



## Training Guide: How to Talk to the Community About Free-Roaming Cats

For the past 100 years, animal shelters have taught people that the correct, helpful thing to do when encountering a loose animal outside is to bring them to the shelter, with the assumption that the animal is “lost” or “stray”. As we embark upon a more modern and humane approach to animal services, one that emphasizes keeping families together and meeting people where they are, it is important to understand that we have re-education to do!

Understand that when a person brings a free-roaming cat to a shelter, they are almost assuredly trying to help the cat. They may not understand why now, after 100 years of being told to do just that, the shelter is refusing intake or advising them to return the cat to their neighborhood. To that Good Samaritan, this may seem cruel or negligent!

Modern cat sheltering is changing. Thanks to decades of science and data collection, we know that the old ways of sheltering cats do not work, not for cats, nor the people who love them. These outdated practices didn't work even for the people who don't like cats!

This is why shelters are changing their practices and programming. With this, we also need to change the way we talk about the services being provided to cats. It is not simply that shelters no longer take healthy cats into their facilities-however, shelters now provide different services to help cats and the people in the communities where they live.

Today, shelters embrace Return-to-Home, Trap-Neuter-Return, and Diversion Services because:

- **The old model doesn't work.**
  - Cats are still losing their lives in shelters today.
  - Return-to-Owner is a system that has never worked for cats, with less than 5% of cats ever being reclaimed by their owner once impounded.
  - Uniquely susceptible to stress, even the best shelters make cats sick.
  - When overwhelmed with high intake, shelters are unable to provide quality care and services to the cats and people who really need our help.
  - The old model indiscriminately removes outdoor cats/pets from marginalized communities and relocates them to more affluent communities, separating families and contributing to systemic oppressions.

We must stop the flow of healthy, thriving community cats into our shelter for impoundment. Unfortunately, many members of the public only hear that shelters are turning cats away and not about the new services that they are providing to ensure the cat's well-being.

Here are some talking points and facts you can use to help your community understand the new model of modern cat sheltering services:

- **Returning the cat to Home (SNR/RTF) is in the cat's best interest.**
  - With an abysmal RTO rate, it is almost statistically impossible that a cat's owner will reclaim her once impounded. Studies show that the best chance for the cat to be reunited with her family is to return her to the location she was found. She is 10-50 times more likely to be reunited with her family if we return her to field versus impound her! It is the community--you, the caller--who more often helps that cat get back home if she is indeed lost. Once she is removed from her neighborhood, and transported miles away, she's less likely to be found.
- **All cats who still need our help at the shelter will get it.**
  - Every cat brought in will be individually evaluated to ensure that the shelter is only returning cats who are thriving in their current outdoor home. Sick or injured cats, abandoned cats, and underage kittens are not immediate return candidates. In fact, this new model creates more capacity for the shelter to care for the cats who truly need to stay with us and receive adoption or medical services. It allows us to provide *better* care for cats and our community.
- **Indiscriminately removing cats separates families.**
  - A single community cat often has multiple caregivers, many people who are bonded to him. Friendly cats became friendly because someone spent time with the cat and continues to interact with him. In many neighborhoods, especially low-income neighborhoods, residents cannot have indoor pets, or may simply allow their cat outdoors. Indiscriminate pick-up of cats results in stealing people's pets.
- **Removing cats from where they live may make things worse.**
  - Studies show that simply removing cats may actually increase the local population by up to 200% because new cats will move into the territory. Those cats will have kittens and the number of cats will rise to match the food available to them. If the cats who were removed belonged to a resident, those residents may get new cats. We have 150 years of sheltering history to illustrate that the old "catch and kill" model does not work, or there would not be outdoor cats any longer.
- **Cats can, and do, thrive outdoors all across the world.**
  - From Siberia to sunny California, cats have been living outside for millions of years. Their DNA has not changed in 12-million years and they remain one of the most successful, adaptable mammals on the planet. In fact, the concept of an "indoor-only cat" is uniquely American and relatively new. Cats never lived inside our homes until 1947 when kitty litter was invented! SNR/RTF further improves the quality of life for these cats through sterilization and vaccination. If the caller is concerned about the cats in harsh weather, offer resources on outdoor shelters appropriate for your climate.

