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INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN RICHMOND OF NEIGHBORHOOD CATS

Neighborhood Cats had its genesis in 1999 when three Manhattan Upper West Siders shared concerns about the number of free roaming cats in their neighborhood. Once someone told them about Trap/Neuter/Return (TNR), Neighborhood Cats was born.

Since then other groups and individuals have joined the TNR effort. But despite their efforts, there's much more to be done. NYC's Animal Care & Control has repeatedly said that the greatest challenge to reducing its shelter population is the number of free roaming, unfixed cats in New York City.

That's why we were intrigued to learn about Neighborhood Cats "Staten Island Clean Sweep." The plan: TNR 1,000 free-roaming cats, with spay/neuter to be performed by a participating local vet.

So, we were honored to interview Susan Richmond, Neighborhood Cat's executive director, to discuss the state of TNR in NYC.

SRAC: Would you describe Neighborhood Cat's "Clean Sweep"?

RICHMOND: Clean Sweep has been the largest "targeted TNR" project yet in NYC. In a targeted project, resources like trappers, spay/neuter clinics and marketing are focused in one clearly defined area. The goal is to achieve a high rate of sterilization among the local free-roaming cat population. Other communities' experience has repeatedly shown this is the fastest and most efficient way to reduce the cats' numbers and their impact. By the end of July, we'll have altered over 1,000 cats on Staten Island in little under one year. The project will be concluding with three spay days at The Toby Project's stationary spay/neuter clinic in Brooklyn. The success of Clean Sweep is due to a generous grant from PetSmart Charities and the hard work of a network of expert trappers who live in Staten Island and came together to make this happen.

SRAC: How many more free-roaming cats on Staten Island still need to be TNR'ed?

RICHMOND: At the start of the project, based on data from colonies and caretakers registered in our database, we had estimated there were approximately 2,000 free-roaming cats still needing to be altered on Staten Island. So there will be at least 1,000 more to go when the project is over. In light of the tremendous response we received from people seeking help, we now believe there are likely considerably more than that left to fix. Whether we've done enough so far to lower intake to ACC's Staten Island facility is something we have not yet evaluated.

SRAC: Can the success of "Clean Sweep" be applied to NYC's other 4 boroughs?

RICHMOND: The targeted approach can and should be used throughout NYC. In fact, it already has been employed in certain neighborhoods. When Neighborhood Cats began 15 years ago, we started doing TNR on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and went block by block, fixing all the feral cat colonies we could find. As a result of this intensive effort, there are very few cats living on the streets there now.

In general though, targeting is a big change from the way TNR has usually been done in NYC so far.

For many years, the approach has been more grassroots – training and supporting interested caretakers to TNR their own colonies. In a large municipality where you need to get a lot of people involved to make a difference, this was a necessary first step and has helped build a strong foundation to TNR in NYC. Neighborhood Cats was the first local group to offer TNR workshops, has trained over 6,000 residents and continues to offer monthly classes. The problem though is that caretakers motivated enough to be trained and do the work are scattered throughout the City. Population control is achieved in certain colonies, but not in entire areas. As a result, overall progress from a city-wide perspective is slow.

SRAC: What do you suggest can and should be done to expand TNR's effectiveness in NYC?

RICHMOND: A lot of progress has already been made in lowering cat intake to ACC over the past 10 years, but to reduce it further and faster, the practice of TNR in NYC has to now include more large-scale targeting. Support for individual caretakers will always be needed, but more attention and resources need to go towards identifying and managing areas with relatively large free-roaming cat populations.

SRAC: What's your best guess on the number of unfixed free roaming and feral cats in NYC?

RICHMOND: Precise estimates really amount to no more than educated guesses. That's why we like to say there are at least tens of thousands remaining to be altered. If pressed for a more specific number, we would say between 50,000 to 100,000. This takes into account the many years of TNR already done by dedicated caretakers, the harsh winter climate and the relative scarcity of ground space in many parts of the City.

SRAC: Are there problems unique to NYC making TNR more difficult?

