



Shelter Snapshot: Questions about community cat programs?

2020-02-04

Erin Katribe, DVM, MS

The free-roaming feline population can provoke controversy among veterinarians, wildlife lovers, cat advocates and public health experts. Here's an evidence-based look at how these programs work—and why they are effective.



Wendy / stock.adobe.com

Hundreds of thousands cats are losing their lives in our nation's shelters every year, simply because there aren't enough homes for them. Bird populations are declining, too, because of the impact of humans and development.¹

What if there were a single solution that could help address both of these issues, one that satisfied cat lovers and wildlife aficionados alike? In reality, we already have this solution—it's community cat programming, and recent research is showing that targeted programs can achieve what both sides want.

Let's look at some common questions regarding community cat programs and what the research shows.

1. What are community cats and community cat programs?

Any free-roaming, unowned cat is considered a community cat. They may be friendly and socialized, truly feral or anywhere in between. Some live in managed colonies, but others thrive by finding alternative sources of food from neighbors, trash or hunting.

Community cat programs (CCPs) are designed to address the health and welfare of community cats and are one part of a comprehensive population control strategy. They provide an effective alternative to the euthanasia of otherwise healthy cats. Frequently, they are operated by local animal shelters, but many individual citizens or focused organizations also run CCPs. Each program is different, depending on the needs of the community or shelter, but the common components of a CCP include the following.

Trap-neuter-return (TNR): Cats are humanely trapped in the community and transported to a veterinary facility or shelter where they are evaluated, vaccinated, surgically sterilized and ear-tipped, then returned to their original location after recovery.

Return-to-field (RTF) or shelter-neuter-return (SNR): RTF programs focus on saving the lives of cats that enter the shelter through means other than owner relinquishment. Typically, they are picked up as strays by members of the public or by local animal control. Previously, the only strategy for these cats to leave the shelter alive was for them to become a pet. However, not only are the number of homes limited, but many of these cats do not make good pets, nor do they desire to cohabitate closely with humans. They were finding a way to thrive on their own, with or without human assistance, and so RTF programs were developed to improve their health through vaccination and sterilization, then return them to their home and their community.

Community engagement: Community cat management is ideally shared by the entire community, including shelters, other nonprofits, pet owners and veterinary professionals. Engagement of the community includes outreach and education on issues like spay/neuter, overpopulation and pet ownership. Additionally, in order for TNR and RTF programs to be successful, the community must be informed about them so that they expect to see their neighborhood cat back in the community after a visit to the shelter—although now unable to reproduce and less likely to exhibit nuisance behaviors like vocalizing or spraying, which often

initiate citizen complaints. Depending on community needs, CCPs may also include additional components, such as:

- **Working cat programs:** For unsocialized cats that cannot safely be released back into the community because the location where they were found is unsafe or because local ordinances prohibit release, cats can be adopted out as barn cats, shop cats or grounds cats. In some instances they have a role, like rodent control, or they may still be considered pets, although spending intimate time with the cat is not part of the adopter's desired dynamic.
- **Kitten programs:** Neonatal orphaned kittens that are found in the community may be cared for through nursery or foster programs as part of a CCP; often this population of cats is at high risk for losing their lives in shelters due to their fragile nature and their need for round-the-clock support for bottle-feeding, which is beyond the means of many shelters.

2. Why support CCPs?

Numerous studies support targeted TNR as a viable way to reduce shelter cat death and reduce free-roaming cat populations.²⁻⁴ Both wildlife and cat advocates get what they want using this model.

One study used sophisticated population modeling to compare strategies for population management while also looking at feline welfare and preventable deaths in the population.² High-intensity TNR is effective and the most humane way to ultimately reduce populations of free-roaming cats. It is also more effective in reducing population size over time than traditional culling methods (also known as trap-and-kill).

CCPs also reduce the number of cats that are losing their lives in shelters by increasing live outcome opportunities and decreasing intake.^{4,5} Sterilizing and releasing eligible cats quickly extends the CCP benefits to those animals remaining in the shelter, freeing up time and space so staff can better care for pets that do require adoption or rescue to get out of the shelter. Euthanasia due to infectious disease in the shelter also declines.⁶

3. What are common objections to CCPs?

Here are some frequent objections to CCPs and what the research actually shows.

What if that's someone's pet? How will they find their cat if it's not at the shelter? Less than 2% of cats that end up in shelters nationally are reunited with their owners. Of lost cats that were reunited with their families, only 8% of those were found in a shelter; the rest were either found in the neighborhood or returned on their own.⁷ Cats have a better chance of finding their way home alive by never entering a shelter in the first place. Many cats are also not owned by a single person but are cared for and fed truly by the community, so in those cases, there isn't a sole responsible party who would go to the shelter to reclaim the cat.

Aren't free-roaming cats a health risk to humans or pet cats? By providing rabies vaccination as part of a CCP protocol at the time of sterilization, CCPs are creating a population of animals immune to rabies, which may subsequently decrease the risk to humans. Regarding other diseases that might put pet cats at risk, studies found that free-roaming cats have a similar or even lower prevalence of infectious diseases than pet cats.^{8,9}

Isn't simply removing cats the fastest and best way to decrease free-roaming cat populations in order to protect wildlife? The key to thinking about this issue is that while CCPs may not be perfect and do not eliminate free-roaming cat populations (and potential threats to wildlife) overnight, they are a far better alternative than other options.

