



**Maddie's Shelter
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To Whom in May Concern:

I am writing regarding the recent concerns that have been raised about the status of community cats in Rochester, NY.

While I am outside the Rochester community, and therefore unable to speak to specifics regarding some of the recent issues with cats, I want to provide some background and support from the view of being a veterinarian engaged in shelter medicine practice. Currently there is a tremendous sea-change in animal welfare which is re-examining, based on decades worth of evidence, the role of municipal and private animal shelters in communities and the management of companion animal populations. This effort is the collective work of thousands of animal welfare professionals including leaders in the field through the Human Animal Support Services program (HASS), Maddie's Fund, Best Friends Animal Society, and the Humane Society of the United States -- as well as academic shelter medicine programs such as my own.

While there are many facets of this shift, in regards to cats it has been clear for decades that the traditional model of open admission and limited outcomes does not serve cats or communities. Cats continue to be at high risk for shelter-related illness and euthanasia when held in shelters. Organizations across the US are taking on the challenge of a cultural and operational shift to a better model of service in animal shelters.

Transitions of this magnitude are not easy, or perfect. While the Million Cat Challenge (<https://www.millioncatchallenge.org/>) has provided support and resources for years on this subject, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the integration of and need for these approaches. Carefully managed intake of cats into a shelter system is essential, as crowding compromises the health and welfare of every animal in the shelter. When shelters exceed capacity for humane care, entering the system is unlikely to have a humane impact for any individual cat. Key principles and recommendations are bulleted below for the sake of brevity:

- The primary mission of the shelter should be to identify timely humane outcomes that prioritize keeping animals out of the shelter facility.
 - Best practice: all public calls related to cats needing assistance should be triaged to determine the best pathway to a humane outcome for that cat. This can be difficult and requires trained staff, support materials, and a public willing to listen to why a particular pathway is advised.
 - Pathways include support in place for many cats, but may also include medical services, re-homing resources, connections to foster providers, food pantry supplies, or other services.

- Healthy, free-roaming adult cats without ID are generally best served by being provided spay/neuter and preventive care and returned to their point of origin. This gives the majority of owned cats the best chance of being reunited with their owner. A best practice is these pets can be scanned for microchip and cross-referenced with lost reports and community pages prior to release.
- Exceptions to the return-to field approach include injured cats, those found in an unsafe location, or those who are located in sites with documented threats to wildlife populations.
- Kittens under 2 pounds found by member of the public should be monitored for 4-6 hours prior to being re-located, as their mother is likely coming back. If they are determined to be orphaned but less than 8 weeks, members of the public are offered support to foster them until they are old enough for spay/neuter and adoption. If that is not possible, the next step is triage to a shelter, organization's foster system, or medical to advance the kitten along the re-homing pathway.
- Communities need to continue to heavily invest in accessible affordable spay/neuter and preventive care as a means of reducing overpopulation and improving welfare.
- Organizations need to clarify and communicate their policies, resources, and mechanisms for providing support in the community.
- Animal welfare groups in a community should network and strategize to ensure comprehensive services for animals are available and accessible in their community; these services often span many different of organizations. This network should be transparent and collaborative.
- I also refer you to a recent statement from the National Animal Control Association on this subject: <https://www.nacanet.org/animal-control-intake-of-free-roaming-cats/>

No single organization can solve the issue of animal welfare in a community. And no one wants to see cats suffer. Community-based solutions work best when stakeholders and organizations with various missions, resources, and areas of focus problem-solve on how they can best work together. This requires creating lines of communication to assist with the triage and decision-making process for cats as well as recognizing the limits of each partner in providing particular aspects of interventions.

Unfortunately, animal welfare as a field has a sad history of often being contentious, with adversarial relationships developing between groups who likely have much in common but differing views on how to accomplish the work. This is sometimes driven by competition for resources, long-entrenched disagreements, or a basic misunderstanding of the mandates and missions of other organizations. One of the most common points of misunderstanding is the limited scope and funding of municipal organizations, especially for cats. My hope is the community finds a means to engage in thoughtful debate and creation of actionable, collaborative programming to better help cats and their people.

Best regards,



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