RICHMOND: For many caretakers, there is a lack of what we call "holding space." This is a place to house the cats during the two or three days of a mass trapping (the TNR of an entire colony at once) and for the recovery time after surgery, which is typically anywhere from 24 to 72 hours. People live in apartments and can have difficulty finding an adequate space. Many people also don't have cars, so transporting cats can be another challenge. Cats have to be brought back and forth from their territory to the holding space, and back and forth from the spay/neuter clinic. In addition, while we're fortunate to have free and low-cost spay/neuter services for feral cats, accessing them and scheduling appointments can be complex and a bit frustrating for someone new to TNR. Another big challenge – which is not unique to New York but is present in every community – is that many, even most, of the people feeding feral and stray cats are not able or willing to do the TNR work themselves. Others have to do it for them or the cats won't get fixed.

SRAC: Do you believe that NYC government can or should provide resources for TNR?

RICHMOND: It's important to acknowledge that the NYC government – through ACC – does offer support for TNR now. Since the early days of Neighborhood Cats, we have had a strong and enduring partnership with ACC. When we first approached them about TNR, they changed their policies to stop having their officers trap cats at the public's request. They also started alerting us when eartipped cats (colony cats who have been marked as sterilized) enter their facilities. As a result of these "eartip alerts," many hundreds of lives have been saved. Plus this safety net encourages caretakers to get their cats fixed. In the Clean Sweep, ACC has provided us with data and helped market the project on Staten Island. These are a few examples of the ways we've worked together.

As far as the NYC government providing more resources, that would be great. There's still a lot of work to do.

SRAC: Hypothetically, if NYC government asked for your advice, what would you propose the City could do to dramatically expand TNR?

RICHMOND: The first thing that would be needed, in order to fully take advantage of a large inflow of new resources, would be formulating a more advanced community-wide TNR strategy. Right now TNR in NYC is very caretaker-based, focusing on isolated colonies located randomly throughout the City. We need to keep this training and support system in place, but in addition, we need to target high-need areas for intensive TNR. This will require hiring staff to work in these areas and perform outreach, trapping, transportation – whatever is needed to get as many cats as possible to the clinics. Besides staff, targeted projects require marketing funds, equipment and assigned vehicles.

I would also recommend building new spay/neuter resources, preferably a clinic dedicated primarily to free-roaming cats. Similar to the [FixNation](#) clinic in Los Angeles. It's wonderful that there are free resources available now, but their capacity for feral cats is not meeting the demand. If more surgeries were available and more easily accessible, more TNR would get done.

Finally, a robust Return to Field program would both save lives and further educate the community on the proper care of the cats. In a RTF program, all healthy but unadoptable free-roaming cats admitted into ACC shelters would be fixed, vaccinated and then returned to their original locations.

These tactics have all been successfully implemented in other communities. For example, a program combining targeted TNR and Return to Field was performed in Albuquerque, NM. It was a partnership between the municipal shelter, PetSmart Charities and Best Friends Animal Society. After only three years, intake dropped close to 40% and euthanasia was down over 85%. Similar programs are now happening in Washington DC, Baltimore and Philadelphia, among others. There is no reason we can't do the same here. If anyone wants to learn more about these methods, they're described in detail in the book from PetSmart Charities, "Community TNR: Tactics and Tools," authored by our co-founder and current Board member, Bryan Kortis. It's available on Amazon.com.

SRAC: Best Friends also has described the success by cities that have undertaken TNR while partnering with Best Friends. See <http://bestfriends.org/What-We-Do/Local-Programs/Model-Programs/>

SRAC: The AC&C recently announced it has created a new position entitled "Community Cat Program Coordinator." What's your understanding of the AC&C's role going forward with TNR?

RICHMOND: To our knowledge there are two positions posted – "Community Cat Program Coordinator" and "Community Cat Program Assistant." We don't know specifically what ACC's plans are, but the job descriptions for the two new positions provide some hints. It appears the plan is for some form of a Return to Field program and some out-in-the-field TNR work. As the agency most impacted by free-roaming cat overpopulation, it makes a lot of sense for ACC to get more actively involved and play a leadership role. We look forward to working with them in whatever way would be helpful.

SRAC: What changes would you suggest in the way the AC&C handles feral cats?

RICHMOND: We would love to see an end to the euthanasia of all healthy, free-roaming cats. Instead, these cats should be fixed, vaccinated and returned back to their original territories. Also, if ACC would provide materials describing local TNR resources to anyone inquiring or complaining about outdoor cats, to the extent it's not doing so already.

SRAC: Thanks so much for speaking with us about the state of TNR in NYC.