



BY NANCY LAWSON

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FERAL CATS



A TALE OF FIVE CITIES



Feral cats occupy the gray spaces in our culture, finding refuge and food in the forgotten alleyways of our neighborhoods and inhabiting the indecisive corners of a societal mindset that hasn't figured out what to do with them yet.

We can't take back what our species has already done to cats, the thousands of years of quasi-domestication that puts some of them on our warm sofas and leaves others out in the cold. We can only dream about what would really end their suffering: a culture so ingrained with compassion for all species that every creature would be cared for in a way that suits his nature.

Even then, though, the arguments would continue over exactly what that nature is and whether we have the right to manipulate it. Even if everyone could agree on an effective option for reducing feral cat populations—euthanasia, trap-neuter-return, or a combination of

both—debates over whether cats should be allowed to wander would linger. The notion that these animals are better off indoors is a given for shelter employees who've seen the prolific breeding and suffering that result from an outdoor existence. But for others whose pet cats cry at the window each day, it doesn't seem so cut-and-dried; many view the cat as a half-wild species whose life is not fulfilled unless he can spend some of it beyond the four walls of his human's house.

And that's part of what's gotten us into this dilemma in the first place. Cats are outside—and reproducing—because they are both neglected and revered. While some are abandoned to the elements by uncaring owners, others are invited to leave by caring ones who so admire felines that they don't even like to think of themselves as “owning” them.

Nothing good or bad happens to our four-legged companions “naturally” anymore; it

is all a result of human whim and manipulation. We often ask why cats are treated so differently from dogs, but history tells us it was only the threat to human safety that prompted the leash and vaccination laws which would ultimately make life better for our canine friends. With the incidence of rabies so low in modern times and the feline tendency to skedaddle away from strange humans, cats do not often pose the same health hazards that packs of wild dogs would. They may be considered a nuisance when their colonies proliferate to the point of stinking up a neighborhood, but not often enough to be high on the list of priorities for local governments.

Programs that sterilize feral cats and release them back to their colonies are sometimes criticized for sending the message that cats don't deserve a home. Interestingly, however, those doing the trapping and sterilizing in their communities say that TNR has the opposite effect on local citizenry, casting new light on animals who had once been all but ignored.

“When the people find out that first of all the cats have received veterinary care, it somehow elevates their status,” says Debra LaBruzzo of the Homeless Cat Project in Massachusetts. “It's like, okay, it's no longer a wild animal. It's now something in between a wild and a domestic. ... At that point they're willing to build shelters [from the elements] and give the cats a name where before that they never had a name. So something's happening; something's clicking.”

Many of the people profiled on the following pages did not become involved in TNR without an internal philosophical struggle. They represent a cross-section of the country and a cross-section of jobs in the animal welfare field: colony caretakers, animal control officers,



wildlife advocates, and shelter employees. One was at first opposed to releasing cats back into the ecosystem because they are nonnative animals. Another was opposed because she viewed it as a form of abandonment. Some who have always been in favor of TNR pine for the day when they no longer have to do it.

For those taking in cats, fixing them up, and releasing them back into an uncertain future, the misgivings are many. Claudia Schlachter of Sacramento finds it “rewarding but sad” because the cats she is letting go should never have been there in the first place. Dianna Walker of Peoria, Arizona, obsesses over how each and every one of the cats in her colonies is faring, always on the watch for signs of sickness that might necessitate treatment or euthanasia. Caroline Page of New Orleans stands at the ready to move in swiftly and remove and euthanize cats if someone is threatening to poison or shoot them.

But their anxieties are overwhelmed by a strong feeling that maybe, just maybe, the approach long espoused by Alley Cat Allies

she had already become a believer because of what she’d seen in her old hometown of San Diego. Euthanasia of feral cats had done nothing to stop the flow of kittens into her animal control agency every spring and summer. But a few years after the Feral Cat Coalition formed, Williams saw a sharp decline in those numbers—and decided the feral cat people must be doing something right.

Others have seen what happens on the micro-level when colonies are removed and a food source remains. Eleven years ago when she first began trapping and sterilizing, Melinie diLuck of Sacramento removed more than 80 cats from a dam for spay/neuter, adoption, and relocation. New cats quickly filled the void. “That’s when I first found out that you can’t take a colony out without it being replaced,” she says.

Recent studies have also challenged old assumptions about everything from the health of feral cats to their effect on wildlife. In “Characteristics of free-roaming cats evaluated in a trap-neuter-return program” (*Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, October 15, 2002),

reported for pet cats undergoing anesthesia and surgery.

And in a study commissioned by Defenders of Wildlife, scientists from the USDA Forest Service and the Smithsonian Conservation and Research Center strayed far afield from the conventional view that cats are a major threat to songbirds. Pointing to the destruction of tropical habitats as a significant contributor to the decrease in avian species that spend their winters in those warmer climes, researchers David King and John Rappole barely mentioned cats in their extensive survey of existing data. “[W]indows, cats, West Nile virus, wind turbines—all those specific causes of death that are apparent in people’s backyards—are not, at present, having any known effect on the population size of any continental bird species ...” writes Maryalice Yakutchik in her summary of the study in *Defenders Magazine*.

In their own write-up, King and Rappole equated predation by cats with that by dogs, skunks, raccoons, opossums, rodents, and human hikers. “Disturbance of nesting birds appears to present a significant threat only to endangered species and in most cases a reduction in human traffic is sufficient to alleviate the problem,” they wrote.

Still, even though the blame for loss of the earth’s species rests not on cats but squarely on the shoulders of the human race, it is up to us to repair the damage as best we can—which is why programs like that of the Louisiana SPCA do not release feral cats back into natural areas where they could further disrupt the ecosystem. “If we get a call of cats killing birds—cats who live in a wild-type land—we respond within 24 hours,” says Page, who



It’s not perfect, but it’s something new to try when everything else has failed to change the status quo.

and other feral cat advocacy organizations can reduce free-roaming populations—or, at the very least, reduce suffering. It’s not perfect, but it’s something new to try when everything else has failed to change the status quo.

Before Theresa Williams moved to St. Charles County, Missouri,

researchers who studied data from more than 5,000 feral cats spayed and neutered over a 40-month period found that their general body condition was adequate; only 20 cats had to be euthanized because of illness or debilitating conditions, and fatal complications occurred at about the same rate as



runs the shelter's feral cat sterilization program. "[Even] if there's someone feeding, the cats are removed."

