

# Trap – Neuter – Return

As the borough is experiencing a growing number of community cats (stray cats, and in an effort to approach this issue in a humane and thoughtful way, members of the Rules Committee of the Borough Council ask for volunteers to participate in a TNR program.

If you are interested in volunteering, need more information, and/or are interested in making an *online* donation to the borough's TNR program please call Ann Zartman, Borough Manager, at 570-473-3414.

You can also send donations by check. Indicate "Northumberland Borough TNR" in the check memo. Send checks to Central PA Center in Danville, 1467 Bloom Rd, Danville, PA 17821

## **Feral Felines: Trap-Neuter-Return Program is Helping Curb Cat Population By Tricia Kline for the Daily Item, published with permission from the Daily Item .**

Washingtonville resident Angela Bassett-Rarig had just returned home with her husband, Douglas, when they heard a kitten crying. They found him in a tree, and Bassett-Rarig coaxed him down with a can of cat food.

"He was starving and screamed at his food while he was eating," she said. Later, on his own, the kitten crawled into a towel-lined pet carrier she set nearby.

"I walked over and closed the door and brought him in the house," Bassett-Rarig said. "His name is Jacob, and he is the sweetest boy you will ever meet."

The couple ended up with seven house cats this same way, she said.

But not all of the cats that continued to show up on her property were as friendly. Feral, or community, cats, are not socialized. So she respected their space but continued to provide them with food. However, the cost eventually became an issue.

"Earlier this year, I was getting very anxious," she said. "I was afraid that we couldn't keep feeding them any longer due to financial responsibilities."

That's when she met Robin Montgomery, a Monroe Township woman who has spent the last 45 years advocating for measures to prevent pet overpopulation. She currently serves as president of SUN P.E.T.S., a local low-cost spay and neuter organization for qualifying pet owners. She also volunteers for Cherished Cats Rescue Alliance and manages volunteers at the Cat Adoption Center at PetSmart.

Montgomery also works tirelessly on her own TNR efforts, even lending out her traps for others who want to help stop the breeding of feral cats in their own neighborhoods.

She has been an advocate in her Monroe Township community, as well as a number of neighboring municipalities, successfully petitioning for local government funding for TNR.

She explained that cats begin breeding at four months old and have three to four litters per year. Because of that, it's important to spay and neuter cats as soon as possible.

"The feral cat population is not a cat problem, it's a people problem," she said. "When you let it get out of control like this, really ugly, bad things happen." From poisoning, to beating, to drowning, to shooting – frustrated property owners take desperate measures to rid themselves of the nuisance the cats can create.

"Is that the kind of community you want to encourage, or do you want to encourage a more humane response?" Montgomery asks.

### **How to respond**

According to Beck Robinson, president and founder of Alley Cat Allies, "If a cat shows up on your property, first determine if she needs immediate veterinary care." If she appears to be healthy and thriving, the next step is to look to see if the tip of her left ear has been "painlessly, surgically removed." This is the sign that a cat was part of a TNR program, through which it was spayed or neutered, vaccinated, and returned to its outdoor home. If there is no ear tip, Robinson said, the next step is to check with neighbors to see if the cat might belong to them. If no one claims her, then TNR is the next best way to help her.

"It's important that you never take a community cat to an animal shelter," Robinson cautioned, since their wild nature makes them unadoptable and would likely end up being euthanized. She said TNR "is the only humane and effective approach to community cats."

The process involves humanely trapping the cat, which is then spayed or neutered, vaccinated, and returned to their outdoor homes.

Montgomery and other cat rescue advocates in the region continue to encourage the development of TNR teams of people formed in each municipality, including caregivers, trappers, transporters, and those who provide recovery care for the cats post-surgery until they are ready to be returned to their outdoor homes.

### **"Humane and effective"**

Robinson calls TNR "the only humane and effective approach to community cats." Among its benefits is the saving of taxpayer dollars by reducing shelter intake, euthanasia incidents, and calls to animal services.

"Fewer cats impounded by shelters means that staff can focus on caring for adoptable cats, and shelters see dramatic declines in illness, such as upper respiratory infections, closely associated with stress and crowding," Robinson said, adding, "TNR is a sound public policy. The program benefits both the cats and the people who live near them."

Montgomery agrees. “A colony that is completely spayed and neutered will eventually die out,” she said, and “They become healthy colonies that do not allow other cats in.” Rather than spending their energies on breeding, she said, they instead focus on protecting their food source. “That’s the beauty of TNR.”

The Pennsylvania SPCA website reports that TNR benefits also include cessation of mating behaviors such as roaming, yowling, spraying and fighting. And they return to the community with their rabies and FVRCP vaccines. Robinson added that concerns about cats carrying disease and killing wildlife are “overblown.”

“You are more likely to contract a disease from another person at the grocery store than a community cat,” she said. And regarding threats to wildlife, she added, “Leading biologists, climate scientists, and environmental watchdogs agree that climate change, habitat destruction and development are leading causes of species loss, not cats.”

## **Success**

More than 12 years ago, Christina Wolfberg, of Camp Hill, who commutes to Sunbury for work, found a stray cat that neighbors had been feeding. She searched online and learned of a program, SNAP of PA, which had low-cost spay/neuter clinics in Harrisburg. She trapped her and took her there.

“That’s when I noticed that there were many, many strays in Sunbury,” she said. So, she, her mom and a few friends began getting more traps and TNR-ing colonies for people who reached out to them for help. They also requested that SNAP offer mobile clinics in Sunbury. After two years, the clinic shut down due to the unexpected passing of the veterinarian who was providing the services. But Wolfberg continues to work tirelessly in TNR efforts. She traps once a week in the summer, she said and takes eight to 10 cats at a time to an organization in Camp Hill. Other times of the year, she will trap once or twice a month. She is currently working to TNR a colony in Sunbury that a local rescue organization had told her about. This colony, she said, had nearly 40 cats and kittens. They were able to put the kittens in foster care, and got permission from colony caregivers to adopt out a few of the cats that were friendly. The rest were returned to their outdoor homes after being sterilized.

Currently, that colony numbers 10. “The number will continue to go down since there will be no more kittens,” Wolfberg said, adding, “The caregivers will monitor the colony in case any new ones show up, and they’ll be TNR’d immediately.

“TNR works,” she said. “I’ve seen it work.”

“The cats that are returned will be healthier, calmer, quieter and not roam as much,” she explained. “Once the colony is stabilized, it will start to go down in numbers. At some point the colony will completely diminish.”

She said education about TNR is Key, and volunteers are always needed to help trap, build shelters, and feed the cats.

“This won’t go away until we do something about it,” she said. Robinson, of Alley Cat Allies, credits TNR efforts for the reduction in the number of feral cats in communities all across the country.

“Thousands of communities conduct grassroots, volunteer-led TNR programs, and hundreds have adopted official TNR ordinances and policies,” she said. “That number continues to grow because of the success of these programs.”

For example, a project in Atlantic City, she said, has resulted in a 70 percent reduction of cats since 2000.

Bassett-Rarig recently finished constructing a shelter on their deck for the colony on her property to use for the winter. She said she already began pursuing the idea of TNR and plans to become an advocate in the borough of Washingtonville. She plans to directly ask borough officials for help through the allocation of funds, as well as through the purchase of traps that can be lent to caregiver.

In the meantime, Bassett-Rarig is thankful for those who have stepped up to help her care for her colony of kitties.

“We have the best neighbors,” she said, adding that some have already begun putting food out for them.