



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY  
OF THE UNITED STATES**

March 15, 2021

Christopher S. Fitzgerald  
Director of Animal Services  
184 Verona Street  
Rochester, New York 14608

Dear Chris,

Here at the Humane Society of the United States we strive to continually evaluate, understand, and promote the most effective and humane animal care practices to inform progressive and lifesaving programming. One such area is the management of community cats. What we know is that animal shelters may not be the best place for cats. Admitting a cat who is found living outdoors to the shelter is not the only service option available to support that cat (and the person(s) who is caring for that cat). We support progressive sheltering programs that work to keep healthy adult cats out of the shelter or limit their entry to return-to-field/home services.

A friendly cat should not be considered lost or abandoned simply because that cat is roaming freely outdoors, as community cats exhibit a range of behaviors, from feral to friendly. A friendly cat may be an owned cat who is allowed to roam, a loosely owned cat who may move between several homes, or a cat who does not have a traditional owner but is cared for by one or more members of the community. These cats already have homes and do not need to be rescued and rehomed.

It is estimated that at least 10% of the American public feed community cats. Often these caregivers have strong bonds with the cats regardless of the cat's level of socialization to humans. The identity of any particular cat's caregiver may or may not be known to others. At times, the identity of a caregiver may be unknown while signs of caregiving are evident. Additionally, many community cats have multiple caregivers who may or may not be known to each other.

Community cat programs are most successful when they engage and support these community members. Someone not familiar with the neighborhood may not realize that a friendly cat is beloved by the people who live there or that the cat has strong social bonds with other neighborhood cats. Taking that cat to the shelter and then placing her in a new home disregards the current home, places unnecessary stress on the cat and degrades any trust between residents and the rescue organization.

When it comes to cats who may be truly lost, it is ineffective to try to reunite that cat with her family by taking her out of the area where she was found. The national average "return-to-



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owner” rate for “stray” cats brought to animal shelters is around 3%. “Stray hold” periods do not help cats who do not have identification (tag or microchip) get back home. Research has found lost cats are 13 times more likely to find their way home if they do not enter the animal shelter and instead focus resources on reuniting the cat within the community. Cats were more successfully reunited through community actions (posting fliers, talking to neighbors) or by finding their own way home. Some cats picked up and brought to a shelter as a lost pet may not have been lost at all.

While we encourage people to keep their cats indoors in order to reduce both the risk of injury to that cat and the risk of harm to local wildlife, we also recognize that keeping cats indoors can be a complex challenge for many people. Domestic cats are highly adaptable and can thrive living outdoors when sterilized, vaccinated, and supported by humans. Cats found outdoors are generally best served by providing services to those cats where they are at.

Return-to-field/home programs for community cats have many benefits to both the individual cats and the community:

- Sterilization of cats contributes to an overall population decline. Because cats are adept at reproduction, cats that have been removed are quickly replaced.
- Vaccination of cats contributes to herd immunity and helps prevent outbreaks should an unvaccinated individual become infected.
- Cats who are spayed or neutered exhibit fewer behaviors that are considered to be nuisances – often those associated with mating and defending territory. This results in fewer complaints.
- Trust and relationship building with communities historically underserved by animal services.
- Practices are more fairly and equitably applied to all pet owners and caregivers.

Sincerely,

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Pets for Life

Danielle Bays  
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