

APPENDIX B

Management of Stray and Feral Cats

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It's estimated that at least 30 percent of cats who enter our nation's animal shelters each year don't make it out alive. Approximately five of every 10 cats brought to a shelter are unowned, stray, "feral" cats, many of whom are not suitable for adoption into homes. In fact, even the most adoptable cat or kitten can be at risk of being euthanized in some shelters, depending on the circumstances (e.g., time of year, shelter capacity, risk of illness).

After generations of impounding cats, only to see the majority of them euthanized, it has become clear that most cats are not well served in the animal shelter environment. Again, this is particularly true of stray and feral (aka "community") cats. It's well understood that the traditional approach to managing community cats — impoundment followed, in most cases, by lethal injection — has failed to produce any overall population reduction. Lethal injection is also wildly unpopular and costly, the poster child for failed public policy.

Efficacy of TNVR programs

Today, communities across the country are turning increasingly to programs aimed at keeping cats and kittens out of shelters. Perhaps the best known of these programs is trap-neuter-vaccinate-return (TNVR or TNR), a common-sense, cost-effective solution for controlling stray cat populations by preventing additional births instead of trying to house, feed and euthanize more cats. The process is simple: Cats are caught, evaluated by veterinarians, vaccinated,¹ sterilized and returned to their original location, where they have been and will continue to be cared for by community residents.

There's compelling scientific evidence that TNVR is effective. In one study, for example, a 36 percent average decrease in population among six sterilized colonies was observed in the first two years alone, while three unsterilized colonies experienced an average 47 percent increase over the same period.² A four-year follow-up census found that one colony had been reduced from 10 cats to none. At seven years, another colony originally containing 10 cats had been reduced to just one cat.³ Similar results were documented by a citizen

scientist in Chicago, Illinois, who observed an average population reduction of 54 percent across 20 colonies.⁴ And a 17-year TNVR effort on the waterfront in Newburyport, Massachusetts, resulted in the elimination of an estimated 300 cats.⁵

A survey of colony caregivers (caring for 103 cat colonies) in Rome, Italy, revealed a 22 percent decrease overall in the number of cats, despite a 21 percent rate of “cat immigration.” Although some colonies experienced initial increases, the numbers began to decrease significantly after three years of TNVR. According to the survey report, “Colonies neutered three, four, five or six years before the survey showed progressive decreases of 16, 29, 28 and 32 percent, respectively.”⁶ (For additional information, see Best Friends Animal Society’s online resource “Trap-Neuter-Return Success Stories: What the Research Tells Us,” available at bestfriends.org/communitycats.)

TNVR was introduced to the U.S. in the early 1990s and has gained in popularity ever since. Although it was mentioned only briefly in ICMA’s *Animal Control Management: A Guide for Local Governments*, published in 2001, TNVR has become one of the most heavily discussed topics in the animal sheltering and enforcement field in recent years. Indeed, guidelines recently adopted by the National Animal Care and Control Association (NACA) acknowledge the philosophical and cultural shift taking place within animal control agencies across the country, as these organizations increasingly adopt TNVR and RTF programs: “NACA recognizes that in some circumstances, alternative management programs, including TNVR programs, may be effective, and recommends that each agency assess the individual need with their community and respond accordingly.”

KEY POINTS

- **Most cats (adoptable or not) are not well served in the animal shelter environment. Many lifesaving programs therefore focus on keeping cats out of shelters.**
- **Managing unowned, free-roaming cats via impoundment and lethal injection has done nothing to decrease their overall numbers.**
- **Trap-neuter-vaccinate-return (TNVR, also commonly referred to as TNR) programs are increasing in popularity across the country.**
- **Return-to-field (RTF) programs represent “low-hanging fruit” for agencies interested in rapidly increasing their lifesaving capacity.**

TNVR can dramatically reduce nuisance complaints since spaying and neutering unowned, free-roaming cats reduces mating-related behaviors (yowling, fighting, spraying, etc.) that can lead to such complaints.

Shelter-based TNVR, or return-to-field

More recently, this same TNVR approach has been applied to stray cats brought into shelters by residents and animal control staff. Again, the process is simple: Community cats deemed healthy enough to qualify for a return-to-field (RTF) program are sterilized, vaccinated and returned to their original location. These RTF programs are not only effective at reducing shelter admissions and euthanasia,⁷⁻⁹ they have the potential to save taxpayers money^{10,11} and provide a public health benefit to the community.

