Introduction

The effectiveness of a community cat program (CCP) depends on a number of factors, including stakeholder buy-in, program funding, clinic capacity and many more. The ability to accurately assess this effectiveness is critical to understanding which aspects of the program are working well and identifying opportunities for improvement. This assessment is most often done by analyzing a shelter’s key statistics.

Although the very thought of analyzing data makes some people uncomfortable, a careful review of the shelter’s key statistics is absolutely essential to understanding a CCP’s current performance and future progress. This understanding also helps staff and volunteers to develop policies and processes that maximize positive outcomes, and the institutional knowledge developed over the course of regular data reviews and reporting is invaluable in helping them make lifesaving decisions quickly and with confidence — all of which improves the CCP’s overall success. (See “Working Toward Positive Outcomes” for additional information on this topic.)

Key metrics

A number of statistics can be tracked to monitor the progress of a CCP, and certain statistics will be of interest for particular shelters, their communities and various stakeholders. For a program operating near an environmentally sensitive area, for example, reducing shelter deaths may be considered less important than reducing the number of young kittens coming into the shelter (the latter metric being a rough measure of population-level impacts, thereby being of particular interest to stakeholders who want to protect wildlife).

There are two broad categories of data to consider when preparing for and analyzing your CCP: shelter statistics and program statistics. Below are the key elements of each category, and suggestions for how you can use them to create a successful program and monitor your progress toward saving cats in your community.

Shelter statistics. The place to begin when creating a CCP is with the shelter’s statistics. Before you begin a program, you need to know the answers to the following:

- Where are the cats coming from?
- How are they getting to the shelter (e.g., owner surrender, stray, commercial trappers)?
- Which age group (kittens or adults) tends to end up in the shelter?
- Which cats are dying in the shelter, and why?

One additional benefit: Careful data analysis and regular reporting are an excellent way to garner support for a CCP, whether from elected officials, the general public, donors or institutional funders (e.g., national nonprofit animal welfare organizations). Indeed, as supporters demand an unprecedented degree of transparency from the animal sheltering and animal welfare communities, data analysis — once considered either a luxury or an academic pursuit — is no longer optional. (See “Financial Considerations” for additional information on this topic.)
**Program statistics.** Government officials and grant-making organizations often want to see program-specific data such as the number of colonies, number of spay/neuter surgeries and total number of program cats. You also need to track location information for each colony along with caregiver contacts. For smaller programs, you can create a spreadsheet to log addresses and contact information as well as details on individual cats. Larger programs, however, will most likely need to use custom fields in shelter database software (e.g., Chameleon or PetPoint) to keep up with their project’s data. Best Friends recommends that you collect the information listed in Table 3 on page 22-8.

This database can be used daily to keep up with the status of cats and manage communications with colony caregivers. You can also summarize the data on an interim basis and pair it with shelter stats to determine program impact. For example, here’s some data reported at the end of the first year of Baltimore’s CCP:

- Total spay/neuter surgeries: 3,500 (50/50 spay/neuter)
- Number of colonies identified: 888 with 4,300 total cats
- Number of colony cats spayed or neutered: 3,097
- Number of colony cats removed for adoption: 450

The live release rate for 2013 was up 13 percent over 2012 (from 63 percent to 77 percent), which included a 43 percent reduction in shelter deaths and a 24 percent increase in live outcomes.

“A data-driven approach is essential to the design, implementation and sustainability of any successful community cat program. By tracking and understanding key statistics, shelters are able to create targeted programs, leverage results to raise support and funding, and achieve sustainable solutions for the cats in their community.”

*Nikki Kelley, senior manager of Best Friends Network operations, Best Friends Animal Society*

**Zooming in and zooming out.** Data entry, tracking and reporting requires great attention to detail. Addresses of colonies, for example, must be precise enough to be used in mapping tools; kittens must be counted individually, not merely as litters; and so on. Nevertheless, it’s important to be able to zoom out beyond a particular shelter and assess lifesaving efforts at a community level, too. This is especially important in communities where, for whatever reason, cats and kittens are being diverted from one facility (e.g., a limited-admission private humane society) to another one (e.g., an open-admission municipal shelter). Only by having a clear “big picture” perspective can a community understand the effectiveness of its current lifesaving efforts and the work necessary to achieve the goals of a CCP.

