

# **‘These are strays. These are starving, these are homeless, these are injured’**

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DOVER A program to trap, neuter and return abandoned cats in Dover is producing positive results six months after it began.

So far, the Tuscarawas County TNR Project has neutered and returned 61 cats and 22 kittens.

“TNR is not a perfect system, but it’s the best one we have,” said Marilyn Graef of Dover, the group’s president. “It’s humane, effective and produces long-lasting results. The best thing would be if people spayed and neutered their pets and were responsible.”

The program began after Dover City Council amended an ordinance in June allowing the group to trap cats for the sole purpose of sterilizing, vaccinating for rabies and ear-tipping (for identification purposes) cats, under the supervision of a licensed veterinarian. The cats must be returned to the location where they were trapped unless veterinary care is required.

Currently, much of the group’s work is being done by Graef and Sarah Keplinger of Dover, the organization’s treasurer.

They spend Wednesdays trapping cats, take them to AlterClinic Animal Care in Canton for sterilization and vaccinations and then return them on Fridays.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5lP4F7ITwk>

The cats are numbered and photographed, and they all have medical records. The location where they are trapped is also recorded.

“That is crucial because that’s not an easy group of cats just to meander into,” Keplinger said. “They have already formed this colony. So a new cat that maybe we got to the wrong area, it’s going to be rough on that cat, because it’s not an easy blending situation. We’re very adamant about getting them where they go.”

Right now, the group is in need of monetary donations to cover the expense, and volunteers to help with the work. Graef said volunteers need to be trustworthy, humane and have a positive attitude. The work only takes a couple of hours a week.

Graef said it is not accurate to call the cats feral.

“These are abandoned cats,” she said. “These are strays. These are starving, these are homeless, these are injured. It takes three or four generations of no human contact to really get a feral cat. So these are dumped cats.

“A lot of the behaviors people complain about disappear when the cats are neutered. There’s no more fights. There’s no more marking. There’s no more digging. There’s no more yowling. All that goes away.”

Added Keplinger, “It’s so much calmer.”

As more cats are neutered, their numbers will begin to level off and then they will slowly fade away.

Graef said the most important thing is that it ends their suffering.

About 75% of kittens born to abandoned cats will die, “and they don’t die easy,” she said. They will be attacked by male cats, dogs or coyotes or they will die from starvation or exposure before they are 12 weeks old.

“They are where they are because a human failed them, one way or another,” she said.

Keplinger stressed that the group is not involved in adopting cats, only trapping and neutering them.

Graef praised Dover city officials for being proactive in addressing the problem of an exploding population of abandoned cats — a situation that other communities in Tuscarawas County are also facing or will likely face soon.

“Cities, New Philadelphia being one, get your game on,” she said. “If you hear us, your problem’s not going away. If not us, you’re going to need somebody else. Get in the game. Do what Dover did. Get out in front of your problem, whether you’re New Philadelphia or Strasburg or Newcomerstown. It’s going to happen to you. Decide what you’re going to do to humanely solve this for your community.”