



Community Cat Programs (CCP) *Communications Guidelines for Animal Welfare Organizations*

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Part 1: Key Messages

- **Effective and humane.** Community cat programs are the most effective and humane model of free-roaming cat management.
- **Collaborative and community-centered.** Community cat programs include collaborative, community-based initiatives such as Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR), Return-to-Home (RTH), proactive community outreach, and alternative placement programs for cats who cannot be safely returned to where they were found.
- **Promote healthy communities.** Sterilization and vaccination improves the lives of cats, humanely reduces the outdoor cat population over time, protects human health, and reduces public nuisance complaints. Even in communities with high rates of lifesaving, CCP advances feline welfare and benefits residents.
- **Keep families together.** Returning all healthy, thriving outdoor adult cats, regardless of temperament, to the location they were found provides the greatest opportunity for reunification between pets and people, helping to keep families together.
- **Build better shelters.** Community cat programs reduce shelter overcrowding, disease, and euthanasia and enable shelters to reallocate resources to proactive lifesaving measures throughout the community.
- **Endorsed by the animal welfare movement.** Community cat programming is endorsed by leading national animal welfare organizations, including the [National Animal Control Association](#), [Million Cat Challenge](#), [Best Friends Animal Society](#), [the Humane Society of the United States](#), [the ASPCA](#), [American Pets Alive!](#), and others.

Part 2: Frequently Asked Questions

Isn't releasing cats into the community considered abandonment? Abandonment laws, defined by intentionally, knowingly, recklessly, or with criminal negligence leaving an animal behind, do not apply to community cat practices¹. Much like returning wildlife to their habitat, returning community cats to their outdoor homes [should not be construed as legal, nor ethical, abandonment](#). Community cats live outdoors and have been living outdoors throughout time. [Return-to-Home returns thriving, healthy cats back to their outdoor homes and to the people caring for them](#). Before being returned, cats are individually evaluated to determine if they are not appropriate for return due to health, age, or other circumstances. It is a misconception that since a caregiver is not identified by name that one does not exist. Signs of caregiving are often evident, such as food bowls. With our community-focused approach, CCP also assures that beneficial resources are available in the neighborhood, e.g. providing caregiver support via food pantries, future medical support for the cats, and weather appropriate shelter/housing donations as needed.

I understand releasing 'feral' cats, but why would you release a friendly cat who could otherwise be adopted? A cat's temperament has no bearing on her ability to thrive outdoors, nor is it an indicator that she's lost or has been abandoned. Friendly cats impounded by a shelter are often indoor/outdoor cats or outdoor pets separated from their families when removed from their neighborhood. Impoundment reduces the likelihood of a cat being reunited with their people. [Returning healthy free-roaming cats, regardless of temperament, is their best chance of reunification](#) with 10-50 times greater success than traditional Return-to-Owner (RTO)². Indiscriminate impoundment can be unnecessary, ineffective, detrimental to cats, and to their families - particularly poor communities where only 40% of residents in the lowest income bracket are reunited with lost cats³. [Read more about returning friendly cats here](#) and view [supporting information from Million Cat Challenge](#).

Are you saying that no cats should come into the shelter? Every cat's health and safety is [individually assessed before return](#). Genuinely [abandoned, lost](#), sick, injured cats, those whose return locations have exigent risks, owner surrendered cats, and social kittens are admitted for traditional shelter services. By returning all other cats to their outdoor homes, shelters have room for, and are better able to serve the cats who truly need a safety net. Read the [HASS Pathway Planning and Stray Cat Decision Tree](#) and [Million Cat Challenge Pathway Planning](#) for more information on how to implement practical decision-making processes in your organization.

Should healthy kittens be returned to the community, too? To ensure survival, health, and safety, all efforts are made to fast-track kittens under six months to adoption, based on age and

¹ American Bar Association. *The American Bar Association (ABA) Recognizes The Lifesaving Value of TNR. Resolution 102b*. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/tort_trial_insurance_practice/animal_law_hist/2016-2017/annual_house_resolutions_2017_102b/

² E. Weiss, M. Slater, L. Lord, et al. Frequency of Lost Dogs and Cats in the United States and the Methods Used to Locate Them. *Animals (Basel)*. 2012 Jun; 2(2): 301–315.

³ Pets For Life 2017 Program Report. 2017. p. 16

sociability. In some cases, appropriately aged, self-reliant, and healthy kittens may be returned if shelter capacity and resources are depleted, if kittens are unlikely to be socialized, or if additional intake would result in increased shelter euthanasia. Read the HASS [Kitten Evaluation Guide for SNR Guide](#), [HASS Kitten Rabies Vaccine Guide](#), and [more detailed kitten information here](#).

Aren't community cat programs a way to get out of your responsibility to care for cats?

