Community Cat Programs Handbook

CCP Programs: Basics

Photo courtesy of Christopher Crews
Why community cat programs?
It’s estimated that nearly three-quarters of cats who enter our nation’s animal shelters each year don’t make it out alive. Most are free-roaming “community cats,” many of whom are not suitable for adoption into homes. This ineffective, costly and inhumane approach to managing community cats is steadily being replaced with progressive community cat programs (CCPs). These shelter-based programs, based on the trap/neuter/return (TNR) method of population management, are effective at reducing the numbers of these cats, reducing shelter admissions and shelter deaths, saving taxpayers money and providing a public health benefit to the community. In such programs, unowned, free-roaming cats deemed healthy enough to qualify for the program are sterilized, often vaccinated¹ and returned to their original location.

TNR has a strong basis in science and enjoys broad public support. Indeed, a national survey commissioned by Best Friends in 2014 found that Americans prefer TNR to lethal roundups by nearly three to one — not only for its obvious benefit to community cats but also for its benefit to public health.² These results correspond to those of previous surveys revealing strong opposition to the lethal roundups of community cats³ and to lethal methods in general as a means of population control.⁴

Brief history of TNR
TNR was first introduced during the 1950s in Britain, and then in Denmark during the 1970s. The practice was introduced in the U.S. around the same time, but remained largely “underground” until the formation of Alley Cat Allies in 1990. The first large U.S. city to embrace TNR as a fundamental part of its approach to animal sheltering was Jacksonville, Florida.

“Community cats are not a new phenomenon and neither is the compassion shown by people who want to help them. A new movement erupted in the 1990s when lone caregivers became community organizers along with their veterinarians. Necessity is the mother of invention and there were plenty of cats to help.

“Today there are hundreds of established and effective nonprofit groups and spay/neuter clinics with paid employees, and thousands of large-scale TNR programs. TNR brochures have been replaced with beautiful websites. Several municipal agencies have launched return-to-field initiatives. And more than 500 new ordinances and policies are in place, making TNR mainstream.”

Becky Robinson, co-founder and president, Alley Cat Allies

Beginning in 2008, the City of Jacksonville joined forces with the nonprofit First Coast No More Homeless Pets (FCMHP) in launching the Feral Freedom program. Under the new program, “feral” cats (the cats who didn’t make it out of the shelter alive in the past) brought to Jacksonville Animal Care & Protective Services were transferred to FCMHP. They were then spayed or neutered, vaccinated, microchipped, ear-tipped and returned to their outdoor homes. (Today, such programs are often referred to as shelter/neuter/return or return-to-field.) Best Friends has supported Jacksonville’s Feral Freedom program since its inception, providing generous grant funding and expertise.

In 2010, San José Animal Care and Services (SJACS) in San José, California, launched its own version of Feral Freedom. According to SJACS, intake of cats and kittens decreased 29.1 percent after four years, and the number of cats being killed decreased from over 70 percent of intakes in 2009 to 23 percent in 2014.⁵ And in 2011, Best Friends began a similar program in DeKalb County, Georgia. As a result, the save rate for cats jumped from 46.5 percent to 77.8 percent in the first year alone (and as of the third quarter of 2015, is more than 85 percent).

April 2012 saw the launch of the first Community Cats Projects in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and San Antonio, Texas. The Community Cats

¹ All of Best Friends’ CCPs vaccinate program cats with the FVRCP vaccine (the “distemper vaccine,” which protects against feline viral rhinotracheitis, calicivirus and panleukopenia) and the rabies vaccine (even though rabies in cats is extremely rare). Considering the minimal costs involved (assuming the vaccines are purchased in bulk from the manufacturer) and the enormous public health benefit, this is a practice every CCP should consider.
Projects are partnerships of Best Friends, PetSmart Charities, Inc.™, and local municipalities. These high-volume, three-year programs focus on specific zip codes and/or neighborhoods (generally those known to be the source of highest shelter intake) in the community, and have proven highly successful at reducing both shelter intake and shelter deaths of cats and kittens. (See “Model Programs” below.)

Since then, Best Friends’ ongoing partnership with PetSmart Charities™ has resulted in four additional Community Cats Projects, with more on the way.

Model programs

The Community Cats Projects are model CCPs, reflecting best practices and some of the most progressive thinking — with the results to prove it. For example:

- In 2014, about 6,000 cats and kittens entered Albuquerque’s shelter system. That’s 39 percent fewer cats and kittens than in 2011, prior to the program’s start. And the number of cats and kittens who died decreased by 83 percent, from more than 3,500 in 2011 to 608 in 2014.

