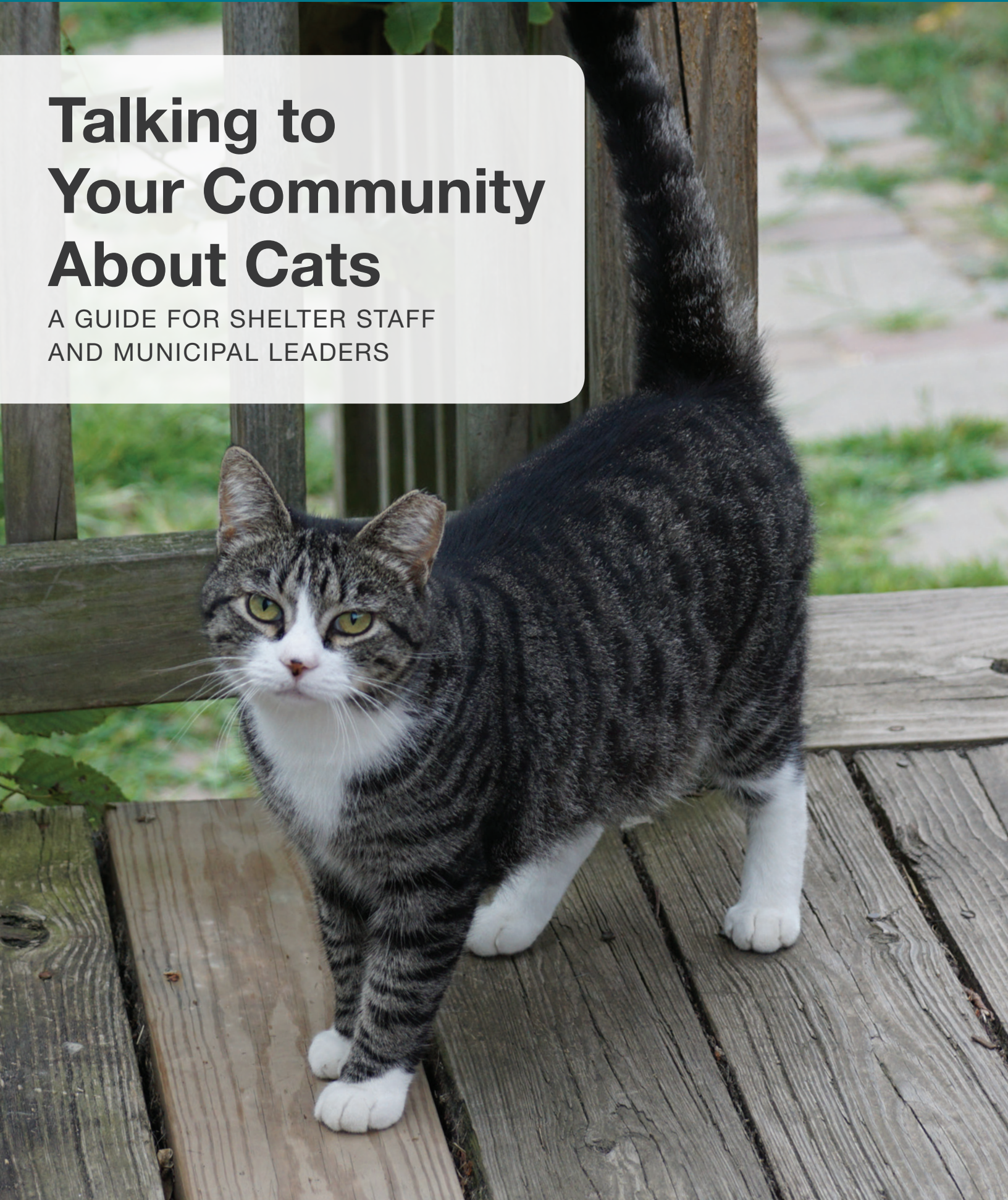


Talking to Your Community About Cats

A GUIDE FOR SHELTER STAFF
AND MUNICIPAL LEADERS



ABOUT ALLEY CAT ALLIES

Founded in 1990, Alley Cat Allies is the leading advocacy organization for cats with a mission to transform and develop communities to protect and improve the lives of all cats and kittens. We work toward a world where cats are valued and every community has humane and effective programs and policies to defend them.