Shelters can increase proactive services like TNR and provide better quality of care to cats that need more extensive services, when not overburdened with impounded cats removed from the outdoor homes they have been thriving in. Community cats get the care best suited for them, while admitted cats may enjoy benefits of increased staff time, additional programming, shorter lengths of stay, and less stress and illness inside the shelter. The decision to return healthy community cats (or to not bring them into the shelter) was made after careful consideration of current research, data, and best practices.

In some places, community cats pose a nuisance, making loud noises and spraying. How do community cat programs address these real problems? While [indiscriminate removal of free-roaming cats is not effective in mitigating complaints](#), CCP is consistently shown to reduce nuisance behaviors and lower populations over time⁴. CCP also increases community support through the shelter's outreach programs and resource provisions, building stronger and ongoing relationships with all residents, including those experiencing nuisance concerns. For more information and cat deterrent tips, see the [HASS How To Talk To The Public About Free-Roaming Cats Guide](#).

What are the impacts on wildlife of releasing cats into the community? With fewer cats born outside due to robust sterilization of community cats, and kittens removed for adoption, the free-roaming cat population declines over time and thus, [potential impact to wildlife is reduced](#). Conversely, studies have shown that lethal control or removal methods may lead to an increased population of other non-native species with an even more detrimental effect^{5, 6}.

Do cats need to have a known caregiver to be considered for community cat placement?

The overall health and body condition of the cat, as evaluated by trained staff, is sufficient anecdotal evidence that the cat is obtaining adequate nourishment in her environment. Many caregivers 'operate in the shadows' or are simply residents who put food out when the cat shows up. Not knowing their names and contact information does not mean caregivers do not exist. Feeding stations are often hidden from plain sight or evidence of feeding can be seen but not the feeder. Experience tells us cats often have multiple caregivers and multiple food sources. An unknown caregiver may be identified at a later date as we engage the community

⁴ Finkler H, Gunther I, and Terkel J. "Behavioral differences between urban feeding groups of neutered and sexually intact free-roaming cats following a trap-neuter-return procedure." Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association 238, no. 9 (2011); 1141–1149.

⁵ n, M., Y. Kuang, and Z. Feng, Cats protecting birds revisited. Bull Math Biol, 2005. 67(5): p. 1081- 106.

⁶ Courchamp, F., M. Langlais, and G. Sugihara, Cats protecting birds: modelling the mesopredator release effect. Journal of Animal Ecology 1999. 68: p. 282-292.

and build trust with the caregivers, which supports our position of not having to know who the caregiver is prior to returning the cat.

Can cats from hoarding cases be released back to where they lived? Cats from hoarding cases or other unhealthy/unsustainable living situations are amongst the cats who should be considered for traditional intake, [using a managed admission system which triages the most urgent cats and incorporates human health services](#) for a holistic approach to serve both the cats and human/s affected in the most productive and humane manner. It may be appropriate to return some outdoor cats from hoarding situations, as carefully determined on a case-by-case basis with appropriate and ongoing support. Cats unsuited for traditional adoption, but who cannot be returned to their home in this case, are excellent candidates for adoption as working cats.

Part 3: Get your community behind you checklist

Note: These are suggested guidelines, but no two cats nor two communities are identical. Therefore, your community cat communications strategy should reflect the unique circumstances of your community.

- ☐ Determine what data you will track to measure success and impact of your community cat programs. (See [“Community Cat Programming Guiding Principles,”](#) Section 7: Data Collection.).
- ☐ Host organized, public discussions with stakeholders in your community, including rescue groups, volunteers, fosters, and partners to explain the proposed programming, engage discussion, and listen to feedback and concerns. Incorporate unique community needs into matrixes whenever possible.
- ☐ Host facilitated discussions with staff to explain the proposed programming, how they will implement it, and incorporate useful feedback whenever possible.
- ☐ Present stakeholders and decision makers with supporting documents, success stories from similar communities, projections of positive impact, letters of support from stakeholders and partners, and cost-benefit analysis. Preemptively discuss possible challenges including community pushback.
- ☐ Be completely transparent. Communicate often about your program, why it’s important, how you measure success, and how people in your community can get involved.
- ☐ Incorporate educational materials and a community cats FAQ document on your website. Here are some examples from [Humane Rescue Alliance](#), [BARC: City of Houston](#), and [Chico Animal Shelter](#).

- ❑ Enlist volunteers, caregivers, and community members to actively participate in your community cat activities, including trapping, transport, marketing, ongoing monitoring of groups of cats, data collection, and troubleshooting.
- ❑ Host quarterly public meetings to provide metrics, present success stories, listen to feedback, and provide opportunity for process improvement. Maintain this open line of communication with the public.
- ❑ Share success stories with community stakeholders to illustrate the benefits of your community cat program, including support from individual residents.

Part 4: Research and Data

Community cat programs work. Success in community cat programming has been demonstrated through [a wealth of published, peer-reviewed, research studies](#). CCP is also validated in shelters through data collection including: tracking nuisance calls, monitoring population sizes of serviced groups of cats, DOA pick-ups, feline intake, live release rate, and length of stay.