Working with Field Services and Dispatch Staff

Introduction

Working closely with field services officers (often called animal control officers or ACOs) and dispatch staff is critical to the success of any community cat program (CCP). Because these people typically find themselves on the “front lines” (fielding complaint calls, addressing nuisance complaints in the field, etc.), they provide an indispensable resource for community outreach and education. Oftentimes, the public first learns about a CCP through conversations with ACOs or dispatch staff.

However, successful collaboration requires some understanding of the role that field services and dispatch staff have played historically in municipal animal control. For many years, some animal control agencies have responded to complaints about stray, abandoned and “feral” cats by rounding them up, contributing to a high rate of killing in shelters. This practice persists today in some places, although in many other communities ACOs will now respond only in cases deemed high-priority (e.g., a sick or injured cat, report of a bite).

It’s important to recognize that the philosophical shift to trap/neuter/return (TNR) is a significant one, requiring some of those involved to rethink their measures of success (see below). Although it’s unlikely to happen overnight, this shift does have the potential to transform an organization. The same staff who regarded the CCP with great skepticism can become its greatest ambassadors, and the program’s emphasis on lifesaving efforts can cause field services and dispatch staff to see every aspect of their jobs through this new lens.

Of course, some staff already share the underlying philosophy of the CCP and will immediately embrace their new role. CCP staff should be prepared for a broad range of responses.

Training

Guidelines recently adopted by the National Animal Care and Control Association (NACA) acknowledge the philosophical and cultural shift taking place within animal control agencies across the country, as these organizations increasingly adopt a CCP model. From the 2014 NACA Guidelines: “NACA recognizes that in some circumstances, alternative management programs, including Trap Neuter Vaccinate & Return (TNVR) programs, may be effective, and recommends that each agency assess the individual need with their community and respond accordingly.”

While no two organizations are exactly alike, the structure of the field services and dispatch departments of most animal control agencies tends to be similar in that there is a clear chain of command. For this reason, it’s important for those
in charge to be committed to the philosophy and goals of the CCP. Their buy-in must be communicated to the rest of the team through initial training sessions and, as the program rolls out, during regular team meetings.

CCP staff can play a critical role in this training, especially in the early days of a program — or better still, before the program launches. Among the various training resources to consider are the following:

- Presentations that explain the CCP’s rationale, describe the benefits to staff and showcase the results of model programs
- Brochures, door hangers and other collateral that will help ACOs as they describe the program to residents (See the appendix for examples of documents explaining that the CCP complies with all relevant laws and has the support of the municipal shelter and elected officials.)
- Scripts and role-playing exercises for interacting with residents

No doubt, some of the best training tips will come from the field services officers and dispatch staff themselves. After all, they have the direct experience and interact with the community on a daily basis. Again, some will embrace the program more eagerly than others. Encourage these individuals to share tips about what works (as well as what doesn’t) with the team regularly.

In a CCP, problem solving is no longer about “taking the cat away.” ACOs and dispatch staff are required to better understand the nuance — and underlying cause — of nuisance complaints, and they often play the role of diplomat, negotiator or counselor. Training ACOs and dispatch staff in such skills is therefore essential to the success of the CCP. (See “How to Address Various Complaints” for additional information on this topic.)

Benefits to ACOs and dispatch staff

In some cases, the benefits of the CCP may not be immediately obvious to field services officers and dispatch staff. This is especially true for agencies in which field services and dispatch services are separate from sheltering services. (Sheltering staff typically observe a reduction in intake and shelter deaths almost immediately upon launching a CCP) However, experience demonstrates that these individuals will benefit considerably, as:

- The policies regarding community cats (impoundment, response to nuisance complaints, etc.) are clarified, reducing ambiguity and misunderstanding — and the associated stress — among staff and residents alike
- There’s a decrease in the number of cats and kittens picked up in the field and/or impounded via shelter intake, thereby reducing workload
• Resources once allocated to impounding community cats are re-allocated to other tasks — for example, at-large dogs, injured animals and cruelty investigations

• Caregivers and the rest of the community start respecting ACOs rather than seeing them as villains

• CCP-related public relations and community outreach efforts help inform residents about the program, reducing the burden on field services and dispatch staff

• Workload is further reduced because healthy ear-tipped cats are only rarely impounded

Communication

As with any collaborative endeavor, a successful CCP depends on effective communication. Because they serve on the front lines, field services officers and dispatch staff play a key role, often acting as the conduit between residents and CCP staff. It’s important, therefore, that these individuals receive proper training and are given appropriate resources (as described above).

