Return-to-field part II: Engaging the community

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Return-to-field (RTF) programs are designed to get community cats out of the shelter and back to their neighborhoods. But the community isn’t always easily convinced this is the right thing to do. Here are some of the commonly raised concerns and suggested responses that our panelists have found most successful. If you find these effective in the conversations you’re having with your community, or if you have more to add that have helped you get various stakeholders on board, we would love to hear from you – email us at info@millioncatchallenge.org!

1. Concern: ordinances prohibit community cat programs/TNR; this constitutes abandonment
   a. Ordinances and laws regarding cats were created with the best of intentions but no actual data or studies to scientifically support decisions. Community Cat Diversion is not only fiscally responsible but saves lives and most constituents do not want cats euthanized.
   b. We now know that very few (far less than 5%) shelter cats are reunited with their families during stray hold periods but Community Cat Diversion programs do return them to their outside homes, therefore these programs accomplish goals of legislation intended to reunite cats with owners more effectively.
   c. Trap/euthanize only addresses the symptom while Community Cat Diversion provides sustainable resolution
   d. Successful programs nationwide see decreases in cat complaint calls so enforcement can concentrate on true animal/public safety
   e. A key aspect of abandonment (as typically defined in anti-cruelty laws) is intent. The people involved with RTF programs obviously have no intention to cause harm; on the contrary, these cats are being returned to their “outdoor homes,” and, having been sterilized and vaccinated, are in better health.
   f. Cruelty laws in many states prohibit intentional killing of animals; but these are not applied to euthanasia of cats in shelters as this is clearly not the intent of such laws; similarly abandonment has not been applied to individuals or organizations participating in TNR/RTF efforts.
g. Community Cats should be exempt from stray hold periods, licensing/registration, running at large and abandonment clauses

h. Resources:
      And resource specifically on key legal considerations: http://bestfriends.org/resources/key-legal-issues-consider
   b. Review article: “Community Cats: Changing the legal paradigm for management of so-called pests” by Joan Schaffner: http://lawreview.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Vol-67.1-Schaffner.pdf (see especially recommendations on page 99 for specific components of ordinances to support effective community cat programs)
   c. Sample ordinances from successful programs: http://www.neighborhoodcats.org/resources/tnr-ordinances

2. Concern: cats have a negative impact on wildlife
   a. Return to Field is about returning cats to where they were found, not about adding cats to the environment or adding to the risk that wild animals may experience. The cats are already “out there,” living in our community. The number of cats impounded by shelters in most communities is tremendous, yet still too small to have any meaningful impact on predation by cats.
   b. Some outdoor cats do prey on birds and other wildlife, yet much of the research suggesting that cats decimate bird populations has been discredited; much is simply exaggerated claims based on evidence from small, isolated islands or extrapolated from small-scale studies that make broad assumptions in order to reach their conclusions. Conflicts between cats and wildlife do not necessitate mass killing.
   c. Research has demonstrated that cats kill up to 9 times as many rodents as they do birds. Rats and other invasive rodents can have an even more devastating impact on birds when cats are removed. For instance, after all cats were removed from one island in order to protect birds, 3 times as many nestlings were killed by rats. (Rayner, M. J., M. E. Hauber, et al. (2007). "Spatial heterogeneity of mesopredator release within an oceanic island system." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 104(52): 20862-20865.) This was only resolved after more than 50 tons of rat poison was distributed across the island.
   d. A number of studies have shown the variability in hunting behavior and prowess among individual cats. Some cats are more adept and prolific hunters. Other cats don’t hunt at all. A minority (usually less than 15%) of cats are
disproportionally responsible for the total predation load. That means the majority of community cats are not having an impact on local wildlife. For those that are, humane, non-lethal solutions should be employed. (Tschanz, B., et al. (2011). "Hunters and non-hunters: skewed predation rate by domestic cats in a rural village." European Journal of Wildlife Research 57: 597-602.)

e. Opposing RTF is not a solution. The “traditional” method of managing community cats is haphazard and ineffective. It hasn't worked for the last 100 years and is no longer supported by the general public. It is time to try something new. RTF, and more expansive TNR programs, offer a practical solution, while freeing up resources to tackle other challenges facing the animals and people in our community.

f. Neither cats nor wild animals are well served by a polarized, divisive, and expensive “cats vs. wildlife” controversy. There is a great deal of common ground between the animal welfare and conservation communities—specifically, our interest in reducing the number of community cats. We all want to see fewer cats living outside but often disagree on how to achieve our shared goal. Community leaders should foster collaboration and open dialog, based on models that have proven successful in other communities. The best public policy choice involves human ingenuity, collaboration, and investments in technical and policy solutions consistent with our best inclinations toward all of the animals living in our communities. RTF (and TNR) is better not only for the cats, but for the wildlife we all want to protect, too.

