



Reunification for Lost and Found Cats

Distinguishing a Lost/Abandoned Cat from a Community Cat

Using a Stray Cat Intake Form and [conversation-based interview](#) with the presenter, staff can also distinguish between a lost cat and community cat using these criteria.

Lost/abandoned cats can be distinguished from community cats when at least one of the following applies:

- Cat is wearing a collar with ID tag
- Cat has a microchip
- Cat is known to be recently abandoned by a previous owner
- Cat is actively trying to get into a particular home or building
- Cat is declawed
- New to the area where found – has been seen in the area where found for 3 weeks or less
- Altered without an ear-tip
- Ravenous appetite *and* unthrifty, disheveled coat, significantly underweight. (Signs of not thriving outdoors.)

In cases where at least one of the above applies, the situation warrants additional consideration and extra time spent determining if the cat is lost/abandoned. If lost/abandoned, follow lost pet reunification procedures, stray hold, and/or admissions/adoption path.

Kitten Evaluation for Return-to-Home

This document is intended to help animal welfare staff and shelters develop protocols related to kittens and the option of returning them to their original outdoor home via a community cat program.

Standard Kitten Pathway Plan:

Social kittens under six months of age are admitted for traditional sheltering (adoption pathway).

- Returning young, healthy kittens may be the best, or only, path to lifesaving.
- Ethical decisions should be based on the capacity of the shelter to provide differing outcomes at that moment in time.
- An organization in the midst of growing both a community cat program and a foster network may need to make decisions on which kittens to place in a socialization program/foster home and which kittens can be returned to their original outdoor home.



- Diverting kittens to an adoption program can improve their quality of life as well as speed the reduction of free-roaming cat populations in the community.
- Developing a robust community cat program, including staff and volunteer resources along with an engaged community, should allow for additional consideration for the factors affecting successful outcomes for kittens and adult cats

Evaluation Considerations for Kitten Return-to-Home

Health

Unhealthy, unthrifty kittens under 2 pounds should not be considered for return to their original outdoor home. Any kitten to be returned should be in robust health and appropriate age/weight for sterilization.

Behavior

The primary window for socialization in kittens is 3 to 8 weeks, with socialization continuing through 12 weeks. Kittens that do not have positive exposure to humans during this critical period may develop into shy or fearful adults. Thus, it is important to set kittens up for lifelong success if they are to be adopted into homes. Consideration should be given to a kitten's behavior and capacity for socialization. A Fear, Anxiety, Stress Assessment score may be helpful in determining if return or foster placement/adoption is the best option for the kitten.

Capacity to Thrive

A kitten's ability to thrive in an outdoor environment increases as the kitten ages. Kittens closer to 8 weeks of age are less mobile and more dependent on the provision of food and other resources. Kittens closer to 12 weeks are more adept at identifying resources as are kittens who have the support and mentorship of adult cats. The younger the kitten, the more important are the following considerations.

- Access to an adequate food supply
 - Presence of caregiver(s) and/or available food source. A caregiver providing a consistent food source is preferable for kittens at the lower end of the age range over a less consistent source such as a restaurant dumpster.
 - Presence of other adult cats, including mother cat, if known, to teach kittens about food sources. * Returning mother and kittens at the same time is recommended, even if that requires one or the other to be held until all can complete the surgery protocol.
- Environmental safety considerations at release location
 - Access to adequate housing/shelter from the elements
 - Threats from nearby high street or highway car traffic, especially where cats would need to cross in order to access a food source
 - Weather conditions at the time of release, such as extreme temperature or storms



- Predator concerns in non-residential areas

Public Communication Guide for Lost and Found Cats

Shelter Messaging: When a Community Member Has Found a Cat

Key Messages

- Caller should determine whether the cat is safe and healthy or injured/unsafe. Ask the caller to send a photo if they are unsure or cannot identify an eartip.
 - If healthy/safe, ask if the cat has a collar and ID tag, and/or eartip.
 - If the cat has identification, the caller should leave the cat in place, but attempt to contact the owner. The caller can affix a paper collar or take additional steps detailed on Page 2.
 - If the cat has an ear tip, advise the caller this is a community cat and no intervention is necessary if the cat is not in distress.
 - If the cat has no identification, nor an eartip, the caller should get the cat scanned for a microchip if the cat can be safely handled.
 - If the cat is not microchipped, he should be brought in for sterilization services then returned to his found location.
 - If the cat cannot be handled, he should be trapped for TNR and scanned then. The caller can post photos/flyers if they believe this is a lost cat, and place food and water outside.
 - Provide the caller with detailed information on Page 2.
 - If the cat is not healthy, or the situation is urgently unsafe:
 - If this is a medical emergency, advise the caller to immediately bring the cat in, to the nearest clinic, or dispatch APO's per organization protocols.
 - If this is not a medical emergency, and the cat has identification, the caller should collect the cat, if possible, and attempt to contact the owner while you provide advice on the medical or environmental concern.

Public Messaging: Found a Cat?

