Introduction

Like enforcement officers and dispatch staff, many shelter staff and volunteers find themselves on the “front lines” of Community Cat Program (CCP) operations. Whereas the role of animal control officers and dispatch staff typically involves outreach and education, the role of shelter staff more directly involves the handling of cats (e.g., staffing the intake desk, making life and death decisions regarding outcomes).

Regardless of the particular role, though, the implementation of a CCP involves a significant philosophical shift for some staff and volunteers. This can take some time. Once the shift is underway, however, the results are often quite striking. Indeed, once buy-in hits a tipping point, an organization can be transformed. Developing innovative ways of creating positive outcomes (for cats and dogs alike) becomes standard operating procedure. Progress is celebrated, and the status quo questioned.

For a CCP to be as effective and efficient as possible, then, it’s clear that CCP staff and volunteers must work closely with their enforcement, dispatch and shelter colleagues. Each relationship has its own challenges, certainly, but also its own rewards (not only for the people involved, but also for the animals entrusted to their care). Guidelines for working with enforcement and dispatch staff are provided elsewhere in this handbook. The following guidelines are intended to help CCP staff and volunteers in their collaboration with shelter staff.

Training and retraining

The organizational structure of most animal shelters tends to be similar in that there is a clear chain of command. For this reason, it’s important that shelter leadership be committed to the philosophy and goals of the CCP, and that their buy-in be communicated to the rest of the team through initial training sessions and, as the program is rolled out, during regular team meetings.

CCP staff and volunteers can play a critical role in this training, especially in the early days of a program — or better still, before the program is launched. Among the various training resources to consider are the following:

- Presentations that explain the CCP’s rationale, describe the benefits to staff and showcase the results of model programs
- Brochures, door hangers and other collateral that will help shelter staff as they describe the program to residents
- Scripts and role-playing exercises for interacting with people (e.g., residents, commercial trappers) bringing cats to the shelter

No doubt, some of the best training tips will come from the shelter staff themselves. After all, they have the direct experience of admitting cats into the shelter and overseeing their disposition on a daily basis. Naturally, some will embrace the program more eagerly than others; these individuals should be encouraged to share tips about what’s working (as well as what’s not working) with the team regularly.

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1 See the appendix for an example of a simple one-page letter explaining that the CCP complies with all relevant laws and has the support of the municipal shelter and city or county elected officials.

2 These are the private companies that offer residents “feral cat” removal services for a fee, often dropping off the cats at the local shelter, where they are likely to be killed.
Benefits to shelter staff and volunteers

Many shelter staff and volunteers experience the impact of a CCP immediately. One day, the shelter is accepting strays from residents and commercial trappers, for example, and the next day the only cats being accepted in traps are those that will be sterilized, vaccinated and returned to their outdoor homes (assuming they are eligible for the program). The daily struggle for kennel space is suddenly less of a struggle — and soon enough, little struggle at all.

Still, although many staff and volunteers will see the benefits practically overnight, it’s important that all shelter staff and volunteers — however removed from the day-to-day activities of the CCP — are at least aware of the progress being made once a CCP is implemented. Volunteer dog walkers, for example, will likely appreciate (and brag about) a shelter’s improved live release rate even if they aren’t directly involved with the CCP. Moreover, they might feel more connected to the program if they realize that the improved kennel conditions for dogs are a direct result of the reduced number of cats being housed in the shelter. The more people can relate to the CCP, the better.

The following are among the benefits most often observed by shelter staff and volunteers.

**Reduction in the intake of cats and kittens.** A key objective of any CCP is to stabilize and eventually reduce the number of community cats in an area. The impact of large-scale, focused sterilization efforts will not, however, be immediately evident in intake statistics. The decline typically observed shortly after the implementation of a CCP is actually the result of policy changes regarding which cats will and won’t be accepted by a shelter’s intake staff. Among these policy changes, two that will make an immediate impact are:

- Discontinuing a shelter’s trap-loan program, thereby ending the practice, common in many shelters, of allowing residents to drop off cats (in some cases, on an ongoing basis) to be killed. Residents can borrow traps, but only for positive outcomes.
- Discontinuing relationships with commercial trappers (e.g., pest control companies) who, in many communities, profit from their ability to trap cats for a fee and then drop them off at the local shelter, where they are likely to be killed (at taxpayer expense).

**Availability of kennel space.** By accepting fewer cats at intake, a shelter frees up valuable kennel space. This in turn frees up resources (e.g., staff time, budget) to care for cats whose condition (e.g., ringworm, broken limbs) would likely have resulted in euthanasia upon intake in the past, and for an improved level of care for all the animals in the shelter.

**Reduction in the shelter deaths of cats and kittens.** As with the decrease in the intake of cats and kittens, the reduction in shelter deaths is an obvious consequence of a CCP’s implementation. If community cats are being returned to their outdoor homes rather than being held (with little hope of adoption) until “their time is up,” it’s no surprise that a shelter’s live release rate would improve. However obvious, though, this one statistic, more than any other, is celebrated by shelter staff and volunteers (and others, of course, including advocates, elected officials and the general public). With its direct, immediate impact on live release rate, a CCP can truly transform the way a shelter operates.