Many involved in TNR believe they are on the same side as wildlife advocates—and that reduction of predation by cats will never happen through trapping and euthanizing. "I think it's really an issue of saying [to the public], 'Yes, you're right, they do kill birds—as do the farmers, developers, and that sort of thing,'" says Leslie Harris, executive director of the Dakin Animal Shelter in Massachusetts. "But I think it's important ... also to say, 'What we want to do is reduce their population and support a program that does that.'"

Even though Laura Maloney was initially against TNR because of her concerns about cats' disruption of the ecosystem, her perspective changed after taking over the helm of the Louisiana SPCA. She soon saw that there were some feral cat advocates she was never going to reach any other way—and that the problem would continue to proliferate through an underground network of people who were feeding but not sterilizing their colonies.

"You're dealing with individuals who, if they feel you're just going to catch and euthanize feral cats, are not going to work with you," she says. "There are some feeders who drive around the city feeding in different spots ... and the only way you can get those people to work with you is to say, 'We're going to help you spay and neuter these animals.'"

Any discussion of feral cats in recent years has ultimately led to the same questions: Are they almost a different species from companion cats? And if so, what is the most humane way to treat them?

No one who isn't a cat can truly



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say. But many are banking on the TNR approach to at least reduce the numbers and eventually the suffering. As one animal control director points out, feral cats don't want to be near people; to them, misery is waiting out their stray holding periods in cages surrounded by strange humans. And the time they spend there represents space, money, and resources that an adoptable cat could be using.

But how can communities, particularly animal care and control agencies that have an obligation to assist and protect the public, take on an issue that presents more questions than answers while also trying to rescue, house, and rehabilitate already owned animals? How can an animal control officer faced with a homeowner overrun by cats not fulfill his duties by taking the cats away? The answer is that no one can approach the issue alone—and no single solution is going to work for every community.

"I think for an awful lot of people, especially shelters, it seems like such a daunting task," says Schlachter. "And I think everybody—the gen-

eral public—expects shelters to do it. And so many of them are strapped for manpower and funding—how can they do that?"

Most can't. But many, like one animal control director in Kentucky, are willing to work with those who are trying, in large part because nothing else has succeeded in reducing the numbers.

"Certainly there was a point when me sitting down and talking with Alley Cat Advocates wasn't a possibility. It just wasn't going to happen," said Eric Blow before retiring in December after nearly three decades with Louisville Metro Animal Services. "Now we have a good relationship. We try to alert them to problems with their colony and things like that.

"But our numbers, like everybody else's, are up. [Cats] used to be just a handful of what we handle, and now it's about 40 percent of what we handle. I sure as hell don't have the answer to it."

A community problem requires a community answer, something the people on the next few pages—all in their own different ways—are trying to provide.

Walking the Fine Line for Feral Felines

The Louisiana SPCA's "cat concerns coordinator" balances nuisance complaints, wildlife concerns, and cat-feeder wariness to find tailor-made solutions

NEW ORLEANS, LA

Two decades ago, during a stage of life when most people worry about little more than who's hot and who's not, Caroline Page started a life-long mission to find out who was in need of her help. And she wasn't about to let a seemingly silly requirement at the Louisiana SPCA stand in her way.

"They wouldn't let me volunteer because I wasn't 18," she recalls. "So I wrote a letter to the executive director ... saying that I was sort of outraged, that I had basically fallen through the cracks and that I had a lot to offer and I wanted to help animals."

An unusual caseload: Transporting these kitties to the shelter clinic is all in a day's work for Caroline Page of the Louisiana SPCA, who describes herself as a "social worker for people who have cats."

COURTESY LA/SPCA



Soon the 16-year-old Page was on her way to becoming a permanent fixture in the organization, bottle-feeding foster kittens in her home and even spending some of her Christmases providing gifts of playtime to each dog in the shelter. At one point, she recalls, she was the LA/SPCA's sole volunteer.

Twenty-four years later, Page is doing her part to prevent the birth of kittens like those she once nursed. As the shelter's "cat concerns coordinator," she's also giving her diplomacy skills a workout as she promotes her new mission to a beast of a different nature: the public. Her efforts to reduce the feral cat population while appeasing cat lovers, cat detractors, and everyone in between has earned Page a "street-level" master's degree in social work, she quips.

"I'm kind of like a social worker for people who have cat problems," Page says. "I'm a little bit ACO, I'm a little bit humane educator, I'm a little bit community outreach. ... I go in and my goal is to permanently solve those problems."

Through neighborhood meetings, door-to-door canvassing, and road trips around the city in a Ford Windstar outfitted with up to 20 traps, Page collaborates with citizens of New Orleans to get at the crux of cat-related complaints. Whether she's working with the devoted feeder of a colony that's spiraled out of control or the neighbor who's fed up with the smell of too many kitties in too small a space, Page takes the time to educate and empower, explaining the consequences of feeding without fixing and offering SPCA-sponsored alternatives.

Begun in 1999, the shelter's Feral Cat Initiative focuses largely on spay/neuter efforts that sterilize about 17 cats a week in the shelter's stationary and mobile clinics—but the program is much broader than

that. To Page and her colleagues, the practice of trapping cats for sterilization and vaccination before returning them to their colonies is just one piece of the puzzle, not an all-or-nothing proposition. What works in one community may not go over well in another, they say, and not every situation can be fixed through fixing.

Often collaboration with local residents leads to what Page calls a "partial TNR," whether it's in conjunction with one neighbor who agrees to keep a few cats but can't handle the rest or with an entire neighborhood that's in the same predicament. During a recent project in an area called Lakeview, 70 kitties lucky enough to have feeders were trapped, vaccinated, and sterilized, while 40 other unclaimed cats were removed for euthanasia or, if tame, adoption.

But such actions aren't taken until the community has spoken; the way Page sees it, community problems require community-generated solutions.

"Before I fix any large group of cats, I ring doorbells, leave my card, get input from the neighborhood," she says. "If there are any complaints, then we try to address the complaints before we even fix [the cats]—because I don't want to fix cats and put them back where they may not be welcome down the road."

"Most people, for the most part, really don't want to see any harm come to the cats," says Page. "They just don't want them around their house—which is their right."

Even within their own organization, LA/SPCA staff are a microcosm of the public at large in their varying takes on the feral cat issue. Executive Director Laura Maloney, a former zoo employee who came to the LA/SPCA in 2001, had to reconcile her commitment to wildlife with her organization's



Pretty spayeds all in a row: Page won't release cats back into an area where they aren't being fed and cared for—obviously not an issue for these little nibblers.

already established TNR program. It was no easy task—until she realized that the two goals were not necessarily contradictory.

