

A PUBLIC HEALTH PERSPECTIVE ON CONTROL OF STRAY CAT POPULATIONS NJ Association of County & City Health Officials

Over the past decade, the number of people feeding and supporting neighborhood stray cats has been steadily increasing and causing the population of feral cats to explode, while costing local tax payers thousands of dollars. Many communities are looking for solutions to manage the problems and costs associated with stray cats. Many municipalities adopted a number of ordinances that are designed to prevent the maintenance and feeding of stray cats within the community. These ordinances address cat licensing, roaming, feeding of strays and setting a limit to the number of animals that a resident may own. Simply stated, if someone exercises control of a cat (i.e., feed regularly), they own it and must take responsibility for licensing and maintaining the health and well-being. Stray cats that are unlicensed and free roaming are usually picked up by animal control and removed from community either via adoption or euthanasia.

Recently, many cat activists have begun to aggressively advocate for Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) programs as the solution to reducing the population of stray cats. Typically, stray cats are trapped, spayed or neutered by a veterinarian, given a rabies vaccination and then released to a site where they are fed regularly by a volunteer. By preventing cats from breeding and protecting them from rabies, a fatal disease that is transmissible to humans, cat advocates feel that they are humanely controlling homeless cats without euthanasia.

However, the success of TNR programs varies. Existing colonies attract new members and often become a dumping ground for unwanted pets. Many colonies are managed in public places such as parks and shopping plazas and are known to persist up to 15 years or more. Even more alarming, initial rabies vaccinations are only effective for one year. Many stray and feral cats that are vaccinated are only protected for the first year. After that, they are susceptible to rabies again if they are not re-trapped and re-vaccinated. As such, TNR programs often fall short of limiting the cat population and protecting the managed felines from rabies.

There is a lot of misunderstanding within the community about the risks involved with maintaining a group of cats. The good intentions of individuals working to save the lives of cats are admirable, but often lead to unforeseen problems. For example, many colonies lack true medical oversight, and cats often fall victim when sick or injured, spreading the problem throughout the colony and to other healthy-owned cats that happen to pass by. Often times, the municipality is forced to pick up the tab for trapping and removing the sick animals.

Even more important, is the risk of rabies within the community. The United States has almost completely eliminated the incidence of rabies transmission to humans because of mandated dog licensing laws. Cats are more likely to encounter rabies because of their nocturnal habits and we are not willing to achieve the same standard? In New Jersey, since January 1989, there have been 292 cases of rabid cats and only 4 cases in dogs.

In addition, many welfare/humane groups frown upon the maintenance of free-roaming cats. Although cats maintain wild traits that aid in basic survival, they are bred to be a companion to man and have no true ecological niche in nature. Not only are they susceptible to diseases and parasites, but feral cats are vulnerable to attacks by dogs and other wild animals, inconsistent food supplies, animal cruelty, and the extremes of weather.

Most importantly, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that “stray dogs, cats and ferrets should be removed from the community” and that local health departments and animal control officers can “enforce the removal of strays more effectively” by promoting confinement and leashing of *owned* animals. Agencies that are responsible for promoting public health should not be promoting the very thing that threatens the health of the citizens.