Through our fearless advocacy, humane care, education and outreach, and law and policy activism, we equip and mobilize citizens, advocates, grassroots groups, shelters, veterinary professionals, and elected officials across the United States and around the world to improve their communities for cats through nonlethal, evidence-based approaches.

Talking to Your Community About Cats

A GUIDE FOR SHELTER STAFF AND MUNICIPAL LEADERS

The following is a guide to support shelter staff and municipal leaders in effectively communicating with members of the community about cats.



DEFINITIONS 4

THE BENEFITS OF TNR..... 5

REMOVING CATS..... 6

GENERAL TIPS..... 7

INITIAL QUESTIONS 7

COMMON CALLS ABOUT CATS

Presence of kittens 8

Injured, sick, or hungry cats 9

Unwelcome cats on property 10

Neighbor issues and community relations 11

Resources for helping cats 12

Disease and public health 13

Wildlife and predation 14

LOCAL RESOURCES 15

DEFINITIONS

for commonly used terms...

Community cat

An unowned cat living in the community. Community cats can have a range of behaviors and socialization levels, and can live long, healthy lives outdoors. They are also occasionally called stray, feral, alley, wild, neighborhood or tomcat.

Colony

Two or more community cats living together outdoors.

Caregiver

A person who provides care to a community cat. Often, a community cat has multiple caregivers. A caregiver is different from an owner.

Eartip

The top 3/8 inch of the cat's left ear is removed while under anesthesia in surgery. This is a universal symbol to identify a sterilized cat.

Trap-Neuter-Return

The method by which entire colonies of community cats are humanely trapped, spayed or neutered, vaccinated, eartipped, and returned to their outdoor home.

THE BENEFITS OF TNR

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is the only humane and effective approach to community cats. Hundreds of shelters and municipalities support TNR, which is proven to stabilize and reduce populations while providing additional benefits to the community:

Stabilizes and reduces feral cat colonies

- Upon completion of TNR, the population immediately stabilizes, and reduces over time through natural attrition. No new kittens are born.
- A University of Florida study found a 66% reduction in population size over 11 years.



Helps the shelter and local government

- Shelters and municipalities often find that it is more cost-effective to neuter and return a cat than it is to impound and euthanize. As a result, more resources are available for other programs.
- Shelter statistics are greatly improved because fewer cats and kittens are impounded.
- TNR offers public health benefits through vaccinations.

Answers the needs of the community

- Mating behaviors (such as yowling, spraying, roaming, and presence of kittens) are reduced or eliminated. This makes community cats better neighbors with less visibility.
- Fewer calls of concern are received by shelter staff and municipal leaders.

Improves cats' lives

- Cats live healthy lives outdoors, and TNR allows them to continue doing so. A study from the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* found that less than 1% of more than 100,000 cats presented with debilitating or fatal conditions.
- TNR eliminates behaviors and stresses associated with mating, improving the overall health of community cats.

RESOURCES

- www.alleycat.org/CaseForTNR
- www.alleycat.org/HealthyOutdoors

REMOVING CATS: A FLAWED APPROACH

Many people want a quick fix, and would like someone to come remove cats from their territory. However, removing cats is not a long-term strategy, as it is both ineffective and inhumane.

Ineffective:

When cats are removed from an area, two things happen: remaining cats continue to breed, and neighboring cats move in to the newly available territory. This is a phenomenon known as the vacuum effect, and it is documented worldwide. Simply put, removing a cat or two from an area results in an endless cycle of population growth.

