



California Animal Welfare Association

Promoting Excellence in Animal Care, Sheltering, and Law Enforcement since 1909

**California Animal Welfare Association Statement
in Support of Community Cat Programs
August 2021**

Introduction

The animal welfare industry continues to explore ways to best serve the needs of cats in our society, recognizing that this is a very complex issue with numerous factors to be considered. Similarly, the California Animal Welfare Association (CalAnimals) supports the efforts of our member agencies to provide the most effective and compassionate care for cats in our state, while acknowledging that there are varying philosophies and available resources among the agencies. Thus, balancing the best interest of the cats in our communities along with each agency's capacity for care and available resources must be considered when designing and implementing a Community Cat Program (CCP).

CalAnimals, along with other leading animal welfare organizations, supports the implementation of comprehensive community cat programs (CCPs) that best meet the needs of individual cats while helping to reduce overall outdoor populations over time. The focus of these programs is to do what is best for community cats by spaying/neutering, vaccinating, and returning healthy cats to their outdoor homes. Established research shows that CCPs are the most humane and effective way to manage free-roaming cat populations while reducing their impact on wildlife populations and public health. This approach is grounded in decades of research with positive results for humans and animals around the world.

The current practice of admitting healthy, community cats is an outdated modality and often fails to serve the public or the goal of advancing animal welfare for cats and each community. However, CalAnimals also fully supports the adoption of cats and strongly encourages organizations to clearly identify those cats that would be best served through a CCP model versus those cats that would be best served by intake and transfer/adoption options. Similarly, CalAnimals urges agencies to help

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PO Box 249

PENN VALLEY, CA 95946

510-525-2744 * INFO@CALANIMALS.ORG * WWW.CALANIMALS.ORG

the public learn and embrace effective ways to help cats live healthy and happy lives in an indoor environment, thus reducing the need for CCP services. The ultimate goal is to ensure that all cats have the greatest opportunity for live outcomes and compassionate life-saving services.

Foundational Concepts

- Community cats are defined as cats living outdoors with no identifiable owner. They may be feral, semi-social or even friendly but do not appear to have a person claiming them as their personal pet. In order to qualify for a CCP, they must also be deemed healthy by a veterinarian.
- Community cats exist in most communities around our State and in every country in the world, regardless of climate.
- Cats make up the most significant number of animals euthanized in California shelters. Death is not a better outcome than a healthy life outdoors.
- Community Cat programs are defined by the recognition that outdoor cats may thrive in their outdoor homes and do not need to be admitted to animal shelters unless they are injured, sick, or otherwise in need; in such cases, these cats may be best served by animal shelters for care and disposition.
- Impoundment of healthy adult cats reduces the likelihood of reuniting families with pets; lost cats are 10-50 times more likely to be reunited with their owners in the neighborhood of origin than through an animal shelter.
- Return-to-owner rates are extremely low for cats (national is 2-5%). Many owners allow their cats outdoors and don't necessarily realize when they've gone "missing." Returning these cats to the place they were found increases the chance of pet cats to be returned to their owners.
- Impoundment of healthy adult cats may disproportionately impact underserved and marginalized communities; such communities are less liable to visit a shelter to look for their pets than higher income community members.
- Impoundment fails to resolve nuisance situations. If cats are always impounded, community members may not be motivated to identify and remedy factors such as open garbage containers or other food sources that may be attracting cats as well as wildlife. CCPs that leave cats where they are have been associated with significant reductions in nuisance complaints.

- Shelters that support community cats are not “putting cats out there” but rather supporting the cats that are already there, thriving in outdoor environments, and altering them to slowly, effectively, and humanely reduce the overall population. Euthanizing community cats in shelters does not reduce the number of free roaming cats, nor does it decrease the predation of wildlife. Removed cats create a vacuum that is filled by new cats.
- Generally, CCP’s are not appropriate for kittens under the age of twelve weeks or kittens under the age of six months where adoption is an available option. However, there may be exceptions to these guidelines and all kittens should be assessed individually to determine the best pathway.
- One size does not fit all, and organization resources are variable. In the event that CCPs are not available, the philosophy that every outdoor cat does not need to be admitted to a shelter still stands. Where CCPs do exist, however, such programs are ideal and should be in effect to prevent these cats from breeding and depleting available resources. All cats should be treated as individuals with their treatment and outcome determined on a case-by-case basis.