Remember, the people presenting with the cat are likely only trying to help the cat. You are on the same team. Explaining the ways SNR/RTF is in the cat's, and community's, best interest will turn the person into an ally versus enemy.

**If the citizen can't bring the cat into the shelter for surrender, what *can* they do to help, then?**

Community cat programming is an excellent way to build community and volunteer engagement. If the citizen would like to help cats, there are so many ways to help:

- Connect the citizen with volunteer TNR opportunities
- Build cold-weather community cat housing
- Assist in the pet food pantry
- Help transport cats to/from sterilization appointments
- Serve as a mentor to assist new recruits, install cat deterrents to manage conflict.
- Volunteer at the shelter or clinic on surgery days

Here are sample responses to some of the most common complaints or concerns.

**Complaint:** The cats are fighting, yowling, spraying.

**Response:** Spay/neuter drastically reduces or eliminates these mating behaviors. By altering the cats and returning them to their original location, you will now have non-problematic cats defending the territory against newcomers, versus a steady stream of in-tact cats coming and going who will continue to display these undesirable behaviors. NS/ is the answer to eliminating these annoyances from your life, removal of the cats will not work as new in-tact cats will only move in and continue the cycle.

**Complaint:** The cats are digging in my garden, on my car, bothering my dogs, etc.

**Response:** The cats are congregating where there are resources they want. Use deterrents or barrier devices to keep cats out of specific areas such as:

- Utilize chemical odor deterrents that are intended to smell unpleasant to certain animals but may also be unpleasant to people who are nearby. Spray-on deterrents must be reapplied frequently, especially after a rainstorm. Recommended spray-on deterrents include Liquid Fence and Repel All, which both contain garlic oil and other plant-based oils that cats will avoid.
- Cover your trash cans tightly or secure lids with bungee cords. If cats are seen ripping open trash bags or in dumpsters, complaints may be directed to the city/county/property owners to enforce appropriate garbage containers and pick-up times.
- If cats are climbing and walking all over cars, a car cover can be purchased to prevent paw prints.
- Use plastic carpet runners, spiked-side up and covered lightly in soil, in gardens, flower beds, and other landscaping.
- Set chicken wire firmly into the dirt with sharp edges rolled under.
- Use lattice fencing material or chicken wire over the soil. This discourages digging.

- Pick up some Cat Scat™ plastic mats to press into the soil. The mats have flexible plastic spikes that are harmless to cats and other animals but also discourage digging.
- Cover exposed ground in flower beds with large (and attractive) river rocks to keep cats from digging.
- Install an ultrasonic animal repellent that includes a strobe light flash combined with an ultrasonic noise device, or a motion-activated water sprinkler like ScareCrow™. Routinely rearranging the devices will prevent the cats from learning where open areas exist.
- Physically block or seal locations that cats are entering with chicken wire or lattice. Double-check that no cats or kittens will be trapped inside.
- Provide outdoor shelter. Shelters should be hidden to keep the cats safe, and placed in secluded areas far from areas they aren't welcomed.
- Place 'litter boxes' (wood frames with sand or peat moss—not actual cat litter, which would absorb water) in strategic areas to give cats a bathroom option other than your neighbor's yard. Be sure to keep these litter boxes and areas clean and change out the contents regularly.
- Combat cat urine smell by spraying the area thoroughly with white vinegar or products using natural enzymes, such as Nature's Miracle®, Fizzion Pet Stain & Odor Remover®, or Simple Solution®
- If you or your neighbors are feeding the cats, be sure it's on a regular schedule each day. This will ensure that the cats are well-fed and don't search the neighborhood for their next meal. Food shouldn't be left out all day and feeding areas must be cleaned immediately to prevent attracting other wildlife or insects.
- To provide total protection to a yard, fence top devices can be installed to prevent cats from entering the property. Overall, this type of physical barrier is highly effective but may be costly. Some of these ideas have been adapted as do-it-yourself (DIY) projects and examples can be found online.
- Angled netting at the top of a fence will deflect animals attempting to climb over the fence. There are several commercial versions available including PurrFect Fence and Cat-Fence-In. Installation of a revolving pole or roller along the fence top prevents animals from getting a perch on the fence top in order to pull themselves over, Oscillot and Coyote Roller are two versions of these devices.
- TOXIC products such as Mothballs are toxic to wildlife and can be confused with candy by young children. They are not appropriate for use outdoors. According to the National Poison Control Hotline, "Mothballs are pesticides. They can be poisonous if swallowed or if large amounts of fumes are inhaled."
- Some products that are marketed to discourage specific species have been found to be not effective with cats, especially over large areas. Some of these products can be harmful and even toxic. The following items are ineffective, and/or harmful, and toxic and should not be used to deter cats: Hot pepper flakes, orange peels, coffee grounds, or other scented oils have not been proven to be effective.