Most cats you see outdoors are not in need of intervention and should be left where they are. So first determine whether this is a cat in need of immediate attention (sick or injured) or a healthy neighborhood cat out for a stroll.

Signs that a cat is sick or injured include the following:

- How is this cat injured? Is the cat able to walk on all 4 legs, bleeding, etc?
- Is the cat wearing a collar?
- Are the cat's eyes clear?



HUMAN ANIMAL SUPPORT SERVICES

- Does the cat appear underfed?
- Is breathing slow and labored?
- Is the cat hunched up in possible pain?
- Does the coat appear dirty or missing patches of fur?
- Is the cat declawed?

If you believe this is a lost or abandoned cat:

- Take a photo of the cat. Try for a full-body side view with face, preferably standing so you have a clear image of the cat and their markings. Use the photo for posting on Nextdoor, social media, and on posters placed at nearby intersections, bus stops, or other high traffic areas. Ask neighbors in the immediate vicinity if they know this cat. More cats are reunited as a result of good posters and flyers than as a result of social media, so get those posters up while the cat is still around and visible.
- Get the cat scanned for a microchip at any vet, animal shelter, PetSmart/Banfield Pet Hospital, or Petco. This is a free service & no appointment is necessary. If you're not able to transport the cat, ask animal services or your local rescue community for assistance.
- If the cat is in danger and urgent action is necessary, bring or lure the cat into your home or garage to keep the cat safe if you are able to do so safely. (Otherwise request assistance from animal services.) The space should be dark and quiet, a separate room well away from children and other pets. Equip the area with food, water, and litter.
 - If the cat is not in danger or sick/injured, do not bring the cat indoors; leave him in place, or return the cat to the exact location you picked him up prior to microchip scanning so he may return home on his own. You may provide food/water support.
- Next, post the found cat alert on Nextdoor.com, PetHarbor.com, PetFBI.org, Pawboost.com, lost.petcolove.org, and Craigslist.in Pets category and Lost and Found Community section. Share the information with your neighbors via social media, email lists, community message boards, or however you typically communicate with those who live closest to you and where the cat was found.

If unable to contain the cat, use [this template](#) to make a paper cat collar. You can also write a note asking about the cat with your contact info, fold it up, and tape the ends to form a collar. Do not give a cat away or offer it up for adoption until you have covered the above steps for at least a week, branching out beyond your immediate area, to make sure no one is searching for this cat. You would want the same done if it were your cat.

If you see a deceased cat, take a photo and call animal services. They will pick the deceased cat up and scan for a microchip in order to notify owners if possible.

Public Messaging: Lost a Cat?

Here are a few big-picture basics from the online [Lost Cat Kit](#)

- Instead of a vague REWARD LOST CAT, offer a specific amount. "Reward for confirmed photo" gets proof of sighting so you're not wasting time on the wrong cat. The photo should be the largest element on the flyer, ideally a side view in silhouette to remove all distracting background. Here's a [free template](#) for lost cat flyers.



- Include a request for neighbors to check around their homes/garages. Cats may have entered an open garage/shed and not been able to escape.
- Use large, bright posters: one in your yard and one at each intersection within a 500-foot radius of your home or the point last seen.
- In addition, you can place a flyer on every car and each door in the neighborhood. As many neighbors may not be out walking or take the time to read a sign.
- Ask neighbors who may have outdoor cameras to review the footage to help look for your cat. The cat's movement may trigger the camera, especially at night.
- Do not put out kitty litter that will draw unwanted wildlife and bully cats. Instead, open a few windows to use the scent of home as a beacon.
- Physically search for your cat, but do not call your cat unless you are within 100 feet of home or you see them. Search in the daytime, lure at night.
- Use a flashlight as you look, the cat's eyes will reflect the light even if you can't see the shape of the cat itself.
- Leave food and water outdoors to attract your cat to stay nearby. Wildlife may be attracted as well, so do not leave large quantities of food.
- Contact your local humane society or community cat organization to rent/borrow a cat trap. Your cat may be too shy to come out to you but may enter the trap for food. Precautions include not leaving the trap open overnight or when you can not check on it every hour. Trapped wildlife may harm themselves trying to escape.

Post Online

- NEXTDOOR.com, post and use the search bar for mentions of cats.
- www.craigslist.org in both LOST & FOUND and in PETS ([renew post](#) every 3 days)
- www.PetFBI.org
- www.PetHarbor.com
- lost.petcolove.org
- Local [Lost & Found pets](#) Facebook groups
- Any neighborhood message boards, email lists, blogs, etc

In-Person

- Call your vet and microchip company. Report your cat lost and confirm your contact info.
- Put a Lost Cat sign in your front yard and the first five intersections near your house.
- Make mini versions of your flyer, 4 to a page. Distribute them to landscapers who often flush a cat out of hiding, local pet stores, vets, mailmen, and FedEx/ UPS drivers.
- Get permission from the nearest school to place a poster at the entrance of the student drop-off area.

For detailed help, the [Lost Cat Finder](#) offers in-person searches and coaching, all based on science-based strategies gleaned from research and 9 years of cat recovery experience.