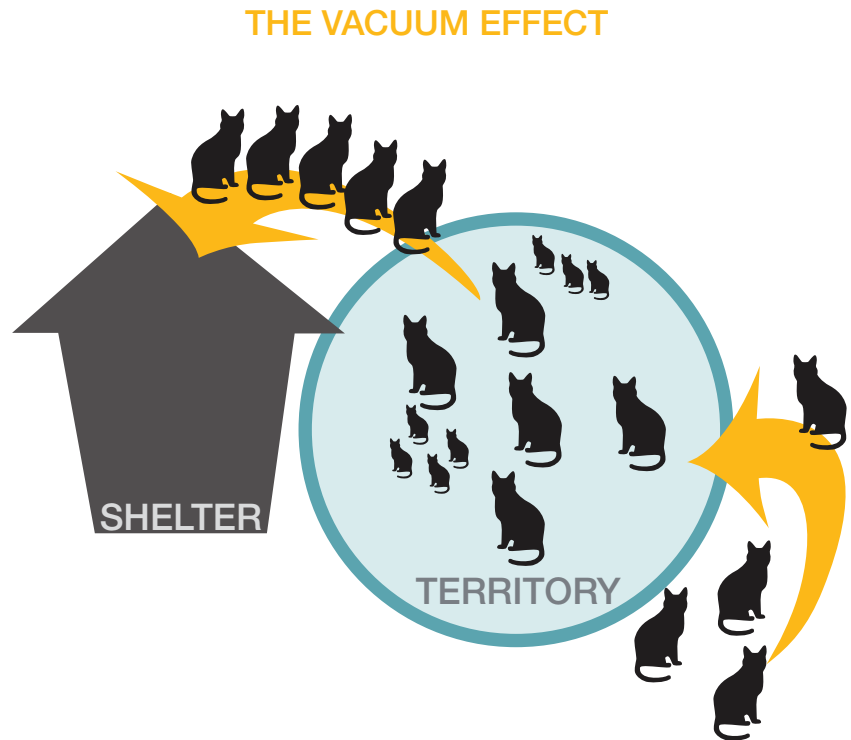
Inhumane:

Many people do not realize that “removal” means the cats will be killed. Because community cats are not socialized to people, they cannot be adopted into a home, and therefore do not have a positive outcome in a shelter setting. *More than 80% of Americans believe that leaving a cat outside to live out his life is more humane than having the cat caught and killed.*

What about relocating the cats?

Relocation of community cats should only be undertaken in the most extreme circumstances, such as imminent threats to their safety or habitat. Proper relocation of community cats is time- and labor-intensive and requires specialized materials, location, and resources. Remember that simply removing cats, whether for euthanasia or relocation, does not prevent population growth. This is not a long-term solution.

The humane, effective solution is Trap-Neuter-Return. TNR is more effective and economical than removing cats, which fails to sustainably decrease the cat population.



GENERAL TIPS

for successful community relations...

- **Be patient**

People may sound upset and feel they are at their wit's end—they may have been trying to address the issue for quite some time and have become frustrated. Be patient and listen to their concerns. More often than not people are not upset with the cats themselves, but rather the behaviors associated with them. They may not fully understand how they can help the cats.

- **Be honest**

People are often looking for a quick solution and want the cats gone—but they may not realize that removing cats is not effective, and is generally a death sentence. People are much more likely to accept TNR once they understand the truth about community cats, so be honest and straightforward about why removal is not an option, and help them understand the humane option.

- **Provide education**

The concept of Trap-Neuter-Return may be new to some people, so your role is to help them understand what it is and how it will benefit them. Identify the source of their concern, and then use this guide to educate them about humane and effective solutions.



INITIAL QUESTIONS

to ask concerned callers...

“Is the cat eartipped?”

Explain what an eartip is. If the cat is eartipped, provide education.

- An eartip signifies that this cat has been neutered and vaccinated, and likely has a caregiver. This cat's home is outdoors and she should be left where she is. If the cat is not eartipped, she should go through a TNR program, which will prevent future litters of kittens and make her a better neighbor.

“What are your concerns?”

Sometimes people will call stating they want cats removed and may not express a direct concern. Try to get to the root of the problem.

- “Are you concerned for the well-being of the cats?”
 - » Educate about TNR and refer to resources.
- “Are the cats bothering you or displaying unwanted behaviors?”
 - » Refer to each section as needed.



PRESENCE OF KITTENS

If a person is finding kittens outside, they are most likely born from unsterilized community cats. All cats in the colony, including the kittens, need to be spayed or neutered to ensure no population growth.