“Whenever you introduce something that’s not natural to the environment, it completely upsets the balance,” she says. “So I looked at the cat as precisely that: they’re an introduced species that upsets the natural balance.”

As she learned more about the issue and studied the “nature abhors a vacuum” arguments, however, Maloney began to believe that aggressive trap-and-sterilize programs in urban areas made more sense than repeated removal of cats whose territory would eventually be refilled by new colonies. And she began to see that the approach makes more friends, something desperately needed in a city inhabited by people whose pity for the cats leads them to feed indiscriminately—and without regard for the breeding cycle.

“Many of the feral cat caretakers in our community are open to us only because they know that we will return cats,” she says. “So if we did not do that, these feeders would just continue to proliferate and feed and feed and feed and not fix. ... So by saying, ‘We will do this spaying and neutering for you and we will give them back to you,’ we

have opened the doors to working with these people.”

Supported entirely by grants and donations, the program brings in money from unlikely sources: a letter hanging on Maloney’s door reads, “I’m a cat person; use this money for things other than killing animals.” Another resident, one whose neighborhood was once overrun by cats, recently left a token of gratitude for the SPCA’s assistance: a \$1,000 check. “I was shocked,” says Maloney. “And they said, ‘It’s because we’re just glad to know that you guys are working on this issue—it’s hard,’ etc. So the public response is really great.”

As a private organization with a public contract to run animal control, the shelter is responsible for assisting both pets and people—two functions that should theoretically coincide but sometimes collide. From her perspective, Page needs time—and is often granted it by local residents—to reduce colonies to a manageable size. From the animal control perspective, however, nuisance complaints are made by citizens whose patience has already worn thin by the time they file a report. And given all the other issues ACOs confront each day, from neglect of owned animals to aggravated cruelty, they don’t have

the resources to actively manage feral cat populations.

Those inherent tensions aren’t unique to the LA/SPCA, but the solution may well be. While the organization’s ACOs handle reports of problems involving fewer than five cats, Page responds to those involving five or more. Since animal control has no choice but to handle complaints before they escalate to city council or board of health issues, Page aims to intervene as early as possible “so that it doesn’t become this big huge snowball and a situation where there’s 80 cats somewhere.”

During her five years of walking the tightrope between divergent

Regional Snapshot: NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

The mild weather of Louisiana accommodates three kitten seasons each year, so identifying ideal trapping times—between weaning and a successive pregnancy—can be hairy. Houses in New Orleans are on stilts, providing cozy spaces for both cats and dogs to mate, nest, knock pipes, rip out insulation, and, of course, breed. Rats run rampant, so even those who once complained about the presence of cats in their neighborhood and insisted on their removal have been known to say, “You should have left some.”

I II

SACRAMENTO, CA

interests, Page has also developed a strong sense of her limits: If someone threatens to poison or otherwise harm cats, she removes them for euthanasia rather than risk their suffering. If no one is feeding or caring for a colony, she removes those cats, too, fearing they will starve or languish without a human to look after them. Cats on wilderness lands are picked up—something Page says she’s “hard line” about because of her desire to ease concerns about the threat of cats to wildlife.

Everything else, though, is subject to compromise. “That’s sort of what makes our program unique is that I can see it from the perspective of the wildlife folks. I can see it from the perspective of animal control. I can also see it from the ‘no kill’ perspective,” Page says. “A lot of times people fail to see the other side, so then it becomes an us-against-them. And the problem is created by society, so the community as a whole needs to have a part in helping to resolve it.”

Though New Orleans, like other cities, has a long way to go before resolving the problem as a whole, Page sees pockets of change that motivate her to keep going. A 17-percent decline in cat euthanasia rates and a 10-percent decline in the number of cats received were her reward during the first few years of the program. Those rates have climbed back up again, but Page remains undeterred; where once she saw neighborhoods crawling with cats, she now sees stabilization.

“You can tell just by driving through these areas at night. Seven years ago, you’d drive into some parts of the town, and it was wall-to-wall cats,” she says. “You drive through the same areas today, and you hardly see any.”

A Coalition of the Faithful — and the Skeptical

The combined effort of Sacramento city agencies and local nonprofits leads to zero population growth of a riverfront cat colony

To some people in California’s capital city, Miller Park is a place to kick back, have a picnic, dock a boat, or sail out into the Sacramento River.

To others, it’s a place to dump cats. For more than a decade, Melinie diLuck has been finding living evidence of people’s neglect—feral cats peeking out from the bushes, tame cats trapped inside taped-up boxes or abandoned carriers, kittens learning the wild ways of their wary mothers.

“This has been a dumping ground for years,” says diLuck, founder and development director of Happy Tails Pet Sanctuary. “People see cats living here, so they open the doors to their car and throw their family pet out.”

The first time she visited the cats in 1993, diLuck was writing a magazine article on “throwaway” ani-

mals and had gone to Miller Park to see for herself what a friend had described. Back then, the colony was small and included a friendly brown cat that diLuck resolved to bring home the next day but never saw again. There were always more cats to keep diLuck coming back, though—by herself at first and later with volunteers—until eventually she formed a nonprofit to try to stop the flow through trapping and sterilization.

Within a few years, with the help of local veterinarians, it seemed that Happy Tails had gotten everything under control; by 1996 the entire colony had been spayed and neutered, says diLuck.

But the victory was short-lived. During the following year’s kitten season, people abandoned their animals at the riverfront again and the colony numbers skyrocketed. Happy Tails volunteers tried to keep up with the influx but were overwhelmed by the numbers of abandoned animals, many of whom were pregnant or unsterilized.

By 2003, the colony was more than 100 strong. Cats were hopping aboard boats and spraying car

Down by the river: After trapping and sterilizing all the feral cats at the Sacramento Marina—and placing the tame cats in new homes—volunteers maintain the colony through an agreement with the city.



CLAUDIA SCHLACKER



tires while well-meaning but ill-informed members of the public continued to feed them somewhat recklessly. Throwing food out their car windows, they trained the cats to associate drivers with dining; in their garage-groupie heyday, as many as 50 hungry cats would emerge and surround vehicles entering the marina.

Skunks got wind of all the free grub in the area and began coming around in great numbers, too. Sacramento Marina patrons grew so nervous about the presence of nocturnal animals in broad daylight that a city agency responsible for overseeing the facility eventually took matters into its own hands and hired a federal trapper to shoot the skunks. More than 120 were killed in one night, triggering a fast and furious reaction from the animal welfare community.

