

## No More Homeless Pets Forum

Date: January 28 – February 1, 2008

Topic: Formula to Fight for Ferals Effectively



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Find out how to implement the three necessary steps for a long-term, community-wide, feral-friendly program. It's more than just trap/neuter/return! Holly Sizemore of No More Homeless Pets in Utah shares her formula to safeguard against trap-and-kill.

### Introduction from Holly Sizemore

When I began advocating for feral cats and trap/neuter/return (TNR), most people weren't familiar with the word feral and most governments viewed TNR as a ludicrous idea. Ten years later, "feral" is a commonly known term and many community leaders buy into the idea of TNR as an effective, smart choice for reducing cat populations. If you want to grow TNR in your community, you want to focus on:

1. Building an infrastructure to provide TNR services.
2. Collecting and using data to prove the efficacy of TNR.
3. Getting the buy-in of your local government and/or shelter.

This week, I welcome your questions on just how to accomplish those three key steps!

### Bio for Holly Sizemore

Holly Sizemore entered the animal welfare world in 1991 while in college. She discovered a population of feral cats eating from a restaurant dumpster, so she and a concerned restaurant patron began the task of what they later (much later) learned was trap/neuter/return (TNR). Together they formed CAWS, a Utah nonprofit group focusing on adoptions, TNR, and low-income spay/neuter.

In 2000, Holly joined No More Homeless Pets in Utah and has served the organization as partner development director, Feral Fix director, community development director, and now executive director. Holly has volunteered and worked in many different animal welfare arenas, ranging from very small grassroots organizations to large-scale public/private partnership efforts. She has seen a tremendous shift in the way local governments and shelters react to TNR in Utah, and has secured over \$100,000 from a number of municipalities to fund TNR.

### They want to haul off all the ferals!

**Question from GrrrVillage:** Holly, welcome to the Best Friends Network and thank you so much for your information for us! I'm in a rural Texas community, and have indeed seen feral cats around restaurant (and nursing home) dumpsters. The problem is, people consider these kitties a nuisance, call animal control to get rid of them and – even if they're in the middle of a TNR program – they are either captured by animal control, or worse!

I have two questions: How do you locate the feral cats that need assistance? (I don't regularly cruise restaurant dumpsters, but I will if that will help!) And how do you convince the public that you are caring for these animals, and to please not kill them or have them "hailed off" (as they so eloquently put it here in Texas)? I would greatly appreciate your comments on how to start a TNR program without showing up one day to find the cats are completely gone.

**Response from Holly Sizemore:** Julie, you certainly touch upon some of the challenges of TNR. Here in Utah, we also have folks who want the cats "hailed off" and yet, believe it or not, we had one very vocal complainer turn into a caregiver! This particular person had called animal control on a number of occasions to complain about the neighbors feeding stray (feral) cats.

Animal control alerted us to the situation; we talked to the cat caregiver and a number of the neighbors, including the complainer, then implemented TNR. Well, don't you know, one year later we get a call from the complainer. We thought, "Oh no, they want the cats gone." Not the case. They said the TNR was very successful, they still saw a few cats, but no kittens running around, no yowling, and no smelly male urine marking their house. They then told us that an emaciated stray momma cat and her one kitten had just wandered into their yard and they wanted to do TNR!

Certainly, you won't turn every complainer into a caregiver. Still, the more widespread TNR becomes, the easier it is to provide safeguards for the feral cats in which you invest your time, emotion, and dollars.

In answer to your specific questions: No need to begin cruising dumpsters as a hobby! Locating feral cats and people who want help with TNR is often the easy part. I believe the best way to have the greatest impact is to partner with the municipal animal care/control or shelter. Implement a public/private partnership in which the TNR group receives referrals directly from the shelter.

With that said, our organization didn't start that way, because we did not have the support of our local shelters at that time. But now we do. Some local shelters will even alert us if a tipped cat enters their shelter. (All cats sterilized as part of a TNR program have a small portion of the tip of one ear removed during surgery. It is completely painless and is the international symbol of a fixed feral.)