Questions to ask:

- “How old are the kittens?”
- “Is there a mother present?”
- “Are the kittens in a safe space?”
- “Are you able/willing to foster or adopt?”

Underage kittens

- Underage kittens should stay with their mom until they are weaned. Leave the kittens with their mom whenever possible.
- If no mother is present, underage kittens will need specialized care from a foster home.

Weaned kittens

- If the person is willing and able, the kittens can be spayed and either placed into foster care or adopted. The caller can take on this responsibility themselves, or try to work with a rescue organization to adopt the kittens into homes. If your shelter is equipped to adopt them out, this option can be offered.
- If there is no shelter space or foster home available, it is perfectly okay for the kittens to be trapped, neutered, and returned to their outdoor home.

Older kittens

- Generally, kittens 8-10 weeks and older who are not socialized to people should be trapped, neutered, and returned to their outdoor home.

Offer a permanent and humane solution

- Be clear that every cat in the area needs to be spayed or neutered, otherwise there will continue to be kittens. Refer them to TNR resources.

RESOURCES

- www.alleycat.org/Kittens — *How and When to Care for and Socialize Feral Kittens*
- www.alleycat.org/Neonatal — *How to Care for Neonatal Kittens*
- www.alleycat.org/Webinars — *“Neonatal Kitten Care Webinars” and “Kitten Season Primer”*



INJURED, SICK, OR HUNGRY CATS

You may get calls about sick, injured, or hungry cats. Get as many details as you can to determine if the cat is truly in need, and assess the situation.

Questions to ask:

- “How can you tell she is sick/injured/hungry?”
- “Are there any visible wounds? Is she limping?”
- “How long have you been observing this issue?”

Sick or injured cats

- Follow appropriate protocol including Animal Control assistance. An animal control officer may need to trap the cat.
- Community cats in need of treatment can be seen by a feral-friendly veterinarian. Provide the person with a list of local full-service veterinarians who work with community cats.
- Euthanasia should only occur when the quality of life is in jeopardy and there is no cure.

Hungry cats

- Community cats may have a leaner body composition than the average house cat. This is normal and healthy for them. A 2002 study found that community cats have healthy body weights and fat distribution.
- If the person would like to feed the cats, encourage them to do so in the proper manner, and in conjunction with TNR.

No signs of physical injury or illness

- The person may just be worried about the well-being of community cats in general. Reassure them that community cats can live long, healthy lives outdoors.
- If they are interested in helping the cat, they can learn about best practices for community cat caregivers.

RESOURCES

- **GetHelp.alleycat.org** — *Find local resources for community cats by searching the Alley Cat Allies Community Resource Tool™*
- **www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare** — *Best practices for feeding and care of community cats*
- **www.alleycat.org/HealthyOutdoors** — *Community cat health analysis*



UNWELCOME CATS ON PROPERTY

Many people are adamant that they just do not want cats on their property. While people may not want to see cats, **removing them will not eliminate the population**; more cats will continue to populate the area. These cats are part of the community just like squirrels, birds, and bees—and they should not be removed and killed just because the person doesn't like to see them. Help the caller understand humane and effective ways to deter cats from the property and to reduce the population.

Questions to ask:

- “Do you know if a neighbor is caring for the cats?”
- “Where are the cats spending time?”
- “Are there specific behaviors you are concerned about?”

Cats in unwanted areas

- Make the area less appealing to cats by removing anything that may be attracting them, such as grill residue, trash, or food.
- When cats have a caregiver, they are more likely to remain close to their home territory, and less likely to roam. Be sure that the cats' shelters and feeding stations are discreet, clean, and away from the area where you do not want them.
- For specific issues such as digging in a garden, lounging on cars, or sleeping on patio furniture, utilize humane deterrents such as ultrasonic devices and anti-digging mats.

