



SPCA Serving Erie County and Feral Cat FOCUS: Working Together to Help Feral Cats



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Working Together to Help Feral Cats

A multi-faceted approach to saving healthy ferals



In June of 2007, having determined that the majority of the feral cats brought to them for euthanasia were healthy, the SPCA Serving Erie County changed its long-standing policy of euthanizing all ferals.

They expanded an existing collaboration with the free-roaming cat advocacy group Feral Cat FOCUS to provide resources for people dealing with these animals. Now, the SPCA euthanizes only sick and injured feral cats, while healthy ferals are spayed or neutered and returned (or even, in some cases, placed for adoption).

Stats

In the year before the policy was changed, the SPCA Serving Erie County euthanized a total of 3,950 cats and kittens. Of those, 351 were ferals.

In the year after the policy change, the SPCA euthanized a total of 2,909 cats and kittens, 11 of them feral.

How Cool is That?

We're impressed that the SPCA leadership collected and studied data about the feral and free-roaming cats in their area, busting the myth that they were sick and "better off dead". We're also impressed that they took the time to develop the collaboration with Feral Cat FOCUS to provide the public with essential resources for before refusing to accept healthy ferals for euthanasia.

Adopt or Adapt

You may feel that it's wrong to euthanize healthy feral cats; however, the public expects you to intervene. Since ferals don't do well in shelters and aren't good candidates for adoption, it's hard to know what to do. Rather than simply refusing to euthanize ferals without providing the public with alternatives, you may find that you too can collaborate with a free-roaming cat advocacy group to make available essential education and sterilization resources.

Who They Are and What They Do

Before 2007, the SPCA Serving Erie County routinely took in feral cats and euthanized them under the assumptions, widely held at the time, that these animals were mostly sick and struggling to survive and that euthanizing them was a kindness. Then, in 2002, the SPCA held a Feral Cat Summit and invited experts from across the country. According to SPCA Executive Director Barbara Carr, the experts challenged those assumptions as outdated and not supported by data.

As a result, for the next two years, the SPCA studied the feral cats presented to them or rounded up for euthanasia and found that 73% were actually in good health. Believing it was wrong for a humane society to be killing healthy animals, the SPCA Board voted in 2004 to stop taking in and killing ferals.

According to Carr, the board delayed implementation of the new policy at the request of Feral Cat FOCUS (FCF), a feral cat advocacy group formed in the wake of the Summit by a veterinarian and two active members of the local animal welfare community. While strongly supporting the policy change, the Feral Cat FOCUS founders were concerned that the infrastructure and capacity for sterilization of feral cats had not yet been adequately developed. The new policy went into effect in June of 2007, once the FCF founders felt they were prepared to collaborate effectively with the SPCA to provide the community with needed educational and spay/neuter resources.

How the Partnership Works

Under the collaboration, which had begun in 2003, Feral Cat FOCUS initially operated monthly spay/neuter clinics in the SPCA on-site surgical suite. Caregivers could have ferals altered, rabies and FVRCP vaccinated, treated for fleas, and ear-tipped to avoid future trapping for a fee of \$15. That fee was later raised to \$25.

The monthly clinics were eliminated when Operation PETS, The Spay/Neuter Clinic of Western New York (www.operationpets.org) opened in 2008. This high-quality, high-volume clinic is modeled after Humane Alliance (www.humanealliance.org). Ferals are now accepted on any weekday at Operation PETS. Two Sunday feral cat clinics a month are being planned.

FCF schedules appointments for caregivers at Operation PETS, raises funds to subsidize the slightly higher surgery fees at the new clinic, loans traps, and operates a hotline. Staff at the SPCA refer calls about ferals to Feral Cat FOCUS.

To prepare the SPCA desk staff to implement the change in policy, Feral Cat FOCUS board members conducted a training session to:

- Educate the staff about TNR as a humane, effective means of managing the overpopulation of feral cats
- Familiarize the staff with the resources provided by the organization

According to Feral Cat FOCUS co-founder Kathy Makolinski, DVM, SPCA staff members were presented with strategies for handling phone calls from people concerned about ferals, and instructed to recommend TNR and refer callers to FCF for further information and support. "We wanted the desk staff to buy in to the program," Dr. Makolinski explained, "It's hard to sell the program if you don't understand and believe in it."