Key Considerations

Community Cat Programs should be developed with a simple, clear goal in mind: to do what’s best for cats and the community. CCPs accomplish this by spaying/neutering, vaccinating, and returning healthy community cats to their outdoor homes. The traditional shelter model was originally developed to care for dogs and livestock, and simply does not meet the unique needs of cats. As a result, shelters usually do not provide the best option for cats, and statistics demonstrate that nationally, cats admitted to shelters have only a 2% chance of being reunited with an owner, and a nearly 50% chance of being euthanized in a shelter.

In shelter environments, community cats who are accustomed to roaming freely each day are confined to small habitats in highly populated indoor spaces, which can lead to stress and illness — factors that can result in higher rates of death and euthanasia. In California in 2019, 9% of dogs who entered shelters were lost,



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euthanized, or died, compared to 25% of cats. Additionally, despite the use of traditional sheltering methods and the work of many people and organizations dedicated to caring for animals, the volume of cats entering shelters continues to increase. In 2019, nearly 2.3 million cats entered shelters nationwide, up from 2.2 million the previous year.

As we seek the best solutions for community cats, it is important to note that cats live and thrive outdoors all over the world. In fact, North America is the only continent in which keeping indoor-only cats has become common practice. Even in the United States, keeping indoor cats as pets only became popular after 1947, with the invention of cat litter, and then became more commonplace in the 1970s when shelters advocated for keeping cats indoors in an effort to control population. But the millions of community cats thriving outdoors across the country now demands that we challenge old ways of thinking and invoke solutions that are in the best interest of community cats.

Leading animal welfare organizations and universities are united and encourage the creation of comprehensive community cat programs to best meet the needs of individual cats while helping to reduce population numbers over time. The focus of these programs is to do what's best for community cats by spaying and neutering, vaccinating, and returning healthy community cats to their outdoor homes. By supporting progressive CCPs, CalAnimals is doing what's best for cats which requires solutions that are state of the art and push us to evolve how we think about our role in caring for animals in need.

Summary

CalAnimals strongly supports the development and implementation of CCPs and encourages our membership to continually work to best meet the needs of their communities. We recognize that "one size does not fit all" and fully appreciate the value of all services within the continuum of care for domestic cats. Whether the route for a cat is adoption, or a CCP, or other positive outcomes, we believe that

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PO Box 249

PENN VALLEY, CA 95946

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each of these services offer critical components to successful programs throughout the State.

CalAnimals recognizes the many complexities of CCPs and encourages our membership to utilize CalAnimals' resources and collaborative opportunities to learn more about how to implement a successful program in their community. And like any new program that interacts with the community, oversight by legal counsel is always advised.

The attached FAQ's and Research/Resource information is offered in support of this position statement.

Frequently Asked Questions

Community cat programs represent a new way of thinking for many, and we understand that individual organizations must determine what program works best for them and for cats in their community.

How do CCPs work?

Community Cat Programs assess the unique needs of every community cat and provide the most beneficial pathway for each animal. [Studies show](#) that the best approach for healthy community cats is to spay/neuter and vaccinate them, and then quickly return them to their outdoor homes. If an adult community cat is sick or injured, he/she should be assessed to determine treatment and return if it is safe for that cat to do so. When sick or injured cats require more extensive medical care and are not eligible for return outdoors, they should be admitted to the shelter. Kittens should be individually assessed to determine the best outcome for each one.

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What are the benefits of spaying/neutering community cats and returning them outdoors?

Returning community cats outdoors is the best outcome for individual cats and for the community. Healthy community cats are thriving in their outdoor homes, and confinement in a shelter — even for a short period of time — can be stressful and detrimental to their health and quality of life. Additionally, community cats who are returned to their outdoor homes are those who have demonstrated that they are healthy and doing well. There is no benefit to the cats to permanently remove them from where they have been living successfully. This approach also stabilizes and reduces community cat populations and minimizes nuisance behaviors (spraying, fighting, noise, etc.). The return of sterilized resident cats also prevents the influx of additional unsterilized cats, and therefore helps to reduce the overall population.

