



Maddie's Institute

Return to Field
Live Webcast Audience Q&A
By Scott Trebatoski
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- 1) **Q: That was a great statistic on the chance of an owned cat getting back home after return to field (R2F) than when left at the shelter, can you repeat the actual number (%)?**

A: Cats are ***16 TIMES*** more likely to get home on their own than waiting for an owner to reclaim them in a shelter.

- 2) **Q: Have you noticed any decline in wildlife in your community?**

A: NO. Remember that ***no new cats*** are being placed outdoors. We are simply returning the cats back to where they were trapped. Since they are now sterilized and can't produce litters it's logical to say that if anything less wildlife is being impacted.

- 3) **Q: What kind of medical requirements do you look at when determining a cat is eligible for return to field?**

A: We are looking for thriving cats, meaning that they are visibly healthy, no signs of severe injuries, disease, emaciation (simple medical conditions may be treated).

- 4) **Q: What are the specific reasons why veterinarians are not supporting this?**

A: The main reasons that we hear from some veterinarians are: 1) cat's shouldn't be outdoors but only in homes – while we agree with that trap and eliminate doesn't resolve the problem either as more cats continue to breed, etc.; 3) they say they are worried about disease that can be transmitted to children or immune compromised individuals – our best response is where is the scientific evidence since tens of thousands of cats have been R2F in Jacksonville, FL and there should be articles all over the place about these disease outbreaks (there have been none).

- 5) **Q: What's your number one tip for getting animal control directors on board?**

A: Let them know how accepting a program of R2F will ultimately reduce costs, reduce intake and reduce euthanasia – most directors want to see those things happen and would consider them a success. Also note that in many communities the number of nuisance calls also fall dramatically and officers can respond to other calls like vicious dogs, bite cases, and animal cruelty investigations. ****A little different spin – for politicians hit these same topics but also add that positive results will generate votes for them when they are up for re-election.**

- 6) **Q: Back to issue of monitoring the care the cats get once returned to field. So you don't try to communicate with care takers at all about best feeding and sheltering practices? Or offer an advice phone line?**

A: We had very clear guidance on best practices for feeding and care in our ordinance in Jacksonville. We utilized not for profit groups and other cat caregivers to provide advice, help lines, etc. This was a true community wide effort for success. In Hillsborough we also have private parties and not for profits handling most of the follow up and advice/education. That doesn't mean that the government couldn't do it but we try to engage the community.

- 7) **Q: How do you know if a cat is spayed or not (if the cat shows no estrus signs)?**

A: My best suggestion is that you make it very visual in your R2F program – if the cat is sterilized tip the ear to indicate it. We treat un-tipped cats as unsterilized and we also treat them as owned cats requiring the owner to follow leash laws, licensing and keeping them from straying.

- 8) **Q: Do you recommend microchips for RTF?**

A: NO. When we first started R2F in Jacksonville we felt there would be some benefit to know if cats were being hit by cars, biting people, or other concerns the naysayers had so we microchipped for statistical purposes. After two years of finding no such issues we stopped wasting the money on that so we could spend it on sterilization and other positive programs. Ultimately in the 5+ years I was in Jacksonville we had no R2F program cats that fell into any of those doom and gloom categories.

- 9) **Q: Do you advocate spaying pregnant cats?**

A: ABSOLUTELY!!! One of the issues we are all dealing with is a huge amount of cats. When was the last time your community had a cat shortage? Until there is a time were there aren't enough cats to meet the demand for adoptions and there are no cats dying in the shelter I will remain an advocate of spaying pregnant cats.

- 10) **Q: How do you deal with a trapped cat that is brought into the shelter, and it is clearly an owned cat, possibly just a lost or stray?**

A: If by clearly an owned cat you mean that it has a collar, license or microchip we hold those as strays and wait for the owner. If the owner doesn't reclaim it is put up for adoption. If you mean it is healthy and friendly so it must be owned, then if we have space we will hold it if we are full we will sterilize it, vaccinate, ear-tip and return. On occasion we get calls that their cat got back home sterilized and ear tipped but we congratulate them that it got home versus possibly dying in the shelter.

- 11) **Q: IF friendly cats come in to you in traps, do you put them in your adoption program?**

A: If we have space in adoptions we put them up for adoption even if they previously were ear-tipped. If we are full we sterilize, vaccinate, re-tip and return. Remember a cat

is 16 TIMES as likely to find its way back home than an owner coming to find it in the shelter. Our cat reclaim rates were under 3% in Jacksonville and under 1% in Hillsborough County.

