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FEATURED

Mentor feral cat program proving effective; questions remain about caregiver compliance

By Betsy Scott bscott@news-herald.com @ReporterBetsy on Twitter Nov 23, 2019



Mentor Community Cats member Wendy Dennis with cats that she brought into PetFix to be sterilized during the summer.

Submitted

While opinions vary on how best to address the feral cat population in the area, local advocacy groups appear to be making an impact.

Lake County Community Cats, which oversees groups in Eastlake, Mentor and Willowick, reports sterilizing more than 600 cats this year, through October.

In addition, 180 were adopted or in foster care awaiting adoption during that period, and 435 were returned to managed colonies.

When combined with statistics from Ashtabula Community Cats, there was a 98.5 percent live-release rate from 2015 through 2018. In the same timeframe, 39 sick animals were euthanized at a health-care professional's recommendation.

These organizations offer trap-neuter-return programs in an effort to reduce the population.

"It fell (at least) 22 percent" in Mentor, said Cindy Valerio, president of parent organization Community Cat Companions Inc. "There are no kittens in any of the colonies that we've TNR'd, so no births."

The Lake County group has about 40 volunteers, including fosters.

"Not all cities have a managed TNR program, but it doesn't mean we don't trap there," Valerio said.

Issues have arisen recently regarding compliance within the Mentor program and how the animal welfare organization is supplying information. There is some uncertainty about what will be required going forward.

The stats

The Mentor feral cat management program has been in place since March 2017.

The city currently has 88 registered colonies, Valerio said, down from 105 initially.

"There are a number of reasons for the reduction in the number of registered colonies," she said. "Some of the caregivers are no longer feeding because there are no more cats. They were adopted, disappeared (or) died.

"Other caregivers have moved, abandoning their colonies. These cats have dispersed and we are unaware of the fate of most of them. We assume that they are being fed by other caregivers in the area who are not registered with us."

At the beginning, there were 585 total cats in Mentor colonies. That number is down to about 364.

"In the 2 1/2 years that the program has been in place, we would expect that the number of cats in the colonies would stabilize, without much of a decrease," Valerio said. "We are somewhat surprised by the rate of decrease that we have seen in such a short period of time. We are aware that there are many, many caregivers that haven't registered and may not be aware of the ordinance or that they are required to register."

She noted that new colonies are being registered continuously.

From 2017 through September 2019, 143 cats in Mentor had been spayed or neutered.

Future unclear

The Mentor ordinance requires Mentor Community Cats, the animal welfare organization working with caretakers, to report quarterly in writing to the city on items including the colony location; number of cats within the colony; a description of each cat; reproductive status; and the number that have died or left the colony, been placed in a shelter or homes, vaccinated, and spayed or neutered under the organization's trap-neuter-return program.

The administration recently held a meeting with Mentor Community Cats about receiving such information in a more timely manner.

"MCC reports that there are currently 88 colonies in the city of Mentor, but we have not been provided with any of the required information regarding two-thirds of those colonies," said Mentor Code Enforcement Supervisor Tom Vermylie.

There is a small group of caregivers who have asked to be unregistered or have failed to respond to requests for updates, Valerio said.

City leaders also indicated that they need addresses of colonies, not just street names, to enable them to more efficiently determine whether caregivers are registered, in compliance with the ordinance.

The addresses are already provided to Mentor Community Cats, but Valerio said she assured caregivers that the information wouldn't be passed to the city unless they agree to it.

A community forum on the topic Nov. 17 produced no meeting of the minds. Caregivers remained uneasy about the public's potential access to their information and feared ill treatment of the cats.

"As far as the TNR portion of it, it is working, the numbers are going down," Valerio said. "But people are not going to want to register if they're afraid of what the city will do with their information."

Some confusion remains as to what will happen if registered caregivers decline to authorize MCC to reveal their address.

"We are trying to determine who makes that decision," Valerio said. "We just don't want caregivers to get the impression that we won't help them if they choose to not share their address."

The city Parks & Recreation Department and Code Enforcement Department will be working with the administration on the matter in the coming months and request a work session on the feral cat ordinance, said Parks & Recreation Director Kenn Kaminski.

Enforcement action

Since the Mentor program began, a total of 43 feral cat complaints have been investigated by the city, Vermylie said.

LCCC and ACC, 2015-2018 by the numbers

Spayed/Neutered: 2,618

Strays/Intake: 2

Returned to Owner: 6

Adopted: 525

Transferred: 426

Returned to managed colonies: 2,098

Euthanized: 39

Live Release Rate: 98.5%

Of those, 33 cases were closed as in compliance when the caregivers registered with MCC. Ten cases were closed as unfounded when investigators found that the property owners were not feeding cats.

Violating the Mentor Animal Nuisance section, including the feral cat law, is a minor misdemeanor and carries a maximum fine of \$150.

"I am only aware of one case where a person was charged under the nuisance ordinance for a cat urinating in a neighbor's flower bed and that case was dismissed due to lack of evidence," Vermylie said.

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