How does spaying/neutering and vaccinating improve the health of community cats?

After being spayed/neutered and vaccinated, cats living in colonies tend to gain weight and live healthier lives. Spayed female cats are less likely to develop breast cancer and will not be at risk for ovarian or uterine cancer, while neutered males will not get testicular cancer. Female cats will also not have to deal with pregnancies, which can be stressful and taxing for any mammal.

Neutering male cats also reduces the risk of injury and infection, since intact males have a natural instinct to fight with other cats. Spaying also means female cats do not go into heat. That means they attract fewer male cats to the area, which reduces fighting and caterwauling.

Additionally, just one round of vaccines received before being returned outdoors can have substantial health benefits for cats and the community, preventing disease and its spread within colonies. [A study involving cats in a TNR program in Florida](#) vaccinated cats against feline panleukopenia virus (FPV), feline herpes virus (FHV), feline calicivirus (FCV), FeLV, and rabies virus (RV). Reexamination after 10 weeks showed that the cats had an excellent immune response following vaccination, significantly lowering their risk of disease. Vaccinations at the time of

spay/neuter not only protect the health of individual cats, but also protect the human community from potential spread of zoonotic diseases, while working to decrease the rates of infectious diseases among outdoor cat communities.

What happens to community cats in animal shelters?

For a community cat, any time spent in an animal shelter can lead to stress, which can cause mental anguish, behavioral deterioration and increases rates of infectious disease — including upper respiratory infection (URI), feline panleukopenia virus (FPV), ringworm, etc. — that lead to higher rates of death in shelter care and euthanasia. In fact, [a study published in the Canadian Veterinary Medical Journal](#) showed that the most significant factor placing cats at risk of developing upper respiratory infection is time spent in a shelter. This includes friendly community cats who, despite being social, do not adjust well to living in shelters because of the stress of being out of their natural outdoor home environment. As a result, traditional sheltering models do not present the best opportunity for success for community cats.

Are friendly community cats returned to their outdoor homes?

Yes. There are multiple reasons to return healthy, friendly cats to the outdoor homes they came from. In addition to helping to stabilize and reduce community cat colonies, this approach allows friendly cats to avoid the stresses associated with the shelter. For even friendly community cats, confinement in a shelter or home environment — even for a short period of time — exposes them to potential illness and can cause extreme stress, which can lead to significant health and welfare problems, including increased rates of death in shelter care and euthanasia.

Additionally, many friendly community cats are social because they do interact frequently with humans in their neighborhoods, including people who may act as their caregivers. While caregiving differs significantly from ownership in the traditional and legal sense of the word, caregivers may provide these cats with food and water, access to their yard, and human interaction and affection — and, in many cases, these caregivers are significantly invested in the cats' wellbeing. Friendliness in a community cat indicates that they have an outdoor home in which they are thriving. Therefore, regardless of their behavior, the best outcome for



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healthy community cats is to spay/neuter and vaccinate them and return them to their outdoor homes.

What about cats found with an ID tag or current microchip?

Cats with identifiable signs of current ownership, such as identification tags or a microchip, would not be eligible for a CCP. All cats should be scanned for a microchip.

Can't community cats just be removed or relocated?

No. Removal or relocation efforts for community cats are ineffective, dangerous for the cats and impractical. Community cats live in an area because the resources — food, water, shelter — are there to support them. These resources may or may not be provided by humans. But there is simply not enough room anywhere for the *millions* of community cats in California alone. Even if the numbers did not end the inquiry, data show that rounding up cats and bringing them to shelters, rescues or sanctuaries does not solve the issue of cat overpopulation, because new cats will continue to fill the spaces in communities created by removed cats, as long as there is resource availability. Relocation is also not a viable option because it is important that cats know their environment and are aware of any threats and resources in the area for their own protection.

How does returning community cats outdoors impact wildlife?

