

Community Cats: A Guide for Busy Ohio Municipal Leaders



What is a Community Cat?

One of the millions of unowned (at least in the traditional sense) cats who live outdoors. Many such cats receive some degree of care from people. Community cats can be divided into two basic categories: stray and feral. Although, these categories are not necessarily static, as a cat's status can change, sometimes more than once, during his or her lifetime.

Stray cats are lost or abandoned pets who remain accustomed to contact with people and are sociable enough to be reunited with their families or adopted into new homes.

Feral cats are often the untamed offspring of cats already living outside, or long-abandoned pets who have become unaccustomed to human contact. With the exception of very young kittens (normally 8 to 12 weeks old or so), truly feral cats are unlikely to adapt well to living as indoor pets.

However, categorizing community cats is not an exact science. Some stray cats are more comfortable than others around people, while it is not uncommon for some feral cats to eventually become accustomed to varying degrees of interaction with a specific person or group of people.

What happens to community cats?

Historically, when community cat populations have been managed, it has been done by trapping and removing the cats. This long-used approach typically results in some stray cats finding new indoor homes after a stay at a local shelter, but nearly always results in euthanasia for most of the cats (who are considered unadoptable because they are perceived to be overly fearful or feral).



More than a century of experience has shown that trap and remove programs rarely have a positive long-term impact on the number of stray and feral cats living in a community. Lethal management is typically unsuccessful because new cats move into recently vacated territories to take advantage of remaining sources of food and shelter (aka the vacuum effect).

Moreover, community cats who were not caught and removed continue to breed—often having larger litters with higher kitten survival rates because of reduced competition for available resources. It is not uncommon for the number of community cats in an area to quickly rebound after management efforts have waned [1]. An endless and costly cycle of killing and replacement is the end result.

Survey data indicate strong public support for the non-lethal management of community cats. To that end, an effective and humane non-lethal alternative to the practice of trap and remove, known as trap-neuter-return (TNR), has steadily increased in use in recent years.

TNR consists of humanely trapping community cats, so they can be evaluated and spayed or neutered by a licensed veterinarian, vaccinated (at least for rabies), ear tipped (which is the universal sign that an outdoor cat has been fixed), and returned to their outdoor homes. Afterwards a caregiver—oftentimes a person already

feeding outdoor felines—provides food, water, and shelter, as well as monitors the now fixed group of cats called a colony.

Why Care About Community Cats?

Ohioans love cats:

The [American Veterinary Medical Association](#) [2] estimates that cats reside in 25% of U.S. households. Ohio exceeds the national average with cats residing in 31% of all households.

Public opinion demands it:

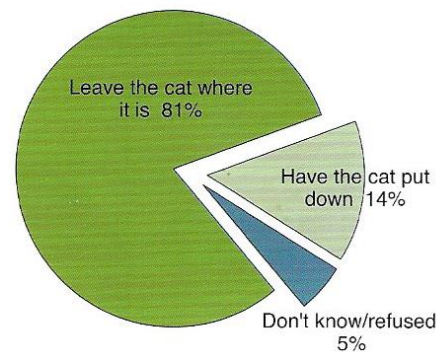
Researchers at The Ohio State University found that 26% of surveyed households in the Buckeye State reported feeding outdoor cats—this significantly outpaces the national average of 14% [3]—and that 77% of Ohio respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “TNR is a good way to manage free-roaming cats” [4].

National surveys indicate similar attitudes:

[A national survey conducted by Harris Interactive](#) [5] revealed that 81% of respondents agreed that “leaving a stray cat outside to live out his life is more humane than having the cat caught and killed.”

According to Wald et al. [6], 83% of stakeholder survey respondents in Florida (TNR participants, National Audubon Society members, and the public living in four targeted counties) preferred non-lethal management of outdoor cats; while Hurley [7] reported that 75% of Americans believe that only sick and dangerous animals should be euthanized in shelters. Moreover, 68.3% of respondents to a 2014 national survey commissioned by Best Friends Animal Society preferred TNR to trap and euthanize or no-management strategies [8].

These statistics speak volumes about what is important to your constituents.



Why choose TNR?

TNR benefits cats and communities. Community cat numbers are initially stabilized—because there are no more kittens—then, gradually reduced over time through natural attrition. This process is often accelerated by the adoption of sociable cats and kittens.

