

“What about Complaints?”

Managing Communications When Your Shelter Adopts a SNR or TNR Policy



About Alley Cat Allies

Alley Cat Allies is the only national nonprofit dedicated exclusively to the protection and humane treatment of all cats.

For 25 years, Alley Cat Allies has led the movement to save cats' lives. With advocacy, education, and grassroots organizing, we champion innovative programs and policies that serve communities and save cats. Since our founding in 1990, we have popularized Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) as the only humane and effective approach to community cats. Before Alley Cat Allies, TNR was virtually unknown in America, and no local governments supported it. Today, a growing list of more than 500 municipalities has officially embraced TNR.

Alley Cat Allies has changed how all cats are treated—pet, stray, feral, and each cat in between. We advocate for a variety of progressive policies to protect cats, including the transformation of the American animal shelter system, which still routinely kills 70 percent of all cats who enter.

Thanks to our more than half a million supporters and countless advocates, Alley Cat Allies works in hundreds of communities each year. To learn more about how we save cats' lives, visit www.alleycat.org.

Shelter Series

This resource is one in a series for shelters and animal control, and was developed by Bonney Brown and Diane Blankenburg of Humane Network.

“What about Complaints?”

Managing Communications When Your Shelter Adopts a SNR or TNR Policy

Real-life advice and information from animal services directors who have implemented SNR/TNR cat management programs to help you address questions about your program or help you make decisions about launching a new program.

We sometimes hear from people who are considering launching a Shelter-Neuter-Return (SNR) or Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program and have questions or concerns—worries even—about how they will handle the challenges that may come up. Others who have already launched programs sometimes comment that they are not sure about the best way to handle questions.

We have gathered advice straight from experts in the field (including how they handle complaints from the public) with the goal of helping those of you in animal services and sheltering (including management, staff members, and volunteers) effectively talk with the public about new SNR and/or TNR policies.

We asked a variety of people because different styles and approaches will better suit different individuals, communities, and programs. Our hope is that their responses will be helpful to you in determining the best approach for your communications about your new program and perhaps provide a bit of comfort from others who have been there that it is doable and worth the challenges associated with making any kind of change.

Here's what will be covered:

- What did you expect to happen when you introduced your SNR or TNR program?
- When you do get complaints, how do you handle them?
- What about really large-scale problems?
- How do you handle strays and community or feral cats being surrendered to your facility?
- What about communications with the media and the public at large?
- What have the results been?

In addition, the Appendix provides sample statements from several animal services websites.

What did you expect to happen when you introduced your SNR or TNR program?

When you are starting something new it is natural to have concerns, so we asked several directors who have implemented SNR/TNR programs what they expected before launching their program and what happened.

Here are some of their comments:

“I was so concerned about people complaining that I insisted we start it as a pilot project so I could stop it if it got out of hand. We did get a bump in complaints, particularly from managers of mobile home parks and apartment complexes. These folks had been trapping for years so we had the data to show them that what they were doing was not producing any long-term results. We started in 2010 and I hardly ever get a complaint anymore, and I never got near the number of complaints I anticipated. Literally one or two a year even make it to my desk... it seems less than what there was before — and it should be. A lot of our data shows that cat populations are declining in the community, so there should be fewer cat complaints. This issue of ‘getting more complaints’ is one of the biggest barriers to Directors/Presidents implementing these programs. I tell them that they already get cat complaints now, and I ask them if they would they rather defend saving the cats’ lives, or defend taking it?”

Jon Cicirelli, Director, Animal Care & Services, San Jose, CA

“Most people consider animal services to be the expert on animal matters. If they state that the cats should be neutered and returned, most people accept that. After the first year, there were very few complaints from citizens. The ones we did get were about specific cats in their yard rather than the program in general.”

Rick DuCharme, Director of First Coast No More Homeless Pets about their joint program with Jacksonville Animal Care and Protective Services

Key points:

- In general, the directors we spoke to said that they anticipated more complaints than they got.
- There will be some concerns raised, so it’s best to be prepared to explain the reasons for the change and why you are taking this approach.
- If in doubt, start it as a pilot program, but set a minimum amount of time—must be longer than six months (a year would be better) to see any results—and really give it your all during that time to be sure it is a fair trial period.



When you do get complaints, how do you handle them?

Given that some complaints are inevitable, we asked directors how they handled these in their community. Their comments have common themes, but also reflect different approaches. You will be the best judge of what will work best in your community. It could be that a combination of approaches will be best for you.