I have found that door-hangers are a great grassroots way to spread the word about TNR. Alley Cat Allies ([www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org)) has some nice generic ones. Door-hangers are very cheap and we chose to print our own. We enlisted volunteers to distribute door-hangers to lower-income areas and areas where we had word that there were lots of cats. We sometimes place ads in the newspaper saying "Feeding a Stray? Neuter or Spay!" with our contact information. Honestly, if you have a TNR program in place that offers low-cost spay/neuter, trap loans, and some trapping assistance, you'll likely find people begging for the service – people who are already feeding the cats.

Convincing absolutely everyone that ferals deserve to be protected is a challenge. Sadly, there will be those rare people who, despite reason, will want the cats gone. However, with effective TNR, you can even deal with those situations. For example, in Utah, we have a small rural town, called Moab, located in the southern Utah desert. It is near Arches National Park – lots of tourists, but many rural, local inhabitants.

Thanks to TNR, the Moab shelter never has to euthanize a healthy feral cat. Five years ago, they euthanized 90 percent of all cats entering their shelter. Today, they recommend TNR to anyone calling about ferals and refer residents to dedicated volunteers in the area helping to conduct TNR. If the residents insist on impounding the cats, they are now actually relocated to one of the existing feral cat colonies. Moab is geographically isolated and so has an advantage in that way (no cat migration from nearby towns). However, the town's efforts clearly show that TNR works!

Our program works hard to make the complainers happy. The lives of the cats depend on it. Much of our literature says, in effect, "Do you love or loathe cats? Either way, we have something for you!" Then it goes on to explain that we can provide humane cat deterrents and suggestions on how to keep cats away from where they are not wanted.

If cats are considered a nuisance in a neighborhood, we go door to door mediating and looking at ways to solve the problem without killing the cats. Many of the nuisances cats create are solved simply by spaying and neutering, but you can address the other issues as well. Here is a link to our handout on dealing with nuisances:

<http://www.utahpets.org/img/feral/catsolutions.pdf>

Putting clear and waterproof signage near the feeding area is important. The sign should say something like this: "This is part of a trap and sterilization program designed to reduce the number of cats in this area. If you have any questions or concerns about the cats or this program, please call \_\_\_\_\_."

Prevention also goes a long way. If you begin a TNR program in an area, go door to door and educate the people in the community in advance about what you are doing. It is best to go as a team. As one of my mentors put it: "When you go alone, you are viewed as the Crazy Cat Lady. When you go as a team, you are suddenly seen as the Surplus Cat Overpopulation Control Coalition." Working in teams and having literature to hand over to people is important to lend credibility. You will never convince absolutely everyone, but with TNR services, education, mediation, and cooperation from your local shelter, you can make a huge lifesaving impact!

**Note from moderator:** There is a new Best Friends online community called Spay/Neuter Fever! on the Best Friends Network to promote spay/neuter, answer questions and invite discussion. It's at <http://network.bestfriends.org/spayneuter/news/>. There is even a forum just for feral cats, called Humane Trap/Neuter/Return for Feral Cats. Please join us there and get involved!

## Directory of TNR experts?

**Question from njanmlrsq3:** Back in December 2007, I was contacted about some feral cats with kittens at a local nursery. I checked it out. Apparently the kittens had died from exposure, but there were a handful of cats on the property. The hardest part was getting them in contact with the right organization. Is there a database or website that lists organizations in each state that can handle TNR?

Also, once an organization has been reached, is it a good idea to follow up and see how the ferals are doing and if the TNR was done?

**Response from Holly Sizemore:** The great news is that there are so many more TNR organizations forming every year. And yet many of them are quite small, may have limited service areas or restricted programming due to limited resources. So, it can sometimes take a bit of digging to find services.

The best resource for a statewide list of TNR groups is at Alley Cat Allies' website ([www.alleycat.org](http://www.alleycat.org)) in their Resources section, Feral Friends Network tab. And if there isn't a group that services your area, it doesn't mean you have to give up! Alley Cat Allies also has great resources for individuals interested in doing TNR. In fact, many TNR organizations form as a result of individuals doing TNR for their colony and then deciding to organize and help others. Also, Google really does produce some great results if you type in your state and the words "Trap Neuter Return."

It is always a great idea to follow up with people who contact you for TNR services. One of our TNR programs uses low-cost vouchers issued to feral cat caregivers so they can do the trapping themselves (we loan out the traps and conduct trapping workshops) and then they take the cats, along with their Feral Fix voucher, to a participating veterinarian.

