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Managing Free-Roaming Cats in Orange County, North Carolina

January 21, 2015

Orange County's Animal Services Advisory Board (ASAB), an advisory body of residents appointed by the County Commissioners, has supported and approved this report. Members of The Free-Roaming Cat Task Force, a subcommittee of the ASAB, and Animal Services staff collaborated to prepare this report. The Task Force consisted of DeWana Anderson, DVM (chair), Judy Miller, Warren Porter, and Aviva Scully. A special thanks to the community members who attended meetings and shared insight, as well as Suzanne Roy, who served as a member of the task force during the early stages of this project. Thanks are also due to Maria Grinshaw, Ellie Nove, and Steven Pray, non-profit Fellows from the UNC-CH Kenan-Flagler Business School, who worked with staff and the task force in this important process.

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Executive Summary

This is a five-year plan to address the pressure of and concerns raised by free-roaming cats in Orange County. Its overarching goal is to reduce their numbers using a humane approach that involves partnerships and community involvement. This reduction in number is desirable in regard to incoming cat populations in the sheltering environment, as well as a mitigation of the problems such cats create within communities.

The report has been prepared by a task force of the Animal Services Advisory Board, working closely with Animal Services staff. The work of the task force included literature research and surveys of other communities currently addressing the issue of free-roaming cats. It also involved public “listening sessions” for cat caretakers, community partners, wildlife advocates and rehabbers, and the general public.

This report and plan is the final stage of Managing Pet Overpopulation: A Strategic Plan for Orange County, North Carolina. Because of the unique challenges free-roaming cats create, the task force and Animal Services staff feel this five-year process of education and partnership is the most effective way to make significant changes in the number and status of cats in our community.

Highlights of the report include:

- Education and outreach to promote spay/neuter, keeping cats inside, and identification
- Pilot programs for addressing cats in select areas
- Partnerships and community involvement
- Performance measures and management

Through this plan, the task force and staff have been able to identify ways to reduce cat euthanasia and the intake of cats into the sheltering system. With decreased numbers over time, the overall health and welfare of the cat and community improves, while nuisance problems and sheltering costs decrease. More generally, it is hoped that this local effort contributes to the paradigm shift in managing free-roaming cats that is underway, and a transformation in the prevailing bond between people and pets.

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No policy changes are being presented or requested to the Board of County Commissioners at this time. However, future policy changes may be presented during the implementation of the plan, particularly in the area of sterilization of free-roaming cats that have a caretaker, but do not specifically belong to a person or family.

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1. Introduction

In 2010, Orange County Animal Services put forward Managing Pet Overpopulation: A Strategic Plan for Orange County, North Carolina.¹ By partnering with animal rescue groups and organizations that offer low-cost and targeted spay/neuter surgeries, this plan has been very successful in both decreasing the overall number of pets that enter the sheltering system and increasing the number of live releases from the shelter.

Between 2005 and 2013, intake numbers of cats and dogs decreased from more than 4,000 per year to less than 3,500; and in 2014, fewer than 3,000 animals were admitted.² During the same period, the number of live outcomes — a combination of animal recoveries, adoptions, and transfers to rescue group— was strengthened and stabilized despite the economic recession. In 2013 and 2014, there were 2279 and 2154 live outcomes respectively, which are among the highest numbers of live outcomes in the history of Animal Services.

As a result of strong placements and declining intakes, there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of animals euthanized. In 2013, 847 animals were euthanized, and in 2014 that number was 760. By comparison, an average of 1580 animals were euthanized annually for the period of 2005-2009.

Despite these significant and notable strides, there is a strong belief that Orange County can do even better, especially in regards to cats. Doing so is important to a community that has a strong tradition of animal protection and demanding expectations for animal care and welfare. Cats are an important issue for animal welfare and services, not only in Orange County, but in the United States. Their persistence as a “problem” raises issues not only about animal sheltering, but also traditional approaches to animal control and the overall philosophy and approach to animal management in our communities. Indeed, cats in general, and free-roaming cats in particular, are a new frontier for animal services and animal welfare.