**Improved relationship with enforcement officers.** Because CCP policies generally lead to a decrease in the number of cats and kittens picked up in the field and impounded via shelter intake, resources can be re-allocated to other tasks that benefit both field staff and shelter staff (e.g., at-large dogs, injured animals, cruelty investigations). In addition, enforcement officers’ public relations and community outreach efforts help inform residents about the program and associated policies.

**Improved public image.** Once various stakeholders — including elected officials, the general public and donors — become aware of a shelter’s success in saving more lives, they are more inclined to show their support and spread the word. Such support tends to have a “snowball effect,” attracting positive media attention and additional support from the community and
Beyond (e.g., grant funding from national nonprofit animal welfare organizations).

“What I emphasize most is this: If you feed ‘em, fix ‘em. This is most easily accomplished with a designated feeding time and a limited amount of food — that way, you know exactly which cats you are feeding. And if you’re free-feeding, locate the feeding station in a place where traps can safely be left overnight — this makes the “fix ‘em” part much easier!”

— Jayne Sage, executive director, Street Cat Hub

**Benefits for local rescue and TNR groups.** The benefits associated with a CCP are often felt quite acutely by local rescue and TNR groups in at least two important ways:

- The number of spay/neuter surgeries provided is increased dramatically.
- These organizations are able to focus their efforts on providing foster care and adoption opportunities for kittens and special-needs cats, as there is now little need to pull healthy adult cats from the shelter.

**Communication**

Because CCPs are shelter-based, effective communication with shelter staff and volunteers is essential. Indeed, this one factor alone can make the difference between a highly successful CCP and one in which every step of the process is a struggle. It’s very important, therefore, that shelter staff and volunteers receive proper training and are provided appropriate resources (as described above).

**Language tip:** Whether to use “euthanasia” or “killing” to describe animals who die in shelters is a matter of considerable debate in the animal sheltering and animal welfare fields. At Best Friends, we use the term “killing” when talking about the death of healthy or treatable animals in the shelter. We reserve the term “euthanasia” for animals whose death is truly one of mercy, when the animal is irremediably suffering with no hope of a positive outcome. However, certain language can be seen as divisive, especially when speaking with shelter staff and volunteers (as well as enforcement officers and dispatch staff). You should use your best judgment in the use of these terms given the situation you are working in.

If a CCP is to have a strong start, effective communication is critical from the very outset, even before the program itself is launched. For example, each party’s expectations (eligibility requirements for program cats, process for deciding outcomes, sharing of medical records, statistics tracking, etc.) and level of commitment must be made clear. Developing trusted, open communication channels also sets the stage for a program’s long-term sustainability, as each party’s expectations, objectives and resources are subject to change over time.

A series of meetings involving, as appropriate, shelter leadership, staff, volunteers, enforcement officers and key CCP leadership can help get everybody on the same page prior to program implementation. And framing the discussion around the shelter’s statistics, and how the CCP is expected to improve various key metrics, can keep participants focused on the improvements ahead regardless of the shelter’s performance historically. This is also a good time to acknowledge the progress made thus far (often despite a lack of resources).

Communication can also be enhanced by cross-training. Although this can be a challenge in the shelter environment, where resources are typically scarce, it’s a worthwhile investment. There are few techniques better than “walking a mile in another person’s shoes” to build trust and develop a common language. At the very least, CCP staff should attend regular meetings with shelter staff.

In addition, processes and protocols should be established to ensure consistent communication wherever possible. Residents, elected officials, the media and others should all receive the same information regardless of whether they speak with shelter staff and the shelter’s volunteers or CCP staff and CCP volunteers. Among the various questions to consider are these:
• How do interested parties obtain information about the CCP?
• What collateral will be available to share with the public, and who will distribute it?
• How will the intake process for stray cats change under the CCP?
• Will the shelter loan traps to residents? If so, under what circumstances?
• How will requests and drop-offs by commercial trappers (e.g., pest control companies) be handled?
• How will decisions be made regarding outcomes of individual cats? Who will be involved? (See “Working Toward Positive Outcomes” for additional information.)
• How will shelter staff and volunteers work with enforcement officers and dispatch staff to maximize positive outcomes?
• How will all individuals involved (e.g., shelter personnel and volunteers, CCP staff and volunteers) understand their role in the network of communication?
• Who will have authority to make decisions surrounding various elements of the program?
• How will disagreements be handled?

Measures of success
Many of the key benefits of a CCP will be evident in the measures of success typically tracked by a shelter (e.g., reduced intake numbers, increased live release rate). Be sure to set benchmarks at the outset of the program and at periodic intervals, and track progress. And don’t forget to celebrate even modest improvements.