The FCF board members also held a training session for their own telephone volunteers so they would feel prepared to handle calls resulting from the SPCA's policy change.

The collaboration provides that:

- Any friendly, unowned cats or kittens trapped with the support of FCF are sterilized and placed for adoption with the SPCA or a local animal rescue organization.
- The SPCA calls FCF if an ear-tipped cat is surrendered. This allows for the possible reuniting of the cat with its caregiver.
- When cats are brought to the SPCA by people who are unwilling or unable to implement TNR, the cats are anesthetized, examined, vaccinated, and sterilized by SPCA staff. FCF volunteers then pick up the cats and place them in an appropriate new location, usually a barn.

Ingredients and Prep Work

In order to make this program work, you need to have in place:

- A support group to educate and provide resources for people dealing with feral cats
- A clinic able to handle large numbers of spay/neuter surgeries for feral cats

Timeline

According to Carr, it took approximately five years to do the research, develop the resources, and implement the policy change.

Upfront Costs

This was not an expensive program to implement. Feral Cat FOCUS is an all volunteer organization. The feral cat surgeries were initially performed in the SPCA's existing surgery suite using volunteer veterinarians and veterinary technicians.

According to Dr. Makolinski, FCF did reimburse the SPCA for vaccines and consumables and for an SPCA employee to make sure the surgery suite was cleaned and organized after the monthly FCF clinics.

A major expense has been providing subsidies for caregivers who cannot afford even Operation PETS' low sterilization fees. Advertising for barn homes to serve as relocation sites for ferals that have to be moved is another ongoing expense.

Step by Step

Step 1: Learn the truth about feral cats.

There are a lot of myths out there about feral cats, but there is also a lot of good information. For the SPCA, holding a Feral Cat Summit got the ball rolling; but you could also consult any of the following websites: www.alleycat.org, www.neighborhoodcats.org. You can also read about some other successful feral cat support programs at the [Feral Cats section](#) of www.ASPCApro.org.

Step 2: Check your local ordinances.

There were no ordinances in Erie County requiring licensing of cats or prohibiting free-roaming cats. Many communities, however, do have laws that would have to be modified (or exceptions made for feral-cat caregivers) to allow for TNR as an alternative to euthanizing ferals.

Step 3: Collect and examine your data.

According to Carr, the SPCA board members were surprised when their own study revealed that nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the feral cats rounded up or brought into the shelter for euthanasia were healthy. They knew immediately that they had to stop killing these healthy animals.

Step 4: Identify or develop resources for people dealing with feral cats.

In Erie County, the SPCA-sponsored Summit spawned the formation of Feral Cat FOCUS. Without that group to handle calls about feral cats, provide information about caring for ferals, lend traps, teach people how to trap, and provide spay/neuter services, the SPCA would not have been able to provide a valid alternative to accepting ferals for euthanasia.

Step 5: Make arrangements to have large numbers of feral cats altered.

This collaboration worked initially because the SPCA was able to provide a surgery suite and FCF was able to use volunteers to set up monthly clinics using volunteer medical staff.

Step 6: Educate the Staff

According to Dr. Makolinski, the education and training of the SPCA desk staff by FCF volunteers was an essential part of the collaboration.

Results

The Numbers

In one year:

- The euthanasia rate for cats brought to the SPCA dropped 26% from 3,950 to 2,909.
- In the same period, the cat intake rate dropped 17% from 8,063 to 6,659.

Carr believes that this collaboration has been a significant factor in a successful multi-faceted program to decrease euthanasia and increase the community's live release rate. In addition, according to Dr. Makolinski, many more people in the community are becoming educated about and supportive of feral cats.

Critical Factors

According to Dr. Makolinski, the following factors have been critical to the success of the collaboration:

- The education of SPCA desk staff so they can disseminate accurate information to people who visit or call the SPCA about feral cat issues. In addition, to avoid confusion and maintain consistency, FCF designates two volunteers to handle questions from SPCA staff regarding ferals.
- Further education of Feral Cat FOCUS telephone volunteers to handle questions raised by the change in policy at the SPCA.
- The ability to spay/neuter a large number of feral cats at low-cost.
- FCF's ability to educate feral cat caregivers so they provide long term food, water, shelter, and medical services for sterilized cats who return to their colonies.
- The ability to relocate cats when they absolutely have to be removed from their environment.
- The ability to place friendly free-roaming cats through the SPCA and local rescues.