Additional benefits of TNR include:

- Fewer resident complaints due to the virtual elimination of nuisance behaviors associated with mating (yowling, fighting, and spraying). Sterilized feral cats also tend to roam less.
- Fewer public health concerns because cats are vaccinated against rabies.
- Reduced predation on wildlife because there are fewer cats.
- Reduced shelter intake of cats and kittens (80% of all kittens are produced by unsterilized community cats).
- Improved welfare of cats living outdoors because they are fixed, fed, and vaccinated.
- Elimination of the perpetual spending of limited public funds on trap and euthanize efforts or enforcement of feeding bans.

Research indicates that TNR is Effective

TNR has been shown to stabilize, reduce, and even eliminate community cat populations at a local level. The peer-reviewed studies summarized in the table below demonstrate the effectiveness of TNR at reducing community cat populations.

Comparison of results from long-term trap-neuter-return (TNR) studies.						
Program Location	PBC California [9]	University of Central Florida [10]	Newburyport, MA, USA [11]	Key Largo, FL, USA [12]	Chicago, IL, USA [13]	Sydney, Australia [14]
Duration (years)	16	28	17	14	4–10	9
<u>Cat populations</u>						
Total managed	258	204	~340	2529	195	122
Initial census	175	68	~300	455	75 †	69
Remaining cats (no.)	1	10	0	206	44	15
(%)	1	5	0	8	23	12
Population reduction (%)	99	85	100	55	41	78
Colonies eliminated vs. total	10/11 ‡	11/16	13/14 ‡	41/85 ‡	8/20	NR
<u>Modes of disposition</u>						
Adoption (%)	41	45	~33	28 ^	30	27
Disappeared (%)	23	24	NR	NR	34	29
Euthanized (%)	14	11	~5–10	17 ^	3	17
Died (%)	12	8	NR	11 ^	7	12

† Total at entry for all colonies; ‡ Feeding stations; ^ Outcomes at last recorded veterinary visit; NR = not reported; PBC = Project Bay Cat.

A sampling of successful TNR efforts in Ohio

Organizations of varying sizes and financial wherewithal have successfully employed TNR programs as part of their efforts to help manage stray and feral cats in the communities they serve.

- Community Cat Companions, Inc.
 - A non-profit that, along with its subsidiaries, facilitates targeted TNR programs in Lake and Ashtabula Counties.
 - Sterilized and vaccinated more than 3,800 community cats between 2015 and 2020, returning nearly 2,600 to managed colonies, while placing the rest into indoor homes.
 - Colony caregivers in Mentor reported a 30% decline in populations over two years.
- Humane Ohio
 - A Toledo-area non-profit clinic that provides high-quality, affordable spay-neuter services and promotes responsible pet care.
 - Performed 17,020 total sterilization surgeries—including 5,494 on community cats—in 2020, despite six weeks downtime due to the pandemic.
 - From 2010 to 2020, sterilized 45,112 community cats, resulting in the prevention of countless kitten births.

- Rascal Unit
 - Operates two mobile veterinary hospitals (based in Dublin) that provide high-quality, high-volume sterilization and wellness services to pet owners, colony caregivers, and rescue groups across Ohio.
 - Typically perform 45 to 60 sterilization surgeries per session.
 - In spite of the pandemic, sterilized 6,751 cats in 2020—835 (12%) of which were community cats—down some from the 7,462 feline sterilizations (9% of which were associated with TNR efforts) performed in 2019.
- Geauga Humane Society’s Rescue Village
 - CatSmart TNR program serves Geauga and surrounding counties.
 - One-day-per-week program offers low-cost spay-neuter surgeries, trap rentals, and free TNR advice.
 - From 2011 through 2020, 6,363 community cats were sterilized as part of the program, including a record number (1,007) in 2020 during the pandemic.
- Cleveland Animal Protective League
 - A non-profit humane society in Cleveland established in 1913.
 - Offers low-cost spay-neuter services for community cats to residents of Cuyahoga County.
 - More than 51,575 community cats have been sterilized since the APL’s TNR program began in 2008.
 - In 2019 alone, TNR practitioners brought 2,980 community cats to the APL for sterilization.
 - From 2014 to 2019, the number of stray kittens surrendered to the APL on an annual basis declined by 55%, from 2156 to 969.
- Licking County TNR, Inc.
 - A non-profit, volunteer-run targeted TNR program.
 - No-cost services provided to colony caregivers include: monthly (sometimes bimonthly) spay-neuter clinics, TNR training, and colony caregiver consultations.
 - An average of 500 community cats from 30 to 40 new colonies have been sterilized per year, in addition to 60 or more cats who receive medical-only services.
 - Worked with residents and management of area trailer parks, who were once opposed to the return of sterilized cats, to develop successful resident-driven TNR programs that are achieving sustained population control.
- TNR of Warren
 - A non-profit, volunteer-run organization providing low-cost spay-neuter services to pet owners and TNR practitioners from across NE Ohio.
 - Sterilized over 21,000 cats since 2008.
 - Conducts TNR seminars, provides winter cat shelters, and holds regular wellness clinics and pet food/cat litter giveaways.