The Animal Services Advisory Board established its free-roaming cat task force (the task force) in December 2013 to develop strategies for overcoming the varied problems created by cats that roam our community and swell the county’s animal shelter during summer months. Doing

¹ The report is available at <http://orangecountync.gov/AnimalServices/documents/ManagingPetOverpopulation2010OrangeCountyNC.pdf>.

² Trend data is available at <http://orangecountync.gov/AnimalServices/info.asp> on intakes, placements, and euthanasia.

so was the final significant stage of the county's strategic plan for managing pet overpopulation. It has been through the implementation of this plan that animal intakes and admissions have been dramatically decreased.

The task force held 13 public meetings between December 2013 and July 2014. Many of these meetings were "listening sessions" for partners in the community, cat caregivers, wildlife advocates and experts, and the general public. There was considerable discussion of issues and viewpoints, but a shared enthusiasm to address the problem of free-roaming cats more directly in a humane and responsible manner.

Many other communities are addressing the issues of free roaming cats as well.³ Orange County's task force studied the different methods and approaches of these areas when forming the strategies and goals that are recommended in this report. It is apparent that this is one of the most significant issues currently facing communities throughout the country, and a true frontier for the field of animal services.

2. Problem

As a major concern for animal welfare and companion animal management, free-roaming cats are a multifaceted problem in Orange County and in communities and jurisdictions across the country. They drive the annual cycle of shelter operations, but their impacts are also felt on community health and livability and human co-existence with wildlife. These and other facets are part and parcel of the prevailing bond between people and cats in our communities and culture. Improved management thus will require changes in this bond.

It needs to be stressed that free-roaming cats do not form a homogeneous population. Rather, there are several different groups that together impact our county. These include:

"Loosely owned" cats: It has long been recognized that the bond of cats and people in contemporary society differs from dogs in its looser nature. Testimony during task force meetings indicated that many families have one or more inside cats but also sometimes feed and provide less substantial shelter for one or more outside cats that they do not claim as their pets. These cats are not owned in a traditional sense, but are also not

³ As referenced in Managing Community Cats: A guide for Municipal Leaders, published in 2014 by the Humane Society of the United States for distribution through ICMA.

what one would consider feral. Loosely-owned cats often show up in an area of the community and may be cared for on some level by one or more persons.

Feral cats: In addition to loosely owned cats, free-roaming cats also include abandoned cats and feral (wild) cats. These may be cats that self-reproduce or come from the offspring of loosely affiliated or abandoned cats. They may depend upon human care or become highly adaptive, surviving on scraps and other area resources. However, they characteristically keep their distance from people due to the absence of human contact and socialization during their formative developmental periods. Feral and semi-feral cats have traditionally been the focus of trap, neuter, release programs (TNR).

Abandoned cats: It seems likely that cats are abandoned to a much greater extent than dogs and other animals, partly on the basis of the preconception that they are self-sufficient as well as solitary in nature. Whatever their status before abandonment, they are afterward destined to become a member of the free-roaming population. Their surviving offspring, unless rescued and brought into close contact with humans, will become part of the feral segment of the population.

Communities and neighborhoods confront a variety of specific issues as a result of the presence of free-roaming cats. While each issue is different in nature, what they all have in common is the presence of free-roaming cats in some number. The three most prominent issues identified by the task force are:

Public Nuisance: Outside and free-roaming cats may tear up gardens or yards, deposit unwanted waste, and interfere with the ability of neighbors to have pets and children safely outside. Such nuisance issues have traditionally been addressed through various cat control measures such as confinement requirements or even cat leash laws, but often call for measures to decrease the number of free-roaming cats.

Health and Welfare: Of the various human health concerns (e.g., toxoplasmosis) with which cats are associated, the most significant continues to be rabies. Today, cats are four times more likely than dogs to contract rabies.⁴ Because of their loose affiliation, many cats do not visit veterinarians with anywhere near the same frequency as dogs, and thus are not vaccinated against rabies to the same extent. Moreover, they are

⁴ In North Carolina in 2014, there were 15 laboratory confirmed cases of rabies in cats, but only 4 in dogs.

outside and unconfined, making it more likely that they will mingle with raccoons and other wildlife that carry rabies.