Decried by advocates as unnecessary and cruel, the skunk killings made the community painfully aware that they needed to find a new approach to solving human-animal conflicts—including the feral cat issues. A work group formed to address the marina situation, and its members included everyone from Bob Reder of The Humane Society of the United States to the director of Sacramento's Department of Convention, Culture & Leisure. Also in attendance, in addition to diLuck, were representatives of Sacramento Animal Care Services, the Sacramento Marina, the Sacramento Department of Parks and Recreation, and the Sacramento Area Animal Coalition.

"There were a lot of fireworks during the beginning because of the different personalities and the different places that we were coming from," says diLuck.

Though initially skeptical of the concept of sterilizing and releasing feral cats, some city employees later became champions of the efforts,

says Claudia Schlachter, secretary of the Sacramento Area Animal Coalition (SAAC) and the coordinator of a feral cat program she runs under SAAC auspices.

"I think for the first three months, we spent all of our time just talking about TNR and educating the other people in the group," Schlachter says. "It was just an amazing process, because at some point we had come to the point where we were all on the same page, we understood what we were going to do, and we created a plan that included trapping and altering the cats—with the permission of all these city departments to bring the cats back."

"Like so many things when you're educating, you need to give them the information and you don't cram it down their throats and make threats," says Schlachter, who helped craft the long-term plan for management of the colony. "You provide all of the information and you do it in a way that creates team-building and group effort."

Compromise was also key. One city official suggested removing the cats and relocating them to a rural town in another county—a tricky endeavor that's rarely recommended by feral cat experts or welcomed by communities on the receiving end. Other officials, concerned with flood control, stressed the need to keep the Sacramento riverfront free of the brush that could have provided refuge for the cats; at the same time, they prohibited the construction of shelter structures or feeding stations close to the water where the cats had been living.

Instead of changing the cats' address entirely, members of the work group agreed to shift their home to safer ground in Miller Park; the plan involved moving the cats' feeding stations by about 200 yards a week. Using a clicker dur-

Regional Snapshot: SACRAMENTO

Cats are abandoned in high numbers along the waterfront in Sacramento, where people think life will be grand for stray animals. "It's great—it's just that they don't give them a fishing pole," quips Melinie diLuck. While many feral cat groups in other areas have stopped routinely testing every cat for FIV and feline leukemia because of a low incidence of the disease, Sacramento groups still test, particularly when dealing with a colony whose composition is constantly changing because of owner abandonment. Prior experiences also weigh heavily in the decision to test every animal; half the cats in one downtown colony diLuck trapped were leukemia-positive, and nearly all the members of a restaurant colony had the disease and had to be euthanized.

ing feeding helped the plan succeed, encouraging cats to associate mealtimes with clicking noises as much as with a specific location. Sheltered feeding stations made of wood were installed by marina employees and Happy Tails volunteers; they stand high enough to deter skunks while also protecting cats in bad weather.

Meanwhile, a group of 15 to 20 volunteers started helping trap the cats in December 2003, bringing them for the next four months to the city shelter's spay/neuter clinic for sterilization by volunteer veterinarians. Everyone had something to contribute: In addition to its facility, Sacramento Animal Care Services donated anesthesia drugs, sutures, medications, and other supplies. The HSUS funded the cost of vaccinations and leukemia testing, and the Department of Convention, Culture & Leisure provided food and drink for clinic volunteers. Back at the site of the colony, the Sacramento Marina donated security services, and marina employees built one of the feeding stations and now provide ongoing support of colony management. Park Patrol Services continues to enforce abandonment laws.

Once all was said and done, 83 cats had been trapped, 25 percent of whom were placed in homes after being deemed friendly. Three cats were euthanized after testing positive for feline leukemia or FIV. Fifty-nine cats were returned to the colony. Best of all, last spring, for the first time ever, no kittens were born.

A Memorandum of Understanding between Sacramento Animal Services and Happy Tails stipulates that Happy Tails will trap and sterilize any cats who aren't ear-tipped, adopting them out if they're tame and releasing them back to the colony if they're feral. Happy Tails volunteers feed twice a day under the guidance of a Sacramento Animal Care Services veterinarian. Every month, Schlachter coordinates a clinic at the city shelter to sterilize and vaccinate not just new marina cats but also cats from other colonies that she now tracks. Recently the county shelter offered to let Schlachter use its clinic on certain Sundays, too.

"After we realized we had pretty much gotten all those cats at the marina, I asked Hector Cesares, who's the director at the city animal shelter, if we could continue on with TNR of other feral colonies in Sacramento," she says. "And he said absolutely. ... For animal control, this becomes a promotion for them to get behind [in terms of] talking a lot about abandonment laws. They're very supportive of what we want to do."

Working with The HSUS's Reder to establish the credibility of TNR efforts during initial discussions about the marina project, Schlachter was conscious of the need to keep detailed records that would serve as a measurement tool for success rates, she says. "And once we realized the success of that one group, then we had the ability, the knowledge, and the experience to move further," she says. "So it is about trying one small colony, trying one thing, and maybe taking a

year to see and let it prove to you that it will have the effect that you want."

As a former humane educator and volunteer coordinator in both public and private shelters, Schlachter understands the importance of coalition-building and education. Her efforts on behalf of feral cats have gotten her more than she bargained for—daily requests for help from members of the community. Even though her corps of volunteers has grown to 180, it's still not enough to keep up with public demand to reduce cat populations through colony management.

Schlachter helped officials at a local school after they'd caused an uproar by trapping a colony of cats and delivering them as ferals to a shelter for euthanasia; only too late did those officials discover that one of the cats had belonged to a neighbor of the school.

When a new colony soon moved into the same spot, city animal control officers referred the maintenance manager to Schlachter, who conducted in-service training on TNR for the school's principals and teachers, distributed flyers to neighbors, and held a humane education assembly for students.

"What ended up happening is the neighborhood and the school are working together," Schlachter says. "We found out who the secret feeder was, and she said she would cooperate, and we trapped the cats and we brought them back and everybody's happy."

What will ultimately make life better for cats, says Schlachter, is recognition by the culture at large that it's not okay to let them roam and fend for themselves—that life at a marina or anywhere else outside is no paradise for a half-domestic, half-wild animal. "The bottom line is about education," she says. "It's educating people in TNR and it's educating the general public about their responsibility for cats. ... And that's really how it's going to change."