In Alachua County, Florida, for example, researchers documented a 66 percent decrease in shelter intake of cats from a target zip code of focused TNVR efforts, compared with a 12 percent decrease from the rest of the county. Euthanasia of cats coming from the target area decreased by 95 percent over the same period, compared with a 30 percent decrease observed in the rest of the county.⁷ Four years after implementing its RTF program, San José (California) Animal Care and Services observed a 29 percent decrease in feline intake and a decrease in feline euthanasia from more than 70 percent of intakes in 2009 to 23 percent in 2014.”⁸ And in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a three-year community cat program (TNVR combined with RTF) resulted in a 38 percent reduction in feline intake, and an 84 percent reduction in feline euthanasia.⁹

To create the greatest impact, TNVR and RTF programs are closely integrated, with stray cats coming into the shelter used to trigger community-level TNVR efforts. Best Friends Animal Society, which operates more large-scale community cat programs than any other organization in the country, refers to this as the “red flag cat model.” Under this model, each cat brought into the shelter as a stray is considered a “red flag,” indicating that there may be more community cats in the same area. That “red flag cat” prompts staff and volunteers to focus outreach efforts (knocking on doors, delivering informational brochures, etc.) on residences immediately surrounding the area where the cat was found. The result is that two to six times as many cats are sterilized and vaccinated through TNVR “field work” than through RTF programming alone.

The role of animal control staff

Not surprisingly, field officers (also called animal control officers, or ACOs) play a key role in the success of any RTF program (and to a lesser extent, TNVR programs). Because ACOs typically find themselves on the front lines (e.g., answering complaint calls, addressing nuisance complaints in the field), they provide an indispensable resource for community outreach and education. Indeed, the public often first learns about TNVR and RTF programs through conversations with ACOs or dispatch staff.

It’s important to recognize that the philosophical shift to TNVR and RTF is a significant one, requiring some of the people involved to rethink their measures of success (see the

sidebar below). Although it's unlikely to happen overnight, this shift does have the potential to transform an organization. After all, the same staff who regarded community cat programming with great skepticism can become its greatest ambassadors, and the program's emphasis on lifesaving efforts can cause enforcement and dispatch staff to see every aspect of their jobs through this new lens. (Of course, some staff already share the underlying philosophy of these innovative programs and will immediately embrace their new role.)

A PHILOSOPHICAL SHIFT

In successful TNVR and RTF programs, problem-solving is no longer about “taking the cat away.” ACOs and dispatch staff are required to better understand the nuance — and underlying cause — of nuisance complaints, and they often play the role of diplomat, negotiator or counselor. Training ACOs and dispatch staff in such skills is therefore essential to the success of these programs. (For additional information on this topic, please see “How to Address Various Complaints,” part of Best Friends Animal Society's *Community Cat Programs Handbook*, available at bestfriends.org/ccphandbook.)

Benefits to field officers

In some cases, the benefits of TNVR and RTF programs might not be immediately obvious to animal control officers. This is especially true for agencies in which enforcement and dispatch services are separate from sheltering services. (Sheltering staff typically observe a reduction in intake and shelter deaths almost immediately upon launching an RTF program.) However, experience demonstrates that these individuals will benefit considerably, as:

- The policies regarding community cats (impoundment, response to nuisance complaints, etc.) are clarified, reducing ambiguity and misunderstanding — and the associated stress — among staff and residents alike.
- There's a decrease in the number of cats and kittens picked up in the field and/or impounded via shelter intake, thereby reducing workload.
- Resources once allocated to impounding community cats are re-allocated to other tasks — for example, at-large dogs, injured animals and cruelty investigations.
- Caregivers and the rest of the community start respecting ACOs rather than seeing them as villains.
- TNVR- and RTF-related public relations and community outreach efforts help inform residents about the program, reducing the burden on field and dispatch staff.
- The workload is further reduced because healthy ear-tipped (i.e., sterilized and vaccinated) cats are only rarely impounded.

