

MANAGING COMMUNITY CAT POPULATIONS: WHAT DOES WORK

Properly managed sterilization-vaccination programs do not create cat overpopulation—the cats are already there. The choice is between making progress or continuing to experience an unmanaged problem. Well-designed and implemented community cat programs are in line with public opinion and can mobilize an army of compassionate, dedicated people who care about the cats, wildlife, and their communities. To be most effective, these programs must be adopted by more communities and supported by more animal care and control agencies and municipal officials. The HSUS strongly recommends effective community cat management programs (including TNR and other sterilization programs), legislation that allows for and supports non-lethal population control, and coalition-based approaches that involve community leaders, citizens, and stakeholders.

Solving community cat problems requires many strategies, including:

TNR

Trap-Neuter-Return and its variants are non-lethal strategies intended to reduce the numbers of community cats, improve the health and safety of cats, and reduce impacts on wildlife. At minimum, TNRed community cats are spayed or neutered so they can no longer reproduce, vaccinated against rabies, marked to identify them as sterilized (the universally recognized sign of a sterilized cat is an ear-tip, a surgical removal of the top quarter inch of the of the cat's ear, typically the left), and returned to their home territory.

Community-wide TNR programs are effective because they:

- Vaccinate cats against rabies (and other diseases, depending on available resources), decreasing public health and safety risks
- Create an immediate reduction in population when kittens young enough to be socialized and friendly stray cats are removed
- Lead to long-term management, reduction, and eventual elimination of outdoor cat populations
- Potentially save or better allocate municipal funds associated with trapping, holding, euthanizing, and disposing of community cats because trapping is typically done by volunteers
- Further save funds by reducing the flood of kittens into shelters each spring and fall kitten season
- Decrease nuisance complaints by eliminating or dramatically reducing noise from cat fighting and mating and odor from unneutered male cats spraying urine to mark their territory
- Attract volunteers, gain caretaker cooperation, and create goodwill for shelters and animal control agencies (if the cats were going to be harmed, there would be few volunteers willing to participate)
- Bring in sources of private funding from nonprofits and individuals willing to pay for the cats' spay/neuter surgeries and care
- Allow private nonprofit organizations that help community cats and volunteers to mediate conflicts between the cats and residents of surrounding communities
- Maintain the health of colony cats (cats living together in a given territory) and allow caretakers to trap new cats who join the colony for TNR or adoption

Targeting Efforts

TNR and sterilization efforts are constantly evolving and improving. Through better data collection on cat intake, complaint calls, and euthanasia, and with the advent of GIS software, we are now able to target and focus resources on areas where projects can have the biggest impact. Many projects have had success focusing their funding and efforts within certain zip codes, neighborhoods, or specific locations, such as apartment complexes.

Through an assessment of the data for a given community, geographical “hotspots” become visible. By targeting the appropriate amount of resources—including trappers, surgeries, and marketing—to fully address that target zone, programs can effectively stop the reproduction and get a handle on that population set before moving on to the next target area. This approach has a much faster and more visible impact on cat populations than a scattered, random approach centered on complaint calls across a wide geographical area. Targeted efforts allow you to reach a high

enough rate of sterilization (ideally as close to 100% as possible) to quell population growth. Assessing your community, mapping cat hot spots, and targeting your approach can also help reduce impacts on wildlife by identifying sensitive and vulnerable wildlife areas and focusing efforts in those areas.

“One of the most important recent advances in TNR is the strategy of targeting. By focusing resources like surgeries, outreach, and trappers on areas with high concentrations of free-roaming cats, populations can be reduced faster and more efficiently, resulting in lower intake and euthanasia at shelters as well as fewer complaints.”

—Bryan Kortis, Program Manager,
PetSmart Charities,
Phoenix, AZ



Animal Control/ Shelter Innovations

In their efforts to combat cat overpopulation, the majority of municipal agencies and private organizations are spaying and neutering animals before they are adopted, providing subsidized spay/neuter for pet owners with low incomes, and supporting community cat caretakers with low-cost spay/neuter services, training, equipment and increased legal protections. Programs like these can also attract private funding and grants and engender public goodwill. Most citizens want to do the right thing for their cats, but barriers such as cost or transportation exist in communities across the country. In order to truly address cat overpopulation, these barriers need to be removed for all members of our communities.



“Veterinary students at the University of Florida have been performing TNR in the Gainesville area since 1998. Since Operation Catnip started focusing on litter prevention in community cats, the euthanasia rate for cats at our local shelter has plummeted from more than 4,000 in 1998 to less than 400 in 2012. Residents were wary at first, but 40,000 cats later, it’s well-recognized that the program to sterilize, vaccinate, and treat parasites in free-roaming cats has made our community better for people and for cats.”

—Julie Levy, DVM, PhD, Diplomate ACVIM, Director, Maddie’s® Shelter Medicine Program at the University of Florida Gainesville

Services for Pet Owners

Services for pet owners in the community must be accessible to all residents. They should include preventative and wellness care, such as vaccinations, tips for finding pet-friendly rental housing, and information on keeping pets in their homes by resolving unwanted behaviors and managing allergies. It’s important to promote keeping cats indoors and using collars, visible identification, and possibly microchipping for pet cats so that those who do go missing can be reunited with their families. It’s also important to let community members know that shelters and rescue groups provide adopters with resources when they face problems with their cats. Shelters and rescues can provide behavior assistance and potentially medical assistance when cats face severe injury or disease.

Collaboration

Each community is different. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for managing community cats. Stakeholders must work together to create programs that address specific needs and maximize their community's available resources. By working together, municipal agencies, shelters, veterinarians, and cat rescue groups can humanely reduce community cat populations while protecting the public, cats, and wildlife. The returns are plentiful: fewer free-roaming cats; lower cat intake and euthanasia; municipal cost savings; greater volunteer participation; more adoptions; better use of limited shelter, animal control, and public health resources; increased goodwill towards shelters; and more lives saved.



“One of the new programs we created was our TNR program, the Apartment Cat Team (ACT). Our data showed us that apartment complexes and mobile home parks were “ground zero” for abandoned cats, feral cats, and litters of unwanted kittens. The ACT program focuses on teaching and empowering apartment residents and managers in the benefits of TNR, spay-neuter, rabies vaccination, and microchips. In addition, we are recruiting kitten foster homes and rescuing kittens out of feral life, socializing them, and adopting them into new homes. The ACT program is a vital program that is contributing to a reduction in euthanasia—along with other innovative programs we have recently put into place to save cats and kittens. The ACT program gives us a chance to try a different approach that is not only more humane, but that also builds rapport between manager and tenant. The result is a public better educated about humane treatment of animals.”

—Mike Oswald, Director, Multnomah County Animal Services, Troutdale, OR