Wildlife Depredation: Outdoor cats also pose a risk to birds and other wildlife. Orange County does not host vulnerable, threatened or endangered species whose existence could be made more perilous by the presence of feline predators. Nevertheless, cats can be a concern to backyard feeding stations and in parks and nature preserves seeking to sustain native habitat.

Sheltering occupancy and operations are driven in no small part by cats and the loose affiliation people have with them. A number of key statistics for Orange County are presented in Cat Statistics.⁵ These include:

Kitten Season: As a result of uncontrolled reproduction, there is a huge influx of kittens each spring that is responsible for the number of shelter cats tripling from less than 50 to more than 150 in the course of a given calendar year.

Seasonal Cycle: The influx of kittens and other cats beginning in spring continues to be the single largest cause of a substantial and predictable seasonal cycle in the population of shelter animals. From fewer than 100 in the winter months of a given year, the overall population grows to upwards of 250 animals in the summer months, and generally exceeds 150 animals in the transitional periods of early summer and late fall.

Cat Sheltering: The successful sheltering of cats requires that they be kept significantly longer than dogs to be homed or rehomed. The average length of stay for cats can approach nearly twice as long as dogs at times. Also, as a result of the number of cats and their average length of stay, cats account for a large share of total board days. In 2013, for instance, they accounted for almost two-thirds of 55,000 total board days.

These shelter operation dynamics have not changed despite the accomplishments of our effort to manage the county's overall problem of pet overpopulation. In the case of cats, these include decreasing the number of cat intakes from more than 2,000 per year to less than 1,500, as well as increasing the number of live releases of cats. In 2013, fewer cats (1,483) were admitted than dogs (1,628); and more cats (787) were adopted than dogs (692).

⁵ These statistics are available at <http://orangecountync.gov/animalservices/documents/CatStatistics03-14.pdf>.

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Interestingly, there were still more live outcomes in 2013 for dogs (1,092) than for cats (843). The reason lies in owner recovery numbers. While only 56 cats were recovered by owners or custodians, 400 dogs were reclaimed for the year. This is a predictable differential between cats and dogs in Orange County, reflecting a pattern of significantly different rates of recoveries for these two species.

In addition, there is good reason to believe there is a comparable difference in the rate at which cats and dogs are brought into the shelter by the public.⁶ We would never tolerate dogs roaming the streets, yet we turn our head to cats and shrug them off as acceptable outside. In the pointed words of one task force member:

If a loose dog is seen running across a public street, people passing by would most likely try to capture the dog or call animal control or 9-1-1. On the other hand, it is far less likely that the public would do the same for a cat seen running across a public street. In general, people seem to believe cats can survive on their own better than dogs, and also seem to have stronger bonds with dogs than cats. And although cats may be able to survive on the streets, the survival isn't always good survival, and the problems they create extend outward into the community.

These differentials reflect the difference in the bond that exists between people and dogs and people and cats in contemporary society. The exact reasons for this difference are still not well known (and arguably they are the subject of inquiry in the humanities and social sciences). However, there is a strong sense that historical differences in their domestication and keeping and cultural perception in contemporary society are significant factors. Ultimately, this is why public awareness and education must be an integral part of a comprehensive program to effectively manage free-roaming cats in our own and other communities.

While American culture as a whole may not hold cats in the same regard as dogs, people do by and large consider them companion animals and do not want to see them euthanized to solve problems. Therefore, decreasing the number of cats roaming freely in our community should be

⁶ It is suggested that 3 times the number of cats are both sheltered and roam freely in a community, compared to dogs, and that each un-spayed female can produce an average of 15 kittens each year.

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welcomed and supported provided that it is done in a sensible manner on the basis of public engagement about the possibilities as well as the need to do so.

