



***Face-to-Face with Feral Freedom:  
Saving Community Cats  
Video Transcript***  
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*[Beginning of Audio]*

*Rick DuCharme:* Hi. I'm Rich DuCharme, as you probably figured out by now. I really do appreciate you all coming here today to hear about what we've been doing in Jacksonville and some of the other programs around the area. Thanks a lot for coming to Jacksonville. We know it's not exactly Las Vegas or New York City, but we do have a lot of neat things to see here so try and get out and check out the city a little bit while you're here.

We're going to talk a little bit about saving community cats. I founded First Coast No More Homeless Pets in 2002 with a mission to end the killing of dogs and cats in the area shelters, and then to help other communities do the same thing once we completed that mission. It was a big problem. Back in 2002, 33,847 dogs and cats were entering the shelters in Duval County, and 23,104 of them died that year. That number was increasing every year.

We only had about a 32 percent live release rate, so you can imagine that things looked pretty dismal in Jacksonville at that time, and, really, it's pretty common. Those are not unusual statistics to see around the country when we worked with other communities around the country. It was bad, but it wasn't uncommon at all. It was pretty common. So we knew we needed a big solution, and that solution included long-term sustained targeted spay and neuter programs.

The targeted part of that is really important because you have to target your efforts at the heart of the problem if you really want to have a huge impact, and especially when you have limited resources, which we always did in Jacksonville. Then, of course, we wanted to increase shelter adoptions, and then we've recently added a lot of pet retention programs as well. We are doing about 25,000 surgeries annually here in Duval County, and we're hoping to increase that.

The one thing that I wanted to stress is that about 85 percent of our surgeries are targeted surgeries, targeted either at low-income pet owners or at geographic or breed-specific areas. And we are actually giving a whole presentation on this later in the week at the Best Friends Conference. So I hope you are all going to attend that because we are doing a whole session on targeting, and targeting is really what makes your efforts effective? So I wanted to make sure and get a little kick in for that.

Here is what we've accomplished in Duval County. I just wanted to show you this. The blue line is total shelter intake. The red line is shelter deaths. The green line is spayed and neuter surgeries. You can see that starting in 2001 and 2002, we had an almost immediate impact in shelter admissions and shelter deaths. Shelter admissions and shelter deaths were really mirroring each other, which is pretty common. Then in 2008 when we started the Feral Freedom program, you can see shelter deaths took a real dive.

Shelter intake continued to go down, but not as dramatically as shelter deaths. That's really cool because when you can start to decrease shelter deaths quicker than shelter intake, that shows that some of those reactor programs you are doing are having an impact. In 2008 is when we started the Feral Freedom program. I've got to tell you, I mentioned that when I founded First Coast No More Homeless Pets, our goal was to end the killing of dogs and cats in the shelters. I wasn't sure how long that was ever going to take or even if we would ever get it done until 2008 when we started the Feral Freedom program.

The Feral Freedom program really was able to give us light at the end of the tunnel because up until that point, we didn't have a clue how we were going to deal with all those feral cats out there and all those community

cats that were coming into our shelter. In Duval County, like in most communities, 50 percent of all the cats coming into the shelter were community cats or outdoor cats, not necessarily qualified as feral cats, but they certainly qualified as outdoor cats, cats that were living outside and doing just fine.

On average, only three out of ten cats were leaving alive, and that was a real issue. We just didn't have enough homes to find homes for all those cats, even if all of them were adoptable. What do you? The Feral Freedom program is what we did. The Feral Freedom program sort of started in a roundabout way. It's really a cool story, and I'll take just a couple of minutes to tell that. Because we had asked – we had actually – Best Friends Animal Society, who has been supporters of our organization from the start had asked if we would be interested in doing a study where we had micro chipped feral cats that we were TNR-ing through our clinic.

We said, "Yeah, we'd be willing to do that." They said, "Well, you got to make sure that the city of Jacksonville will give you back all the ear tipped cats that come into the shelter," which at that time, they were not doing that. This was in 2008. I went to the head of animal control, at that time it was an interim head and it was somebody who was an engineer with the city of Jacksonville. His name was Ebenezer Gujjarlapudi, and he now works in Charlotte, North Carolina, I believe. And I said, "Ebenezer, I'd

like all the ear tipped cats back and I can get a grant to put microchips in them all if you give them back to me.”

