HASS Toolkit: Community Cat Programming

What is Community Cat Programming?

Community Cat Programming provides humane, species-appropriate programs and services to reduce the number of outdoor cats, improve quality of life, keep families together and pets in their homes, reduce shelter intake, and reduce needless feline euthanasia.

Internally -- Diversion & Return-to-Home are the default live outcomes for seemingly unowned cats presenting to the shelter who are determined to be thriving in their habitat.

Externally-- Trap-Neuter-Return and community engagement shifts the focus of the community cat program from in-shelter (only addressing cats that are identified through complaint/concern calls) to the greater population of cats in the community. This may be in-house or in collaboration with existing community organizations.

What problem is HASS Community Cat Programming trying to solve?

In the traditional sheltering model, indiscriminate impound and automatic intake results in the following consequences:
- breeding seasonality leads to surges in feline intake
- unsocialized cats are often brought into shelters where traditional adoption is not possible
- community cats are removed from their families and neighborhoods
- impounded cats are rarely reunited with their families
- and the compounding effect is a national euthanasia rate that disproportionately affects cats

The traditional model sees drastic spikes in cat intake which may result in sickness, mental health decline and stress, shelter crowding, neonatal kitten fatality, and needless animal deaths in shelters. The traditional model is also expensive, and resource-intensive in daily shelter care and feeding of animals who may not need intake.

Where to begin

It depends on your organization, the particular laws and ordinances that govern free-roaming cats in your community, and currently available resources.

Here are some things most organizations can do to build Community Cat Programming:

1. Know your data! In order to plan for a new model/Community Cat Program, you need to determine:

   a. What areas/zip codes/neighborhoods have the highest rate of feline intake and/or public complaint?
   b. Are there any ordinances or local laws acting as a barrier to community cat programming?
   c. What is your surgical capacity in your community for large numbers of cats?
   d. What is your monthly feline intake and in-shelter animal count now?
   e. What is the monthly live release rate for cats, unsocialized cats, and neonatal kittens?
   f. What resources you have now, and what would you need (traps, etc.?) What funding sources are available to you for these programs? Can you reallocate funds from providing care to cats in shelters to providing services to them in the community?

2. Ask yourself if other organizations and/or volunteer groups in the area already performing any aspects of community cat programming. What partnerships can you forge?

3. Immediately halt the deliberate intake of healthy free-roaming cats.
   a. Animal Protection Officers/ Field Services should only bring in sick or injured felines or cats at immediate risk of unmitigated danger.
   b. Field Services should use judgment on a case-by-case basis of each unique situation and offer solutions and support of community cat management.

4. Commit to widespread, public service announcements and education on why healthy, free-roaming cats and neonatal kittens should not be brought to the shelter. Provide education, advice, and support services for the community on what they can do instead (free or low-cost sterilization, pet food pantry, conflict mitigation, etc.)

5. Train customer service representatives, front-end staff, Field Services, and intake personnel on speaking to citizens who bring free-roaming cats to the shelter for surrender. This staff will become a resource to divert these unnecessary intakes and explain that the cat/s may be returned to the habitat imminently, and why this is beneficial (to people and cats!) and humane.

6. Create training guides, flowcharts, SOPs, and pathways into and out of the shelter for cats who are brought in. Staff should be trained on which cats are to be intaked for traditional

sheltering and which cats are candidates for Return To Home services. Medical services staff should have guidelines for quickly servicing the cats so they may be returned to home as quickly as possible, ideally within 24-48 hours. If internal medical services are not available, who in the community can provide these services that your organization can partner with? SOPs should be written on how the cats will be returned and by whom, with the opportunity to engage volunteers.

7. Identify the high-target neighborhoods or zip codes in your community to begin high-impact TNR work, or partner with private organizations or volunteer groups to focus on these areas immediately for the highest measurable impact.

8. Once the conveyor belt of cats into the shelter has slowed, re-evaluate your feline resources. Can you redirect staff, funds, and space to challenging cats you have never been able to assist before? Can you now launch programs that increase adoption, reduce the length of stay, provide increased medical or behavioral support to shelter cats?

What is needed to implement Community Cat Programming
Technology:
Ideally, you will want a shelter database system to enter cats and people served, including microchips, vaccines, health records, and the address of cats. This database of information allows monitoring of the program's goals and can give field staff access to information on previous/ongoing work in the area. If you will begin targeted TNR services, technology tracking your highest intake, or locations of concern, such as GIS heat mapping, will be helpful but not required.