Unwanted behaviors

- Unwanted behaviors like spraying, yowling, roaming, and fighting, are all mating behaviors displayed by cats who have not been spayed or neutered. After sterilization, hormones leave their system and the behaviors are significantly reduced or eliminated.
- To avoid conflicts between cats, ensure that all cats, both outdoor and indoor, are spayed or neutered. Once cats are sterilized, they become more sedentary and are less likely to have conflicts.
- To keep cats from rummaging through trash, place a tight lid on your trash can. Ensure that the cats are being fed on a set schedule and in a proper manner. Feeding cats regularly and in reasonable quantities, will deter cats from scavenging for food in unwanted places.
- Utilize humane deterrents to keep cats away from the house. To combat urine smell, spray the area thoroughly with white vinegar or with products that use natural enzymes.

RESOURCES

- www.alleycat.org/Deterrents — *Comprehensive list of deterrents*
- www.alleycat.org/CommunityRelations — *Mediating conflicts about cats*
- www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare — *Best practices for feeding and care of community cats*

NEIGHBOR ISSUES AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Community cats can be a source of conflict for neighbors, but they don't have to be. Whether the person calling is a caregiver or a concerned neighbor, you can help them develop a strategy for resolving community issues in a humane and effective way.

Questions to ask:

- “Do you know who is caring for the cats?”
- “Are you able to speak with them?”

Neighbor complaints

- If a caller is concerned that a neighbor is attracting cats by providing food for them, explain that the cats will not simply disappear if the neighbor stops feeding them. By feeding the cats, the neighbor is giving them a very easy source of food, and the cats will not be scavenging in other, less desirable locations—such as trash cans or dumpsters.
- Emphasize the importance of spaying and neutering, and ask if any of the cats has an eartip. If so—great! This is a chance to educate a citizen about Trap-Neuter-Return, with the added benefit that the cats are already sterilized and the caller does not need to take any action to accomplish this.
- If the caller has complaints about the feeding practices of a caregiver, encourage the caller to speak to their neighbor about altering the feeding location or practices. The cats' feeding station can gradually be moved to a location that all can agree upon.

Suspected cruelty

- If a caller is concerned that a neighbor is threatening or committing cruelty to cats, make them aware that **intentionally killing a cat is a criminal offense in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, regardless of ownership**. Anti-cruelty laws apply to all cats.
- If cruelty is suspected, the person should be referred to the appropriate animal control/cruelty investigation department as soon as possible. Be compassionate; this person has potentially witnessed something traumatizing and is calling for help and guidance.

RESOURCES

- www.alleycat.org/CommunityRelations — *Mediating conflicts about cats*
- www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare — *Best practices for feeding and care of community cats*
- www.alleycat.org/Anticruelty — *Guidance for individuals who encounter cruelty to cats*
- www.municode.com/library — *Database for individuals to search for animal ordinances*





RESOURCES FOR HELPING CATS

People may be seeking advice and resources for helping cats in their community. Help connect them to the information that they need.

Questions to ask:

- “Are you familiar with Trap-Neuter-Return?”
- “Do you have traps?”
- “Do you have a veterinarian or spay/neuter clinic?”
- “Are you looking for the best way to provide care?”

Trap-Neuter-Return

- Talk to the person about how Trap-Neuter-Return is the effective, humane way to help cats.
- They will need traps, materials, a veterinarian, and a little bit of know-how. Have contact information for local TNR groups, trap banks, spay/neuter clinics, and individuals who know how to trap so that you can direct them to the right resources.

- Ensure them that trapping is easy and effective when done properly—they can learn how to trap by watching a webinar or reading educational materials.

Colony care

- Cats should be fed approximately ½ cup of food each, once a day, and all remaining food should be picked up after 30 minutes. This ensures a clean feeding station and provides the cats with a healthy routine. Water should be kept fresh and plentiful.
- Shelters can be provided to protect cats from the elements, and should be placed in a discreet location.
- Ongoing monitoring and TNR should be conducted to ensure all cats are sterilized.

RESOURCES

- www.alleycat.org/TNR — *How to conduct Trap-Neuter-Return*
- GetHelp.alleycat.org — *Find local resources for community cats by searching the Alley Cat Allies Community Resource Tool™*
- www.alleycat.org/ColonyCare — *Comprehensive guide to care for community cats*
- www.alleycat.org/ShelterGallery — *For tips on building cat shelters*

PUBLIC HEALTH

Community cats live healthy lives outdoors, and are as healthy as indoor cats, showing the same low rate of illness.