Well-Oiled Machine Attracts Vets and Volunteers

This monthly clinic in rural Massachusetts has one goal: to sterilize as many barn and feral cats as possible—with a little help from the community

LEVERETT, MA

There was a time when Debra LaBruzzo couldn't bear to look at the classified section of her local newspaper. Back in 1998, column after column featured ads for free kittens—a disheartening sight for someone who'd been trying to improve the lives of animals since the early '70s.

"But you look in the paper now, and you're lucky if you see any free kittens," says LaBruzzo, coordinator of the Homeless Cat Project in Massachusetts.

The dramatic turnaround is no coincidence. In the seven years since the Homeless Cat Project began in the Springfield area, LaBruzzo and a friend in another county have worked with local veterinarians to sterilize and vaccinate more than 5,000 free-roaming cats. And in 2002, the launch of a monthly clinic organized by the Dakin Animal Shelter in Leverett made LaBruzzo's job much easier, dramatically reducing the wait time for spay/neuter surgeries from one year to one month.

Known as "Feral Spay Sunday," the program has been "an absolute god-send," says LaBruzzo. Responsible for the sterilization of more than 2,000 feral cats in its first three years, the shelter-sponsored clinic performs a total of 50 to 100 surgeries each month for the Homeless Cat Project and anyone else in the Pioneer Valley who's willing to deliver and pick up the animals.

The program, which relies on volunteer vets and a rotating group of donated facilities, grew in response to staff laments about the lack of

services available to help the community's feral cats.

"The Dakin Animal Shelter is a very small, limited-admission animal shelter in a rural area in western Massachusetts, and we accept only those animals we know we can find a home for," says executive director Leslie Harris. "Therefore, we don't accept feral cats. And for years we had people in our community who wanted help with feral cats, but we didn't have anything to offer them. ... That was a frustration for us."

In examining their own statistics and interviewing relinquishers, Harris and her staff also found that as many as two-thirds of the kittens they were receiving were the offspring of feral or stray cats. Statewide numbers supported that assertion: About 89 percent of cat owners in Massachusetts have had their animals sterilized, says Harris, so clearly most of the incoming kittens were the babies of homeless cats.

After hearing veterinarian Julie Levy of Operation Catnip speak at a meeting of the Massachusetts Animal Coalition in November 2001, Harris was convinced that her own shelter could take on a high-volume spay/neuter program like the ones Levy had started in Florida and North Carolina. When she returned to Dakin, she called a meeting of local shelters, feral cat groups, and interested veterinary technicians from area clinics.

Soon enough, an \$11,000 budget was established for the first year. Local veterinary technician Karina King offered to run the program and began seeking revenue sources. Grants from the Massachusetts SPCA and the Massachusetts Animal Coalition funded equipment purchases, and drug companies donated vaccines and flea control medications.

About 30 veterinarians have volunteered since then, some giving up their time several Sundays a

Regional Snapshot: WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

To help cats through biting cold winters, Debra LaBruzzo of the Homeless Cat Project makes sure the ferals she works with have a place of refuge—whether it's a box in a person's shed or an enclosure she crafts herself from recycled Styrofoam containers. Using duct tape, a computer mousepad, and straw, she creates a wind deflector, an escape hatch, and bedding. Many residents who call upon her spay/neuter assistance program assume it's okay for cats to live under their shed or porch; when LaBruzzo points out that the ground is cold, however, they often become inspired to build something themselves—and even become personal snow shovelers for the cats in the dead of winter.

year. At least 16 hospitals have donated their facilities for the events. Other partners in the program include the Second Chance Animal Shelter in East Brookfield, the Pioneer Valley Humane Society in Greenfield, and Catspills Mountain Rescue, a TNR group. Recently, the Massachusetts SPCA agreed to begin hosting clinics at its Springfield hospital in 2005.

"The people behind the program—Leslie and Karina—bring a lot of credibility to it," says



Assembly-line spay/neuter: These female cats at a Feral Spay Sunday event have been prepped and scrubbed and are awaiting their turns on Plexiglas "spay boards."

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Steven Ellis, DVM, board president of the Dakin Animal Shelter and owner of the Sunderland Animal Hospital. "Their reputations are really what brings a lot of the veterinarians in because they know that this isn't a fly-by-night kind of operation. These guys are interested in really making this work and making it last."

Vets often learn of the program from cat-loving clients, says Harris. They are further lured in by a recruitment packet complete with fact sheets, a 100-plus-page procedures manual, a cover letter, and letters of reference from other veterinarians who already participate. The fact sheet assures newcomers that the subsidized spay/neuters won't hurt their business; Feral Spay Sunday's kitty clientele would never be part of a clinic's normal patient load.

"I hear over and over again whenever a new veterinarian comes in, 'Wow, you guys are so well-organized,'" says Harris. "It surprises them that we can, in four hours, neuter 100 cats and nobody gets hurt, no cats escape, and cats don't die. Nobody's running around like an idiot."

About 25 well-trained volunteers man each clinic, which LaBruzzo likens to "a well-oiled machine." But efficiency doesn't preclude providing the kind of attention cats need after surgery. "I have seen the post-op care where the sleeping cats are brought in after surgery," LaBruzzo says, "and they get as

much tender loving care as a valuable owned cat. Nothing goes undetected."

Cats are sterilized, vaccinated for rabies, and tested if veterinarians have reason to suspect feline leukemia. In an ideal world, they'd all be tested, says Ellis, but the way he sees it, at least the community is able to provide the animals with care they wouldn't otherwise receive—including treatment of obvious conditions like tooth abscesses or kidney abnormalities.

Many of the cats come from area farms overwhelmed by the number of ferals flocking to their barns. Signs on the walls of local feed stores promote the program, and veterinarians making house calls inspire action as well, warning farmers that unvaccinated cats could possibly spread rabies to the other animals.

"The people who have these feral cat issues can't afford to deal with them appropriately," says Ellis. "It's not that they don't want to; they just can't. They have 30- and 40-plus cats just walking around their property, and they can't afford to spend \$100, \$150 a pop to get them spayed and neutered. And this allows them to do something that's good."

The Feral Spay Sunday model, adapted largely from Operation Catnip and other organizations, has been tailored to suit the independent spirit of the western Massachusetts region, says Harris. "It would not work for us to say, 'We have to trap your cats,' because a lot of these people don't want us on their property," she says. "And so we have to say, 'Okay, here's the trap, you go do it. Here's how to do it humanely.'"