One potential alternative is to simply house the cats in the shelter and search for alternative outcomes. The reality is that these live outcome options don't exist, and the cats suffer while in the shelter's care. The entire shelter population suffers because of overcrowding, a longer average length of stay and subsequent increases in infectious disease. Additionally, at any given time, a shelter may take in only 4% of the area's estimated outdoor cat population over the course of the year; regardless of the outcome of those cats, there will be little impact on the overall outdoor cat population.

When trap-and-kill or removal methods are suggested, similar problems emerge. With removal, what will be done with the cats? For culling strategies to be effective, such large numbers of cats must be removed from a targeted area that these strategies cannot gain enough public support or funding to be feasible alternatives.

4. How is community cat medical care different?

CCPs commonly engage both shelters and local veterinary practices to provide care for community cats. Some differences exist, though, in how we approach community cat medical care, and it's important for veterinarians to understand the reasoning behind these differences. The largest difference in providing care for community cats as opposed to private practice patients or even shelter animals is the focus on disease prevention and population control. Medical resources are better devoted to vaccination and sterilization of more cats rather than extensive individual treatments; like shelters, CCPs operate with limited resources, and to be most effective at reducing free-roaming populations, they must provide targeted and intensive sterilization.

The handling of community cats in a clinic environment is unique; in order to reduce stress, clinic staff attempt to minimize handling as much as possible. Anesthesia is typically induced using specialized tools like feral dens or through humane trap bars to keep both cats and staff as safe as possible. All treatments are done under anesthesia, if possible, including physical examination.

Stress can lead to increased cortisol and slower healing; therefore, it makes sense that we should release these cats back to their communities as soon as it is safe to do so. Common practice is to release healthy cats the day following surgery for routine, uncomplicated procedures.

We also know that spending time in the shelter is a significant risk factor for some diseases, like upper respiratory infection in cats.¹⁰ Because of this, it also makes sense that unless illness is severe, these cats are likely to recover better on their own in the community than they are in a stressful, contained shelter situation. It's not uncommon for cats with minor medical conditions to be released to recover rather than hospitalizing them for continuing treatment, which is likely to be stressful and detrimental to their physical and mental health. Ultimately, though, eligibility of individual cats to be returned to the community is at the veterinarian's discretion.

Conclusion

CCPs provide an effective and humane way to address both the needless death of cats in shelters and populations of free-roaming cats in communities that may have an impact on local wildlife. CCPs are something that shelters, wildlife advocates and the community at large can all get behind because they create safer, more humane communities for both animals and people.

Interested in learning more? Here are some additional community cat resources:

- Association of Shelter Veterinarians Position Statement: Trap-Neuter-Return of Free-roaming & Community Cats: sheltervet.org/assets/docs/position-statements/trapneuterreturn.pdf
- Best Friends Animal Society Community Cat Handbook: resources.bestfriends.org/article/community-cat-programs-handbook-strays-and-ferals
- The ASPCA's Feral and Community Cat resource page: aspcapro.org/feral
- Alley Cat Allies: alleycat.org

References

1. Rosenberg KV, Dokter AM, Blancher PJ, et al. Decline of the North American avifauna. *Science* 2019;366(6461):120-124.
2. Boone JD, Miller PS, Briggs JR, et al. A long-term lens: cumulative impacts of free-roaming cat management strategy and intensity on preventable cat mortalities. *Front Vet Sci* 2019;6:238.
3. Levy JK, Gale DW, Gale LA. Evaluation of the effect of a long-term trap-neuter-return and adoption program on a free-roaming cat population. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2003;222(1):42-46.
4. Levy JK, Isaza NM, Scott, KC. Effect of high-impact targeted trap-neuter-return and adoption of community cats on cat intake to a shelter. *Vet J* 2014;201(3):269-274.
5. Spehar DD, Wolf PJ. Integrated return-to-field and targeted trap-neuter-vaccinate-return programs result in reductions of feline intake and euthanasia at six municipal animal shelters. *Front Vet Sci* 2019;6:77.
6. Johnson KL, Cicirelli J. Study of the effect on shelter cat intakes and euthanasia from a shelter neuter return project of 10,080 cats from March 2010 to June 2014. *Peer J* 2014;2:646.

7. Lord LK. Attitudes toward and perceptions of free-roaming cats among individuals living in Ohio. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2008;232(8):1159-1167.
8. Luria BJ, Levy JK, Lappin MR, et al. Prevalence of infectious diseases in feral cats in Northern Florida. *J Feline Med Surg* 2004;6(5):287-296.
9. Lee IT, Levy JK, Gorman, SP, et al. Prevalence of feline leukemia virus infection and serum antibodies against feline immunodeficiency virus in unowned free-roaming cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2002;220(5):620-622.
10. Dinnage JD, Scarlett JM, Richards JR. Descriptive epidemiology of feline upper respiratory tract disease in an animal shelter. *J Feline Med Surg* 2009;11(10):816-825.

Dr. Erin Katribe is medical director of Best Friends Animal Society, overseeing Best Friends Animal Sanctuary's medical department and providing medical guidance for all of Best Friends' lifesaving centers and partner shelters.

"Shelter Snapshot" is a collaborative column between the Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) and dvm360.com to help inform veterinarians and team members involved in veterinary shelter medicine and in related aspects of veterinary general practice. To learn more about the ASV and to find more information on these and other animal sheltering terms, visit sheltervet.org.