Trap-Neuter-Return is the best way to ensure that community cats are healthy. Public health concerns can be addressed through education and vaccination of community cats.

Questions to ask:

- “What are your concerns?”
- “Are you in physical contact with the cats?”



Community cats live healthy lives outdoors.

- Research confirms that community cats are not a health threat to communities in which they live. A 2002 study concluded that “feral cats assessed in this study posed no greater risk to human beings or other cats than pet cats” when tested for FIV, FeLV, and nine other infectious organisms.

Rabies

- The last confirmed cat-to-human transmission of rabies occurred in 1975, and the risk of catching rabies from a community cat is almost nonexistent. Statistics from the CDC show that as a source of rabies infections, cats rank way behind wild animals like bats, skunks, and foxes who account for more than 90% of reported cases of the disease. People can further prevent the risk of rabies in community cats by conducting TNR, which includes a rabies vaccine.

Toxoplasmosis

- Most cases of toxoplasmosis stem from undercooked food, not cats. According to CDC statistics, toxoplasmosis is the third leading cause of food-borne illness-related death in the U.S. It's rare for anyone to catch toxoplasmosis from a household pet, let alone a community cat with whom they have no contact.

Hands-off approach

- The best way to coexist with community cats is to stay hands-off. Bites and scratches generally only occur when a cat is cornered and acting in self-defense, so the best bet is not to approach a cat that you do not know. Humane traps can be used to trap cats for TNR so that a person never comes into direct contact with a community cat.

RESOURCES

- www.alleycat.org/HealthyRelationship — *Community cats and public health*
- www.alleycat.org/Rabies — *Information about rabies and community cats*
- www.alleycat.org/HealthyOutdoors — *Community cat health analysis*



WILDLIFE AND PREDATION

Many people are concerned about cats' interaction with wildlife—either that cats will hurt wild animals, or that wild animals will hurt them. Regardless of the concern, TNR is the only effective approach, as it will reduce the number of cats in the area.

Cats as predators

- Cats are scavengers. Decades of studies prove that when cats do hunt—which is not nearly as often as they scavenge—they prefer a diet of rodents rather than birds. When sterilized and

provided with a food source, this decreases their need to hunt.

- Many wildlife advocates support TNR because it is the only way to effectively reduce populations of community cats.

Cats as prey

- Cats have coexisted with predator species like coyotes for thousands of years. However, there are ways to further ensure the safety of community cats.
- In flat landscapes, 6–7-foot cat perches can be installed, which give the cats a way to climb and escape.
- Many cat shelters offer security from predators.
- Motion activated lights can be installed to deter predators.
- Raccoons, foxes, and opossums typically coexist peacefully with adult cats. Kittens, however, are at greater risk due to their vulnerability and size. Predation of kittens can be prevented when all cats in the colony are sterilized.

RESOURCES

- www.alleycat.org/SaveTheBirds
- www.alleycat.org/CatBiology
- www.alleycat.org/BuildAShelter

LOCAL RESOURCES

Alley Cat Allies recommends that you keep a list of local resources on hand to provide to people who have community cat inquiries. Compile a list by starting with **GetHelp.alleycat.org**. Find local resources for community cats by searching the Alley Cat Allies Community Resource Tool™.

TNR GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

TRAP BANKS

SPAY/NEUTER SERVICES FOR COMMUNITY CATS

FULL SERVICE VETERINARIANS FOR COMMUNITY CATS

OTHER



Connect with us online!



facebook.com/AlleyCatAllies



instagram.com/AlleyCatAllies



youtube.com/AlleyCatAllies



tiktok.com/@alleycatallies



linkedin.com/company/alley-cat-allies



x.com/AlleyCatAllies



bsky.app/profile/alleycatallies.bsky.social



threads.net/@alleycatallies

7920 Norfolk Avenue, Suite 600

Bethesda, MD 20814-2525

Phone: 240-482-1980

© 2016-2025 Alley Cat Allies. All rights reserved.