3. Concern: Everyone will complain, nobody wants the cats back.
   a. No doubt it seems like residents want the cats removed, because these are the residents that tend to contact the shelter knowing this is a service that’s historically been provided. But these residents don’t represent the larger community.
   b. In our experience speaking with residents, we see that most residents really don’t want the cats killed.
   c. Many of the behaviors that can trigger nuisance complaints (e.g., spraying, fighting, etc.) are resolved through sterilization. Once colonies have been spayed/neutered, the complaints often drop off considerably.
   d. RTF programs typically loan humane deterrents to residents with legitimate nuisance complaints, and this often resolves the issue without having to remove the cats.
   e. Municipalities are becoming increasingly uncomfortable with allowing residents to make life-and-death decisions regarding outdoor cats (unowned and owned alike).
4. Concern: We are a public agency, we have to provide this service to the public
   a. Impounding and euthanizing stray and feral cats is costly and short-sighted, while affecting only a tiny fraction of the total number of cats in a given community and doing nothing to manage overall cat populations. This haphazard approach has little impact on welfare, environmental, or public health issues. It stresses shelters, overwhelming their resources and far exceeding capacity, and it gives false expectations to citizens coming to these agencies for help resolving problems. Using resources for sterilization has a larger impact than focusing resources on intake and euthanasia. RTF program have led to a significant decrease in cat intake and euthanasia rates, thus also saving tax-payer dollars.
   b. RTF is a public service, particularly when a municipal ordinance does not require the agency to pick up cats. Other municipalities may not have adequate funding to address free-roaming cats so only deal with feral cats when there’s a specific complaint about them. But doing nothing, or just trapping and euthanizing cats, amounts to ignoring a community animal issue. Public agencies should focus on long-term solutions such as a RTF policy and broader TNR programs to humanely reduce the population of outdoor cats overtime and provide immunity from rabies while the population declines.
   c. With the majority of Americans believing it is more humane to let a cat live outdoors than for him to be caught and killed, animal control departments should engage the community in being part of the solution. Nuisance complaints can be mitigated with simple tools and strategies to keep cats from where they are not wanted, with residents working together in order for all to co-exist safely. Spaying and neutering reduces many of the behaviors that prompt residents to contact enforcement agencies, such as night-time yowling, malodorous spraying, and producing unwanted kittens.
   d. Resources:
      i. https://www.animalsheltering.org/magazine/articles/talking-tnr
      ii. https://www.animalsheltering.org/sites/default/files/content/ca_community_cat_guide_updates_6_15_lowres_final.pdf

5. Concern: The cats will suffer, freeze or starve if they are released with no confirmed feeder
   a. We only release cats back to the address/area where they came from
   b. If the cat was healthy when it came in, we don’t release sick or emaciated cats, then there was a food source there
   c. Just because there is not a known feeder doesn’t mean that someone isn’t feeding or sheltering the cat, it might not be an official feeding station but in situations where there are community cats there are usually someone putting
out food on a somewhat regular basis
d. Cats have evolved across a wide range of climates, and there is no difference in
abundance of feral cats based on latitude or winter temperature across Canada
(Blancher, P. (2013). "Estimated Number of Birds Killed by House Cats (Felis
ca tus) in Canada." Avian Conservation and Ecology 8(2.).

e. Kittens are most likely to suffer and die (75% mortality rate); TNR/RTF reduce
kitten births as well as improving the health of the sterilized cats
f. People are more likely to dump cats, and less likely to reach out for help, when
they are afraid the cats will be euthanized if brought to a shelter. TNR/RTF
encourages people who care about cats to reach out, and we can then educate
them about proper feeding, sheltering and care.
g. Resources:
   i. Body Condition of Feral Cats and the Effect of Neutering for pre surgical
      assessment showing health of trapped feral cats. “At the time of surgery,
      the cats were lean but not emaciated (BW 3.1 0.9 kg; BCS 4 1; based on a
      1 to 9 scale ranging from 1 [emaciated] to 9 [grossly obese]).” (Scott, K.
      C., J. K. Levy, et al. (2002). "Body Condition of Feral Cats and the Effect of

6. Concern: The cats will be a source of rabies, toxoplasmosis, murine typhus, other public
health threats
   a. Most diseases that infect cats can only be spread from cat to cat, not from cat to
human. You are much more likely to catch an infectious disease from the person
standing in line with you at the grocery store than from a cat. In fact, a 2002
review of cat-associated diseases published in the Archives of Internal Medicine
concluded that, “cats should not be thought of as vectors for disease
transmission”
   i. Toxoplasmosis: if a cat is infected with Toxoplasma, it will generally shed
only once, after the first time they eat infected prey. They will shed for a
few weeks and then be immune for life. Therefore preventing the birth of
new susceptible kittens will be a better way to reduce risk than removing
adults who are likely already immune if toxoplasmosis is prevalent in the
area. This may explain why a study found that cats in managed colonies
are up to 4 times less likely to shed toxoplasmosis than unmanaged feral
cats or wild felids (Vanwormer, E., P. A. Conrad, et al. (2013).
"Toxoplasma gondii, Source to Sea: Higher Contribution of Domestic
Felids to Terrestrial Parasite Loading Despite Lower Infection Prevalence."
Ecohealth 10(3): 277-289.)
   ii. Additional information on toxoplasmosis since this is often the most
common public health concern:

