



Shelter Practices

Toolkit

Transforming Shelters to Save More Cats: Activist Toolkit

Do you want to help your local shelter save more cats' lives? This toolkit will help you organize your community and approach your shelter about implementing positive changes for cats.

A Need for Transformation

Nationally, only about 30% of cats who enter shelters have positive outcomes. In fact, being killed in a shelter is the leading cause of death for healthy cats in the United States. And almost no feral, or community, cats who enter shelters have positive outcomes. Since community cats are unsocialized and unadoptable, they are almost always killed immediately or after a short holding period.



Change is greatly needed—and you can be an architect of change in your own community. There's no better way to create sustainable change for cats than by working with shelters to help them save more lives.

Some innovative shelters are already making positive changes that are saving cats' lives. They're adopting Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) programs, launching public education campaigns, and increasing their transparency. The exponential increase in TNR and other life-saving shelter practices provides a platform for you to bring about change. This is your opportunity to help your local shelter save more lives. This is an opportunity to make your community a safe place for cats.

What is Happening in Your Community?

First, get a better understanding of what is happening in your community in regards to animal control and animal pounds and shelters.

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- **Learn about your local shelter's approach to community cats.** Call the shelter and ask! Check out their website and printed materials. Sometimes it's the simplest approaches that can get you the quickest answers.
- **Do some research online.** Read news articles on your local shelter. Locate other animal protection entities nearby: rescue groups, TNR organizations, spay/neuter clinics. Some of this information can be found by accessing a list of Alley Cat Allies Feral Friend Network members in your community at www.alleycat.org/FeralFriends.
- **Learn about local policies affecting cats.** Ill-conceived ordinances like feeding bans and limit laws punish the very people who work as volunteers to improve conditions for both cats and the community. Even while community cat groups have organized and grown, many individual caregivers are being harassed and cited for their community service. These primitive ordinances ignore the true problem—the lack of subsidized spay/neuter and TNR programs—and end up forcing even more community cats into shelters where they are almost always killed. The good news is that you can help change these backward ordinances and lead the way to bring about change in your local shelter. Learn about your local policies affecting community cats and their caregivers at www.alleycat.org/Ordinances.

Be the Voice for Cats

We've seen it all over the country—colonies of community cats wiped out by a single call from one neighbor to animal control. Most people who call about community cats don't want the cats to die—but they don't understand that the cats have a home outdoors and are just as healthy as pet cats. This is where you come in. You and other compassionate community members



need to represent the many people who are happy to have the cats in the community.

Take these next steps to be proactive and build support for protecting and improving the lives of cats.

Mobilize Your Community for Shelter Reform

Before approaching your shelter, network with other community members who are working to make positive changes for animals and form a group to support feral cats and TNR. You want to demonstrate that many people in your community want a better approach to outdoor cats. Grassroots organizing is an American tradition that lives on today in communities across the country. It's in hometown newspapers all the time—residents working together to improve their neighborhood or draw attention to a worthy cause. And it works for cats too: it's the most effective approach you can use to help your local shelter save more lives. Grassroots organizing can be done effectively with minimal resources. Email and the internet make it cheaper and easier than ever to reach out to others who want to help animals and to form an organization to push for change in your community.

Read our guide to organizing your community for strategic change for cats: www.alleycat.org/Organizing.

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Encourage Your Shelter to Change its Approach to Cats

The best change your shelter can make right now to save more lives is to adopt a Feral Cat Protection Policy and no longer accept community cats.

Community cats are not socialized to people and are therefore unadoptable.

In addition to not accepting community cats, you can work with your shelter to put a TNR program in place for community cats. Other programs and policy changes that will help your shelter save lives include recognizing eartipping, operating a trap loan program, increasing transparency, building community partnerships, and opening a low-cost spay/neuter clinic.

In addition to adopting a Feral Cat Protection Policy, shelters can save even more lives by only taking in the number of healthy cats that they can adopt out. Studies show that stray or lost cats are more likely to be adopted or to return home if they stay where they are, outside—however counterintuitive that may seem—instead of being brought to a shelter.

When you encourage your shelter to make these policy and program changes, be sure to provide them with materials explaining how to make the change—and why it is so beneficial for animals, the shelter's staff and volunteers, and the community. Commit to helping your shelter implement new strategies for cats. Find rescue groups and other community partners who can help the shelter by financially supporting TNR and helping reunite cats with their owners or finding them new homes.

Read our toolkit for helping shelters transform their approach to cats: www.alleycat.org/Shelters.

Provide your local shelter with a link or printed version of the toolkit when you contact them.

Approach Your Local Shelter

Once you have a better understanding of what's happening in your community and have organized a strong group of concerned community members, it's time to approach your shelter. Make sure everyone in your group is on the same page about what policy and program changes you're recommending, and choose a spokesperson to contact the shelter. The spokesperson should then call or email the shelter to request a meeting with the director or other staff members. Be sure to introduce yourself, including who you are, your title in the group, why you care about these issues, and any experience you have with TNR or caring for outdoor cats.

