

# Fixing the Feline

Those immersed up to their whiskers in the companion animal overpopulation issue crave new ideas on how to deal with the influx of homeless cats. For even the most jaded person, there is reason for hope based on experiences in many communities where activists have refused to give up.

In 1994 a small not-for-profit group, New Leash on Life, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, had a goal to sterilize 1,000 cats. It reached that goal in 1997, after three years of trapping homeless cats, coordinating bake sales to raise money for the surgeries, and shutting 10-15 cats a week to the vets. In Houston, a free sterilization clinic was built at the city animal control facility. Spokane passed an initiative to get government funding for free spay/neuter services. Miami got a mobile spay/neuter van on the road. San Mateo, California, collected data on people who were not sterilizing their cats and targeted their outreach accordingly.

These innovative strategies and others were recently profiled at The Public/Private Strategies for Cat Population Control conference sponsored by SPAY/USA, a program of the North Shore Animal League. Speakers outlined how their community chose to tackle the problem of homeless and marginally-cared-for cats.

Different communities, different goals, different approaches. It is understood that there is no one-plan-fits-all solution to ending cat overpopulation. It takes grassroots effort to intercede with homeless and feral cats; cooperation from the veterinary community to offer affordable sterilization; educational programs to inform people about the needs of cats; legislation to secure legal protection for cats; and the willingness of animal guardians to keep their cats indoors.

The following examples are cause for both celebration and inspiration. The activists involved are more than willing to share their knowledge and available resources in the spirit of community cooperation. And although cat overpopulation is a national problem, the solution may be in more than one backyard. (See "Resources.")

## San Jose, California

San Jose (population 873,000) is the 11th largest city in the United States and the third largest in California. It is located in Santa Clara County, which has a population of 1.65 million. The city is ethnically diverse, with Hispanics and Asian-Americans comprising half the population; many residents do not speak English.

**Problem:** In 1991 Santa Clara County shelters euthanized 30,000 animals, more than 22,000 of

which were cats. No spay/neuter program existed except for a few small, private organizations with limited finances.

**Strategy: Municipal Funding of Free Spaying/Neutering.** In 1991 The Coalition for Humane Legislation was formed to help companion animals in Santa Clara County. Its members fought for about five years without success to get a comprehensive breeding control ordinance passed. They did, however, get cat licensing mandated in 1993, but were unable to get wording included in the ordinance to allocate all license revenue for a sterilization program. Unwilling to give up, they pursued other channels until the city council gave them a verbal agreement that all surplus funds from the animal control budget would go to a spay/neuter fund. In October 1994 the free sterilization program began with \$148,000. In 1995 and 1996 it received \$50,000 each year, and in 1997, \$27,000.

**Impact:** Since the program began, 7,765 cats and 658 dogs have been sterilized. At first cats and dogs were neutered for free; in following years the program focused exclusively on cats and began requiring a \$5 co-payment from the animal guardians. The county animal shelter's statistics show a decline in the number of cats destroyed.

## Houston, Texas

Houston covers more than 700 square miles and has a population of 4 million. It is an ethnically diverse urban area with a large Hispanic population.

**Problem:** In 1994 the city's six sheltering agencies took in 100,000 cats and dogs, of which 90,000 were destroyed.

**Strategy: Multiple Sterilization Clinics Serving Different Clientele.** Houston now has four separate sterilization clinics serving the public. The first was a low-cost facility established in 1990 by the Houston Humane Society. The second came about after an animal task force was created in 1991 with representatives from animal rights organizations, animal control, breeders, veterinarians, and the Houston Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In 1992 the task force established a free spay/neuter clinic at the city's animal control facility to service animals in low-income families. All labor was donated. However, it soon became apparent that many inner-city residents had no means of transporting animals to the clinic.

To address this need, a nonprofit group began raising money in 1994 to buy a mobile unit that could be used to sterilize up to 20 animals a day. The Fund for Animals (FFA) adopted the program in 1995, and got the vehicle on the road full time. Explains Sean Hawkins, FFA's director of spay and neuter services,



"Each month a Fund representative meets with the animal control staff to identify the hot spots—areas in Houston where a concentration of complaint calls come into animal control. Our van then targets that area by first sending in our outreach coordinator, who talks to school children and community groups to educate them about proper animal care and the importance of spaying and neutering. Our mobile unit arrives the following week, sets up camp in the community, and sterilizes animals for free on a first-come, first-served basis."

