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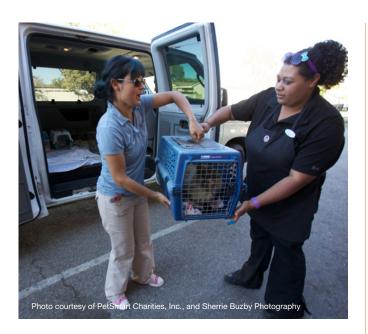
Community Cat Programs Handbook

Chapter 15 CCP Operations:
Working with Local TNR and Rescue Groups

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Introduction

The impact of a large-scale, focused community cat program (CCP) can be considerable, with dramatic reductions in shelter intake and shelter deaths virtually overnight, as well as long-term population-level reductions. Unfortunately, the sheer scale of such programs (perhaps combined with other factors) can sometimes overshadow or even pose some conflicts with the invaluable work of local trap/neuter/return (TNR) and rescue groups. This can lead to challenges among the very stakeholders whose collaboration, or at the very least, coordination, is required for a community to achieve its no-kill objectives.

It doesn't need to be this way, of course. Ideally, the CCP is integrated into the various lifesaving programs (TNR, rescue, foster, adoption, etc.) already underway in a community and has a synergistic effect. However, because the CCP often brings an approach that may be foreign to traditional TNR groups, it is important to engage stakeholders early on in a dialogue and identify where it might make sense to collaborate and coordinate. In some cases, stakeholders may need to "agree to disagree" about certain issues, such as returning cats prior to identifying a caregiver. The following guidelines are therefore intended to help CCP staff and volunteers in their collaboration and coordination efforts with local TNR and rescue groups.

Benefits to various stakeholders

When various stakeholders in a community work closely together toward the common goal of saving more cats, the results can be astonishing. Among the key benefits to the CCP are:

- The ability to tap into a network of trappers, caregivers, foster homes and adoption outlets, thereby expanding the options for positive outcomes. These people have knowledge and experience specific to their community, and this on-the-ground experience is invaluable.

- The opportunity to capitalize on a community's past success, giving momentum to the CCP from the very beginning.

- Increased confidence in the long-term sustainability of the CCP, as key stakeholders have a vested interest in a program that will outlast any short-term funding from organizations outside the community (e.g., Best Friends, PetSmart Charities™).

The benefits are generally felt most acutely by local rescue and TNR groups in two important ways:

- As the need to pull adult cats from the shelter is greatly reduced, rescue organizations can focus their efforts on providing rescue services, foster care and adoption opportunities for kittens and special-needs cats.

- The number of community cat spay/neuter surgeries increases dramatically, directly addressing the primary source of kittens in a community and eventually reducing the number of breeding community cats, an issue of particular concern to TNR groups. Economies of scale generally lead to better pricing as well.

And by sharing resources, a community's lifesaving capacity can be greatly expanded. Among these resources are:

- Vouchers redeemable for surgery or vaccination

- Traps and related tools and materials, such as trap covers and trap tags

- Donations of cat food for caregivers

- Community outreach materials, such as door hangers, flyers and adoption promotions

- Ongoing training in best practices and data analysis

- Services for transporting cats to and from clinics

Additional benefits include improved relationships with shelter staff and field services officers, as resources once used to handle the steady flow of cats into the shelter are reallocated to tasks more closely aligned with the missions of these organizations, such as dealing with at-large dogs, picking up injured animals and handling cruelty investigations. As CCP staff and volunteers develop strong working relationships with their counterparts in the shelter and in the field, local rescue and TNR groups are included, developing their own relationships with these key players.

Last but not least, there's the positive public image that comes from a shelter's improved lifesaving record. Everybody loves a winner — and, by extension, those associated with a particular success story. Local rescue and TNR groups stand to gain from this "halo effect."

Communication and collaboration

As outlined above, the benefits of working closely with local TNR and rescue groups are significant. To reap the rewards, however, those involved must be committed to such an arrangement. Effective communication is critical to getting these collaborative endeavors off the ground, and to achieving long-term success.

Laying the groundwork. Even before launching a CCP, key CCP staff and volunteers should meet with local TNR and rescue groups. Among the range of topics to be discussed are these:

- The proposed CCP's philosophy, goals and basic scope of work

- Each stakeholder's core strengths

- Ways to leverage those strengths while avoiding areas of apparent redundancy, such as trapping in the same neighborhoods and transporting to the same clinics

- Gaps that need to be filled to maximize lifesaving in the community

Establishing clarity around these issues helps build trust among stakeholders and manage expectations. While differences may arise in philosophies and goals, all parties must listen to each other respectfully, recognize each other's strengths and acknowledge successes that have paved the way for the work ahead.

