

Million Cat Challenge
Pathway Planning

WHAT TO DO WITH ALL THESE CATS

No two shelters or cats are the same.
How to manage a shelter's most vulnerable
population varies by community.



RULES OF THE ROAD.

Fast track all your kittens to adoptions if they are social.

Fast track all your adult cats to RTF if they are healthy.



Now for the exceptions...

Friendly kittens (< 6 months of age)

The superhighway, or preferred outcome, is to a pet home.



Friendly kittens are likely to adapt well to life as a pet, and filling homes in our communities with friendly, happy, healthy, sterilized, vaccinated pets is part of the mission of shelters.



Kittens by definition have been born within the current breeding cycle, and therefore are not as likely as older cats to already be adapted to the environment of origin and occupying an ecologically important niche. The food source that their parent accessed may not be adequate to support another generation of cats, and removing these immature cats is not likely to trigger the immigration or increased breeding associated with removing mature adults.

Sample reasons kittens might exit the superhighway



The kitten is not social and could not become social with reasonable efforts within the capacity of the organization.



The organization does not have the capacity to place all cats in need of homes (owner surrendered cats, sick and injured cats, victims of cruelty and neglect, cats that can't go back to the location of origin) and adding kittens to the mix competing for adoptive homes will mean euthanasia/overcrowding/poor outcomes for some cats that can't compete with the onslaught of kittens.



Where adoption into a home is not an available outcome, RTF/TNR is often the next best choice. The younger the kitten, the more ideal it is to make efforts to follow up at the location of origin to make sure the kitten is receiving/will receive care. Kittens under 12 weeks should ideally remain in place until 12 weeks for sterilization and return; if RTF is done below 12 weeks, kittens should be given a rabies vaccine labeled for three years AND the finder/trapper should be advised to retrap and follow up with rabies booster if possible.



When neither adoption nor safe return or relocation is possible, euthanasia is preferred to returning kittens to a situation in which the risk of suffering, starvation and death is high (for example, if there's no evidence of access to food and shelter, or there's elevated environmental risk, such as a high rate of disease or building destroyed).



The superhighway to a home does not always have to lead through the shelter, but should ideally always include sterilization and basic vaccination.

Examples: Foster/finder to adoption, kitten diversion, and transfer to a rescue partner.

Healthy free-roaming adult cats (> 6 months of age)

The superhighway, or preferred outcome, is to return to the location of origin.



Whether feral or friendly, mature cats in good body condition are by definition occupying a niche in the community, and removal raises the risk of increased breeding or translocation of cats remaining in the community, thereby increasing risks to cats, public health and wildlife (e.g. Lazenby et al, removal of up to a third of adults led to population increase of up to 200% at removal sites).



In many shelters there are still abundant adult cats that truly need pet homes (owner surrendered cats, sick and injured cats, victims of cruelty and neglect, cats that can't go back to the location of origin) and fast tracking healthy cats that are doing fine back through RTF/TNR will reserve homes for those truly in need. It is often surprising the cats that turn out to be 'adoptable' when they are not competing with 50 other friendly healthy cats; even shy, older cats and those with medical challenges can be adopted when there is less competition.



Mature feral cats are not candidates to become pets. Relocation is resource intensive and has a high failure rate, leading to risks for relocated cats. Limited relocation sites (working cat homes) should be reserved for cats that can't be returned.

Mature friendly cats are likely to be from one of three scenarios:



Lost pet that is > 10x more likely to get back home if returned to the location of origin.



Pet that was not lost but rather was on walkabout when it was picked up by a well-meaning person and brought to the shelter. If sterilized and returned, they will be a better, safer pet; if not returned, they will be replaced by a different, likely unsterilized, new pet to fill the spot left open when the cat did not return).



97% of people in underserved communities obtain their pets from a source other than a shelter, so RTF/TNR of friendly cats serves to "close the loop" on adoptions that happened outside the shelter's sphere.



Community cat that is cared for and valued by more than one person in the community and if sterilized and returned will continue to thrive.



Community cat (friendly or feral) that a constituent is bringing to the shelter because they don't want them on their property. A better solution is to discuss the situation with the constituent, find out what might be attracting the cat to the property and make recommendations. The conversation should also include the benefits of sterilizing as a long term solution in the neighborhood.



The superhighway back to the location of origin does not always have to lead through the shelter.

Example: Supporting finders in locating the cat's owner in the neighborhood of origin.

Sample reasons adult cats might exit the superhighway



Probably goes without saying, but owner surrender cats are the cats we are reserving adoptive homes for. We're not suggesting they go back where they came from.



Feral cats from a situation where return is not feasible - exigent risks, such as destroyed building at location of origin or environmental conditions (e.g. sensitive habitat, serious nuisance colony, high rate of disease) that make return unacceptable. Relocation is the preferred choice where possible in these cases.



Building construction, proximity to busy roads, areas bordering to coyote habitat etc. should not in themselves be considered exigent environmental risk - adult cats can thrive under these conditions as evidenced by ongoing reports of cats found in such areas.



Friendly cats where there is evidence of genuine abandonment (e.g. neighbors moved out and cat suddenly showed up and started desperately trying to get into finder's home; reasonable efforts have already been made to locate owner in the neighborhood of origin).



Cats with significant health concerns. For friendly cats, err on the side of adoption after making genuine efforts to locate owner in neighborhood of origin; for feral cats, err on the side of locating a caretaker in the neighborhood of origin.