The approach helps community members feel vested in the program and gives them a sense of ownership. Just as importantly, excluding trapping from their own to-do list helps staff and volunteers meet

the program's core goal: high-volume spay/neuter. "That is our mission. And we don't waver from that mission," says Harris. "It is not to manage colonies; it's not to teach people how to manage colonies. It is to reduce the population by sterilizing as many as possible."

While long-term colony management is important, it's not possible for the Dakin shelter and partnering organizations to take on that job, so they focus on what is possible, says Harris. "If somebody wants to do the whole shebang and monitor their cats and all that, great. We can provide you free surgery and free vaccines, and you can do all the rest of that," she says. "And if you want to [monitor], the more the merrier, and spread the word—because I do think more cats will be better cared for should everybody be doing that."

People who care enough to bring cats into the clinic in the first place usually care enough to look after them indefinitely, says Harris. And groups like LaBruzzo's don't bring cats in until they know for sure that the animals will be welcomed back at their original locations.

"People have said, 'If I can get this colony under control, I will be happy to feed the cats.' And then it's a go," says LaBruzzo. "But if they say, 'No, I can't—we leave on vacation for three months,' then those are the people we cannot help. But most people, by and large, are just so enthused that they will do anything they can."

The owners of a local banquet hall even created an elaborate sheltered space for the colony of cats living behind their building, equipping the area under two abandoned tractor-trailers with tarps and bedding. "And they take fabulous care of the cats," says LaBruzzo, who worked with the owners to sterilize and vaccinate the colony. "Some cats are very lucky."



IV

PEORIA, AZ

Small-Town Relationship Helps Animals and People, One at a Time

LaBruzzo keeps a “colonies completed” file that’s grown thick over her years of delivering traps to citizens and trapped cats to local veterinarians. Supported off and on by funding from foundations, pet supply stores, city governments, and tag sales, she brings six to ten cats a week to local vets for spay/neuters. Her counterpart in a neighboring county does the same. The Feral Spay Sundays have greatly bolstered the numbers they can sterilize each month; the Dakin Animal Shelter allows LaBruzzo to bring anywhere from 20 to 35 cats to each clinic.

Before the Homeless Cat Project existed, the only alternative LaBruzzo had was to loan traps through another organization she belongs to, Concerned Citizens for Animals. People who used the traps would either decide to work with the cats if they were friendly enough or bring them to a local shelter, which euthanized ferals. Employees “did the best they could, but they got 50, 60 cats in a day at times,” she says. The method never effectively reduced colony sizes; more cats just moved in to fill the void.

And there were many in the community who refused to participate in such a program; they didn’t want feral cats euthanized, so there was nothing to do but stand by and watch the cats proliferate. “There was a lot of suffering going on, and at some point some of the cats would migrate trying to find more food, and [end up near] people that didn’t want them at all,” says LaBruzzo. “So it was totally a mess.”

Times have changed, and the public is so receptive to the neuter-and-return programs that many of them will do whatever it takes to help, even if it takes them a year to trap a cat. “They stick with it,” says LaBruzzo. “And I’ve been blessed so many times that no matter what I did, I’m not going to hell. People are just so grateful.”

Monitoring is an important component of this program that works informally with animal control

Dianna Walker isn’t even finished telling the story of one favorite kitty before she interrupts herself to help another. Her voice trails away from the phone for a moment as she calls out in that high-pitched tone reserved for all things small and furry, *Hi, pretty girl!*

“I’m just stopping at the alley,” she explains, “and here’s this little calico that I had caught about three weeks ago to have spayed. She’s over here under the trailer; she’s just looking at me.”

Carrying on conversations with cats on the street and an interviewer on the phone—while simultaneously filling food bowls for a legion of kitties—could challenge even the most organized soul. But as someone whose goal in life is to find homes for both people and animals, the Phoenix area real estate agent is used to such balancing acts, moving with ease from one thing to the next and back again.

Returning to her tale of “Black Magic,” she describes how she trapped, sterilized, and released the black cat with the faint white patch on her chest 15 years ago—and then looked out for the creature’s well-being every day thereafter.

“Then one Sunday morning, I didn’t see her,” Walker says. “And then I was walking to one of the feeding stations that was in the bushes, and I saw her just kind of crouched. She had never let me touch her before, and so I saw that there was something wrong because I was able to touch her nose.”

After retrieving a towel from her trunk, Walker picked up Black



We all scream for ice cream: Dianna Walker, the Good Humor Lady of cats, has been making special deliveries to Peoria’s ferals for 20 years.

Magic with the intention of taking her to the clinic. The cat vomited, and Walker knew what she had to do. “I took her over to emergency and I said, ‘This cat’s real old, and I’m going to choose to euthanize because she’s sick.’”

Walker felt lucky. Aware of the hard-luck life of the area’s alley cats, some of whom have been killed by dogs, other cats, and even people, she had been particularly worried about the day she might no longer see Black Magic. “And I thought, this way I know she’s going to go in peace,” Walker recalls. “She’s not going to suffer; she’s not going to have any more pain.”

As she recounts those details, Walker is standing near the intersection of 83rd Avenue and Washington Street in Peoria, Arizona, satiating the appetites of Black Magic’s kitty brethren, a colony that has inhabited this space in one form or another for decades. Twenty years ago when Walker began feeding and trapping, there were at least 30 animals. The ten that remain await her daily arrival, appearing out of their hiding places to follow her like children gathering around the Good Humor man. “I have to drive really slowly because they run in



Regional Snapshot: PEORIA, ARIZONA

Kitten season seems endless in Peoria, though spring and fall are the most prolific breeding periods. In the area's older communities, breeding is sometimes still rampant because of a mentality animal control officer Monica LueraHarris describes as "take the mom, leave the pups"—something she hears repeatedly from people who want her to take new mama animals to the shelter and leave the babies behind to reproduce. LueraHarris tries to encourage residents to help break the breeding cycle by referring them to spay/neuter assistance programs like the one Dianna Walker provides.

A much larger TNR-focused organization called the Arizona Cat Assistance Team (AzCATS) is also working to reduce cat overpopulation. Named Alley Cat Allies' Organization of the Year last fall, the group has sterilized more than 20,000 cats in its five years of existence in Maricopa County. But as a large-scale operation that traps dozens of cats at a time, AzCATS is busy enough trying to tackle the bigger pieces of the puzzle, says LueraHarris. Walker provides a complementary service. "The little groups help out and pick up the things that the bigger ones can't. ... And that helps on my level because I get a person who has one or two cats and they don't want to kill them, but they don't want to have more babies either. So I refer them to Dianna."

front of the car, and I have to kind of say, 'Please, guys, I can't see you!' " she says.

