Guidelines for the Community Cat Diversion Program in Greenville County, South Carolina

Revised September 21, 2015

Program Overview

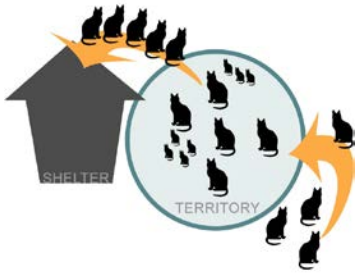
As of May 1, 2016, any free roaming community cat brought to Greenville County Animal Care, either by an animal control agency or by the public, may enter the Community Cat Diversion Program if it meets the qualifications for entry into the program. Each cat will be vaccinated, altered (spayed or neutered), and returned (also known TNR) to the location or vicinity of origin within 48-72 hours, unless the property owner/caretaker requests that the cat not be returned to that location. In addition, each cat will be ear-tipped (the universal symbol of a sterilized cat).

What is a "free roaming" or "community" cat?

Any cat that is not owned and lives outside is considered a "free roaming" or "community" cat. Typically these cats have little or no human contact for much of their life and live outdoors full-time. Free roaming/community cats and stray cats are not the same. Stray cats are lost or abandoned house pets. Stray cats are generally friendly with humans and may be adopted into a new family. Community cats, on the other hand, are not well socialized to humans or accustomed to living indoors. They avoid close contact with almost everyone, even when living in the same neighborhood. These cats live where they can find food and shelter – which is usually near people who intentionally or unintentionally provide a steady source of food.

"Catch & kill" doesn't work and removing cats from an area creates a vacuum.

Removing cats from an outdoor area and euthanizing them (also known as "catch and kill") has been the traditional approach to controlling the community cat population for decades. Despite our best efforts, the number of outdoor cats does not decrease, making the practice outdated and ineffective. However, scientific evidence shows us that removing feral cats only opens up the habitat to an influx of new cats. The cycle of breeding continues, and it draws the community into a costly, endless cycle of trapping and killing cats – an ineffective use of tax dollars. This is commonly referred to as "The Vacuum Effect" and it is documented worldwide.



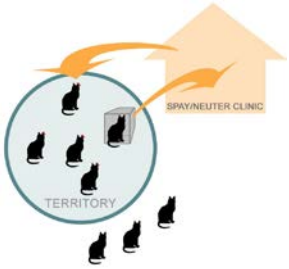
Catch and Kill

What is "The Vacuum Effect"?

The vacuum effect describes what happens when a portion of an animal population is permanently removed from its home range. Sooner or later, empty habitats attract other members of the species who then move in and take advantage of the same resources (like shelter and food). Killing or removing the original population does nothing to eliminate these resources; it only creates a "vacuum" that will inevitably draw in other animals living nearby – in this case, community cats.

Trap-Neuter-Return (a.k.a. "TNR") works!

This program involves humanely trapping all outdoor cats in the colony, spaying or neutering, vaccinating, and returning them to their outdoor homes. If additional cats move into the colony, TNR is also done to them. When there are no more kittens, the population stabilizes. Behaviors and stresses associated with pregnancy and mating stop, such as yowling or fighting. Not only does TNR make good sense, it is also a responsible, humane method of care for outdoor cats.



Trap-Neuter-Return

What cats will be accepted into the Community Cat Diversion Program?

- Only unwanted or abandoned cats living outdoors full-time and brought to Greenville County Animal Care by animal control agencies or surrendered by the public will qualify for this program.
- Kittens must be at least 12 weeks old and healthy enough to undergo spay/neuter surgery.
- Friendly or abandoned house pets do not qualify for this program as they rely solely on humans for their survival.

Examples of cats who do not qualify for the Community Cat Diversion Program.

- Friendly, well socialized house cats whose owner can no longer keep them.
- Extremely sick cats or kittens that are not healthy enough to undergo spay/neuter surgery. This is determined by the veterinarians on staff at Greenville County Animal Care.
- Kittens under the age of 12 weeks who are not big enough to undergo spay/neuter surgery.

What information do we need to make TNR successful?

The key to TNR is to return the cat back to its own territory with its own colony mates – not to just release the cat anywhere. Community cats become well adapted to their territory and can live safely – even in places we don't think would be sustainable, such as parking lots, backyards, alleyways, and a host of other locations. The present home of a community cat colony is the optimal place for the cat to be returned as it has probably been living there for some time. It is critical that complete and accurate information is gathered on where the cat was found and trapped. To ensure this, we will need to know where the cat was found and trapped. Be exact! We need a complete street address including zip code. We also need to know how the cat was acquired.

How do we handle nuisance complaints?

The majority of complaints received by animal shelters and animal control are about mating behaviors displayed by unsterilized cats. These include yowling, fighting, spraying, unhealthy and sick kittens, and roaming. An immediate reduction in these behaviors is realized after the cats are altered. Many cats become friendly and stay closer to home.

All nuisance complaints should be directed to the appropriate animal control agency so the issues may be resolved and corrective action taken to help these cats become good neighbors.

Why do we ear tip community cats?

Ear tipping is the universal sign of a spayed or neutered outdoor cat. The procedure involves removing approximately ¼" off the tip of the cat's left ear while the cat is anesthetized for spaying/neutering. Ear tipping is safe and humane, and it allows people to clearly identify that a cat has been spayed or neutered without having to catch it first. Also, ear tipping is a good indicator for animal control officers that a cat is part of a managed colony and does not need to be picked up.

I have community cats living outside near my home. What do I do?

1. First make sure the cat(s) you see outside are community cats and not house pet(s) that may have ran away from home. Check to see if the cat(s) has any form of visible identification and return it to its home if it does.
2. Set up a humane live trap near where you have seen the cat(s) eating or living. Traps are available at Greenville County Animal Care on a first-come, first-served basis.
3. When you trap a cat, bring it to Greenville County Animal Care between the hours of 12PM-4PM Monday through Wednesday.
4. Animal Care medical staff will determine eligibility for the Community Cat Diversion Program. If eligible, Animal Care will get some critical information from you and then will take the cat to its clinic to be spayed or neutered.
5. You will be asked to pick up the cat after it has been spayed or neutered and has adequately recovered from surgery. Usually this is within 48 hours after trapping the cat.
6. Return the cat to the exact spot that you trapped it near your home. Release it from the trap.