3. Goals

Our overall goal is to decrease the number of free-roaming cats in Orange County through spay/neuter efforts, public outreach and education, community involvement, and more innovative approaches to resident cat concerns. It is expected that, by doing so, far fewer cats will enter the shelter as a result of “kitten season,” and fewer cats will need to be euthanized as a means of population control. A major lesson of our prior experience managing pet overpopulation is that there is a direct correlation between the number of animals euthanized and the number of animal intakes.

Decreasing the number of intakes should have an impact on current seasonal sheltering dynamics. The influx of cats in early summer should lessen over time, alleviating the seasonal surge now driving sheltering operations throughout the rest of the year. Board days per animal should lessen with decreases in the number of kittens being admitted, and as a result, it may become possible to redirect certain resources to other areas of animal care or even into early prevention in the community.

In addition, community dynamics and impacts should be mitigated by decreases in the number of free-roaming cats. Reducing the number of free-roaming cats overall is expected to reduce potential or actual disease transmission (including rabies, which exists in wildlife species such as raccoons with which uncontrolled and unvaccinated cats can come into contact). It should also mitigate nuisance neighborhood issues, such as the soiling of gardens and sandboxes, as well as the depredation of birds and other wildlife that often fall victim to free-roaming cats. It deserves to be stressed that a strong sense emerged from task force listening sessions that an effective plan for addressing free-roaming cats would protect wildlife.

Decreasing their numbers, in short, will be a prerequisite to success in better managing free-roaming cats in Orange County. Available and emergent resources must be used strategically and they must be used to reduce the number of free-roaming cats over time, on the basis of preceding interventions, public awareness, and community commitment and involvement.

4. Pilot Programs

The plan for managing free-roaming cats in Orange County includes one or more pilot programs that seek to progressively reduce cat numbers in specific areas. The exact form of these pilot programs will be decided on the basis of experience gained in the formative phases of the plan. Particularly important may be the partnerships that are formed and the capacities that they generate; the lessons learned not only both locally and in other communities across the country; and the degree of community commitment to managing these cats in new and different ways.

An important part of these projects will be identifying the specific areas of the county in which there will be pilots. It is hoped that the development of a community database about free-roaming cats (see section 6) will create a basis for identifying areas in which there are more or fewer free-roaming cats and even areas of concentration. Alternatively, it may be possible to use GIS mapping of the cat litters brought into the Animal Services Center in recent years, or animal control complaints about concentrations or colonies of cats.

Depending upon a host of variables including resident preferences, there may be pilots that involve sterilizing loosely affiliated and feral cats in particular areas. These may be done in partnership with existing cat caretakers and organizations that currently have low profile programs for sterilizing and releasing feral cats (often referred to as Trap, Neuter, Release or TNR). A critical measure of such efforts would be the demonstrable reduction of cats in these areas. Another important measure would be whether nuisance cat issues and/or complaints decreased.

A strong sense emerged from the work of the task force that there are some extraordinary opportunities for coordination between Animal Services and partnering non-profits to address concentrations of cats in particular places in the county. In particular, there was strong interest in exploring a form of partnership in which Animal Services could refer nuisance cat complaints to a partner for assessment and intervention.⁷ The form of the intervention by the partnering organization might well include direct outreach and education as well as trapping and sterilizing some or all of the cats identified.

⁷ An important model for this kind of partnership is the very successful collaboration existing between Animal Services and the Coalition to Unchain Dogs. Residents with tethered dogs are referred to the Coalition for assistance with fence building and the Coalition assumes full responsibility for working with residents who vaccinated and sterilize their dogs to build a fence.

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Pilots of this kind would depart from current practices. Animal Services continues to treat most cat complaints from a regulatory standpoint— that is, as public nuisances that cat owners or keepers must abate to avoid enforcement actions. With the exception of cases involving public health or animal suffering, Animal Services has not trapped cats for residents since 2010. Instead, Animal Services makes traps available to residents to use on their own (requiring only a deposit for the cost of the trap in the event it is damaged or not returned).