Language tip: Be consistent in the terminology used to describe your community cat program. It’s probably best to avoid referring to it as TNR, since trap/neuter/return is actually just the method being employed by the program, not the larger program — which typically includes community outreach, adoption and foster opportunities. Furthermore, the term has negative connotations for some people, and can therefore become a barrier to effective collaboration. The terms most often used are shelter/neuter/return (SNR), return-to-field (RTF) and community cat program.

Processes and protocols should be established to ensure consistent communication wherever possible. Callers should receive the same information regardless of whether they speak with a field services officer, a dispatcher or CCP staff. Among the various questions to consider are:

• Who receives incoming calls about the CCP (e.g., dispatch, customer service representatives, 311 operators)?

• What information do callers receive?

• Is key incoming information about community cats passed effectively and efficiently from ACOs and dispatch staff to CCP staff?

• How will all staff involved in the CCP program understand their role in the network of communication?

Measures of success

As mentioned above, the philosophical shift necessary to launch and operate an effective CCP will require some field services officers and dispatch staff to rethink their measures of success. Their traditional role in animal control efforts often involved responding to complaint calls by removing cats or kittens from a particular location, often with fatal consequences. Removal of the cats or kittens completed the job. They considered the cessation of complaint calls success.

A successful CCP may very well lead to fewer complaint calls, but this is just one favorable outcome. Among the others are:

• Reduced intake and shelter deaths of cats and kittens

• Reduced number of young kittens brought to the shelter (an indication that the population of community cats is being stabilized or reduced)

• Reduced colony size and/or number

• The number of positive interactions with residents who support the CCP and, perhaps more important, those who were skeptical of the program but who have seen its impact in their neighborhood

• Improved relationships with shelter staff, caregivers, elected officials and the community overall

Admittedly, some of these measures are difficult to quantify and track. However, the value they represent to various stakeholders, generally speaking, far exceeds anything captured merely...
by tracking impoundments. In any case, some process of documenting and tracking an agency’s performance must be implemented if stakeholders expect to see ongoing future improvements.

Finally, collecting and sharing success stories can be remarkably effective at demonstrating to ACOs and dispatch staff the significant contribution they’re making to the agency and their community. Such stories can also be integrated into an agency’s training program.

**Innovative tools**

In addition to the shelter intake tools commonly used by field services officers and dispatch staff (e.g., Chameleon/CMS for tracking intake and outcome data), a number of new mapping tools, such as Google Maps and Microsoft MapPoint, and geographic information system (GIS) technology allow CCPs to track intake and colony locations. Visualizing such data can be enormously valuable not only to various staff members, but also to elected officials and the general public, as a compelling way to demonstrate a CCP’s progress. (See “Data and Statistics” for additional information on this topic.)

**Additional resources**

- Best Friends’ community cats page
- FAQs About Trap/Neuter/Return (TNR)
Appendix 1: Letter of Support from Municipality — San Antonio, Texas

Animal Care Services
4710 State Highway 151
San Antonio, TX 78227
210.207.4PET www.saacs.net

CITY SUPPORTS TRAP-NEUTER-RETURN FOR COMMUNITY CATS

The City of San Antonio Animal Care Services Department supports and embraces Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR), a program for community cats. We currently support this program by providing free spay/neuter services for community cats in targeted zip codes. The services for selected zip codes are funded by both a grant from Best Friends Animal Society as well as the Department’s Budget. For the other zip codes in San Antonio and the surrounding areas, The San Antonio Feral Cat Coalition (SAFCC) provides subsidized low-cost surgeries, resources and volunteer assistance. SAFCC is a local non-profit, all volunteer organization. Find out more at their website www.sanantionioferalcats.org. You can also contact them by calling their helpline at 210-877-9067 or by sending an email to info@sanantionioferalcats.org.

TNR has assisted many communities across the United States in dealing with their cat overpopulation challenges. In accordance with Chapter 5 of the City of San Antonio Municipal Ordinance, spayed or neutered outdoor cats are legal. As part of this program, any feral or community cats brought into the shelter as strays will be spayed or neutered, vaccinated, ear tipped and returned to the area that they were taken from, provided they are healthy and appropriate for surgery (weight and age).

As part of this nationally accepted program, cats are returned back to their original territory fully vaccinated and sterilized. They have no more kittens, their population stabilizes, declining over time. Bad behaviors associated with mating, such as yowling, spraying and fighting, decreases. The cats live out their lives and over time, the colony reduces in numbers as the cats naturally die off while no new kittens are born into the colony.