1. Seroprevalence (the frequency of antibodies present in blood indicated exposure to toxoplasma) decreased from 1988-2010; TNR began being practiced on a large scale in the United States in the early 1990s, suggesting that at minimum this has not resulted in greater risk to public health. (Whitney S. Krueger et al., Drinking Water Source and Human Toxoplasma gondii infection in the United States: A Cross-Sectional Analysis of NHANES Data, 14 BMC PUB. HEALTH, July 10, 2014, at 4–6, 9.)

2. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists eating undercooked meat and handling raw meat or the surfaces it comes into contact with as the most common forms of transmission. Contaminated drinking water is another potential source of infection.

3. To catch toxoplasmosis from a cat, a person would need to have direct contact with these infected feces. There are also serious parasites shed by wildlife such as raccoons that can also be contracted by touching or ingesting soil contaminated with feces. Whether cats are present or not, people need to protect themselves by wearing gloves when gardening and washing fruits and vegetables.

4. Recent research has dismissed sensationalized media reports of toxoplasmosis leading to mental disorders and increased prevalence of aggressive or risky behavior, finding no evidence to support such claims. As well, claims that free-roaming cats are responsible for toxoplasmosis-caused deaths in endangered species may be unfounded, as recent studies suggest the source of infection may instead be wildlife.

5. https://www.animalsheltering.org/magazine/articles/panic-button-toxoplasmosis

6. https://www.animalsheltering.org/toxoplasmosis

b. Murine Typhus: this disease is spread by fleas not cats. These fleas can also be carried by opossums and dogs. Meanwhile, cats may play a significant role in controlling rodent populations that can spread this and other diseases.

c. Rabies: A major component of TNR is the rabies vaccine which ensures cats that have been TNR’d can’t catch or spread rabies. Because survival of sterilized cats is greater than intact cats, these cats can contribute to population immunity to rabies.
7. The municipality will be held liable if any of these cats ever was to bite someone or transmit a disease
   a. A municipality would be liable for an injury or damage only if it committed an act of negligence. Implementing or permitting a RTF or TNR program to reduce the community cat population and resolve nuisance complaints is reasonable government behavior, not negligent conduct. In addition, liability for harm caused by animals typically stems from ownership— but no one “owns” a community cat just as no one “owns” a squirrel who might cause damage.
   b. Even if a person is bitten or scratched, a TNRed cat likely would have been vaccinated against rabies. Rabies prophylaxis treatment would likely still be advisable, but the real risk of rabies is reduced.
   c. There has not been a proven case of cat-to-human transmitted rabies in four decades, and the more vaccinations administered through TNR programs, the more likely this trend is to continue.
   d. Consider an alternate situation, where a person is bitten and sues the municipality because officials turned down a RTF or TNR program that would have dealt with an overpopulation issue and vaccinated cats against the disease.
   e. Resource:
   f. [https://www.animalsheltering.org/sites/default/files/content/ca_community_cat_guide_updates_6_15_lowres_final.pdf](https://www.animalsheltering.org/sites/default/files/content/ca_community_cat_guide_updates_6_15_lowres_final.pdf)

8. Who’s going to pay for it?
   a. Public/private partnerships can support success especially at the beginning, as they allow capitalizing on the strengths and resources between a broad range of organizations.
   b. Return to Field and TNR can be the target of grants, donations and foundation support; revenue sources that are unlikely to support trap and euthanize programs.
   c. Over time, cat intake will decrease dramatically thus money previously spent on cost of care can be reallocated for spay/neuter.
   d. Goal should be spay/neuter as close to free for Community Cats that will be ear tipped and low-income pet owners.
   i. “Lethal methods must be accomplished at government expense and the cost to handle and dispose of the cats is more expensive than to sterilize and vaccinate the cats. For example, Hillsborough County Animal Services in Tampa Florida...
spent approximately $168 to catch, hold, and dispose (i.e., kill) of a cat while the cost to sterilize and vaccinate a cat was approximately sixty-five dollars. Moreover, TNVR often is conducted by nonprofits and individual volunteers costing the government little or nothing. For example, in 2007 Cook County, Illinois enacted a Community Cat Ordinance. By 2013, the county had saved more than $1.5 million in their efforts to control feral cats. Instead of killing 500–600 cats per year at $135 per cat, nearly 18,000 cats had been sterilized, vaccinated, and ear-tipped through collaboration, communication, education, and prevention programs conducted by nonprofit humane groups.”