**Work must also be done at the root of the problem: turning off the reproductive faucet of the "owned" cats.**

FFA set up the fourth Houston clinic in 1996. The high-volume stationary facility is open to all members of the public; fees range from \$15 to neuter a male cat to \$30 to spay a female dog.

**Impact:** The human population in Houston increased 25 percent from 1991 to 1997. However, the number of cats and dogs turned in to shelters has remained stable, as has the euthanasia rate.

### **Spokane, Washington**

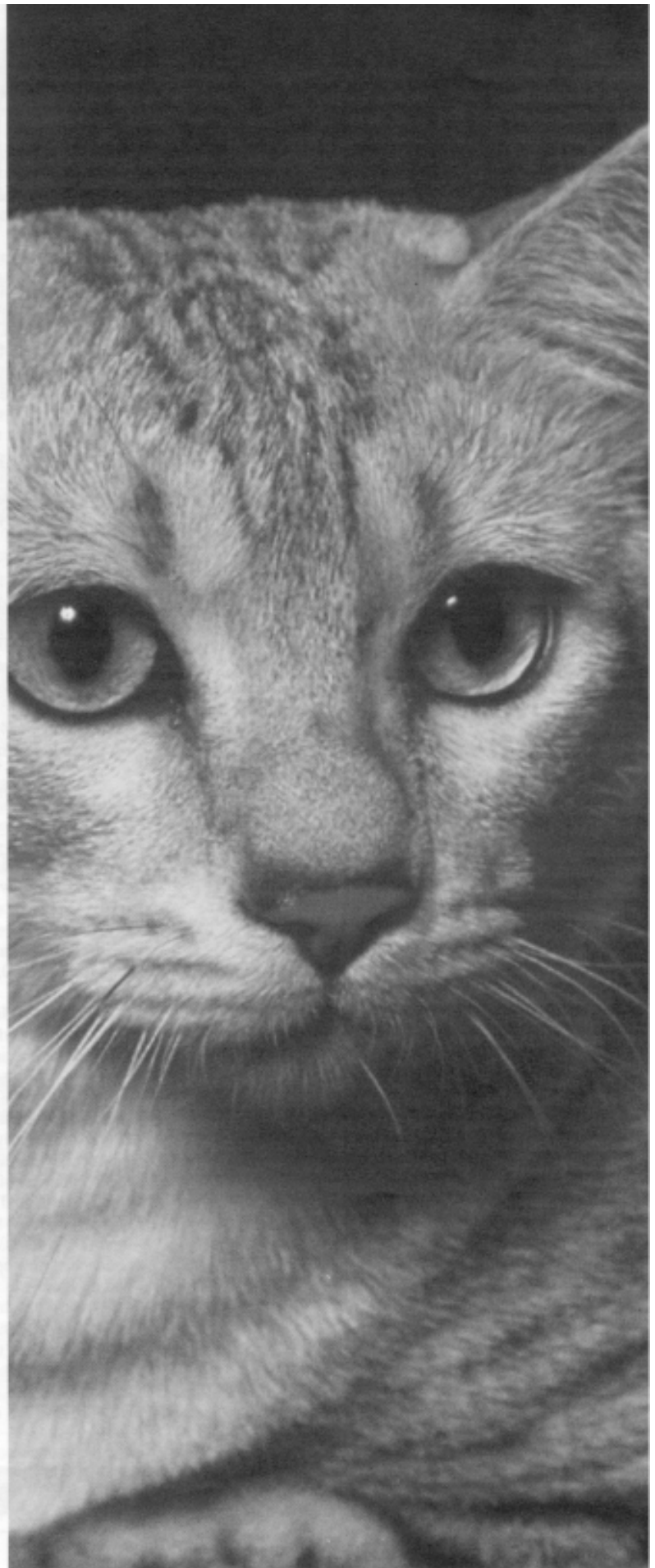
Spokane is a mid-sized city of 284,000. It is home to five universities and an Air Force base, resulting in a high transient population.

**Problem:** Animal control authorities were receiving many nuisance calls concerning cats. Passage of a 1994 cat-licensing ordinance helped, but in industrial areas and around riverfront restaurants, the feral and homeless cat population grew out of control.