Thinking Outside the Box

Dr. Makolinski asks: "If animal shelters don't kill or condone the killing of apparently healthy wildlife — even if people find some wildlife behavior upsetting — why should shelters take on the role of euthanizing apparently healthy feral cats?"

Their Next Steps

Feral Cat FOCUS hopes to recruit more volunteers to serve as telephone counselors.

They would also like to allow initially unsociable free-roaming cats that cannot stay at their current site the opportunity to show their "true personalities." This would require obtaining a space where the cats could be held in a humane environment for a few days to see how they acclimate. Cats who are determined to be truly feral would be relocated. Cats who become friendly would be placed for adoption through local rescues.

Words of Wisdom

What Worked

According to Dr. Makolinski, it is advantageous to have local government and media recognize the benefits of TNR. She reports that there was little governmental objection to TNR in Erie County and

that the county health department donated rabies vaccines for use at the feral cat sterilization clinics. The local newspaper wrote a very positive story about the change in policy.

It can be difficult to find proper feral cat relocation sites on short notice. FCF therefore advertizes for barn homes in effort to have people on standby for accepting cats dumped at the SPCA shelter by people who "just want them gone."

Be Prepared For

- Dr. Makolinski cautions that there will be a period of transition since some people will have grown accustomed to trapping stray and feral cats and bringing them to an animal shelter for euthanasia. People who disapprove of the policy change may write letters to the editor and try to get the media to jump on the band wagon. Initially, a large amount of the feral cat advocacy group's time and energy may be consumed countering these efforts by educating the public and the media about feral cats and TNR.
- The feral cat advocacy group should be prepared to receive more difficult calls, such as those from people who do not wish to implement TNR and just want the cats to be gone. This is where having trained telephone volunteers is essential. Feral Cat FOCUS is always in search of additional people who wish to serve in this capacity.
- Dr. Makolinski cautions that there are people who, when told that a humane society no longer accepts or rounds up ferals for euthanasia, will threaten to hurt or kill cats they consider a nuisance. If a feral cat is dropped off or taken to the SPCA shelter and the person refuses to do TNR, the SPCA will accept the cat, perform a veterinary exam, administer vaccines, sterilize the animal and then turn it over to FCF for relocation.

Thumbnail Sketch: SPCA Serving Erie County

205 Ensminger Road
Tonawanda, NY 14150
www.yourspca.org



The mission of the 141 year-old SPCA Serving Erie County is to create a caring and kind community that encourages fair and humane treatment of all creatures.

The SPCA, which receives no government funds, cares for approximately 20,000 animals each year through programs that include rescue; adoption; animal cruelty investigations and seizures; emergency transport; lost and found services; humane education, and care for wildlife, reptiles, exotics, and farm animals.

Staff

55 full time
24 part time
4 seasonal

Operating Budget

\$3.6 million

Business Type

501(c)(3) nonprofit

Thumbnail Sketch: Feral Cat FOCUS

P.O. Box 404
East Aurora, NY 14052
www.feralcatfocus.org



Feral Cat FOCUS was founded in 2003 by a group of dedicated volunteers concerned about the feral cat overpopulation problem in Western New York.

Between 2003 and 2007, approximately 2,000 cats were sterilized and vaccinated at monthly FCF volunteer clinics, preventing the birth of unwanted litters of kittens and allowing for socialized cats and kittens to be adopted into a home environment.

FCF now makes appointments for ferals at the Operation PETS: The Spay/Neuter Clinic of Western New York Humane, educates cat caregivers about the necessity of proper care for feral cats, answers telephone inquiries via their hotline, and lends humane traps. FCF also arranges for twice monthly feral cat spay/neuter clinics on Sundays at Operation PETS.

Staff

No paid staff.

3 active co-founders/board members

15 - 20 active volunteers

Operating Budget

\$14,200

Business Type

501(c)(3) nonprofit