12) Q: How did you get your staff on board, especially the field officers?

A: Kind of a two edged approach – initially we did our best to educate them in how this would ultimately reduce the number of cats, complaints and make their jobs easier; ultimately they were told it was the policy and if they didn't follow it they would be disciplined and discharged.

13) Q: After implementing RTF, do you recommend still having ACOs actively trap for nuisance cats?

A: Depends on what you mean by actively trapping 'nuisance cats.' We changed our definition of nuisance cats to one that dealt with a public nuisance meaning that the majority of the people of the neighborhood were negatively impacted – not just that one person had an issue (i.e. "private nuisance"). Public nuisances had to be verified by officers and documented as to what mitigation was tried before trapping took place. The amount of true public nuisance cases was less than a dozen a year that we had to deal with. So in general my answer is no to *actively* trapping but if there is no other alternative to resolve a public nuisance in the neighborhood then you must trap and remove those few cats for the better good of the program.

14) Q: Do you recommend actively seeking and trapping cats for RTF, or simply returning cats who happen to be brought in as stray?

A: My suggestion is to start with everything that comes into the shelter first. Once that is fully addressed on an annual basis it is great to take the next step by actively engaging in trapping outdoor cats and getting them sterilized. This type of program has begun in Jacksonville after about 5 years of working with all of the cats coming in the shelter. The ones coming in the shelter are at the greatest immediate risk and they should be the first target for R2F.

15) Q: How do gov't shelters get around the freedom of information act requirement to give out the trapping address to private groups operating RTF program?

A: We simply did not maintain a registry of caregivers – otherwise that would be public record in Florida. If someone wanted to know where a cat was picked up or where it was brought in from and there was a record we would provide it. There were no records per se of where the cat was returned although one could assume it was very close to where it was picked up. There really was no need to record where they were returned to because in general it was within one block of the address it was found. (As a side note – in over 5 years of R2F in Jacksonville I could count on one hand the number of times anyone ever even asked.)

16) Q: How many years do you recommend to document success? Our city only wants to give us 2 years.

A: If your community is willing to go all-in, meaning every cat that comes through the shelter trapped and is not made available for adoption is sterilized and returned, then 2 years should be sufficient to start seeing positive results. There are many communities you can use their stats to show that you can make that impact quickly if you go all-in rather than dabble with a few.

17) Q: How did you get people to go to a private vet to sterilize them?

A: This was actually an unexpected result that we didn't encourage and didn't really see until we started looking closely at the data. When both individuals and vet clinic know that they won't get citations they naturally start to grow these relationships and when the community knows its public policy there are people who really want to try to help the problem – they just want a non-lethal solution.

18) Q: I'm unclear how you manage to move from large feral cat communities to a few cats being cared for by many individuals. How did you make that transition?

A: You must set strict care requirements for all outdoor cat feeding and care. Do not allow dumping of large quantities of food, do not allow feeding after dark, and do not allow quantities of cats that create nuisances for the neighbors – also strictly enforce these rules and write citations where needed. That will discourage the large cat colonies. There will be less need for large colonies when you lift the threat of legal action and fines from people caring for outdoor cats in the right way. Remember that the most common TNR cat colony is less than 10 cats and the average backyard feeder feeds less than 5 cats. The system will ultimately work itself out in the first couple of years – but don't ignore the enforcement component for the major nuisance creators.

19) Q: Do you have any solutions for the big nuisance colonies?

A: Enforcement. Make sure you keep your enforcement active for large nuisances. If the caregivers can find ways to mitigate those issues or break the colonies into smaller groups that's great. Sometimes trapping a removal is the only alternative. But remember that the new R2F program will benefit multitudes more cats than one large colony – don't let those large colonies make the public not want R2F.

20) Q: What about cats that have been abandoned, owner moved away, and we are not sure of a food source. Apartments are a big problem in this area.

A: If there are no other care givers in the area abandoned cats would ultimately be trapped and euthanized if they weren't adoptable, but we try hard to see if there are other caregivers before we would make that determination – simply because an apartment manager says that a caretaker left isn't a good enough reason for us to remove the cats without verification that others haven't taken over feeding.

21) Q: How do you convince someone who has trapped a cat and brought to a shelter to dispose of to actually take it back after it's been altered?

A: We don't have the person that brought it in come back to return it. In R2F the program must include transport for return. In many cases people don't even realize that the cat has been returned.

22) Q: Who does the sterilization and recovery for your program? Do you bid that out or is it internal?