**A word of caution.** Although some very successful CCPs exist in communities requiring colony cats to be registered (i.e., colony and caregiver information is recorded and tracked by a “sponsor” organization), such arrangements can be detrimental to a program’s effectiveness. Such bureaucracy (sometimes accompanied by annual fees) tends to drive caregivers underground, likely reducing sterilization and vaccination rates in a community. For this reason, Best Friends discourages CCPs from requiring colonies and caregivers to be registered.

In addition, there is a risk that sensitive colony and caregiver information might be made public via public records requests. It’s generally assumed that this risk is greatly reduced by having colony and caregiver data tracked by a private nonprofit organization rather than by a government agency (e.g., the department of the local government overseeing municipal shelter operations), although there is no known legal precedent. Such risks would seem to outweigh the benefits of registration, which are, in any case, limited to begin with. (See “Legal Issues to Consider” for additional information on this topic.)
Innovative tools
Among the most popular case management software applications used by shelters are Chameleon/CMS (chameleonbeach.com) and PetPoint (petpoint.com). Although none of this software is designed specifically for CCPs, key program statistics can be tracked using customizable fields.

In addition, a number of new mapping tools (e.g., Google Maps, 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. Using Google Maps, for example, you can create custom maps to track the status of CCP colonies. This simple map shows all colonies in a given zip code and their status. (Note: These are not actual colony locations.)

By zooming in on target areas and clicking on markers, you can see detailed information. These maps are easily accessible on mobile devices, helping you manage trapping schedules and locations while out in the field. For additional information about creating maps using Google Maps, see the Google Maps Help Center (support.google.com).

Additional resources
- Shelter Animals Count project shelteranimalscount.org
- The National Federation of Humane Societies’ Basic Data Matrix
- What Is Your Rate? Understanding the Asilomar Live Release Rate, ASPCA Live Release Rate and Save Rate
- Cat Stats online database
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of importance</th>
<th>How to track</th>
<th>What it tells you</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intake (overall)</td>
<td>Essential</td>
<td>For shelters with a high volume of animals, it's recommended that you use tracking software such as Chameleon or PetPoint.</td>
<td>Intake decreasing over time suggests a reduction in your community’s free-roaming cat population. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, feline intake fell 38% within three years of the CCP launch, from about 9,800 in 2011 to about 6,100 in 2014.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intake by age</td>
<td>Essential</td>
<td>Enter the estimated date of birth (DOB) at intake. This allows you to easily calculate age at intake and age at outcome. You can also develop age ranges for reporting (e.g., up to eight weeks, two to six months, adult, senior).</td>
<td>Effective CCPs should experience a gradual decrease in intake of kittens under eight weeks of age, signifying fewer litters being born to free-roaming cats and, over time, a reduction in the community cat population. In 2016, Baltimore, Maryland, saw 39% fewer kittens (up to four months of age) entering the shelter compared to 2012, the year before the program started.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intake by zip code</td>
<td>Optional</td>
<td>When possible, enter zip code information for all intakes. This helps define areas of high intake so you can create targeted programs to decrease the number of cats coming into your facility.</td>
<td>Focusing on one or two zip codes to start a CCP is a good way to collect initial impact data. This creates evidence you can take to local government and granting organizations to gain support for your program. In Louisville, Kentucky, Alley Cat Advocates identified one zip code as the location with the highest percentage of feline intakes at Metro Animal Services. After an eight-month TNR effort, they were able to decrease intakes for that zip code by 51%.</td>
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Summary: Combining intake information broken down by age and zip code can help you determine which areas to target first, and then give you a clear picture of your program’s success over time. It can also help you refine the program along the way to maximize impact. If interim progress reports don’t indicate that intakes are declining as you hoped, it’s time to re-evaluate and see if you should be targeting different areas. This information will also help you secure funding for your program, as intake statistics broken down by age and zip code are required in most major TNR and CCP grant applications.
### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes (overall)</th>
<th>Essential</th>
<th>How to track</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Track in the shelter software system at the individual animal level.</td>
<td>In tandem with declining intakes, you should expect to see an increase in live outcomes as a percentage of your intakes (live release rate), as your shelter’s lifesaving capacity expands.</td>
<td>Within three years, the CCP in San Antonio, Texas, saw the live release rate jump from 31% in 2011 to 83% in 2014. In that time, live outcomes nearly tripled.¹</td>
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| Outcomes by age | Essential | Devise a formula using the outcome date and estimated DOB. | Outcomes by age help paint a complete picture of your shelter’s increase in lifesaving. You would expect to see fewer deaths across all age categories, not just some populations. For example, if fewer kittens are dying but adult cat deaths remain unchanged, this suggests a need to investigate adult cat health issues in your shelter. | When Best Friends, the Animal Care and Control Team of Philadelphia (ACCT Philly), and PetSmart Charities™ launched that city’s Community Cats Project in mid-2014, ACCT Philly began a foster-based kitten nursery in tandem with the CCP. Together, these programs helped increase their save rate for neonatal kittens by 17% from 2013 to 2017. |