- The number of cats who died in San Antonio’s municipal shelter during 2014 was 77 percent lower than in 2011, when more than 4,300 cats and kittens lost their lives.

- In 2014, 26 percent fewer kittens under four months of age entered the Baltimore Animal Rescue and Care Shelter, compared to 2012. This is a strong indicator that the number of outdoor cats breeding in these communities is being reduced significantly.

“The ideal community TNR program will operate on multiple fronts — saving healthy outdoor cats in shelters from euthanasia through return-to-field, targeting areas with large cat populations for intensive TNR and engaging the public to practice TNR themselves. This holistic approach is the fastest, most sustainable way to solve overpopulation.”

Bryan Kortis, program manager, PetSmart Charities

Much of the success of the Community Cats Projects can be attributed to what’s become known as the “red flag cat” model. Under this model, CCP staff and volunteers consider each stray cat surrendered to a shelter as a likely indicator (i.e., a “red flag”) that additional cats are living in the same area. Although it’s possible that the cat could truly be a loner, it’s more likely that he’s got friends and family nearby — and perhaps he’s even part of a well-established colony. Time and time again, this assumption pays off.

Indeed, we’ve found that for every program cat who’s pulled from shelter intake, two to six times as many are found in the community as a result of calls from concerned citizens and door-to-door neighborhood canvassing by Best Friends staff and volunteers. This allows us to identify colonies otherwise largely “invisible” to shelter and enforcement staff, and to spay or neuter a high percentage of the colony cats (as well as provide resources to caregivers). For municipalities interested in reducing feline intake and shelter deaths, such programs are the way to go.

The importance of leadership

In time, a well-run CCP will be able to demonstrate its success in quantitative terms — an increased live release rate, for example, and a reduction in the intake of young kittens. These metrics can be very useful for persuading any remaining skeptics. But in the days leading up to program launch, and even in the early days of its operation, there are no such metrics available. (And it’s likely that there is more skepticism about the program.)

6 These efforts also allow us to gather “intelligence” about cats and colonies, ensuring that cats being returned are thriving in their outdoor environment.
Planning, launching and operating a CCP is a considerable undertaking, in part because it involves a number of new policies and procedures. More broadly, though, it requires a radical shift in the way a shelter and the community it serves approach community cats (and cats in general). Such a shift requires strong leadership in both shelter and enforcement operations, and, ideally, among the city and/or county officials overseeing shelter and enforcement operations.

These leaders must demonstrate to various stakeholders (see below) an unwavering commitment to the CCP and its objectives, and create the conditions under which staff and volunteers can work toward achieving those objectives.

“In while we had many staff members who ‘got it’ as soon as we previewed the Community Cats Project, we still had many that felt it wouldn’t work or would not be accepted by the public, or had some other reservation about the program. Our managers and supervisors were instrumental in changing the not-so-accepting hearts and minds of our staff. It takes leadership. It takes teamwork. And it takes off when you combine the two.”

**Kathy Davis, director, San Antonio Animal Care Services**

**Engaging key stakeholders**

By their very nature, CCPs are collaborative efforts. To be effective, a program must have some degree of buy-in from a range of key stakeholders in the community, including these:

- Elected or appointed officials overseeing animal services in the community
- Shelter staff and volunteers
- Enforcement officers and dispatch staff
- Partner veterinary clinics
- Local TNR and rescue groups
- Caregivers and colony managers
- Donors and other funding sources (e.g., nonprofit organizations offering grants)
- The general public

In each of these categories, it’s easy to imagine securing support from like-minded individuals. Keep in mind, though, that not everybody will look on the CCP favorably. Some veterinary clinics, for example, might see low- or no-cost veterinary services as a threat to their livelihood (though there’s no evidence that this is the case). And, of course, the general public includes residents who complain about the cats. Remember, engagement means having honest, good-faith conversations, not necessarily convincing others to adopt your position on the issue. What’s most important is to be able to proceed with a clear understanding of key stakeholders’ concerns.

“It’s critical to engage key stakeholders, ones that you see as potential allies and collaborators, as well as those who may oppose the project. Either way, it is important to know the interests and issues of key stakeholders in order to garner support, address concerns or, if necessary, combat threats to the project.”

**Holly Sizemore, director of national programs, Best Friends Animal Society**