**Strategy: Free Spaying/Neutering Mandated by Initiative.** La Verne Kettlety, a longtime Spokane activist who cares for many homeless animals, wanted an ordinance that would help solve the surplus cat and dog problem. She proposed an ordinance requiring the city to provide free sterilization services to residents' companion animals. The city council, however, did not support the idea of taking money from the general fund to sterilize animals. Kettlety explained that it was more cost effective to spend taxpayer money on a preventive program such as free spaying/neutering than to just manage the problem through sheltering and euthanasia. City officials disagreed.

Instead of getting discouraged, Kettlety took the issue to the voters. With the help of other activists, she wrote an initiative that requires one-tenth of one percent of the city's general fund be used solely for spaying/neutering dogs and cats residing in the city limits. The initiative passed in November 1995. About \$100,000 a year is now allocated for this service; to offset the cost, the city council increased the dog and cat license fees by \$2.50. The program is active for three years and will continue unless repealed by the city council.

**Impact:** The group Spokanimal has been distributing sterilization vouchers since April 1996, and the program's effect has not been quantified.



## Central North Carolina

The Triangle section of North Carolina encompasses Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill. The region contains both rural and urban areas.

**Problem:** Besides having many homeless cats and dogs, North Carolina has a serious rabies problem, particularly among cats.

**Strategy: Get the Veterinary Students to Do It.** In 1989, members of Second Chance Pet Adoptions began rescuing stray dogs and cats. The feral cat program, now called Operation Catnip, started in 1996 as an offshoot to address the feral cat problem through trap-neuter-release.

Workers initially used a local veterinary clinic that donated its facility for a "spay day" each month. Volunteers, including five veterinarians, staffed the clinic and sterilized more than 100 cats in a few hours. Funds came from caretaker donations, special fundraisers, and grants.

Lisa Kaplan, director of Operation Catnip, explains that the program soon outgrew its original facility, and in 1997 made its new home at the North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine in Raleigh. "The University accepted Operation Catnip as a learning program for veterinary medical students. We continue scheduling monthly clinics and sterilize 100-150 cats within four to five hours of surgery time. The surgery team now consists of 15 veterinary medical students and five to six veterinarians. Our total volunteer force for a one-day clinic is about 35-40 people."

Operation Catnip depends on a core of four individuals who are responsible for the most important organizational tasks. A director oversees the program, a volunteer coordinator assigns the clinic staff, a supply coordinator gathers purchased and donated supplies, and a cat coordinator communicates with the caretakers and distributes the live traps.

**Impact:** Operation Catnip has existed for less than two years, and its impact has not yet been evaluated.

## San Mateo County, California

A middle- to upper middle-class county, San Mateo has a population of 700,000 and is one of the most ethnically diverse counties in the nation. Its temperate weather—little rain, and mild winters and summers—is among the reasons that few people keep their cats indoors.

**Problem:** Peninsula Humane Society (PHS), which services San Mateo County, began receiving an increasing number of cats in the early 1990s. In fiscal year 1992 it took in almost twice the number of cats (9,704) as dogs (5,221), and euthanized most of them.

**Strategy: Survey the Community and Target the Hot Spots.** PHS took a comprehensive analytical approach: compiling internal data, evaluating the shelter's statistics, and examining trends. Reasons for euthanasia were analyzed (i.e., surplus, unweaned, medical, feral, behavioral). Examining 20 years of shelter history led PHS to believe that solving overpopulation was possible, and helped its leaders to set the goal of equilibrium—the point in time at which only suffering or dangerous animals would be euthanized—by the year 2002.

To reach its goal, PHS knew it would need to target its programs better. It surveyed the community to find out the primary reasons people were not sterilizing their animals, and polled residents to determine how many people fed stray cats and at what level of commitment.

PHS' action plan focused on ferals and unweaned kittens, the bulk of the incoming animals. A Feral Cat Co-op was established with local caretakers, who agreed to register their colonies with the humane society and abide by specific guidelines developed in cooperation with Homeless Cat Network. In return, PHS provided free sterilization, leukemia testing, and vaccinations for the

caretakers' cats. PHS now has 120 registered colonies in which more than 1,200 cats are cared for.