It was in this neighborhood near City Hall that Walker also gained a two-legged fan several years ago in the form of Peoria animal control officer Monica LueraHarris. Stationed at the police department up the street, the new ACO had been eager to meet the cat feeder; though Walker has occasionally been chased away from other areas, she's long been accepted by Peoria city officials because of her

practical approach and the success of her efforts.

And she was certainly accepted by LueraHarris, who enjoys being able to offer Walker's reduced-rate sterilization program to citizens who can't afford to spay and neuter. As one of three ACOs in a municipality of about 120,000 people, LueraHarris doesn't have time to work on feral cat issues herself but appreciates the fact that Walker does. "She is a great asset to our city because Peoria Animal Control does mostly field work and enforcement," says LueraHarris.

Sun Cities Spay a Stray, a group Walker formed with a friend in 2001, provides certificates that allow pet owners or cat caretakers to have their animals spayed and neutered at a reduced price. Working with four veterinary clinics, Walker sometimes drives dogs and cats to the clinics herself for sterilization, testing, and vaccination. Whether it's a new neighbor with a frequently roaming pit bull puppy or a caller seeking assistance for a cat who's just appeared at his doorstep, Walker helps where she can—adopting out homeless animals at a local PetsMart one day a week, helping owned animals by talking their people into spaying and neutering, and calling animal control whenever she spots a neglect or cruelty situation.

The relationship is reciprocal. When a local businesswoman discovered six cats on the property of her new wedding and party business, she called animal control for help—something LueraHarris wasn't able to provide directly.

"She didn't want them killed, and she didn't want them removed," says the officer. "She was going to let them stay there; she just didn't want them to multiply. So I referred her to Dianna."

Though she loves her job, LueraHarris doesn't relish bringing so many animals to Maricopa County's already busy shelter, which houses Peoria's homeless and stray animals. Walker's assistance provides some much needed relief. "It helps because then that's one less animal we have to impound and take to the county," says LueraHarris. "I don't like to have to take animals to be put down all the time, so it's always nice for me on a personal level when I can help a person or an animal."

By managing feral cat colonies and providing subsidized spay/neuter options, Spay a Stray aims to fill in where shelter services leave off. Residents who want to help stray cats but are overwhelmed by the numbers turn to the organization for donated food and veterinary services that include not only discounted spay/neuter surgeries but also vaccinations and FIV/feline leukemia testing.

Money for the program comes from donations, adoption fees, and spay/neuter co-pays that are charged to those who can afford them. A certain amount also comes out of Walker's pocket. In fact, she is so impressed with the work of a larger colony management organization called AzCATS that she has pledged \$5,000 to help the group start its own spay/neuter clinic.

"What I do is my labor of love; it's my way of giving back to the community and to the world," says Walker, her voice over the phone competing with the sound of clinking cat food cans. "I think everybody should have a cause of some sort—something that you give up your money and you give up your time and you give up your heart for—to help make this maybe a little bit of a better world and help alleviate suffering, whether it be for people or for animals."

Fanaticism is a helpful qualification for such work, Walker says wryly, but she adds that people have to know their limits and understand that “you can’t save them all.”

Walker tries to save more than she used to, though, in part because of changing societal attitudes. “When I first got involved, I used to put some of these feral cats down because I felt what was the sense in putting them back into [a situation] that perhaps was no life for them? I didn’t always euthanize, but a lot of times I felt that in the majority of cases it was more humane to just euthanize them,” she says. “But later I saw that [living outdoors] was better than nothing as long as I or someone I could count on was able to at least ensure they would have access to food and water—and that it wasn’t unsafe for them.

“I look at it where, hey, if they’re not reproducing and they at least have food and water, it’s not the best life, but it’s better than no life, and they’re not really bothering anybody.”

Local veterinarians also prompted Walker to start considering neutering and returning more cats back into their colonies, she says. About five years ago, increasing numbers of vets, including one who took over a clinic she works with, began refusing to euthanize feral cats unless they had feline leukemia or were suffering from some other ailment or injury. “It was just going against their principles,” she says.

If there is one thing Walker has learned over the years, it’s that good relationships with human animals help make life better for the nonhuman ones. Though many people have welcomed her presence, a few—like one man who was angry when feral cats scratched his truck—can be less

than amiable toward their feline neighbors.

“You have to be understanding. They have a legitimate complaint,” she says. “But what you do in that case ... is just try to be friendly. And I had this big tarp and asked him, ‘Could I give this to you to put over your truck?’ I said, ‘I’m really sorry if the cats are doing that, and I’ll try to keep the food away.’ And then he had a baby, and I brought a gift for the baby. Now he’s got two little girls, and now I give them gifts.”

“I don’t think the cats are on his truck that much anymore,” says Walker, “but the point is that now I’m not the enemy. I’m not such a bad lady after all, even though he thinks I’m crazy because I feed the cats.”

By the time she has finished explaining her program, Walker has managed to deliver a dog and cat to a spay/neuter clinic and feed dozens of stray animals before even arriving at the site of her oldest colony. She’s armed with water bowls and dry and canned food. “They wait for the canned because they are spoiled,” she says. “And they all have names—there’s Inky, and there’s Mr. Gray, and there’s Princess II, and there’s Sweet Pea, and there’s Hocus Pocus.”

Yes, “Princess II” had a predecessor; the original Princess was euthanized recently after her kidneys failed, Walker says. Like Black Magic, she had been spayed many years before and lived to old ladyhood. And by that point, Walker had fed the wary cat for so long that Princess was eventually allowing herself to be petted and, in her final hours, carried away in the arms of her caretaker on her last trip to the veterinarian.



Changing the Language of the Law

As a TNR convert from California, this Missouri municipal agency director has started a monthly spay/neuter clinic at her county facility—and is gearing up to change local cat ordinances

If anyone had asked Theresa Williams 20 years ago what she thought of trap-neuter-return programs, she would have said they were cruel to cats, threatening to wildlife, and against the best interests of the community.

“At the time, everybody in animal control believed it was a stupid thing to do,” says Williams, who worked at San Diego County Animal Services for two decades. “I felt strongly that we had an obligation to remove [feral cats].”

Now, as the director of St. Charles County Humane Services in Missouri, Williams is the woman behind Operation Sterile Feral, a monthly clinic held at the county shelter in conjunction with two private humane organizations.