Here are some of the responses we received:

“When we get complaints we have to be sure to listen to what the issue is. If a person reveals that there are 30 cats next door, then we have to approach that in an entirely different way than if someone is complaining that the cat gets on their car or uses their garden for a litter box. Thankfully, it is mostly the latter and we are able to recommend devices such as the CatStop and Scarecrow to resolve those concerns. We have even lent out the CatStop to folks that are skeptical and asked them to use it for a while and if they like it, give us ours back and get their own. Of course no method is 100% guaranteed, but we’ve had a lot of luck with these two devices. One of the bigger complaints is the sexual behavior and the birth of kittens—so those are easily resolved with spay/neuter. We find most people are accepting of the program and relieved the cat doesn’t have to die. The point is to empower the person with information. Almost all cat problems are nuisances. The message can’t be ‘this is what we do with cats (TNR) so just deal with it.’ If the person is pointed to tools and techniques to handle their own specific cat nuisance, that’s really all they want. They want their problem solved, most don’t want the cat dead.”

Jon Cicirelli, Director, Animal Care & Services, San Jose, CA

“One of our staff members would make an appointment with the individual and go out to their address, talk with them, let the person show the scope of the problem, assess the situation and make specific recommendations to resolve the problem. Removing all food sources from the property was a common solution. We also had humane deterrents to loan out and a list of recommendations to deter cats from your property. That personal attention and a visit by a knowledgeable individual who provided specific advice and assistance went a long way to resolving any issues.

Frequently complaints turn out to be related to domestic disputes; one family member is feeding the cats and another does not want the cats around. Sometimes we can recommend moving the feeding station or deterrents. It’s important that people understand that there are really only two options for outdoor cats; TNR or trap and kill. Relocation and adoption are not viable options.”

Rick DuCharme, Director of First Coast No More Homeless Pets about their joint program with Jacksonville Animal Care and Protective Services

“In our discussions with complainants, we stressed the advantages of having cats near someone’s property in the reduction of rodents and snakes. We also pass out brochures that were obtained from Alley Cat Allies entitled ‘How to Live With Cats in Your Neighborhood.’

Before we began trapping, we set up a group of foster parents for kittens and also had in place a free adoption for anyone that needed a barn or farm cat... For the cats that just could not go back we were able to introduce them into other colonies and also started a colony in a city park. These cats have adapted to a new place. They are fed and have shelter and are thriving...”

Officer Johnson, City of Spartanburg

Key points:

- Listening and letting the individual with the problem tell you (or a representative of your team) all about it allows them to get it off their chest. Once they have done that they are better able to hear what you have to say.
- The personal touch of listening and taking their problem seriously, without compromising on your program policies, has been successful for most of the programs.
- Some organizations are more comfortable having put contingencies in place, such as barn cat adoptions for rare circumstances. At the same time, many successful programs do not have these additional components.

What about really large-scale problems?

Most agencies have to deal with hoarding cases from time to time or encounter a large outdoor cat situation. One of the directors shared how he handles these situations:

“Major problems with cats are handled on a case-by-case basis and frequently involve a team effort between us as enforcement and volunteer trappers and rescue groups. Again, this is also sometimes a barrier to other agencies enacting a program like this, but they have to be reminded that there will be hoarders no matter what law you pass or what policy you adopt. The point is, don’t let a small percentage of the problem dictate the overall policy of TNR. Those hoarders are there today, and there will be others tomorrow.”

Jon Cicirelli, Director, Animal Care & Services, San Jose, CA

Key points:

- Hoarding cases and large-scale TNR projects will occur occasionally, whether you have a SNR/ TNR program in effect or not.
- It’s best to have a plan in place for dealing with them when they do occur that includes partnering with other groups in your community including other shelters, rescue groups, low-cost clinics and TNR groups to maximize lifesaving.



How do you handle strays and community or feral cats being surrendered to your facility?

Open-admission shelters will have people walk in to surrender cats they have picked up or trapped in their neighborhood.

Two different programs, below, share how they handle these situations differently in ways that work well for their community:

“If someone brings us a healthy stray, we ask a series of questions to determine if it’s a community cat that is thriving on their own. If so, we have a discussion with them about TNR. We have the law on our side and the conversations we have usually result in acceptance. For those who have concerns, we discuss mediation and exclusion techniques. If the cat turns out to be a lost pet, we hold for the mandatory five days, then place into the adoption program.”

Scott Giacoppo, Chief Community Animal Welfare Officer, Washington Humane Society

“Jacksonville Animal Care and Protective Services takes animals, including outdoor cats, and gathers the needed information without getting into specifics about what happens next, unless the person specifically asks about what will happen to the cat. Most people don’t want to know about the fate of the animal.

