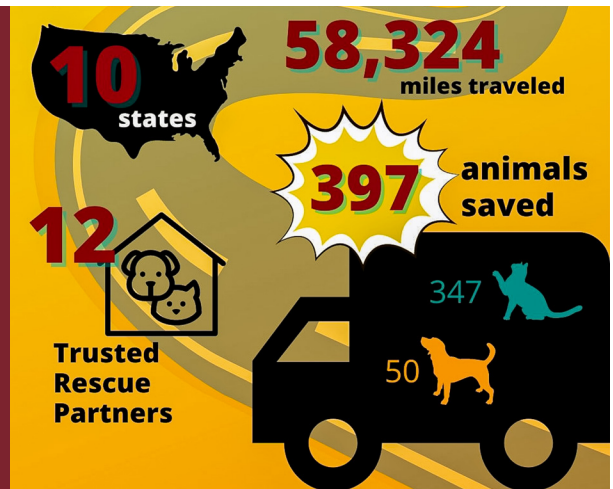
**LEARN MORE** about their services and programs on their website,

**BigSkyRanch.org**

## CARES TRANSPORTS IN 2021

Another way that CARES helps animals in our area is by transporting them to adoption partners in other states. When Parish Animal Service partners pull cats and dogs from shelters, they are brought to CARES for evaluation, medical treatment, and preparation for travel to an adoption partner in another state. A minimum of \$100 is spent on

every 'healthy' animal received for spay/neuter, vaccinations, microchip, feeding and boarding - and even more if the animal is sick or injured. Transports happen at least twice a month and often, four per month. In 2021, compassionate CARES volunteers drove 58,324 miles to ten states and saved the lives of 347 cats and 50 dogs!



Education is an important key to changing the way Louisiana addresses animal care. As a kid, I remember Animal Control ("the dogcatcher") driving through the neighborhood and rounding up stray dogs. This is still the policy in many cities and parishes. Animals are piled into crowded buildings with little resources available for care. They are often unspayed, unneutered, and unvaccinated. This leads to a lot of ill animals, unlikely to be adopted or returned to their owner and more likely to eventually be euthanized.

According to Dr. Wilbert, there's a whole movement to revamp Animal Control. The Human Animal Support Services (HASS) model's primary goal is to keep people and pets together.

"We are bringing animal welfare organizations and community members together to engage in partnerships that support the bond of people and animals," she explained. This is a collaborative effort facilitated by multiple animal welfare organizations.

In the traditional model, pets in need were separated from their families.

3500 animal shelters across the country take in 6 million dogs and cats per year for many reasons - loss of job or home, moving to a place that doesn't allow pets, a found or injured pet, or some other crisis. The shelter is then responsible for finding placement for these animals through adoption or rescue groups. Many open-intake shelters frequently operate at over 90% of their capacity.

A lack of space and funding for programs leads to approximately 1.5 million of the animals that come into the shelter annually being euthanized. There are very few programs available to keep pets and their owners together during tough times.

The traditional model focused mainly on sheltering and housing animals with only a small portion focused on community-based services, such as spay/neuter and vaccine clinics. In the HASS model, shelters act as a hub to become a community animal center and ICU room for animals in need. Fostering becomes the preferred way to care for animals.

Partnerships with animal welfare agencies help pet owners access the resources they need. When lost pets stay in the neighborhood where they are found, they are reunited with their owners 86% of the time. People have access to telehealth for their pets, reducing the need for in-person vet visits.

Some people are concerned that this results in turning away animals. Not true. Instead, these programs allow pets to receive the necessary care without having to be surrendered. This model allows shelters to take in pets in need when a flood or hurricane strikes, and helps pets stay in their communities with their families.

In 2018, BSR opened a small spay and neuter clinic at their 10-acre site for animals in their care. As more pet owners adopted from them and utilized their programs, demand grew for their low-cost vet care. Eventually, they opened their small clinic to the public, resulting in a long waitlist for spay/neuter. The traffic quickly became too much for the road at the Ranch

## HOW YOU CAN HELP BIG SKY RANCH / CARES:

Donate. Volunteer. No amount or task is too small. They desperately need consistent volunteers to help with laundry; care for animals; clean and sanitize cages before and after transports; clerical duties; social media; handyman duties, etc. Every single volunteer hour directly helps save an animal.