We have found that for every three vouchers issued, only one is used. We do not have the resources to call up every voucher recipient to ask why they didn't use the voucher, but many times voucher recipients will call us at a later time to request more vouchers. (They have expiration dates of about 45 days from date of issue.) The feedback is typically that they had trouble trapping some of the more wily cats, or quite often they simply procrastinated. For the hard-to-catch cats, again, Alley Cat Allies is a terrific resource for tips on catching those wily cats.

We have found that many people procrastinate because they have anxiety about doing TNR and fear that it will stress out the cats. You can try to combat this anxiety in the trapping workshops simply by acknowledging that it is a common feeling and emphasizing that the alternative of doing nothing will likely ultimately put the cats at great risk. However, we have found that the most successful way to alleviate people's anxiety about trapping is to help them the first time they trap. When our program was newly formed and small, we simply didn't have the volunteer base to do much in that way. Now, we have staff members and volunteers who can often mentor caregivers and even provide trapping assistance for those who are unable to trap themselves.

Another great way to ensure that you successfully TNR all the cats is to perform mass trapping, where you endeavor to get all the cats in the colony trapped within 2 -3 days. Detailed information on how to perform mass trapping can be found on Neighborhood Cats' website at [www.neighborhoodcats.org](http://www.neighborhoodcats.org) in the information section. Their video and handbook also cover mass trapping and is a great resource.

**Note from moderator:** Meredith Weiss of Neighborhood Cats was the No More Homeless Pets Special Guest the week of June 26-30, 2006, discussing how to trap the elusive cats.

## A long-term plan for TNR

**Question from krazcatlady:** Thanks for offering to share your knowledge about TNR organizations with us. It seems that when people first discover TNR and how effective it is, they want to just get some traps and jump right in, because there are so many cats that need to be TNR'd and now they know a way to help.

I understand that response, as I was the same way some 10 years ago, but what steps do you think should be done first, to ensure a successful TNR program for the long haul? Could you elaborate on the three steps you listed in your introduction, what they entail and at what stages of organizational development they need to be addressed? What are the risks if these steps aren't taken? I look forward to your response.

**Response from Holly Sizemore:** “You’re right, jumping right in and doing TNR is great, but if you want to do TNR for the long haul and on a comprehensive level, you do need to plan and organize. Generally, I find with many animal-welfare programs, it is easy to get caught up “in the trenches,” as there is always another animal who desperately needs your help. And don’t get me wrong, the people in the trenches are absolute angels and essential to any good program.

For a well-rounded, “long-haul” program, though, you also need people who are skilled in taking care of the “behind the scenes” duties. It is important to allow them to stay out of the trenches so they can focus on keeping the program strong in other ways. So, here are some guidelines for implementing the three steps I mentioned in my intro.

### Building an infrastructure to provide TNR services.

To build an infrastructure for TNR services, I would recommend creating a strategic plan that includes who, what, where, when, and how:

- **Who:** Stakeholders who will help or hinder your project (and remember, those who hinder one day may help the next). The cats, caregivers, veterinarians, local government, shelters, the media, funders, the volunteer community, and other animal welfare agencies are potentially important stakeholders.
- **What:** Mission statement and goals. A mission statement can be a bit more broad than goals. For instance, here at No More Homeless Pets in Utah, ours is “To end the euthanasia of cats and dogs in Utah shelters and to promote humane alternatives for feral cats.” Our goals are much more specific and measurable. For example: “We will TNR no fewer than 2,500 ferals in the state in 2008. One thousand of those cats will be under the partnerships with West Valley City, Salt Lake City, and Weber County. The remaining 1,500 will be performed throughout the state by volunteers with our financial and mentoring support.
- **Where:** Should you focus on one colony, one neighborhood, one city, or the entire state?
- **When:** We designed our program into one-, two-, and three-year tiers and chose to incorporate more with each year as we grew stronger. For instance, in the beginning we focused mainly on providing the TNR basics: trap loans, trapping instruction, low-cost spay/neuter and vaccinations via a voucher program using participating private veterinarians. The second year, we added high-volume feral

cat roundups, using our Big Fix mobile spay/neuter clinic, which allowed us to do large mass-trapping efforts, fixing 30-40 ferals in one day. The third year, we added educating the community and Animal Care & Control about TNR, and worked for proactive change of local ordinances to de-criminalize TNR and heighten the status of free-roaming cats.