When returning cats to their territories, the drivers put door-hangers on the houses surrounding the release site to inform residents about the program and advise them that eartipped cats have been through the program and there is no need to trap them. The door hanger includes information about living with community cats.”

Rick DuCharme, Director of First Coast No More Homeless Pets about their joint program with Jacksonville Animal Care and Protective Services

Key Points:

- People surrender outdoor cats for many, often very different, reasons—from concerns that the cat needs a home to an annoyance with a particular behavior. You will want to decide how much information you wish to obtain from, and review with, individuals at the time of the surrender.
 - Some agencies ask questions so they can gain and provide information in the surrender room.
 - Others find that it is more efficient and effective to address it later with an informational handout explaining TNR and living with cats in the neighborhood.
- You will decide what works best for your community, but it’s good to know that both approaches can work.

What about communications with the media and the public at large?

Any new policy or program will invite questions, so we asked directors how they managed the introduction of their new policy and program.

Here are the responses:

“It’s important to have an official policy that all involved agree upon and use when responding to the public or media. The policy must hold up under pressure and be appropriate for discussing the program with people on either side of the issue.

Jacksonville’s policy is that trapping and killing cats year after year had no impact on reducing the number of cats in the community. This new, more effective method of handling feral and community cats was introduced and is now the city’s policy. However, residents don’t have to tolerate unwanted cats on their property. Callers who complain about nuisance cats on their property are educated in ways to humanely exclude or discourage cats from their property.

This is consistent with the way the city handles complaints about raccoons and squirrels. The city does not remove these animals from resident’s property either. Assistance will be offered with trapping cats and sterilizing them to decrease the population.”

Rick DuCharme, Director of First Coast No More Homeless Pets about their joint program with Jacksonville Animal Care and Protective Services

“Calls to the Mayor and City Council were all forwarded directly to me for consistency in response. The response usually included the fact that the old system was not reducing cat intake and nuisance numbers and that the City was spending \$X simply to catch and kill cats with no real impact on the future. Then we would explain the anticipated goals of the program and how it should ultimately save money in the long run. Ultimately, when we had stats we showed how the program was reducing intake and complaints (and we were able to estimate savings both annual and long term - long term can be in the millions if you extend out ten or twenty years).

The public was advised that there were no alternatives being offered by animal control because the City had made a policy decision. That held up through 6-12 months of a few people trying to derail the program and the Council and Mayor holding firm. By the time we had 24 months of results it was much easier to sell the program with real results.

A big hurdle was some employees and ultimately they were simply told this was the new policy and if they didn’t like it they would have to look for another job.



When a few veterinarians complained we told them until a better alternative came we were going with the community cat concept. If they said they thought catch & kill was the only way to manage feral cats we told them we were not going to simply kill cats because they ended up in the shelter, but if they wished to offer the catch and kill euthanasia at their practices there was nothing holding them back from that.”

Scott Trebatoski, Director of Hillsborough County Animal Services, Division Chief of Jacksonville Animal Care and Protective Services at the time the program was undertaken

Key Points:

- It's important to have a consistent, well-thought-out policy.
- Staff needs to be aware of the new policy, have an understanding of it, and know how you expect them to talk about it, so everyone will answer the same way.
- It's best to have one person appointed to handle all questions about the policy from the media and the public to ensure consistency in the response.
- You (and those above you in the chain of command) need to have courage of your convictions. You have done the research and made a sound decision. You know it's the best thing for the community and the cats. Your conviction is a powerful tool for convincing others.

You may also want to check out the sample statements from animal services websites, below.

What have the results been?

Communities in which animal services has implemented an SNR/TNR program are seeing substantial reductions in intake and a dramatic drop in feline euthanasia in the shelter. Many report substantial cost reductions as well.

The intake of cats was increasing each year in Jacksonville, Florida. With the advent of the Feral Freedom program and its publicity, there was a very modest increase in cats entering the JACPS shelter early on, most likely due to some feral cat caregivers bringing in cats to be sterilized and returning to them with the new program. Following that one-time increase, however, the number of cats entering the open-admission public shelter decreased.

- In 2007 (before the program) JACPS took in over 14,000 cats and euthanized roughly 12,000 of them.
- In 2012 (5 years into the program) JACPS took in fewer than 10,000 cats and euthanized well below 3,000 cats.
- This improved their live release rate from 15% to 74% for cats.
- There were substantial cost reductions associated with this program; from \$1.2 million for cat programs in 2007 to \$870,000 in 2012 – a savings of over \$300,000 in annual costs.