Another metric of great interest is intake of young kittens (i.e., under eight weeks of age). We observed a decrease of 33 percent over three years in Albuquerque’s Community Cats Project, a public-private partnership among Best Friends, PetSmart Charities™ and the Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department. Although it’s difficult to attribute such dramatic results solely to the number of surgeries performed in these high-volume, focused programs, they are nevertheless a strong indicator that the number of outdoor cats breeding in these communities is being reduced significantly. (For detailed case studies, see Community TNR: Tactics and Tools.)

Some measures, of course, are easier to quantify than others. Reduced intake and euthanasia, for example, lend themselves to careful documentation and tracking. The improved staff morale that often accompanies these improvements, on the other hand, is more difficult to pin down numerically. Still, indirect measures can be used to shed some light on such factors. Staff turnover, for example, and the number of sick days taken by staff are easily quantified and, if significant decreases are observed, can be used as reasonable measures of a CCP’s positive impact on a shelter.

Regardless of which metrics are considered, it’s important that any comparisons made to other shelters are fair. Comparing statistics from a large municipal open-admission shelter, for example, to those from a small private shelter is generally not helpful (and might result in poor decision-making).

Finally, collecting and sharing success stories can be remarkably effective at demonstrating to shelter staff and volunteers, as well as various stakeholders throughout the community, the significant contribution they’re making to the shelter and the community it serves. (Such stories can also be integrated into a shelter’s training program.)

Innovative tools
In addition to the shelter intake tools commonly used by shelter staff and volunteers (e.g., Chameleon), a number of new mapping tools (e.g., Google Maps, Microsoft MapPoint) and geographic information system (GIS) technology allow CCPs to track intake and colony locations. Visualizing such data can be enormously valuable not only to various staff members, but also to elected officials and the general public, as a compelling way to demonstrate a CCP’s progress. (See “Data and Statistics” for additional information on this topic.)

Additional resources
• Community TNR: Tactics and Tools
• RACI Charting: racichart.org

1 See, for example, “A Novel Approach to Identify and Map Kitten Clusters Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS): A Case Study from Tompkins County, N.Y.” (ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24766036)
Appendix: Letter of Support from Municipality — San Antonio, Texas

Animal Care Services
4710 State Highway 151
San Antonio, TX 78227
210.207.4PET www.saacs.net

CITY SUPPORTS TRAP-NEUTER-RETURN
FOR COMMUNITY CATS

The City of San Antonio Animal Care Services Department supports and embraces Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR), a program for community cats. We currently support this program by providing free spay/neuter services for community cats in targeted zip codes. The services for selected zip codes are funded by both a grant from Best Friends Animal Society as well as the Department’s Budget. For the other zip codes in San Antonio and the surrounding areas, the San Antonio Feral Cat Coalition (SAFCC) provides subsidized low-cost surgeries, resources, and volunteer assistance. SAFCC is a local non-profit, all volunteer organization. Find out more at their website www.sanantoniocatlifers.org. You can also contact them by calling their hotline at 210-877-9167 or by sending an email to info@sanantoniocatlifers.org.

TNR has assisted many communities across the United States in dealing with their cat overpopulation challenges. In accordance with Chapter 5 of the City of San Antonio Municipal Ordinance, spayed or neutered outdoor cats are legal. As part of this program, any feral or community cats brought into the shelter as strays will be spayed or neutered, vaccinated, ear tipped and returned to the area that they were taken from, provided they are healthy and appropriate for surgery (weight and age).

As part of this nationally accepted program, cats are returned back to their original territory fully vaccinated and sterilized. They have no more kittens, their population stabilizes, declining over time. Bad behaviors associated with mating, such as howling, spraying and fighting, decreases. The cats live out their lives and over time, the colony reduces in numbers as the cats naturally die off while no new kittens are born into the colony.

The typical trap-and-kill methods used in the past were cruel, inhumane and ineffective at solving the cat overpopulation issue. It just doesn’t work. Worse, trapping and killing actually perpetuates the problem due to the “vacuum effect”. This “vacuum effect”, which happens when cats are trapped and removed from the colony, allows other cats to move in and take advantage of the newly available resources and to breed as early as 4 months. Attempting to relocate cats also creates a vacuum effect. Think about this— if just 3 kittens survive in a litter, those kittens and their descendants can produce over 11,000 cats in 5 years! TNR solves the problem at its root by making sure the cats are healthy and cannot reproduce.

Below are a few frequently asked questions:

What if the cat is sick or injured?
All cats brought into our shelter receive a medical examination. Sick/injured cats will not be returned to their colony.

Who is going to care for the cat, once it returns?
Cats coming into the program that are a healthy weight most likely have someone in the neighborhood feeding and helping care for them. If you want to learn how to care for community cats, visit the website at felines.bestfriends.org

What if I don’t want the cat back in my neighborhood?
The law allows for outdoor cats. It does not require that a cat have an owner or care taker. As such, the cat will be returned to where it was impounded or trapped. ACS and the program coordinator can assist you with humane, legal deterrents to keep cats off your property.