



Shelter Practices

Toolkit

Transforming Shelters to Save More Cats: Frequently Asked Questions

The best change shelters can make right now to save more cats is to adopt a **Feral Cat Protection Policy** and stop accepting feral, or community, cats.

You may be wondering...

But what will happen to community cats?

Instead of being impounded, community cats can be spayed/neutered, vaccinated, eartipped, and returned to their outdoor home and their family colony. The population stabilizes—no more kittens! Volunteer caregivers provide food and water for colonies and help ensure that the cats coexist peacefully with their community. TNR is a humane method of care—and the best approach—for outdoor cats. If your facility cannot start its own program right away, consider working with local community cat groups that you can refer people to in the interim. Learn how to implement an organizational TNR program at www.alleycat.org/OrganizationalTNR.

If you decide to take the next step and only accept the number of healthy socialized cats that you can adopt out, there are other alternatives to shelters for those cats who you can't accept. Cats are actually much more likely to find their way home or be adopted if they stay where they are instead of coming to a shelter. According to Barbara Carr, Director of Erie SPCA in Pennsylvania, cats who were waitlisted when the shelter was full had far more live outcomes than cats admitted to the shelter. Of those not taken in, 45% were rehomed 14% were kept by their caregivers, and about 6% were taken to a rescue group.¹

For detailed veterinary protocol for community cats, go to www.alleycat.org/Veterinarian.

Don't we have to accept community cats?

Many public shelters operate under the assumption that they are legally required to impound community, or feral, cats when residents bring them in. But it is actually rare that local or state laws require municipal shelters to impound



Eartipped cat.

Fact Sheet:

TRANSFORMING SHELTERS TO SAVE MORE CATS: FAQ, page 2 of 3

healthy community cats. Check your local laws to determine whether your city or state requires that municipal shelters accept community cats. If your municipal shelter is required to accept community cats, work with local officials to propose reversing this policy.

Who will pay for their care?

While costs differ from area to area, implementing a shelter-sponsored TNR program—or even just underwriting the spay/neuter for community cats—will almost always cost less than catching, receiving, housing, feeding, and then killing, the cats. And it's a real investment in the future—leading to healthier cats and happier community members, and humanely stabilizing outdoor cat populations. If your shelter can't afford to sponsor its own TNR program right now, you can consider partnering with private community cat protection groups that can cover some or all of the cost of TNR and use volunteers to trap and transport cats. For example, commissioners in Hillsborough County in Florida have approved a two-year TNR pilot program that will save the tax-funded shelter at least \$160,000 a year through a partnership with private organizations.

Jacksonville Animal Control and Protective Services estimates that the city's TNR program, Feral Freedom, has saved the city more than one million dollars in just over four years.

According to Donna Alexander, DVM, director of Cook County Animal and Rabies Control, the average cost of trapping, transporting, holding, killing, and disposing of a feral cat is \$185. The cost of TNR is much lower. If caregivers trap and transport the cat, the organization providing TNR services only covers the surgery or a portion of it. Even if the shelter is covering all costs associated with TNR, the total cost will still be lower than that of the trap and remove method.

Many public shelters cover the cost of TNR themselves because it is an investment in cats' lives and health, and it demonstrates a commitment to using socially responsible, compassionate, and efficient approaches to serving the animals and the public. And because it quickly pays for itself with reduced intake rates and increased save rates.

Also, it is free to educate people about TNR—you are welcome to use any of our free resources on TNR available at www.alleycat.org/TNR.



Can cats be left outdoors?

Yes—and for community cats, this is the only humane option. Cats have lived outdoors for thousands of years and can live—and thrive—in every habitat and climate, from farms to cities, and north to south. Outdoor cats can have the same lifespans as pet cats. A long-term study published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* of a TNR program noted that 83% of the cats present at the end of the observation period had been there for more than six years—showing that the cats were living about the same amount of time as pet cats, who have an average lifespan of 7.1 years.²

Outdoor cats are also healthy. A 2006 study published in the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* found that of 103,643 community cats examined in spay/neuter clinics in six states from 1993 to 2004, less than 1% of those cats needed to be euthanized because of debilitating conditions, trauma, or infectious diseases.³ In other words, most outdoor cats live full, healthy lives outdoors.