The typical trap-and-kill methods used in the past were cruel, inhumane and ineffective at solving the cat overpopulation issue. It just doesn’t work. Worse, trapping and killing actually perpetuates the problem due to the “vacuum effect”. This “vacuum effect”, which happens when cats are trapped and removed from the colony, allows other cats to move in and take advantage of the newly available resources and to breed as early as 4 months. Attempting to relocate cats also creates a vacuum effect. Think about this—if just 3 kittens survive in a litter, those kittens and their descendants can produce over 11,000 cats in 5 years! TNR solves the problem at its root by making sure the cats are healthy and cannot reproduce.

Below are a few frequently asked questions:

What if the cat is sick or injured?
All cats brought into our shelter receive a medical examination. Sick/injured cats will not be returned to their colony.

Who is going to care for the cat, once it returns?
Cats coming into the program that are a healthy weight most likely have someone in the neighborhood feeding and helping care for them. If you want to learn how to care for community cats, visit the website at felines.bestfriends.org.

What if I don’t want the cat back in my neighborhood?
The law allows for outdoor cats. It does not require that a cat have an owner or a care taker. As such, the cat will be returned to where it was impounded or trapped. ACS and the program coordinator can assist you with humane, legal deterrents to keep cats off your property.
Appendix 2: TNR Resolution — Arlington, Texas

Resolution No. 13-208

A resolution authorizing and approving the community cat initiative Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program whereby nonprofit organizations help manage feral cats

WHEREAS, feral cats currently exist in large numbers and roam free throughout the City of Arlington with no comprehensive effective means of controlling their population; and

WHEREAS, the City currently addresses nuisances caused by feral cats through trapping and humane euthanasia; and

WHEREAS, the City recognizes the potential for a Trap-Neuter-Return program as a mechanism to reduce existing feral cat populations; and

WHEREAS, in the interest of instituting a successful TNR program to control feral cat population control, sponsoring organizations and individuals approved as caretakers with the sponsoring organizations have agreed to act to minimize feral cat nuisances; and

WHEREAS, sponsor organizations including the Arlington Feral Cat Coalition, Friends of Arlington Animal Services, the Texas Coalition for Animal Protection, and Alley Cat Allies, Inc. have volunteered to provide the TNR program and coordinate with Arlington Animal Services; NOW THEREFORE

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF ARLINGTON, TEXAS:

I.

That all of the recitals contained in the preamble of this resolution are found to be true and are adopted as findings of fact by this governing body and as part of its official record.

II.

That the City of Arlington adopts the community cat initiative Trap-Neuter-Return program whereby organizations or individuals sponsored by certain organizations take actions to control the City of Arlington feral cat population.

III.

That the organizations designated by the Arlington City Council as community cat sponsoring organizations to work with Arlington Animal Services are the Arlington Feral Cat Coalition, Friends of Arlington Animal Services, the Texas Coalition for Animal Protection, and Alley Cat Allies, Inc.
IV.

That the community cat sponsoring organizations have agreed to publicize information about the Trap-Neuter-Return program, provide a single point of contact for Arlington Animal Services, and will attempt to notify the appropriate sponsoring organization when notified by Animal Services about an impounded TNR designated cat. Animal Services will notify the single point of contact about any apparent feral cat colonies in order that the sponsoring organization can take action to limit any nuisances caused by feral cats.

V.

That the sponsoring community cat caregivers have agreed to obtain cats in public areas only or with property owner permission using humane measures, ensure veterinarian care including vaccinations, and coordinate with City Animal Services. Sponsoring organizations and their caregivers have affirmed that all cats that are part of the Trap-Neuter-Return program will be sterilized, vaccinated against the threat of rabies, and ear-tipped for easy identification. If these requirements are met, properly identified TNR cats have an affirmative defense to the requirements of licensing, stray, at-large and other city ordinance provisions if there is no nuisance created by the TNR cats.

VI.

That the City Council authorizes and approves the Community Cat Caretaking Sponsor organizations relative to control of feral cat populations.

PRESENTED AND PASSED on this the 20th day of August, 2013, by a vote of 9 ayes and 0 nays at a regular meeting of the City Council of the City of Arlington, Texas.

ROBERT N. CLUCK, Mayor

MARY W. SUPINO, City Secretary

APPROVED AS TO FORM:
JAY DOEGEY, City Attorney