**Impact:** In 1995, the program's first year, PHS sterilized, tested, and vaccinated 392 cats, euthanized 45, and removed 200 others from colonies to be fostered and placed in indoor-only homes. The following year after the introduction of the Feral Cat Co-op program, feral cat euthanasias decreased 23 percent. Anecdotally, the caretakers reported seeing fewer kittens in past spring and summer months. From 1992 to 1997, PHS has had a 31 percent reduction of incoming dogs and cats, and a 39 percent reduction in euthanasias (48.5 percent for cats alone). The county park service is now participating in the program to manage cat colonies in public parks.

## San Diego County, California

Bordering Mexico in southern California, San Diego has an ethnically diverse population of more than 2.5 million and covers 4,261 square miles with a mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas. The beach community's mild climate makes it an inviting environment for homeless cats. The city's colleges and three military bases contribute to a high transient population.

**Problem:** The homeless cat population had reached crisis proportions; in 1992, more than 15,000 were killed in area shelters.

**Strategy: Free Monthly Sterilization Clinics for Feral Cats.** In 1992, the Feral Cat Coalition (FCC) was established as a nonprofit, all-volunteer organization focusing on one goal: to sterilize as many cats as possible, efficiently and economically. The FCC traps feral and homeless cats, sterilizes and immunizes them against rabies, and then returns them to the persons who feed them. Remarkably, licensed veterinarians and volunteers provide the service to the community at no cost.

According to Linda Kelson, FCC schedules large monthly clinics at existing veterinary facilities, using 30 volunteers and four to seven veterinarians. Kelson explains, "Within five hours we can sterilize 100 cats. We use a voice-mail hotline and referrals to obtain cats. Volunteers screen callers, make clinic reservations, and set callers up with traps and/or trapping volunteers. Using this format we can sterilize 1,500 cats a year."

Besides some seed money for medical supplies and traps, the FCC program requires just three main ingredients—cats, veterinarians, and volunteers.

**Impact:** In 1992, more than 15,500 cats were euthanized at the San Diego County animal shelter. In fiscal year 1996-97, more than 7,800 cats were destroyed—a nearly 50 percent decrease since the FCC program's inception.

## Miami, Florida

Miami is an ethnically diverse, bilingual city within Dade County. The county is 2,000 square miles with a population of 2 million. Most residents are Hispanic, but there are also large numbers of African-Americans, Haitians, and Caucasians. There are many senior citizens and people who live in Florida only during the winter.

**Problem:** Miami Beach is one of many areas in Dade County with a high concentration of feral cats. Its boardwalk and numerous restaurants provide a food source for the cats. In 1912, many cats were brought into the area to solve the city's rat problem, but the situation soon developed into a long-term cat problem.

**Strategy: Mobile and Stationary Sterilization Clinics.** In 1994 Dade County commissioners approved money to purchase a 40-foot bus designed to provide free and low-cost sterilization and rabies vaccination services, and disaster relief when necessary.

Free sterilization is provided to dogs and cats cared for by people receiving public assistance; other caretakers pay anywhere

from \$10 for neutering a male cat to \$35 for spaying a female dog.

The bus hit the road in 1995 and operates three days a week. In 1996 Dade County animal control opened a low-cost clinic at the shelter that operates the other four days of the week.

**Impact:** Although it is too soon to see a reduction in the number of cats entering the county shelter, Dade County animal control services succeeded in reducing cat populations in such targeted areas as Miami Beach. Additionally, they are slowly breaking through some cultural barriers to educate residents about the importance of spaying and neutering.

## Norfolk County, Massachusetts

Norfolk County covers 400 square miles and ranges from lower to upper middle class. Its proximity to the university town of Boston influences the high educational level of the community.

**Problem:** Most of the shelters in the region do not accept cats. The county Board of Health, concerned about potential health problems from the many homeless and feral cats, contacted local animal groups for advice.

**Strategy: Establish Cat Action Teams.** Representatives from the humane society, Board of Health, and animal control decided that a citizen action committee was the best way to address the problem. Formed in 1994, the Cat Action Team (CAT) identifies cat colony locations, mobilizes volunteers to trap the animals, works with veterinarians to get them sterilized, identifies caregivers who are responsible for feeding and monitoring the cats, and then returns the spayed and neutered animals back to their colonies.

Such community-based efforts

have many advantages. They help to enhance the cats' status by generating community support, donations, and media attention. Local government officials are more responsive to residents in organized groups; the team can band together to put pressure on anyone who threatens the cats' well-being.