- How: Throughout the state, we set up trap depots that were run by trained volunteers. We provided each depot with traps, instructional videos, trapping and colony maintenance handouts, trap loan forms, and other equipment used in TNR. We advertised the program by reaching out to people already feeding ferals. We set up a hotline voice-mail (also manned by volunteers). Callers would then be referred to their nearest Trap Trading Post. At the Trap Trading Post, the cat caregiver would borrow traps (free with a security deposit), receive trapping instructions, and receive Feral Fix vouchers. Our voucher program used private veterinarians who agreed to provide surgeries for a set reimbursement rate. The caregivers would be screened and would pay a portion of the cost if they could afford to do so. We provided information and some equipment to each participating veterinarian so that they could safely and appropriately handle the feral cats.

The big infrastructure question is how do you fund it all? I won't go into great detail here, as this subject is so complex and outside the specifics of this forum, but services and funding go hand in hand. You design your program based on your resources and incorporate a sustainability plan that will grow your funds. We were lucky enough to begin with a foundation grant. There is funding out there. PetSmart Charities, for example, gave out over \$4 million in spay/neuter grants in 2006. Funding is an area where a particular person or persons should focus their efforts and begin to research the myriad funding opportunities for your specific program. And, in time, you CAN get money from local government to fund TNR.

### **Collecting and using data to prove the efficacy of TNR.**

Collecting data is boring to most people, so it's easy to put it on the back-burner. And yet reliable statistics collection and reporting is essential to getting funding. When we went to the leaders of West Valley City and asked them to endorse a public/private TNR pilot project in their city, we had numbers to show that a few particular cat colonies reduced in size because of TNR. We also used the data collected by others across the country. Honestly, that data wasn't nearly as compelling as the data we have now.

Thankfully, the city leaders of West Valley City had vision and signed on to a TNR pilot project, which then resulted in the very compelling data that I now use when talking to municipalities. The West Valley City shelter gave us statistics on cat intake, redemption, adoption, and euthanasia from three years before the project and tracked these same statistics throughout the project. They also tracked their calls for service and cat bite stats. No More Homeless Pets tracked how many caregivers we serviced, how many cats we TNR'd, how many cats we removed for taming/adoption, and how many cats we had to relocate.

After three years of this project, the statistics were encouraging: West Valley City's cat intake was down over 30 percent, their cat euthanasia was down over 40 percent (they could hold tame cats longer since the ferals weren't taking up space), their calls for

service did not increase, nor did their cat bites. The data clearly showed fewer cats in the shelter and yet no increase in complaints or bites as a result of returning the cats to the community. And, of course, fewer cats means fewer tax dollars spent – which is the most compelling fact for city leaders.

### **Getting the buy-in of your local government and/or shelter.**

Getting the buy-in of the city has a lot to do with using your statistics collection to prove that TNR is effective and fiscally prudent. The other important factor is simply going to the city council or other government entities and presenting them with the issues. First, I always acknowledge that trap/neuter/return seems like a counter-intuitive solution to ending cat overpopulation. I joke about it, saying “What, you RETURN them?” This immediately lets them know that I understand their skepticism.

I then give a PowerPoint presentation that de-bunks some of the myths of TNR. I describe the West Valley City project and then compare that situation with either their own community or another similar community. Then I ask them to help fund a similar project. It was this method that resulted in our largest city, Salt Lake City, changing their ordinance to allow for TNR and giving us money to provide TNR services for their residents. It took three years to fully convince them, but it was well worth it!

Getting the buy-in of shelter personnel requires training sessions, accountability protocols – and feedback. Feedback is important because animal control officers rarely get to see the positive successes of their work, since their duties are primarily handling complaints.

With our public/private partnership in West Valley City, the shelter lets us know the locations of cat problem areas. We then go into the neighborhood to leave door-hangers and talk to residents. We locate the caregiver and/or the complainer, educate the caregiver and help them conduct TNR. We then mediate with the complainer to help them keep cats away.

Most of the time, the complainer and the caregiver are happy, the cat numbers drop, and we have another TNR success story for the books. However, if we forget to relay those stories to shelter personnel, they would never know they exist. We host bi-annual meetings to refresh training and share with the shelter staff the success that we could not achieve without them.

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