People:
People are needed to perform sterilization surgeries if done in-house or to coordinate them if performed elsewhere. Trained staff/volunteers familiar with the guiding principles of a community cat program will be required to be available to answer questions from the community on trapping, scheduling services, conflict mitigation, and transport assistance. This is an excellent opportunity for passionate volunteers.

Supplies:
A trap bank for public lending use will be tremendously helpful, as well as the establishment of a "pantry" to disburse cat food for caregivers in need of assistance.

Success Stories

For many years, neighbors Alice and Susan had been taking care of a colony of outdoor community cats in their Baltimore neighborhood. Over the years, they had taken advantage of BARCS'

Community Cats Program (BCCP) for TNR (Trap, Neuter, and Return) to keep the population both healthy and manageable. One summer, they noticed a new cat had taken up "home" in their colony, and they named him Mr. Hanover. He was a big, smart, un-neutered, un-eartipped cat who was not easily fooled into being trapped. However, over the course of a few years, Mr. Hanover went from cunning and agile to weak--he had lost weight and wasn't thriving. Alice and Susan knew that trapping him was now less of a neighborly challenge, but a lifesaving matter. They called BCCP for help and, not long after, Mr. Hanover was caught and in BARCS's care.

Even though Mr. Hanover was technically an un-owned, outdoor cat, Alice and Susan had grown quite fond of him and were invested in getting him help beyond TNR--and so was BARCS. An important part of the BCCP program is that only when community cats are healthy and thriving are they returned to their colonies. Mr. Hanover clearly needed more care than neutering and vaccines. He was sent to a partnering clinic where he received a number of surgical procedures to fix his ailments. Once stable, he returned to BARCS for continued recovery.

Mr. Hanover is not a domesticated pet cat, and while he was somewhat tolerant of his medical procedures, he was very unhappy being indoors. We contacted Alice and Susan to discuss what was best for Mr. Hanover, they agreed that he was best suited for his outdoor life, as they had tried many times to woo him with the charms of indoor living and he was never interested. Because Mr. Hanover's medical care returned him to a state of healthy and thriving, the BCCP team returned Mr. Hanover to his colony, under the watch of Alice and Susan, where he has continued to live happily ever since. --Baltimore Animal Rescue & Care Shelter (BARCS)

What does success look like?
A successful community cat program takes shape in many forms. Reduced feline intake numbers in the years ahead can be achieved with consistent, dedicated efforts to your new program. Nuisance calls and complaints often drop as mating behaviors are eliminated. Success commonly looks like fewer orphaned neonates being brought to the shelter, and thus, a higher live release rate and lower staff overhead. Less visible, but equally important success can be seen in reduced instances of panleukopenia and FIV/FeLV in the community because cats living in the area are now vaccinated and no longer mating. Community engagement and satisfaction with the shelter may elevate with increased lifesaving, increased volunteer opportunities, and proactive management of free-roaming cats.

What are the potential benefits of implementing Community Cat Programming?

- Reduce citizen complaints regarding free-roaming cats
- Build community engagement
- Grow volunteer support
- Reduce preventable loss of life/increase lifesaving
- Redirect resources onto saving cats previously deemed too challenging

- Reduce the number of animals housed in the shelter
- Reduce intake
- Improve humane care in the shelter
- Reduce shelter illness and disease
- Promote diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Support human health and wellness
- Minimizing impact to wildlife, when viewed as potential for conflict

Sample Documents
- **Intake & Diversion**:
  - HSUS Can You Help This Cat
  - Million Cat Challenge: Pathway Planning
  - HSUS Return to Field Handbook
  - Cat Intake Decision Tree
  - Stray Cat or Community Cat Decision Guide
  - PACC Community Cat Info For Field Services
  - Kitten Evaluation for SNR Guide
  - Distinguishing Lost Cat vs Community Cat
- **Handling Criticism & Complaints**
  - BFAS Community Cat Resource Guide
  - Customer Service Training on Responding to Cat Complaints
  - For Shelter Staff: Responding to the Top Ten Concerns About CCP
  - Cat Deterrent Tip Sheet
  - Community Cat Programming FAQ for the public
  - Alley Cat Allies: How To Live With Cats
  - HRA Cat Deterrents
- **Legal, Policy, and Change**
  - HASS Community Cat Principles, Definitions, and Positions
  - Model Community Cat Ordinance
  - Ordinance Revision Best Practice Guide
  - HASS Statement of Support of CCP
  - Community Cat Shelter Law Webinar
- **Health and Medical**
  - ASPCA Community Cat Medical Guide
  - HASS Kitten Rabies Vaccine Position Statement
  - Austin Pets Alive! Feral Rehab, Recovery, and Release