

Buddying up

In Edmonton, house-soiling cats become farmers' friends

BY JAMES HETTINGER

The Edmonton Humane Society (EHS) is giving shelter cats once considered "unadoptable" another shot at life—out in the barn.

For cats surrendered due to litter box issues, EHS has developed the Barn Buddies program. The initiative places house-soiling felines in barns (as well as farms and shops), where they provide mousing services and don't have to worry about finding a proper place to do their business.

Begun as a pilot in late 2006, the program placed 65 of the 258 cats admitted with house-soiling issues in 2007.

While the primary benefit of the program is the second chance it gives hard-to-place kitties, Barn Buddies provides other advantages as well. Bilinda Wagner, the shelter's operations and human resources manager, notes that the program combats indiscriminate breeding—a problem common to areas where unsterilized cats are allowed to roam—by enabling Edmonton farms to acquire spayed or neutered cats for free. EHS waives the typical \$110 fee for adopting an adult cat.

"Something that always bothered me was the fact that cats were always breeding, and farmers do what they do to stop the cat population," Wagner says, alluding to the fact that some farmers drown kittens or shoot adult cats. "When I started working at the shelter, we had a bunch of house-soiling cats come in. I thought, if they're spayed and neutered, could we not offer these to the farmers instead, and hopefully prevent them from having cats breed at will?"

Edmonton farmers, she adds, "don't have the extra money to put into spaying and neutering their animals, and we thought this would be a great option for them."



Little Ears, a frostbitten-eared cat, found a new home through the Edmonton Humane Society's Barn Buddies program. EDMONTON HUMANE SOCIETY

In addition to spaying or neutering, the shelter makes sure the cats are vaccinated, microchipped, checked for health, and deemed nonaggressive and easy to handle. Adopters do not receive the same extensive counseling that regular adopters get, but they must register, pick up the cats within 24 hours of getting a call to do so, provide veterinary care, and provide an enclosure the cats can easily enter for protection from the elements and predators such as coyotes and farm dogs. "And they have to make sure they feed them," Wagner says, "because we don't want the cats having to rely on mousing as their main source of food."

When house-soiling cats are brought to the shelter, staff members ask how the owners have tried to combat the problem, suggesting ways to entice cats to use the litter box. "Quite often we find that people aren't aware of the fact that if they have multiple cats they need multiple litter boxes, and you've got to clean them regularly, because some cats are really fussy," Wagner says.

Wagner, who piloted the program with 16 cats in a barn, says issues such as predators will always be a concern, "but the other option is euthanasia." Barn Buddies, she notes, gives cats a chance to do what comes naturally and helps the community at the same time.

For some house-soiling cats, such as those who are elderly or have seri-

ous medical conditions, such a setting would not be appropriate, says Diane Shannon, communications and marketing coordinator at the shelter. Only cats who are cleared medically are allowed into the Barn Buddies program. The EHS medical department performs a urinalysis to check for infections or crystals in the urine, and most times the cats can be treated. Bladder infections can cause frequent urination, which often occurs outside the litter box.

If a cat can be treated for a medical issue, Shannon explains, he gets placed in a foster home to see if his litter box issues can be resolved after his health improves. Once deemed adoptable, cats can be placed through the shelter's regular adoption program. But if, despite medical treatment, the litter box issues are not resolved, they can get a second chance through the Barn Buddies program.

"[The] bottom line is that 25 percent of the cats that would previously have been euthanized had a great new option in 2007 that did not impact our very limited operating resources," Shannon says.

"I encourage other shelters to 'think outside of the box,'" adds Stephanie McDonald, EHS's executive director. "You never know what unique opportunities may be available to support another shelter's mission of saving more lives." **AS**