Benefits to Shelters and Shelter Staff

Euthanizing healthy animals comes at a high cost, both fiscally and emotionally [15]. Conversely, Community Cat TNR programs prevent cats from ever entering shelters, saving both lives and money [16,17] – and increasing morale among staff.

Shelter Benefits due to Community Cat Programs



Fewer cats die in shelters



Improved staff morale & decreased staff turnover rates



Money spent on euthanasia is redirected to adoptable animals – dogs often have higher adoption rates in shelters that have Community Cat programs



Increased number of volunteers and donors due to a shelter's improved reputation



Ability to attract funds and grants for trap-neuter-return (TNR)



Widespread public support

But We Just Want to Get Rid of the Cats

Still not convinced that a community cat program is right for your area? Please consider these facts:

Cost Considerations

[In an article published by the American Veterinary Medical Association \[18\]](#), it was estimated that it would cost local governments across the U.S. almost \$16 billion to trap and kill community cats, as opposed to an estimated \$7 billion if they supported TNR programs run by rescue organizations and volunteers.

It has been shown that cat advocates will not volunteer to assist in trap and kill efforts. Meaning that the cost of lethal management is typically borne by local governments, making euthanasia an expensive and often unsustainable option. Enlisting volunteers to participate in TNR programs empowers them to help cats while improving the situation for all concerned.

"TNR with the necessary community support is therefore the most cost effective means to feral cat population control," the study concludes.

The Vacuum Effect

Cats can be territorial, establishing a colony and chasing away newcomers. But when cats are removed from the colony, new cats freely join. This means that catching and killing feral cats may temporarily reduce the number of cats in a given area, but two things happen: intact survivors continue to breed, and other cats move in to the now-available territory. The vacuum effect is just one of the reasons catch and kill is ineffective.

What about the People Who Don't Want Cats on Their Property?

Alley Cat Allies offers a publication, [How to Live with Cats in Your Neighborhood \[19\]](#), which explains how to divert cats away from trouble spots. For example, tight-fitting lids on trash cans will impede hungry cats as they search for food. Cats can be prevented from digging in garden areas by using plastic carpet runners, spike-side

up, covered lightly in soil. The publication offers many additional solutions and can be shared online or ordered. A bundle of 20 brochures is just \$5.

The Only Effective and Humane Solution

The best course of action is to take a strategic approach. Community Cat TNR programs have been shown to reduce colony size. These programs are humane and supported by the community at large, volunteers, donors, and grant funders. Hundreds of communities (large and small) here in Ohio and across the country are now successfully practicing TNR to the benefit of cats, people, and the environment. Will yours be next?

Want to Learn More?

How to Develop a Community Cat Ordinance:

<https://www.alleycat.org/resources-page/> - Provides information from Alley Cat Allies on starting a Community Cat Ordinance.

Managing Community Cats, A Guide for Municipal Leaders:

<https://www.animalsheltering.org/page/managing-community-cats-guide-municipal-leaders>

How TNR Works: <https://resources.bestfriends.org/article/tnr-stray-cats-meaning-history-statistics>

National Animal Care & Control Association position statement on community cats:

https://www.nacanet.org/animal-control-intake-of-free-roaming-cats/?fbclid=IwAR3N9CliDzV2vGOaL-WA4nww5OO_5RIAEmdj5I_4nySk2oTFvW2rQxUrxFQ

About This Guide:

This guide was created by Ohio Animal Advocates and the Together Initiative for Ohio's Community Cats.

Ohio Animal Advocates (OAA) strives to make Ohio a place where all animals are protected from cruelty, abuse and neglect. This includes advocating for local and state legislation toward the prevention of animal cruelty as well as public awareness campaigns designed to teach communities across Ohio about the ongoing threats to animals. <https://www.ohioanimaladvocates.org/>

The **Together Initiative for Ohio's Community Cats'** mission is to promote and enable the effective and humane management of Ohio's community cats via public education and by encouraging and facilitating collaboration among our state's public and/or private stakeholders. <http://www.communitycatsohio.org/>

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