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Community Cat Programs Handbook

Chapter 10

CCP Administration: Program Sustainability

Program Sustainability

Introduction

Community cat programs (CCPs), based upon the trap/neuter/return (TNR) method of population management, play a critical role in a shelter — and by extension, the community it serves — achieving and maintaining no-kill status. This means that the CCP must be sustainable, continuing long after the energy (and often the funding) that launched the program has been depleted.

Although sustainability requires long-term thinking, planning for program sustainability should actually begin before the CCP is launched. Indeed, this is often a key requirement from organizations that offer CCP grant funding. Once the program is underway, management and staff must monitor its progress, regularly comparing key metrics against the goals articulated in the plan, making necessary adjustments and reporting results to various stakeholders. The plan for sustainability is therefore likely to change over time, reflecting the dynamic environment in which CCPs operate.

Although no two CCPs are alike, there are key general factors contributing to their sustainability. The following provides an overview of these key factors and indicates how they relate to a program's sustainability.

Key factors

It's easy to think of sustainability purely in financial terms, since a program is sustainable only as long as the funding needed to support it remains available. Although many other factors affect a CCP's sustainability (see below), funding is a good place to start.

Funding and budget. It's not uncommon for a CCP to receive a significant portion of its initial funding from nonprofit organizations interested in seeing the program implemented. Even before the CCP is up and running, though, substantial thought must be given to how future funding will be secured. Increasingly, municipalities are being asked to fund such programs from the

outset, as an integral part of their animal services budget, thereby eliminating the need for a future “hand-off.” And because such an approach requires significant up-front buy-in from public officials responsible for overseeing budgeting, it increases the likelihood of a CCP's sustainability. (See “Financial Considerations” for additional information about this topic.)

Key shelter and program statistics. A CCP's effectiveness is most often measured in terms of key shelter and program statistics (e.g., reduction in the intake and shelter deaths of cats and kittens, reduction in the number and size of carefully monitored colonies). It's therefore recommended that CCPs have clear, quantifiable goals set from the outset.¹ Although there might be very legitimate circumstances that prevent a CCP from achieving its goals, it must be understood that doing so can jeopardize the program's future.

Colony management. A reduction in the number and size of carefully monitored colonies is a key measure of a CCP's effectiveness.² Ensuring that colonies can be properly managed long-term is therefore critical to the program's sustainability. (See “Colony Management and Caregiver Resources” for additional information about this topic.)

Note: Special care must be taken to ensure that colony and caregiver records are protected, which might mean that they remain the property of a nonprofit organization that is not considered a designee of a government agency.³ Otherwise, this sensitive information might be made public via public records requests.

Staff and volunteer training. The philosophical shift to the CCP model of managing community cats is a significant one, requiring some of those involved to rethink their job responsibilities and various measures of success. Although there is often a strong emphasis on training staff and volunteers during the early days of a CCP, it's important to recognize that training must be ongoing. Key concepts need to be reinforced

¹ For example, our Community Cats Projects (partnerships of Best Friends, PetSmart Charities™ and local municipalities) have the following goals: year 1, reduce shelter deaths of cats and kittens by 25 percent; year 2, reduce intake of cats and kittens by 10 percent; year 3, increase the live release rate by 35 percent.

² This colony-level focus is also the basis for the “red flag cat” CCP model: CCP staff and volunteers consider each stray cat surrendered to a shelter as a likely indicator (i.e., a “red flag”) that additional cats are living in the same area.

³ The specific factors used to determine whether a nonprofit is subject to public records requests varies state by state.

periodically; processes and protocols must be revised and refined as lessons are learned. (What's considered best practice one day might be outdated the next.)



A commitment to training not only makes for a more effective CCP, but also ensures that the people involved feel invested — all of which has a positive impact on the program's sustainability. (See “Working with Field Services and Dispatch Staff,” “Working with Shelter Staff and Volunteers” and “Working with Local TNR and Rescue Groups” for additional information about this topic.)

Effective communication. A CCP's sustainability relies on the commitment of staff, volunteers and other stakeholders. This commitment, in turn, relies heavily on how much trust people have in CCP leadership. One of the most effective ways to build and maintain this trust is through honest, open communication. This might take the form of regular meetings with staff (ideally, representing various departments and/or organizations), a monthly newsletter to supporters of the shelter, or any number of other channels (some high-tech, some low-tech). Again, what's important is that the communication be honest and open, and that it involves the broad range of stakeholders.

Processes and protocols. Standardizing (to the extent possible) various processes and protocols will not only improve a CCP's efficiency and effectiveness, it can also reduce stress levels among staff and volunteers. It's perfectly normal to struggle early on, sorting out what works and what doesn't. Once the steep learning curve has been overcome, though, key processes

and protocols should be streamlined and standardized, allowing for straightforward daily operations. Among those to which CCPs should pay attention:

- Voicemail script (outlining key CCP points)
- Forms and templates (e.g., intake and clinic drop-off forms)
- Surgery vouchers
- Trapping, recovery and return protocols
- Caregiver best-practice recommendations
- Resources for addressing complaint calls
- Relocation policies and protocols

Service areas. CCPs are most effective when they serve very targeted areas (e.g., specific neighborhoods or zip codes), often those determined to be the source of highest shelter intake. It's expected that these service areas will shift or expand as “hot spots” are addressed, but it's important that a CCP's service areas be matched to its capacity. Expanding too far or too soon, or using a scattered approach rather than a targeted one, can greatly reduce the program's effectiveness — which can easily lead to a loss of morale, public support and funding.

Burnout and “compassion fatigue.” Even in the most successful CCPs, staff and volunteers are exposed to an enormously stressful environment. This is especially true in the early days, when the way forward might be clear but far too many lives are still being lost. Given the critical role that a program's staff and volunteers play in its long-term success, it's important that management is aware of the risks of burnout and “compassion fatigue” — and takes appropriate steps to minimize the risks (see “Additional Resources” below).

Working toward sustainability

Ensuring a CCP's sustainability is an ongoing effort requiring stakeholder engagement at a deep level. The more the program can become embedded in the shelter and the broader community (and thought of simply as “the way we handle community cats here”), the greater its chances of long-term success. To achieve this kind of engagement, consider the following:



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- Regular cross-training (shelter staff and volunteers riding along on trapping jobs and returns, CCP staff and volunteers “shadowing” intake staff and field services officers, etc.)
- Testimonials from caregivers; testimonials from complainants whose issue was addressed by the CCP staff or volunteers (perhaps as video clips on the shelter’s website and shared via social media)
- Media events showcasing the program and its impact in the community (“spay days,” vaccination clinics, etc.)
- Regular “town hall” meetings (open to the public and designed to both educate the community about the program and allow residents to voice their concerns)
- Regular TNR workshops (to demonstrate best practices)

This list is hardly exhaustive, of course; it’s meant only to be a starting point. Again, what’s important is stakeholder engagement at a deep level. CCPs are therefore encouraged to experiment with various ideas and techniques that are likely to result in such engagement. (See “Community Outreach and Engagement” for additional information about this topic.)

Additional resources

- [Best Friends’ community cats page](#)
- [FAQs About Trap/Neuter/Return \(TNR\)](#)
- *The Power of Joy in Giving to Animals* by Dr. Linda Harper (book available on amazon.com)
- [“Feeding the Fire \(Without Burning Out\)”](#) (article in *Animal Sheltering* magazine) by Carrie Allan