Her about-face on the feral cat issue was not an overnight decision but a gradual evolution spawned by a newsletter article she was asked to write years ago. “That’s how I

ST. CHARLES COUNTY, MO

A different kind of animal: Feral cats like these may soon be defined separately from domestics in St. Charles County—and thus exempted from current laws that technically prohibit their release.



TERESA WILLIAMS



Kitty collaborators: Monthly clinics at the St. Charles County Division of Humane Services are held in partnership with Metro Animal, a private nonprofit that assists feral cat caretakers.

THERESA WILLIAMS

became interested in feral cat programs," she says. "I did the research and I realized, 'Well, you know what? These people aren't so far off here. They're not wackos—what they're saying makes sense.'"

At that time in the early '90s, San Diego shelter employees were receiving boxes and boxes of kittens, many of them the babies of ferals, says Williams. But after a local group called the Feral Cat Coalition began holding large-scale free spay/neuter clinics, the tide began to turn. "What affected me most as an animal control person was ... those orphans were no longer coming in because the Feral Cat Coalition was literally—over a number of years—spaying and neutering thousands of cats," Williams says.

When she arrived in Missouri two years ago, Williams felt she'd entered a time warp. While shelters in her old California haunts are receiving fewer kittens these days, Missouri facilities are still inundated with an "explosion" of them, especially in the summertime, says Williams. And as the new animal control director, she made it clear that she intended to do something about it, indicating her support for TNR in a speech to local groups. "I got a standing ovation," she recalls.

Soon Williams was partnering on a feral cat sterilization program with Metro Animal, an all-volunteer organization that provides traps and assistance to feral cat caretakers. All Paws Rescue, a fostering and adoption group, also joined in the effort.

"When Theresa first came into town, we made a point of meeting her," says Metro Animal president Val Schweickhardt. "She's been a big help to us, and we're helping her, so it works both ways. She's very, very dedicated."

In an area where most municipalities aren't amenable to the idea

of TNR, Williams's stance is unusual, says Schweickhardt. Her proposal to the county to open up the shelter once a month for feral cat sterilization surgeries was not only accepted but well-received. "She's working above board with her county officials," says Schweickhardt. "It's not like she has to sneak around. And they've given us the space to do it, which ... I thought was very exciting."

Metro Animal obtained a grant to pay for supplies, and volunteer veterinarians perform spay/neuters, vaccinate for rabies, clean ears, check for external parasites, administer anti-parasite medication, and check for general abscesses and lacerations. Caretakers who want other vaccinations for their cats can buy them at feed stores and give them to the vets to inject, says Williams. Testing for feline leukemia is not performed unless a cat is showing symptoms.

As the program grows, Williams hopes the funding will grow along with it, allowing her agency and the other organizations to do more for the animals they see. But the primary goal of Operation Sterile Feral—spay/neuter—is at least being met in the meantime, with as many as 50 cats coming to each monthly clinic. Flyers in feed stores and veterinary offices let people know they can bring both feral and barn cats in for sterilization. The price of the surgeries ranges from \$6 to \$15, depending on the person's circumstances and the number of cats they bring.

Many cat feeders cannot afford to spay and neuter their colonies and aren't aware of low-cost options, says Schweickhardt, so they let their cats reproduce and then put the kittens up for adoption through local rescue groups. After witnessing this cycle repeatedly during their own rescue days, Schweickhardt and her colleagues decided

in the late '90s to stop what they were doing and start TNR.

"We had worked in rescue for a long time and it became real evident to us that we were not making a difference," Schweickhardt says. "And we also knew from being at adoption events and taking in cats that a lot of people were managing their colonies by giving the kittens to rescue groups. They weren't stopping the flow of kittens."

Now, instead of placing a few hundred animals a year, Schweickhardt has been trying to prevent the births of thousands. After finding a couple of veterinarians willing to help, she and a handful of volunteers began lending traps and providing assistance to citizens in ten counties in Missouri and Illinois.

To really make a dent in the numbers, the program needs more broad-scale support, says Schweickhardt. But still, it's a start. "Our whole thing was to try to get to this underground group of people who were taking care of animals and trying to do the right thing," she says. "And we knew [they were worried that] if they told us they had cats, we were going to call animal control and come and take them. So that was the thing we had to get over with these people: no, we don't want their cats. We just want to help them and keep them from having too many."

Operation Sterile Feral allows residents, farmers, and business owners to bring in cats for sterilization as well, and volunteers provide trapping assistance to those who ask for it. When the owner of a bike rental company wanted to help the cats hanging around his property but was unable to attend the clinic on Sundays, a peak time for his business, volunteers did the job for him, says Williams. "And we were able to solve his problem."

As Williams looks for ways to

further develop the program, she is also working on making it all legal. Existing ordinances stipulate that cats not be allowed to run loose off their property; they are also required to wear I.D. tags. Following the example of other jurisdictions that have sought to define the differences between wild cats and pet cats, Williams is drafting language that will exempt the already feral feline by describing him as a "domestic cat either born in the wild or living in the wild for a period of time and is not tame or socialized." Such cats would fall outside the parameters of the at-large laws, unless they are found in a wildlife preservation area.

Williams's beliefs have changed dramatically from the days when she equated TNR with cruelty and abandonment. "These animals are going to be here anyway—they're going to live a certain amount of time," she says. "Most of them are not out biting people because they don't get close enough to people to bite. They are living fairly decent lives ... and in some cases you could say that they were living better lives than animals that were supposedly owned." ▶▶



A stitch in time:
Operation Sterile Feral spays and neuters 35 to 40 cats each month for residents, businesses, and caretakers who want to keep feeding but need help in stopping the breeding.

Theresa Williams

Regional Snapshot: ST. CHARLES COUNTY, MISSOURI

Across the Missouri River from St. Louis, St. Charles County is one of the fastest growing areas in the United States. Subdivisions are sprouting up everywhere as farmers sell off land to developers. The sudden encroachment recently created an unexpected problem for Operation Sterile Feral coordinators when a months-long effort to trap and sterilize cats at a local trailer park was foiled by the sale of the property to a developer. With hardly any notice, shelter staff and Metro Animal volunteers had to remove the cats from the land before it was bulldozed.

Since cats know no borders, Williams hopes to expand Operation Sterile Feral into outlying areas where nothing is being done for free-roaming animals. "We're surrounded by other counties that have no ordinances, that have no animal control, and that have big problems with animals being dumped and cats being brought in," she says. "And we end up with the cats in this county anyway."