Research shows that feral cats are not a health threat to communities in which they live. After testing feral cats in Northern Florida for FIV, FeLV, and nine other infectious organisms, a 2004 study published in the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* concluded that “feral cats assessed in this study posed no greater risk to human beings or other cats than pet cats.”

Learn more about feral cats living healthy lives outdoors at www.alleycat.org/HealthyOutdoors.

Fact Sheet:

TRANSFORMING SHELTERS TO SAVE MORE CATS: FAQ, page 3 of 3



How will we respond to calls from the public about community cats?

The majority of people calling animal control about community cats are looking for help—they do not want community cats to be taken away and killed. Even though communities sometimes have one opponent who is very vocal and makes it seem like people want the cats gone, that idea is held by a small minority. The truth is that killing healthy cats does not align with what the overwhelming majority of Americans want. More than 80% of Americans believe that leaving a stray cat outside to live out his life is more humane than having the cat killed, according to a national survey conducted for Alley Cat Allies by Harris Interactive.

When people call, educate them about community cats, TNR, and local resources like low-cost spay/neuter clinics. If you have partnerships with local groups providing these services, give referrals when appropriate. If needed, provide information on humane deterrents to keep cats away from places they are not welcomed, and step in to mediate disputes. Find information on deterrents at www.alleycat.org/Deterrents.

Share educational materials and information in your shelter and online about community cats and why TNR is the best option for the cats, the shelter, and the community.

Always be sure to tell people the truth about what will happen to community cats who are brought to shelters—that they almost always have negative outcomes. Learning about what happens to community cats in shelters motivates people to participate in the only humane approach to community cats, TNR.

Sue Cosby, CEO of the Pennsylvania SPCA, says that when her shelter receives calls from people who see cats outside, they start by educating the callers about why these cats are outside and let them know that TNR is the best approach for outdoor cats.

“Animal control in Philadelphia has actively supported TNR for nearly a decade,” says Cosby. “Over the years we have come to recognize that there are a wide range of cats living comfortably in our community from the truly feral to the socialized, yet un-owned neighborhood cat. If they’re healthy, happy or feral, we explain that the cats living outside are already in their home—they live outdoors much like the squirrels and other animals seen outside. We explain how humanely trapping, vaccinating and sterilizing the cats, then returning them right back to where they live outdoors, is the best option for the cats and for people. We have continued to evolve over time on how we can best help cats and the community, at first just assisting just the truly feral and now being more flexible to serve a wider range of cats in a similar fashion. Our philosophy is to educate people and help them understand that scooping cats up and bringing them to the shelter is neither the best, nor the only, option.”

How will not accepting community cats improve our shelter?

Shelters that stop accepting community cats, and support TNR programs, generally see both their intake numbers decrease and their number of live releases increase. Shelters can also save money by not taking in community cats. Holding cats for a waiting period and then killing them is costly. It is obviously extremely stressful for the cats, as well as for the shelter staff. Shelters are often able to invest more resources into adoption services and programs that empower community members to help protect animals. Shelters that have stopped accepting community cats and increased their save rates often report that this shift drastically improves shelter staff morale and community relations as people feel better about a shelter that is actively working to increase live outcomes.

References

1. Hurley, K. Sheltering as a response to outdoor cats [PowerPoint slides]. Center for Companion Animal Health. University of California, Davis. 2012.
2. Levy JK, et al. “Evaluation of the Effect of a Long-Term Trap-Neuter-Return and Adoption Program on a Free-Roaming Cat Population.” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. 2002. 222(1): 42-46.
3. Wallace JL and Levy JK. “Population Characteristics of Feral Cats Admitted to Seven Trap-Neuter-Return Programs in the United States.” *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery*. 2006. 8: 279-284.