In addition, pilot programs may include or be supplemented by additional or enhanced information about preventing and dealing with loosely affiliated and feral cats as an individual resident and/or neighborhood development. This is an area that begs for attention and that may be addressed using modern media as well as more traditional canvassing and face-to-face contact. Presently, little information of this kind is readily available. By comparison, Animal Services currently has a dedicated webpage for coyotes and an entire segment of its website dedicated to wildlife.

Alternative forms of intervention in specific situations involving free-roaming cats need to be explored and evaluated in an open-minded manner. The reason that they are part of this plan is that they are indispensable to developing effective and acceptable methods for managing free-roaming cats. Their evaluation should be evidence-based, with due consideration of their fit with the needs and wants of residents. Ideally, they will lead to new and proven ways of managing free-roaming cats that can subsequently be used on a more regular basis throughout Orange County.

Finally, as pilot programs evolve, there may be need for legal review of existing animal ordinances and consideration of policy changes by elected officials. These needs may arise from efforts to sterilize and return loosely affiliated cats to specific places in the county. Staff will be attentive to these needs and the underlying issues during the latter part of the plan when pilot programs are developed, implemented, and evaluated.

5. Resources

It is not reasonable to expect a single agency or organization to be solely responsible for managing free-roaming cats in any community or jurisdiction. The sheer number of free-roaming cats makes this a problem that is bigger than Animal Services can handle alone in

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Orange County. More generally, a definite view emerged from the task force's survey of other local experiences that Animal Services must develop strong partnerships with non-profit and private organizations in order to effectively manage free-roaming cats.

Another theme that crystalized was that community awareness and "ownership" is no less critical. In none of the surveyed communities was animal services solely responsible for addressing the problem. Rather, community members were involved as individuals and strategic partnerships were developed with other organizations. Often, there are robust working relationships between public agencies and non-profit humane societies.

Partnerships have been critical to Orange County's own efforts to manage pet overpopulation since the strategic plan was originally adopted. Fortunately, there are a number organizations already in operation in Orange County with which Animal Services may partner to manage free-roaming cats in the coming years. Below are existing organizations, divided into groups that address outreach and education, and those that deal directly with targeted spay/neuter.

Public Outreach and Awareness

Outreach and awareness are important parts of a comprehensive plan for managing free-roaming cats in Orange County in order for members of the public to become familiar with available solutions to this problem as well as its roots and impacts. Accordingly, we will seek to promote awareness of available services and programs and the opportunities that exist for individuals to themselves become involved and make a difference.

The final form of outreach will be shaped by the experience, opportunities, and challenges of managing free-roaming cats in Orange County. But it will commence on the basis of our assessment of the problem of free-roaming cats (as previously described), and it will be undertaken in coordination with the following partners starting in 2015:

- *Kids for Kindness* is a local non-profit that started with an effort to teach fourth graders at Hillsborough Elementary the importance of responsible pet ownership and humane animal care. The hope is that this program can be expanded to include all fourth grade classes in both school systems in Orange County. Presently, the curriculum encompasses cats and dogs and addresses county animal services, spaying and neutering, and animal sheltering.

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- *Local veterinarians* are already seeing cat patients every day and seeking to educate cat owners. They will be enlisted to help spread the word about the benefits of keeping cats inside, environmental enrichment, the identification of pets, and the benefits of spay/neuter.
- *Independent Animal Rescue (IAR)* is an area organization active in Orange County that focuses on feral cats as well as rescue and rehoming of cats and dogs. As part of our effort to develop a strong partnership with IAR, shared and/or coordinated forms of outreach will be discussed early in the plan for managing free-roaming cats.

Coordination with these partners will be complimented by the elaboration of ongoing Animal Services activities to include and emphasize free-roaming cats. Staff already posts flyers and door hangers for low-cost spay/neuter programs in areas where free-roaming cats are centered, and they refer residents with reproductive dogs and cats to AnimalKind. But there are other opportunities to reach out to residents. These include outreach at low-cost rabies vaccination clinics, when residents recover stray cats that have been impounded from the Animal Services Center, and when complaints about neighborhood cats are taken.

