Orange County Animal Services Advisory Board
Free-roaming Cat Task Force Charge
March 3, 2014

**BACKGROUND**

In January 2010, Orange County Animal Services (OCAS), in conjunction with the Animal Services Advisory Board (ASAB), developed "Managing Pet Overpopulation: A Strategic Plan for Orange County, NC." The Orange County Board of County Commissioners approved the plan in 2010. The plan states: *"Animal Services staff and the Animal Services Advisory Board (ASAB) recognize that the problem of pet overpopulation is a community problem and must be addressed on a fundamental level by targeting and preventing the root cause, namely the birth of unwanted litters of puppies and kittens..."*

Goals identified in the plan included lowering animal intakes to the OCAS center, thereby controlling costs; increasing the annual rate of targeted spay/neuter of dogs and cats to 5 per 1000 county residents (approximately 600 per year); and reducing the euthanasia rate to 35 percent or lower over a period of five years.

Fundamentally, the plan represents smart fiscal and humane policy. By investing in pro-active strategies to address pet overpopulation now, Orange County will be saving taxpayer dollars over the long run, by reducing the numbers of animals entering the shelter system, lowering euthanasia rates and reducing the costs of providing services over time.

Current data shows that OCAS has surpassed the 35% euthanasia rate goal, but OCAS and the ASAB agree that more progress can be made to further decrease animal intake and euthanasia numbers. Strategies employed by OCAS to address pet overpopulation have been successful to date, and the investments made in strategic spay neuter and adoption outreach have had an impact. But, it is necessary to remain vigilant and continue the significant effort. Since the population of Orange County is continuing to increase, OCAS must continue to be aggressive in its approach to pet overpopulation in order to keep this significant community problem under control.

Cats continue to be a special issue of concern within the overall pet overpopulation problem. The strategic plan identified feral cats as an area needing special attention, because at the time, feral cats accounted for 30 percent of all cats euthanized at the shelter. In 2010, OCAS ended its long-time practice of trapping and euthanizing feral cats. The number of feral cats euthanized has since declined, but stray or free-roaming cats remain a significant source of the OCAS' annual animal intake.

According to OCAS statistics, the 2013 intake of cats was 1,483. While 20 percent (296) of these intakes were owner surrenders, fully 80 percent (1,187) were strays. Just 4 percent (56) of intakes were returned to owners. Overall, live releases (returns to owner, adoption, or transfer to placement partners) accounted for 62 percent (926) of intakes, while 34 percent (506) cats were euthanized.

Based on the fact that the majority of cat intakes for 2013 were strays, it is clear that free-roaming cats constitute a large percentage of OCAS' total cat intakes.

Further, due to the unique reproductive physiology of cats, OCAS faces seasonal challenges in addressing cat overpopulation. The shelter population can increase sevenfold during "kitten season" which typically spans from late March through October, and the number of cats coming in to the shelter significantly exceeds the capacity of the OCAS adoption and partner placement programs to place them.

Based on the above, it is apparent that the free roaming cat situation remains an area of ongoing concern that must be addressed.

**DEFINITIONS**

The task force recognizes that the issue of cats in the community is broader than just ferals. As a result, the task force has decided to focus its attention more broadly to free-roaming cats in our community. For the purpose of this task force, free-roaming cats are defined as outdoor cats for whom an owner cannot be readily identified, and who may or may not be loosely affiliated with a caretaker or multiple caretakers. These cats can be sociable, or feral, including individual cats, groups of cats, or cat colonies.

**TASK FORCE CHARGE**

Orange County is a community that cares deeply for the welfare of animals – both domestic and wild. As a result, the Task Force seeks to develop, in cooperation with OCAS, a humane, holistic, and balanced approach to manage the free-roaming cat population, based on the following tenets

1. **Reduce number of and improve health of free-roaming cats** - Increased spay/neuter of free-roaming cats will reduce litters of kittens, decrease fighting between cats, and reduce cat-to cat-transmission of viral disease and parasites, allowing longer and healthier lives.
2. **Protect health for community members –** Increased vaccination of free-roaming cats will decrease the potential for rabies transmission. Improved health and reduced populations of free roaming cats will also decrease the potential for other zoonotic disease transmission.
3. **Protect wildlife** – A reduced and healthier free-roaming cat population will have fewer impacts on birds and other wildlife.
4. **Uphold and elaborate community values** – All programs must reflect Orange County's demonstrated concern for and dedication to the humane treatment of animals.
5. **Save taxpayer funds** – OCAS costs short- and long-term costs will decrease with the reduction in intake and euthanasia of free-roaming cats as well as the decrease in nuisance calls that would be expected with a reduced and better managed free-roaming cat population.

6. **Promote public/private partnerships** – The scope of the free roaming cat problem is broad and beyond the capacity of any single agency to address it. OCAS itself has limited resources and has maximized its programs through successful partnerships for spay/neuter outreach and services, as well as fence building in conjunction with tethering ordinance enforcement. Similar partnerships must be identified and cultivated on the free roaming cat issue.
7. **Strengthen the cat/human bond** – The bond between people and cats must be strengthened. Cultural differences in attitudes toward cats and dogs result in much higher abandonment rates for cats than dogs. This means that spay/neuter alone cannot solve the free roaming cat problem; education and outreach must be an integral part of any program.

To accomplish these goals, the Task Force will explore and propose ways to work together as a community to:

1. **Educate and endear** our citizens to cat nature and welfare and how appropriate reproductive strategies and vaccines (rabies) can benefit the overall well-being of the pet.
2. **Identify** pets with permanent identification that will allow easier tracking of pet/owner relationships (2013 data showed that of the 1483 cats presented to OCAS only 4% or 56 cats were reclaimed by their original owners)
3. **Reduce Population and Increase Health of free roaming cats** with spay/neuter and vaccination by:
    - Exploring Trap/Neuter and Release programs for free-roaming cats;
    - Exploring model programs and ordinances from communities within North Carolina and across the nation for addressing free-roaming cat issues;
    - Identifying community partners to assist in outreach and delivery of spay/neuter, vaccination and identification services;
    - Identifying mechanisms for outreach and expansion of low cost spay/neuter services to low income segments of population.

The Task Force will provide a report to the ASAB containing its recommendations and findings for addressing and improving the plight of free-roaming cats in Orange County.