**Complaint:** The cats are sick.

**Response:** TNR/SNR services include vaccination, which prevents many diseases and viruses. Offer TNR/SNR services that keep cats from breeding and producing new kittens who are highly susceptible to disease. Ask questions about the illness and offer resources, including treatment if possible, for sick or injured cats.

**Complaint:** I don't like the cats and want them gone.

**Response:** Eliminating the cats will not work. Ask how long the caller has had cats in the neighborhood. The answer is likely "forever." Use this opportunity to expand awareness that there have always been cats, industry has always removed them, so you can see it does not work. There is a better method: TNR/SNR. If removed, more cats, intact cats who display undesirable behaviors, will only move in and the cycle will never stop. Studies show removal may actually increase the colony size. The only proven solution is TNR/SNR which we will be able to help you with today. You will see a drop in the annoying behaviors and the number of cats will decrease over time. New residents to the area may not be familiar with the concept of community cats. Encourage them to speak to the neighbors and determine if the cats may require spay/neuter services. Offer deterrent advice if the complaints are primarily about cats on their property as opposed to seen in the neighborhood.

Be aware that a person who simply doesn't like cats and is not open to reason or solutions, may not have a problem with the cats but with the neighbor who cares for them. There may be some underlying grudge that is beyond your capacity to resolve.

**Complaint:** Why don't you remove all the cats and place them in homes?

**Response:** There are far more cats and kittens coming into shelters and rescues than can be easily adopted, leading to the euthanasia of large numbers of cats and kittens in some regions of the country. Additionally, as long as food is present (including dumpsters and other garbage receptacles), cats in adjacent areas will simply spread and fill the newly available space.

**Complaint:** Don't cats kill a lot of wildlife?

**Response:** Some free-roaming cats do kill wildlife. However, reports of the impact of this have been wildly exaggerated and we know the most serious threat to wildlife is human encroachment and environmental disruption. We are all trying to reduce the number of cats living outdoors and that's what's going to help the wildlife. TNR/SNR helps reduce the number of outdoor cats by sterilizing them so the breeding cycle stops and there are, ultimately, fewer cats. If the complaint is about cats killing birds, being drawn onto the property to a bird feeder, suggest predator deterrent devices such as those that keep squirrels and raccoons out of feeders as well as an ultrasonic or water sprinkler device to keep cats at bay.

**Complaint:** The neighbor is feeding cats/food attracting other animals.

**Response:** Feeding cats in a neighborhood should be done responsibly. There are several guidelines available and may be dependent on whether food is being placed on public or private

property. Ask if they know who is feeding and for contact information such as an address so that you can follow up directly with the feeder.

Feeding should be done on a regular schedule and an appropriate amount of food/cat, so as not to attract unwanted animals to leftover food. Caregivers should clean up any leftover food and bowls on a daily basis. Feeding is best located away from private property or public spaces where the cat would be visible during feeding time. Don't leave food out overnight that will attract wildlife.