Messages and educational themes will not be limited to the benefits of sterilization. They will also address the benefits of keeping cats indoors (with information about how to enrich their inside environment) and the benefits of identification of all pets. These are key in negating the undesirable impacts of free-roaming cats on residents' quality of life and on wildlife.

Targeted Spay and Neuter

Targeted spay and neuter has been a defining focus of Orange County's effort to manage pet overpopulation in recent years. This notion specifically refers to the sterilization of cats and dogs that otherwise would remain intact and reproductive. In our effort to more humanely and effectively manage free-roaming cats in the coming years, targeted spay and neuter will continue to be aggressively pursued to reduce their numbers in Orange County. The scope of targeted spay and neuter may eventually be broadened to include un-owned and/or loosely-owned cats involved in some carefully developed and managed pilot programs.

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As with public outreach and awareness, this part of the plan will depend upon strong partnerships with non-profit organizations committed to addressing the problem of pet overpopulation. As can be seen from the following discussion, a number of these partnerships are already in place as a result of our prior effort to proactively reduce the number of homeless cats and dogs in Orange County.

- *AnimalKind* has been a major partner of Orange County Animal Services since before the strategic plan for managing pet overpopulation was launched in 2010. It is fundamental to the targeted sterilization now done in Orange County, providing veterinary services and hundreds of spay/neuter surgeries each year on a low-cost or no-cost basis.
- The *Spay Neuter Assistance Patrol (SNAP) Mobile Spay Neuter Clinic* is already in operation in Orange County, providing sterilization services at the Animal Services Center every 10 to 14 days on average. SNAP is another proven partner in the county's current effort to deliver targeted sterilization for cats and dogs, having spay/neuter agreements with both *AnimalKind* and Orange County Animal Services. It is possible for these partnerships to change to include vouchers for greater numbers of free-roaming cats.
- *Independent Animal Rescue (IAR)*, as previously noted, works with residents in problem cat areas where they can help with care and spay/neuter for a number of resident cats. They also foster feral kittens so that these have the opportunity to be tamed and adopted rather than being recycled as part of a specific colony of free-roaming cats.

Increased awareness, coupled with ease of access to beneficial programs, will be crucial for finding success in these areas. Collaboration and community support will be the most important features that allow free-roaming cats to have the focus and follow through needed to begin seeing tangible improvements throughout the community.

6. Strategies and Timeline

Essential to the success of the county’s strategic plan for managing pet overpopulation was a timeline of initiatives that would be carried out in a five-year period. The task force has used this model to develop the timetable for managing free-roaming cats that is presented in this section. As can be seen, initiatives and expected outcomes are listed by year (or a longer time span).

The details of several initiatives are expected to emerge and/or evolve through the working relationships formed between partners in the initial stages of the plan. As previously indicated, this is especially so with pilot programs that sterilize cats without an owner in targeted geographic areas. The more complex and challenging initiatives appear toward the end of the timeline so that they can be matched to community support as it evolves.

TIMETABLE

	Initiative	Outcome
2015 Year 1	Education from OCAS (when adopting animals, recovering animals or visiting low-cost rabies vaccination clinics)	Indoor cat promotion, spay/neuter, identification
	Coordination with veterinary community	Indoor cat promotion, spay/neuter education, identification
	Continued coordination with Kids4Kindness regarding schools	Indoor cat promotion, spay/neuter education
	Public Affairs Campaign development	Indoor cat promotion, spay/neuter education
2016 Year 2	Partnership Exploration	targeted spay/neuter, program evaluation
	Program evaluation framework created	baseline database, shared guidelines for tracking and evaluation
	Public Affairs Campaign- launch	Indoor cat promotion, spay/neuter education, identification
	Expand targeted spay/neuter	increase number spay/neuters