The focus of community cat programs is bringing down the number of community cats, which will be beneficial to wildlife. When a spayed or neutered community cat returns to a colony, it no longer reproduces and helps suppress the litter sizes of other cats by continuing to use available resources. This approach is the only method proven to reduce cat colony sizes over time, which also benefits wildlife. While cats are efficient hunters, and some community members express concern over their impact on birds and other wildlife, it is important to note that outdoor cats also play an important role in managing the population of rodents that eat bird eggs. There is also data to suggest that sterilizing cats reduces their desire to hunt. Because new community cats will fill any space from which community cats are taken, the removal of community cats from an outdoor area would not create any benefit for, or reduction in the predation of, birds. And studies of some CCPs

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have demonstrated a reduction in predatory behavior after spaying/neutering. Additionally, community cats are often sustained by a caregiver who feeds them regularly, or by scavenging rather than hunting for food.

Why not just eradicate community cats?

Simply put, no one would tolerate this. The vast majority of people would be opposed to euthanizing hundreds of thousands of community cats in any one area. And it wouldn't be possible. No one group could effectively euthanize all the community cats before new cats move into the area. The population would continue to be supplemented even as cats were removed. The most compassionate thing to do — sterilizing community cats and returning them outdoors — is also the most effective.

Studies show that litter-bearing mammals breed in proportion to the available food in the environment. Removing one cat from a population does not reduce the population because the food source remains, and other cats will continue to reproduce. Additionally, cats from other areas will move into areas from which cats have been removed. One example includes an attempt to eradicate cats on Marion Island in South Africa in the 1980s. The island is 129 square miles and is largely uninhabited. The eradication effort took more than 15 years and tens of millions of dollars. Even if eradication were desirable or effective — and it has been proven that it is not — such a project could never be carried out in large communities in which hundreds of thousands of community cats may exist, or across a state like California where literally millions of community cats thrive.

Have Community Cat Programs been successful elsewhere?

Yes. This approach is grounded in decades of research and backed by supporting data. Communities worldwide have implemented strategic efforts to spay/neuter community cats and return them to their outdoor homes and experienced the following outcomes, which indicate the success of these efforts in reducing litter numbers and sizes:

- San Jose Animal Care and Services saw the number of felines brought to their shelter decrease by 29% after four years.



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- The Fairfax County Animal Shelter in Virginia saw a 58% decrease in the number of bottle-fed kittens arriving at their shelter after one year.
- At the University of Florida, the number of community cats on campus declined by 66% during an 11-year study. Additionally, no new kittens were born after the first four years.
- In Rome, Italy, similar efforts saw community cat colony size decrease between 16 and 32% over a 10-year period.
- At Texas A&M University, 123 cats were neutered in the first year of their program operations, and no new litters of kittens were produced the following year.
- A 23-year study of a targeted program to trap, spay/neuter, and return cats outdoors in the Ocean Reef Community of Key Largo, Florida, showed a 55% decline in the free-roaming cat population.
- A study of telephone complaints related to free-roaming cats in five cities in Israel found that complaints related to cats' aggressive behavior, invasion of human facilities, injuries, and distress significantly correlated to complaints about kittens and reproduction. These findings imply an association between cat welfare impairment and reproduction intensity.
- In the city of Rishon LeZion in Israel, a 2012-2014 study of free-roaming cats found that a higher ratio of neutered cats in the geographic population correlated with fewer emaciated and thin adult cats. This suggests that neutering favorably impacts the health of community cats.

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Community Cat Research and Resources

Community cat programs are built on years of research from leaders in the field of animal welfare, and are supported by shelters, veterinarians, animal welfare organizations, and advocacy groups.

The Future for Cat Intake at Shelters

This webinar, sponsored by Best Friends, reviews the rationale for providing innovative solutions for community cats.

- Future of cat intake: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-wtJ3Hum3Q>

Dr. Kate Hurley's groundbreaking research provides the basis for community cat programs nationwide. This is a recording of her presentation for San Diego Humane Society.

- Rethinking the shelter's role in CCPs:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etQ-Gj7GY9o>

National Animal Care and Control Association--Animal Control Intake of Free-Roaming Cats

- [Animal Control Intake of Free-Roaming Cats | National Animal Care & Control Association \(nacenet.org\)](https://www.nacenet.org/)

National Feline Research Council

National Feline Research Council compiles, analyzes and disseminates rigorous scientific research relevant to the efficient management of free-roaming cats.

- <https://www.felineresearch.org/>

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