Before the Meeting

- **Do Your Homework.** Review talking points on TNR (www.alleycat.org/FAQ) and outdoor cats before meeting with shelter staff. Also review our frequently asked questions about shelter transformation, which provides answers to questions that shelters may have as they consider TNR and new approaches to community cats. Find FAQs on shelter transformation at www.alleycat.org/Shelters.
- **Have Resources On Hand.** Bring copies of educational materials, including our shelter transformation toolkit (www.alleycat.org/Shelters) and details on how to start a TNR program (www.alleycat.org/TNR).
- **Show Support.** Bring a short list of examples of other shelters that have seen success with TNR, including any available statistics on reduced intake rates, increased adoption rates, etc. If possible, include local shelters or rescue groups that have seen success with TNR. You can find examples of successful shelter initiatives in our shelter transformation toolkit at www.alleycat.org/Shelters.

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During the Meeting

- **Suspend Judgment and Be Positive.** Be positive and friendly in your interactions, and offer your help wherever possible. Keep in mind that shelter staff want to save animals lives but may be facing a range of challenges.
- **Listen!** Listen for key words or phrases that can help you understand any underlying issues or concerns that the shelter staff may have. You may be able to comment on the issue or clarify how the new program or policy could work. Make a note of any questions the shelter staff has, and respond if you know the answer or offer to send them a response later after you've had a chance to do some research.
- **Be Understanding.** In many shelters, current practices and programs have been in place for decades. Shelter staff may have a difficult time imagining how this new approach could work for them. Be mindful of this, but also ensure them that it is feasible and that you and the community are there to help and support them.
- **Be Prepared to Address Tough Questions.** It is not important, or even possible, to have answers to every question. It is OK to say that you do not know the answer to a question, but that you will find out and get back to them with more information. Do not pretend to know the answer to a question when you don't. Do not respond to every part of every question. Stick to the most important parts.
- **Offer to Help.** If you volunteer locally conducting TNR, offer to partner with the shelter and ask them to refer callers to your group instead of trapping the cats. Be realistic and do not agree to help in a way that is not feasible for you or your organization.
- **Make Connections.** Provide contact information for your group or other groups that may be able to help. Also, encourage the shelter staff to contact Alley Cat Allies for guidance as they consider this transition. We are here to help and have experience working directly with shelters as they adopt TNR programs and make other positive changes for cats. If the shelter's staff needs to be trained on TNR, refer them to Alley Cat Allies' webinars at www.alleycat.org/Webinar.
- **Propose a Pilot Program.** If the shelter seems receptive but unsure of how TNR would work in your community, propose implementing a pilot program before addressing the entire community. A pilot program focuses TNR on no more than one or two neighborhoods. Pilot programs are designed to be successful with the minimum commitment level of resources and volunteers. They are a good way to show shelter and animal control staff that TNR really works. Providing assurance that the program will be tested first and modified as needed has persuasive power. If the pilot works, it is more likely that an expansion program will be supported.
- **Remember That Small Steps Equal Big Wins.** If the shelter agrees to a pilot program, thank them and work with them to assure that enough time and resources are available to show how TNR can benefit the cats, the shelter, and the community.
- **Ask for Another Meeting.** This is particularly important if no agreement is reached or there are still major questions. Even if all of the details are resolved in your favor, it is important to continue to build the relationship.

After the Meeting

- **Send a Thank You Note.** Send the staff members you met with a thank you email, thanking them for their time, and also recapping the programs and policies that you are encouraging them to adopt. Include answers to any questions that came up, and include a list of resources that they might find helpful.
- **Build the Relationship.** Continue to stay in contact with the shelter staff, whether or not another meeting is scheduled. Depending on your relationship and their receptiveness, you may consider sending them news stories on TNR programs and any new resources that they might find helpful.

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You Can Change Your Shelter

Making positive changes to animal shelters is possible—with your help. Your shelter wants and needs support from the community. Many shelters are open to a conversation about making changes to preserve resources and save more animals' lives—especially if community members are open-minded and willing to help them make the transition.

The DC CAT program in Washington, D.C., offers a guiding example of how community members can come together to ignite positive, sustainable changes for cats. In 2004, the D.C. Department of Health, which oversees the city's animal control, approved a proposal from Alley Cat Allies, Washington Animal Rescue League, and Washington Humane Society to conduct a

TNR pilot program. Calls about community cats were then referred to Alley Cat Allies, which worked with residents to conduct TNR. Within 18 months, more than 1,600 cats were neutered and vaccinated. As a result of the pilot program's success, Washington Humane Society, which runs the city's animal control, officially embraced TNR in 2006. The following year, Washington Humane Society opened the first high-volume spay/neuter clinic in D.C., and Alley Cat Allies was a founding member. In 2008, D.C. passed a law requiring animal control to promote TNR for community cats. The pilot program that started with a small number of cats sparked real social change in the way the community values cats' lives.

Showing local officials that people want a humane approach to animal control—and that TNR is the best way to stabilize community cat populations—can eventually lead them to officially embrace the new model. It takes time to achieve full acceptance and implementation, but now is the time to plant the seed and begin talking to your local shelter about TNR.