A: There are examples that include everything being done by the government agency, everything being done by a private not for profit, and some parts being done by the government and some by private entities (usually not for profit). We have been fortunate to have not for profit partners assist us in many cases but we do dabble in doing the surgeries ourselves when we are not booked full on adoption surgeries.

21) Q: If the community doesn't "buy in" to this program, is it still worthwhile as a single shelter manager to utilize these practices? Do small efforts make a worthwhile difference?

A: YES. Starting somewhere is better than ignoring the problem or relying on old practices that haven't worked for decades. Even the smallest efforts will ultimately be rewarded as the overall country's perceptions change and remember it still means a lot to the cat that was spared its life and the countless kittens that might have been born and died due to the naturally high rate of infant mortality in outdoor cats.

23) Q: Where are examples of much smaller municipalities with documented success with RTF/TNR? I live in a town of 28,000 and our city officials are doubtful.

A: Unfortunately I can't give you a specific example under 100,000 population (the Texas town in the graphic was about that size), but it's not because they aren't out there doing it, it is more because they aren't always the best at keeping stats and reporting them to where they can be used. However, it actually should be easier and less expensive in a smaller community because there should be fewer cats to work from. Of course funding in smaller communities would be a greater issue – look for grants and maybe try to work with one of the national agencies so that they can gather stats to share with other smaller communities.

24) Q: How do you address HOA's and other property owners who claim the cats are a nuisance?

A: Working in the Deep South property rights is at the core of most political issues. But property rights and responsibilities go both ways; if there is not an overwhelming public nuisance that is affecting multiple households in the neighborhood the 'nuisance' is actually a "private nuisance" that must be addressed by the property owner not the government. Additionally, the government is not meant to enforce restrictive covenants and other concerns of the HOA – that too is a private matter.

25) Q: Our shelter also says the "ferals" brought in are nuisance cats. How do we address "nuisance" claims?

A: Take that one directly to the policy makers – your elected officials – and get them to define nuisance in the ordinance. Nuisance is not based on the type of animal but rather the results that are negative to the enjoyment of liberty. Then work hard to make sure best practices are being reviewed for nuisance definitions in other communities.

- 26) **Q: How do you deal with the reality that people may lie about the origin address of the cat? Could you end up returning to the wrong location where that cat doesn't have known resources?**

A: We typically ask for a person's ID before we even begin a conversation with them. If we feel that they are not being truthful or that the area they say the cats came from is far from their location we probably will return those cats to their neighborhood knowing the greater likelihood that is the point of their origin. The number of people that are going to lie is a small portion – one of the failings of public shelters in the past is that they always treated people as if they were the worst people that always lied or had ulterior motives – most people want to do the right thing and are honest.

- 27) **Q: Have you had any dealings with or been in communications with the FL Fish & Wildlife Commission (FWC) and their anti-cat, kill them anyway you can anywhere you can agenda?**

A: When I was on the Board of Directors of the Florida Animal Control Association we not only engaged FWC we also asked their attorney for a specific legal opinion on feeding cats outdoors and returning to cats to the field (Will work to get copies of that online in the resources area). Their response essentially was as long as the cats were not on state property they felt that cat issues are local jurisdictional issues and they were not involved nor did they want to be involved.

- 28) **Q: How do you handle country cats versus in town cats? We're talking about out in the middle of nowhere farm versus a neighborhood?**

A: R2F doesn't treat them in any different way – cats are returned where they came from. Jacksonville is the largest landmass city in the continental United States. It has heavy urban areas, suburban areas and rural areas all within the City of Jacksonville. Cats were returned to every community within that City. Many other communities have always accepted cats in rural areas with barn cat programs. Some communities start their before they go full into R2F.

- 29) **Q: What would the startup costs be?**

A: Startup costs vary greatly depending on what you already have that can be used. In most cases your community has the assets available but they may need to be repurposed. You can expect the cost pet cat – all inclusive from intake to return to run around \$80-85 if using a contracted vendor for surgery and one for return. You can cut that nearly in half doing it yourself.

- 30) **Q: How often are rescue groups creating colonies? And why are they more of a nuisance?**

A: The exact number of rescue groups creating colonies is very difficult to determine because none are going to give you that information. From an enforcement standpoint you usually find them because they garner complaints from neighbors. Common problems include relocating cats to an area that already has cats thus increasing the nuisance potential; relocating to a neighborhood where the caregiver doesn't actually live – this often means mass dumping of food, less concern over what the area looks like and truly less concern over the neighbors. Larger groups are ALWAYS a greater nuisance from the standpoint of people living nearby. Anyone in enforcement will tell you that is the number one complaint about cats – large numbers are a nuisance.