**Impact:** Since 1994, CAT has sterilized more than 3,000 homeless cats. Additionally, the original CAT has established successful groups in several other communities. Many veterinarians have reported receiving fewer calls requesting help with finding homes for strays.

## Playing Catch-Up

These communities and thousands like them share the problem of too many cats and the pitfall of too few resources. A common strategy has become to focus on homeless and feral cats and sterilize as many as possible, as cheaply as possible. Work must also be done at the root of the problem: turning off the reproductive faucet of the "owned" cats. They are the ones who will continue to add to the feral population.

It's about time cats get the attention they should have had decades ago. But quick fixes won't permanently solve the problems—cat guardians need education. By nature, cats may be different from dogs, but that doesn't mean free-roaming Fluffy can fend for herself. Cats need identification and confinement, but with outdoor enclosures where they can exercise and explore. In other words, they need and deserve the same protection our society has given dogs for years.

*Kim Sturla is Director of Education for The Fund for Animals.*

## RESOURCES

• **A Guide for Living with Feral Cats** by Audrey Boag. This 32-page book covers how to evaluate a colony, pay for care-related costs, get cats sterilized, tame them, and more. Available for \$4 by contacting the author at P.O. Box 714, Conifer, CO 80433.

• **Alley Cat Allies**, Dept. Animals' Agenda, P.O. Box 397, Mt. Rainier, MD 20712; (301) 229-7890; Fax: (703) 243-2409; E-Mail: alleycat@igc.apc.org; www.alleycat.org. National resource center for nonlethal feral cat control, cat behavior, predation, rabies and health care, and policy development.

• **Coalition for Humane Legislation**, Dept. Animals' Agenda, 690 Bold Court, San Jose, CA 95111; (408) 226-0221. Information available on legislation and gaining government funding for sterilization.

• **Feral Cat Coalition**, Dept. Animals' Agenda, 9528 Miramar Rd., #160, San Diego, CA 92126; (619) 497-1599; Fax: (619) 536-9670; www.feralcat.com. Publications include "Taming Feral Kittens" and "Humane Trapping Instructions." Instructions for clinic operation procedures and necessary forms are also available. Copies can be ordered for the cost of postage, or can be downloaded from their Internet home page.

• **The Fund for Animals**, Dept. Animals' Agenda, P.O. Box 70286, Houston, TX 77270; (713) 862-3863; Fax: (713) 880-3172; E-Mail: shawkins@phoenix.net. Packet on setting up and equipping a mobile spay/neuter van; consultation services available.

• **Metro Dade Animal Services**, Dept. Animals' Agenda, 7401 N.W. 74th Street, Miami, FL 33166; (305) 885-0377; Fax: (305) 884-3447. Information on equipping mobile spay/neuter vans.

• **Neponset Valley Humane Society**, Dept. Animals' Agenda, P.O. Box 609, Canton, MA 02021; (617) 341-2675; Fax: (617) 784-4385; E-Mail: nvhs@conejo.com; www.conejo.com/nvhs.html. Publications on fundraising and feral cat programs: *Getting Your Paws on More Money, How to Create a Grassroots Community Program to Help Feral Cats, Planning a Walk Event.*

• **Operation Catnip/Second Chance Pet Adoptions**, Dept. Animals' Agenda, P.O. Box 73, Cary, NC 27512; (919) 676-3770; www.pagesz.net/~secondchance/. Packet on Operation Catnip program and procedures for running a monthly sterilization clinic.

• **Peninsula Humane Society**, Dept. Animals' Agenda, 12 Airport Blvd., San Mateo, CA 94401; (415) 340-8200; Fax: (415) 348-7891. Packets available: *Adapting Traditional Shelter Programs to Address Cats and Feral Cat Co-op*, which provide information on policy, program guidelines, and procedures.

• **SPAY/USA**, Dept. Animals' Agenda, 750 Port Washington Blvd., Port Washington, NY 11050; (800) 248-SPAY; (203) 377-1116; E-Mail: Zellweg@aol.com. This national low-cost spay/neuter referral service is a project of North Shore Animal League. Advice on spay/neuter programs and clinics. A handy binder full of detailed outlines, worksheets, tips, and program blueprints from the Cat Population Control Conference is available for \$13.

• **Spokanimal**, Dept. Animals' Agenda, N. 710 Napa St., Spokane, WA 99202; (509) 534-8133. Copies of the legislative initiative are available.

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