Statistics from Community Cats Management Case Study published by Target Zero Institute

“The average number of animals euthanized daily at KCHA in 2009 was 19. The average number of animals euthanized daily in 2014 is 1. 1,944 animals were euthanized in the first six months of 2013 and only 211 in the first six months of 2014.”

Chelsea Staley, Executive Director, Kanawha-Charleston Humane Association reported, after adopting SNR for outdoor cats.

“Now that there is an alternative to surrendering and having the feral cats euthanized, caregivers are allowed to be more open in their work. This has built a more cohesive care community and allowed the sharing of information for overall better management... The “decriminalization” of caring for feral and outdoor cats has also changed the attitude of the public as to who is or should be responsible for cats in the neighborhood. A dramatic resource shift has occurred, in which, sterilization surgeries are increasingly being funded by individuals.”

Rick DuCharme, Director of First Coast No More Homeless Pets about their joint program with Jacksonville Animal Care and Protective Services

Sometimes people worry about the well-being of outdoor cats, this data from one program is illuminating:

“The first 6,000 Feral Freedom cats were implanted with microchips for identification. This was done to address the concerns that these cats would be hit by cars, bite people, starve to death, be attacked by dogs, and many other hypothetical tragedies that should nullify the program. After more than a year, none of the more than 6,000 feral cats with a microchip were ever identified as falling into any of those situations. Now, more than four years later, no identified Feral Freedom cats have been involved in these types of incidents.”

Rick DuCharme, Director of First Coast No More Homeless Pets about their joint program with Jacksonville Animal Care and Protective Services

Key Points:

- The lifesaving impact of an SNR and/or TNR program can be dramatic.
- The cost savings are substantial.
- There are other less tangible benefits, including community engagement.
- Statistics support the concept that the majority of cats do well post-release.



Appendix

Sample Website Statements

These sample statements were drawn from several different animal services website. They may help you in formulating the message that is right for your agency and community.

Sample 1:

Q: The cats in my neighborhood are wild. I'm afraid they may be carrying a disease or may harm my children or pets. What should I do about them?

A: In cases like this, the best thing to do is often nothing! You are describing feral cats, which are essentially wild animals. While a few people believe that they are a danger to some wildlife, the truth is that they fill a predatory niche in our ecosystem once occupied by predators no longer in existence in our area. They are important to the health of prey species, as are all predators. Because they are essentially wild, like many truly wild animals, they are often very healthy without the benefit of human care. Feral cats are all around us all the time. We generally do not see them, except by quick glimpses and stolen opportunities. Feral cats, like wild animals are afraid of people and want nothing to do with us. They will keep their distance and are of no real health concern to you, your children or your pets. Confirmed cases of rabies or other serious illness are exceptionally rare in feral cats likely due to their aversion to people and other animals.

Q: I live close to a main road. I'd rather trap the cat and bring it to a shelter where it can be humanely euthanized, then allow it to be injured or killed on the road or subject to some other horror.

A: We applaud your compassion, but think about it from the cat's perspective. This cat does not know there is any other way of life and is not suited to being indoors. It does not want to sleep by a fire or lounge in a lap. While life outside can be challenging, a feral cat is not a domestic animal and is well suited to this life.

The trauma of being trapped and then placed in a cage is horrific for any wild animal and no less so for a feral cat. Certain death by injection, however kind it may be intended so to avoid any possibility of injury or accidental death on a road, by a predator or due to disease is not likely the choice the feral cat would decide upon. It has chosen to live wild and free—as free as our society will allow.

Catch and kill methodologies as a means of feral cat control have been failing for more than thirty years. Once a group of feral cats is trapped and killed, another group gradually forms to replace them. The cycle of killing will be repeated, over and over again, endlessly because it is not a sound method to control feral cat populations. Where there is a food source, there are feral cats.

Q: So what can be done? It all sounds so hopeless.

A: Far from it. More and more feral cats are making friends and allies. TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return) programs combined with supported, managed colonies reduce the number of feral cats through sterilization, gradually, slowly, soundly.

While HSHC does not yet have a feral cat program, we would be happy to point you in the direction of local efforts to help feral cats in our community. Among these efforts are those of the national organization Alley Cat Allies. Please visit them at www.alleycat.org to learn more about what you can do to help feral cats in your neighborhood.

HSHC is only one part of the solution. You are the key to real and lasting change. To help feral cats, we must have willing community partners who will advocate for them, care for them, and actively participate in programs to save lives.