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2017	Year 3	Fosters for Feral Kittens	reduce euthanized free-roaming cats
		Partnerships- development	Feral fosters, neighborhood problems
		Program Evaluation	determine past and current success and evaluate for future success
		Pilot Programs	Identify target areas
2018	Year 4	Pilot Programs	increase number spay/neuters
		Partnerships- sustenance and evaluation	feral fosters, neighborhood programs
		Pilot Program- implementation	Expand spay/neuter for cat caretakers, feral foster feeders, neighborhood problem solvers
		Evaluation of Plan	determine rate of success
2019	Year 5	Pilot Program Evaluations	determine rate of success
		Cat regulations	needed changes identified
		Evaluate Plan and Sustainability	sustainable program

Involving the public will be a priority throughout this period. One possibility is recruiting and training foster homes for kittens born to feral and semi-feral cats. Another is to set up a volunteer core for grassroots efforts to teach community members about spay/neuter possibilities, animal identification, and public health issues. A third possibility is a program to recruit and train cat caregivers to assist in projects that address the problem of free-roaming cats in select “hot spots” in Orange County.

In addition, an effort may be made to form partnerships in the triangle to proactively address free-roaming cats on an area basis. Collaboration of this kind could include things like a collective advertising campaign to encourage spay/neuter, vaccinations and identification of cats, and education about how people can enrich the environment inside their homes to be more satisfying to their cats.

7. Benefits and Program Evaluation

The potential benefits of the initiatives set out in the previous section are far-reaching insofar as they are successful in decreasing the number of free-roaming cats in Orange County.

Sheltering benefits are expected to include fewer feline intakes, reduced board days, a reduction in the number of cats euthanized, and a reduction in the rate of euthanasia.

Community benefits are expected to include lowered risk of rabies transmission, reduced nuisance issues for residents in municipal and unincorporated areas alike, and less loss and injury to wildlife from feline predators.

There may also be more general benefits as the health and welfare of remaining free-roaming cats improve with sterilization and more adequate vaccination. Fewer cats may result in less disease and infection, less fighting for territory, and less stress associated with living outside. Outcomes such as these may affect many different aspects of the free-roaming cat problem. They are at once beneficial to specific areas of community, public health, and animal welfare and sheltering.

An integral part of the task force's plan is program evaluation and management. Sheltering and intake numbers are one measure of success, as intake and litter numbers are tracked and evaluated over the course of the five-year plan. Similarly, community benefits may be measured in different ways, such as the number of cat nuisance calls received and the number of cat traps borrowed annually.

Because so many free-roaming cats are never brought into the county's animal shelter, more general measures will also be needed. The intention is to develop a community database from statistics pooled by the different groups working with free-roaming cats in Orange County. Ideally, it would be possible to aggregate some data from each group and track the total number of free-roaming cats over time. In this way, it would be possible to determine whether the plan is effectively contributing to the goal of decreasing free-roaming cat numbers.

Database development will depend upon the development of strong partner ties during the formative period of the plan. It may be a matter of agreeing to aggregate already available statistics from different partners, or alternatively it may depend upon the creation of some statistics by partners for aggregation. In either case, developing a comprehensive database from pooled information will depend upon developing good working relationships and a shared commitment to decreasing the number of free-roaming cats.

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Program evaluation is essential to the effective management of any effort of this kind, just as it has been to previous efforts to manage pet overpopulation to date in Orange County. Without some meaningful measures, there is no feedback between individual initiatives or a package of initiatives and the objectives or goal of a plan of this kind. Measures are important to effective management, whether they reinforce the importance of that effort in its present form, suggest that there is a need for some slight modification, or show that there should be a shift from one track to another.

Program evaluation is also important for communicating with the public, elected officials, and local government managers about a plan or program for managing animal companions. Ongoing communication should be evidence-based and strengthen overall support. It should make the public aware of new and different ways to address “cat problems” and relate to cats now and in the future. Such efforts should encourage and invite members of the public to become involved in what is ultimately a community effort to reform the enduring but dynamic bond between cats and people as we move forward in the 21st century.

8. Sources

- A. Meeting notes by date
- B. Strategic Plan
- C. Cat stats
- D. JAVMA articles on feral cat stats
- E. Pilot Program ideas