Measures of success

As mentioned above, the philosophical shift necessary to implement effective community cat programming will require some ACOs to rethink their measures of success. Their traditional role in animal control efforts often involved responding to complaint calls by removing cats or kittens from a particular location, often with fatal consequences. Removal of the cats or kittens completed the job, and ACOs considered the cessation of complaint calls their primary measure of success.

The success of TNVR and RTF programs is tracked by very different metrics, however. Studies show that these programs can lead to fewer complaint calls, for example.¹²⁻¹⁴ (For additional information on this topic, please see Best Friends Animal Society's online resource "How TNR Reduces Nuisance Complaints: What the Research Tells Us," available at bestfriends.org/communitycats.) Among the other measures of program success are:

- Reduced intake and deaths of cats and kittens in shelters
- Reduced number of young kittens brought to the shelter (an indication that the population of community cats is being stabilized or reduced)
- Reduced colony size and/or number
- The number of positive interactions with residents who support the community cat program and, perhaps more important, with those who were skeptical of these programs but who have seen their impact in their neighborhood
- Improved relationships with shelter staff, caregivers, elected officials and the community overall

Admittedly, some of these measures are difficult to quantify and track. However, the value they represent to various stakeholders, generally speaking, far exceeds anything captured merely by tracking impoundments. In any case, some process of documenting and tracking an agency's performance must still be implemented if stakeholders expect to see ongoing future improvements. (For additional information on this topic, please see "Working with Field Services and Dispatch Staff," part of Best Friends Animal Society's *Community Cat Programs Handbook*, available at bestfriends.org/ccphandbook.)

NOTES

1. All of Best Friends' return-to-field (RTF) programs vaccinate cats with the FVRCP vaccine (the "distemper vaccine," which protects against feline viral rhinotracheitis, calicivirus and panleukopenia) and the rabies vaccine (even though rabies in cats is extremely rare). Considering the minimal costs involved (assuming the vaccines are purchased in bulk from the manufacturer) and the enormous public health benefit, this is a practice that should be considered for every RTF (and TNVR) program.

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4. D. D. Spehar and P. J. Wolf, "A Case Study in Citizen Science: The Effectiveness of a Trap-Neuter-Return Program in a Chicago Neighborhood," *Animals* 7, no. 11 (2018).
5. D. D. Spehar and P. J. Wolf, "An Examination of an Iconic Trap-Neuter-Return Program: The Newburyport, Massachusetts Case Study," *Animals* 7, no. 11 (2017).
6. E. Natoli et al., "Management of Feral Domestic Cats in the Urban Environment of Rome (Italy)," *Preventive Veterinary Medicine* 77 (2006): 180–185.
7. J. K. Levy, N. M. Isaza and K. C. Scott, "Effect of High-Impact Targeted Trap-Neuter-Return and Adoption of Community Cats on Cat Intake to a Shelter," *The Veterinary Journal* 201 (2014): 269–274.
8. K. L. Johnson and J. Cicirelli, "Study of the Effect on Shelter Cat Intakes and Euthanasia from a Shelter-Neuter-Return Project of 10,080 Cats from March 2010 to June 2014," *PeerJ* 2 (2014): e646.
9. D. D. Spehar and P. J. Wolf, "The Impact of an Integrated Program of Return-to-Field and Targeted Trap-Neuter-Return on Feline Intake and Euthanasia at a Municipal Animal Shelter," *Animals* 8, no. 4 (2018).
10. F. E. Hamilton, "Leading and Organizing Social Change for Companion Animals," *Anthrozoös* 23 (2010): 277–292.
11. *County of Cook v. Village of Bridgeview*. No. 1-12 – 2164 (Illinois Appellate Court, First District, Sixth Division, April 25, 2014).
12. K. L. Hughes, M. R. Slater and L. Haller, "The Effects of Implementing a Feral Cat Spay/Neuter Program in a Florida County Animal Control Service," *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 5 (2002): 285–298.
13. K. L. Hughes and M. R. Slater, "Implementation of a Feral Cat Management Program on a University Campus," *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 5 (2002): 15–28.
14. H. Brown and B. Kortis, *When You're an Outlaw: Persuading Municipal Officials to Implement TNR*. (Webinar produced by PetSmart Charities, Inc., and the Humane Society of the United States, 2014).