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Working together. Generally speaking, CCPs offer important roles for individuals and organizations with a range of interests and skill sets. The key is leveraging these varied interests and skills in such a way that the CCP's big-picture goals are efficiently and effectively achieved. Stakeholders need not see eye-to-eye on every issue, as long as each party knows where others stand. With that said, agreement on key issues will make it easier for a CCP to work effectively with local TNR and rescue groups. Among these key issues are:

- Whether or not vouchers will be used, and how

- Which resources (e.g., traps) will be shared, and how

- What data will be collected and/or distributed

- Ear-tipping protocol

- Vaccines administered

- When to test for feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) or feline leukemia virus (FeLV)

- Post-surgery recovery care

- Protocols for returning "friendlies"

- Relocation criteria

- Adoption criteria

- Best practices for caregivers

Seeking broad agreement among the various stakeholders on these issues will stave off potential issues in the future. And yet, CCPs can be remarkably effective despite a significant level of disagreement, even on the issues mentioned above. For example, CCP staff and volunteers might be committed to returning virtually all healthy community cats who enter the shelter, while a TNR group opposes returning "friendly" cats. Indeed, this is not an unusual situation. But such philosophical differences are not necessarily barriers to strong partnerships, as long as each organization operates openly and in accordance with its values. Once again, it all comes down to mutual respect, trust and communication.

Building relationships among stakeholders. Simply "walking a mile in another's shoes" can be one of the most effective ways of building a solid foundation of trust among differing parties. Going out on a trapping job together, for example, can allow one organization to appreciate some of the more nuanced practices used by another group. CCP staff working an adoption event will almost certainly gain an appreciation for the challenges associated with finding homes for shy cats. Such activities might not result in changes to an organization's policies or practices, but they often improve the group's ability to work effectively with others.

Checking in regularly with local TNR and rescue groups can also strengthen these relationships. It demonstrates the ongoing commitment of CCP staff and volunteers, and encourages others to do the same.

Another method is to hold occasional meetings to help maintain the kind of close working relationship necessary to increase a community's lifesaving in a sustainable manner. To keep things on track during these meetings, be sure to have an agenda and stick to it — though casual get-togethers have their place, too. Newsletters and email updates, while no substitute for face-to-face meetings, can also help keep local TNR and rescue groups informed and engaged.

When to go separate ways. Unfortunately, instances arise when the best decision that a CCP can make is to not work with a particular TNR or rescue group. Despite having a shared goal, there are simply too many contentious issues. It's better to part company if working together undermines lifesaving efforts. Each organization can go on doing their own work, of course — and perhaps an opportunity will arise to work together in the future.

If a "parting of the ways" occurs, it's important for everybody involved to be as professional and respectful as possible — if for no other reason than to ensure that lifesaving efforts are not negatively affected. (See _Conflict Resolution for the Animal Welfare Field_ for additional guidance.)

Measures of success

Before launching the CCP, have a good sense of each group's capacity. How many cats can be trapped weekly or monthly? How many kittens can be absorbed into the local rescue community? It's important to be realistic with such estimates, too. There's nothing wrong with being ambitious, but it's easy to get carried away. And doing so can have serious consequences. If a rescue group accepts too many neonatal kittens, for example, it can lead to inadequate care. Or if a TNR group can't trap enough cats to fulfill the requirements of a grant, future funding might be jeopardized.

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Estimating capacities up front offers an additional benefit: It focuses attention on the various metrics that will be used to measure a program's success (number of cats trapped, kittens pulled, adoptions, etc.). Be sure to set benchmarks at the outset of the program and at periodic intervals, and track progress. Don't forget to celebrate even modest improvements, which offers an excellent opportunity to strengthen the relationships among the various organizations involved.

Finally, collecting and sharing success stories can be remarkably effective at demonstrating to everybody involved — including various stakeholders throughout the community — the significant contribution they're making. Such stories can also be integrated into a CCP's training program.

Additional resources

- *Community TNR: Tactics and Tools*

- Best Friends' community cats page

- Frequently Asked Questions About TNR

- FIV and FeLV FAQs