**LEARN MORE AT:** (website) [BigSkyRanch.org](http://BigSkyRanch.org) | (Facebook) [Facebook.com/BigSkyRanch](https://Facebook.com/BigSkyRanch) (Instagram) [Instagram.com/catnipbsr](https://Instagram.com/catnipbsr)

and hazardous to their free-roaming animals. Also, in 2018, they worked closely with then-St. Tammany Parish President, Pat Brister to create the spay/neuter voucher program. She was all for it, quickly shifting money to provide vouchers. It was so popular, they ran out of money in their first 2-month trial period!

In 2019, they began the search for property nearby and found their new 6000 sq. ft. building with the thought to build out the space to handle high volume, high quality, low-cost care. Their vision: "The socioeconomic level of the animal's owner should not determine the animal's level of care."

They purchased the building, secured funding and donations and then Covid hit; locking everything down. Many of their in-kind donations went away, leading to longer and more costly construction.

When they opened their doors in 2021 as Big Sky CARES, they thought this would offer a step up from the craziness of the small clinic at the Ranch, allowing them plenty of time to develop clinic and wellness protocols, vaccination schedules, etc. Instead, with so many vet clinics closed for Covid, they became the defacto ER clinic, with phones ringing off the hook. They couldn't keep up with the waiting list for spay/neuter. As Catherine said, "These are all good problems to have."

Big Sky CARES is a direct implementation of the HASS model and has worked tirelessly in the community to change the ways people think and feel about living with and caring for animals.

"We achieve our mission statement every single day, because we see the change in the people," Dr. Wilbert said. "They can't change without having the tools."

Many animal welfare organization's mission statements only mention animals and leave people out entirely. CARES is all about including people in the solution.

I can attest to their low-cost care as our adopted feral cat received his medical treatment there. In addition to staying over two months, he's had multiple surgeries, daily laser treatments, antibiotics, pain meds, etc., and all at an affordable price. I hate to think what this would cost us if we had to take Floyd elsewhere. And the best part of his care is that the entire team of employees and volunteers love on him daily! I think he just might be the Big Sky Rockstar!

Big Sky CARES' reception in the community and state has been overwhelming. There's a waitlist of people wanting to use their services. People are driving from all over the state, another prime example of how desperately these services are needed.

In addition to the low-cost community animal clinic and hospital, there's also the Calico Cat Café and Adoption Lounge where adopters can mingle with available pets in

a chilled environment, enjoy local baked goods and events like Cat Yoga. There's a retail shop, offering affordable pet-themed jewelry, arts, gifts and pet supplies. They also have pet boarding space. Both operate as for-profit to help offset the costs of running their charitable services.

Why are animals adopted so much more quickly in other states than here? There's not such an overabundance of animals available for adoption because these states embrace spay/neuter programs and alternatives to open-intake shelters. Also, our milder climate leads to year-round kitten breeding season.

Thanks to grants from Bissell Pet Foundation and PETCO, CARES was able to provide spay/neuter, vaccinations and microchips for community animals at no cost to the owner.

Raising the bar for our community would mean not only access to affordable care for the community and their animals but helping other animal welfare organizations and municipalities to learn better options for their animal services. Per Catherine, "We want to raise the bar for animal care in Louisiana. But the bar is very heavy and very low. We can't do it alone. We need help."

Please help with your support of this worthy organization that provides so much for our community. Help spread the word about the amazing difference they are making in the lives of people and animals.

## CARES BY THE NUMBERS:



**2,500**  
low-cost care  
appointments



**825**  
animals adopted  
or transported to  
new homes



**800,000**

**bowls of pet food distributed to  
other rescues and families in need**

During 2021, CARES provided 2500 low-cost care appointments, adopted or transported 825 animals to new homes and distributed 800,000 bowls of pet food to other rescues and families in need. They are one of the few organizations that I'm aware of with a track record of 95% of donor dollars going directly to their mission!