The Humane Society of Harford County www.harfordshelter.org/resources/feral-cats

Sample 2:

AC&C recognizes that community cats are a challenge throughout the five boroughs and is committed to participating in effectively and humanely controlling their population. Community cats can include tame, owned cats, abandoned strays and feral cats—really, any cat living outside that has an established and sustained lifestyle can be considered a community cat. For many years, it was common practice across the US to purposefully trap outdoor cats and bring them to shelters. For cats acclimated to living outdoors, who sometimes have not been socialized with humans at all, euthanasia was the most likely outcome for many. Over time, as animal welfare tends changed and more became known about outdoor cats, their effect on the community, and the effects of simply removing them, it became clear that better options were and are available.

AC&C has believes that the most effective solution is a comprehensive program that includes:

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) of community cats. Through TNR, cats are humanely trapped and sterilized, and then placed back into the environment in which they were living. Volunteer caretakers then provide food, water, and clean, unobtrusive shelters for the cats.

Though it may seem against logic to allow cats to remain living outdoors, there are some real, data supported reasons to do so. National studies have shown that when cats are removed from an area, more cats move in. If you sterilize the population, you will stop the constant flow of kittens and the colony will actually keep other cats from moving into the area. Eventually, through natural attrition, the colony dies out. TNR also helps to stop many of the undesirable behaviors including loud mating, territorial fights and spraying.



TNR:

- Stabilizes the population.
- Is more effective and less expensive than attempts at extermination.
- Eliminates or reduces annoying behaviors like spraying, yowling and fighting.
- Is the humane thing to do. Anyone who suggests inhumane and/or illegal methods of cat population control may be prosecuted according to the law.

What is a feral cat?

Feral cats are not socialized to humans. They are afraid of people and cannot be touched. Time, love, and kindness will not tame an adult feral cat.

How is that different from a community cat?

It actually may not be (but it might!). Community cats are simply cats that have established themselves and who maintain a lifestyle outdoors. They may be feral. However, they may be friendly, they may be shy; as long as they live outside with relative success, they can be considered community cats.

Isn't it inhumane to let them stay outdoors?

Not if there are resources supporting them and not if they are used to living there year round. Certainly, AC&C would not advocate for a cat to live in an abandoned lot, for example, where there is no shelter and no one to provide food. If you've seen a cat in your neighborhood for a while though, and it doesn't seem ill or injured, it stands to reason that the cat's basic needs are being met. It makes sense that to survive outside, the cat must have developed strategies to keep safe and found places to stay dry, warm, and fed. And, if the cat seems to be ok—living, maybe even thriving—it does not make sense to remove it from that environment, to be placed into one where euthanasia is statistically the most common outcome in the US today.

Animal Care and Control of NYC www.nycacc.org/CommFeralCats.htm

Sample 3:

Nuisance Cats

Are roaming cats causing a nuisance in your neighborhood? In addition to producing litters of kittens every two to six months, unneutered and unsprayed cats tend to spray, fight, and urinate and defecate in the open. Male cats can impregnate up to 100 female cats in one day!

Fix the Problem... for FREE

The most effective and humane way to manage outdoor cat populations is TNR: Trap cats, have them Neutered (“fixed”) then Return them to the place where they were trapped. This service is free for all people who bring cats in to SJACS from our service cities. Healthy, stray cats over three months of age surrendered to SJACS who do not qualify for adoption due to behavior considerations are eligible for this program.

Euthanasia?

If you would like a GUARANTEE that the cat you bring in for TNR will not be euthanized, please use our pay service and do NOT surrender the cat as a stray. Bring trapped cats to the shelter Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday between 8:00 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. Use the front door. You will be required to pick the cat up in the afternoon and pay a \$25.00 fee for services. The cat will need to recover indoors for 24-72 hours prior to release.

Don't Remove... Removal creates MORE cats!

By ensuring as many cats as possible in a location are neutered, you can dramatically reduce the number of roaming cats in your area, and the nuisances they may produce. Trapping cats and removing them from the area can cause cat populations to explode. Especially if the cat being removed is already spayed or neutered. That cat will likely be “replaced” by a roaming, breeding cat that will produce litters of kittens.

...Causing harm to or releasing a trapped cat to any location other than the location where it was trapped is a crime.

Conflict Mediation

Human-Animal Conflict Resolution and Mediation: Little Blue Society is a nonprofit organization that resolves human-animal conflicts. If you are having an animal-related problem with a neighbor, municipality, community or business, their experienced staff can help you resolve your dispute. They specialize in wildlife, feral cat and dog related issues. Please visit their website at www.littlebluesociety.org or call them at (650) 365-8623 to set up a free consultation.

Animal Care Services, San Jose, CA www.sanjoseca.gov/index.aspx?NID=1153