



## 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, the adoption pathway.**

We recognize:

- 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

### Considerations when evaluating kittens for return:

#### 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