

Saving Albuquerque's Community Cats

New Trap-Neuter-Return Model Reduces Euthanasia by 76%

By Bryan Kortis and Heather Vana

At PetSmart Charities, our vision is: a lifelong, loving home for every pet. But what if a particular cat's perfect home is...the viaduct a few hundred feet from your driveway? The dumpster behind your neighborhood cafe?

That's the case for many of North America's free-roaming and feral cats. Many of these cats will never be the snuggly, adoptable pet you bring home to your family—because they've often never been socialized, or learned how to be a house pet. In some cases, they're just not "owned" by anyone. They're truly community cats [[Link to separate page with "what kind of cat" definitions](#)].

Community cats exist because of house pets that weren't fixed. Someone's pet cat got loose or was abandoned, and she reproduced again and again. Her babies learned to fend for themselves on the streets. Then, as young as 2 months old, her [babies made more babies](#).

These cats are coming, box after box, to open admission animal shelters which are obligated by law to accept any pet that comes through their doors. The City of Albuquerque's Animal Welfare Department took in more than 8,000 cats in 2012 alone.

What are shelters like Albuquerque's supposed to do with droves of terrified free-roaming cats? Often, they have no choice but to euthanize them. Open admission animal shelters have unfortunately become places where cats go to die.

But the City of Albuquerque, and many others, are no longer willing to accept that role. And PetSmart Charities is here to support them. We're helping many communities, including Albuquerque, implement new models of the most humane, effective approach to reducing the free-roaming cat population: [Trap, Neuter Return \(TNR\)](#).

And so far we've seen amazing results.

An Advocate for Albuquerque's Cats

When Jayne Sage moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, she immediately noticed that the cat population was out of control. "I couldn't do nothing," said Jayne. "I couldn't just watch cats breed in my neighborhood. But I couldn't trap them and bring them to the shelter to be euthanized, either."

Jayne began doing TNR work as part of a group called [Street Cat Companions](#). The [Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department](#) started its own TNR program in 2011. Around the same time, PetSmart Charities began funding targeted spay/neuter efforts through a local private shelter that's staffed to support high-quality, low-cost, spay/neuter, [Animal Humane New Mexico](#).

The groups began discussing the impact their programs could have if they all worked more closely together. Shortly after, Jayne began working for Best Friends Animal Society, and began developing a unique TNR program for Albuquerque with her colleague Desiree Triste Aragon.

Jayne and Desiree looked to the industry-leader in TNR for guidance on how to make that happen: PetSmart Charities spay/neuter program manager Bryan Kortis.

“PetSmart Charities has funded hundreds of TNR projects over the last several years. The data we’ve collected proves that TNR is the most humane and effective approach to managing free-roaming cat populations,” Bryan said. “TNR prevents the flood of kittens and unwanted cats from entering shelters in the first place. This reduces intake and, as a result, euthanasia.”

Working together, Best Friends Animal Society, the Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department and PetSmart Charities built a 3-year, \$700,000 program to TNR 10,500 free-roaming cats in Albuquerque.

Keeping Cats at Home

First, they had to stop the unnecessary euthanasia of Albuquerque’s community cats. So, PetSmart Charities and Best Friends worked with the City of Albuquerque to build in a “return to field” component to the TNR program. Now, any community cats that end up in the city shelter are transferred to Best Friends.

“Healthy community cats no longer face euthanasia at the city shelter,” said Desiree. “Instead, Best Friends arranges spay/neuter surgery and vaccinations for them. Once they’ve recovered, we return the cats back to their home.”

Staff at Best Friends and the City of Albuquerque worked hard to collaborate between their teams to make this possible. City employees call the team at Best Friends whenever they receive a cat complaint call. Best Friends gets the cats to Animal Humane, where they efficiently fix the cats. The cats then go back to Best Friends, where teams return them to their original communities.

Each group is able to focus on their area of expertise: Best Friends handles trapping and returning, Animal Humane handles spay/neuter, and the city’s animal control staff is able to focus on rescue, cruelty and neglect cases.

“The Community Cats Program has affected our shelter’s health in a very big way,” said Barbara Bruin, Director of Animal Welfare for the City of Albuquerque. “We have fewer cats, so less overcrowding. And, since we don’t house feral cats anymore, there’s a lot less stress in the cattery.”

Where There’s a Few Cats, There’s a Colony

But the team didn’t stop there. “Any community cat that’s trapped for TNR is a line of intelligence for us,” said Bryan. “They’re the clue to where the other cats are in their area.”

Where there are 2 or 3 cats, there's almost always an entire colony of up to 20 cats nearby. The Best Friends crew, and its growing group of local volunteers, began trapping these whole cat colonies each time they returned an individual cat to his home.

On average, for every 1 cat returned to his original location, Best Friends is able to TNR an additional 3 cats.

By taking this approach, they proactively reduced the amount of breeding occurring at "hotspots" throughout Albuquerque.

"Those communities of cats are shrinking over time because fewer kittens are born," said Peggy Weigel, Executive Director at Animal Humane. "So we see fewer complaints in the community because there's fewer 'nuisance cats.' But that's simply because there aren't as many cats."

A Healthier, Happier Albuquerque

This more concentrated effort significantly reduced the city shelter's intake rate, or the number of cats coming into the shelter—and the numbers are staggering.

From January 2012 to December 2013, the Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department has taken in 25% fewer cats. What's more, cat euthanasia has dropped by 76%. The Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department saved 8 out of 10 cats in its shelter in 2013. Their euthanasia rate is now one of the lowest among open admission shelters serving a major metropolitan area in the United States.

The team was hoping for results like these—but didn't expect them to come until at least the second year of the program.

"PetSmart Charities grant has really enabled the Community Cats Program to grow from a local, grassroots TNR program to a city-wide solution to cat overpopulation," said Jayne.

The Community Cats Program has also changed the way the city's shelter operates, and the group's TNR education efforts have improved the community dynamic. "We're making a city of cat lovers," said Jayne. "People are really learning how to take care of free-roaming cats."

A New Model For Community Cats

The Albuquerque Community Cats project has been a local success, and the project holds hope for community cats across the nation.

PetSmart Charities and Best Friends have already launched two additional Community Cats Programs: [San Antonio](#) in 2012 and [Baltimore](#) in 2013. The program has already reduced the euthanasia rate at San Antonio Animal Care Services by more than 50%.

PetSmart Charities is committed to funding more TNR programs in the United States and Canada, because it's the most humane and effective approach to managing free-roaming cat populations. We're funding targeted community cats programs nationwide, in addition to our targeted spay/neuter grant programs. In 2014 alone we're funding 6 city-level community cats

programs, including funding 2 more Community Cats Projects in 2014 with Best Friends Animal Society.

“Together with Best Friends Animal Society, we’re creating a new model for how animal shelters in the United States manage cat overpopulation. It has the potential to end the euthanasia of millions of cats in this country,” said Bryan.

Want to promote TNR programs in your community?

- Share this article with your city shelter and policymakers
- [Search for low-cost spay/neuter programs](#) in your area
- Learn how to start a TNR program in your community [link to Bryan’s book]
- Apply for a [PetSmart Charities targeted spay/neuter grant](#)