| Outcomes by type | Essential | This is perhaps the most essential element to track. Each outgoing animal is assigned an outcome type: adoption, returned to owner, euthanasia, etc. (See reference to Shelter Animals Count matrix below.) | The secret to increasing your save rate is decreasing deaths and increasing live outcomes as a percentage of intakes. Many shelters see an initial dramatic spike in save rate as policies change to get more community cats out alive. The true challenge is continually finding ways to increase live outcomes, which, in combination with intake reductions from the program, can translate into sustainable no-kill status for cats. | In 2014, the first year of the CCP in Pima County, Arizona, the live release rate for cats jumped 54% compared to 2013 (from 51% to 79%). This was the result of a 70% reduction in shelter deaths and a 21% increase in live outcomes. |

¹ For a discussion of save rate, live release rate and other related metrics, see What Is Your Rate? Understanding the Asilomar Live Release Rate, ASPCA Live Release Rate and Save Rate.
Table 2, continued

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<td>Nuisance calls</td>
<td>Optional</td>
<td>Keep a call log of incoming complaints related to free-roaming cats. (It’s important to distinguish between inquiries and complaints.)</td>
<td>While not as dramatic as other lifesaving results, decreased complaint calls can be helpful when making a case for your program to local government. Fewer calls means fewer upset residents and less staff time spent responding to the calls (i.e., a cost savings). In Harrington, Delaware, where 550 cats (93% of the pre-trapping count) were sterilized and vaccinated, the shelter saw a 98% reduction in the number of cat-related nuisance complaints. (^2)</td>
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Note: Shelter Animals Count’s Basic Animal Data Matrix lists the essential statistics that all shelters should track.

**Table 3**

**Colony data**
- Unique identifier (assign a unique colony ID number to each colony)
- Address (including zip code)
- Total number of cats
- Number of original colony members and number of “new arrivals”
- Number needing spay/neuter (update as program proceeds)
- Additional notes

**Caregiver contacts**
- Colony ID: the unique number you assigned (there can be multiple contacts per colony, all with the same ID)
- Name
- Address (not necessarily where the colony lives, include zip code)
- Phone
- Email address
- Additional notes

**Cat details (for each cat trapped)**
- Colony ID (unique number you assigned)
- Estimated date of birth
- Name
- Sex
- Description (create a drop-down menu of items to choose from)
- Microchip number
- Intake date
- Origin (trapped by program, resident, shelter, etc.)
- Shelter ID number, if pulled from shelter
- Surgery date
- Surgery type (spay: pregnant, in heat, normal, abnormal; neuter: normal, abnormal)
- Clinic name
- Other medical information
- Outcome date
- Outcome type
- Additional notes