He is like, “Well, I’ve got to think about this for a little while. I’m just not sure about feral cats. I really don’t know anything about feral cats. And so I said that’s fine. Take your time. He did some research. He came back to me and he said, “Rick, I’ve got a new feral cat plan with the city of Jacksonville.” I said, “Great. Let’s hear it.” He says, “From now on, we’re going to start – we will give First Coast No More Homeless Pets all of the feral cats that come into the city of Jacksonville to trap, neuter, return, microchip, vaccinate, and return to where they come from.”

I’m like, “Great.” *[Laughter]*. I knew that was about 3,500 cats a year. I’m doing the math and I’m like, well, that’s about 70 or 80 bucks a cat, that’s about \$240,000.00 dollars, but I think we’ve got \$42.00 in our checking account, but that’s great. *[Laughter]*. This is July 1<sup>st</sup>; let’s start this program August 1<sup>st</sup>. He said, “Great.” Of course I realized that was a revolutionary idea, at least as far as I had heard in dealing with community cats, so I didn’t want lead on to him that it was so exciting, but it certainly was.

I left lunch, I picked up my cell phone, I called Best Friends Animal Society, and I said, “Listen, you all wanted me to ask them for the feral

cats back, and he has agreed to give me all the feral cats. I need your help.” Thank god Best Friends came through with \$150,000.00 that first year, and they actually funded the program for three years fully or at least for \$150,000.00 to help us get started. Because that was the only way we could have done it, although I didn’t let onto the city about that.

So in Duval County, we now call feral cats community cats, at least once they are ear tipped. That’s really the definition of a community cat is a cat that’s been sterilized, vaccinated, and is ear tipped and is living outside. That’s a community cat in Duval County. Cats that are outside that are not ear tipped are considered strays. They end up going to the city shelter and we make them into community cats. We pick them up from the city shelter; we ear tip them, vaccinate them, sterilize them, and return them as community cats.

Who qualifies for that program? Basically it’s any cat that is living outside and doing okay. As long as it’s living outside and it’s doing fine, then we’re willing to return it back to where it came from after it’s been sterilized, vaccinated, and ear tipped, and let it continue to do okay. How do cats enter the shelter? One thing I want to point out, especially when this program first started was that these were not cats that people were bringing to us and saying, “Here, fix my cat and give it back to me.”

These were cats that people were bringing to the city shelter and saying, “This is a nuance cat. I do not want it anymore. Take it away.”

For the first couple of years, we basically implemented a policy of, “Don’t ask. Don’t tell.” If the people didn’t ask what we were going to do with the cat, we didn’t tell them. Just like in the past, we didn’t tell them we were going to take it in the back and euthanize it. We also didn’t tell them that we were going to fix it and return it to where it came from. That really worked out quite well. I’ve got to tell you that I, probably more than anybody, expected an avalanche of complaints and outrage from the community that we returning these cats that they had gone through a great deal of work to borrow a trap and bring to the city shelter.

That never happened. The first year, we probably got a dozen serious complaints, and that number has decreased every year. To be honest with you, in 2013, I haven’t gotten not one phone call about this program in a negative way from anybody in the city of Jacksonville. I had a few people from other areas to call me to complain about it, but what can you do. The fact is that the community has accepted this program. Here the cool thing. Animal control is the experts for animal issues in any given community. Isn’t that correct? Sure it is. We’ve made it out to be that way.

If you call animal control and animal control says – and you say to animal control, “I’ve got this cat that’s been in neighborhood. What do I do with it?” Animal control says, “Well, trap it and bring it in here and we’ll take care of it for you” that’s what you do. If they say, “Trap it and bring it in here and we’re going to fix it and put it back,” that’s what you do because guess what? The experts just told you that is what you should do.

That’s really the key is once we get everybody on the same page with this program from the mayor’s office and the city council, all they have to do is refer questions to animal control. Animal control can just have a nice pat answer – and Scott will be up here later to talk to you about this a little bit, but as to the explanation to the community, but basically it’s just we’ve decided not to kill cats in Jacksonville anymore just because they’re living outside.

It’s worked. Cats enter the shelter. They come in either one of two ways: over-the-counter from people bringing them in, or if they are trapped, our animal control officers will pick them up in the community if they are already trapped. We don’t normally trap animals in the community now. They come to the shelter, and then basically who qualifies? The intake desk or the animal control officer looks at the cat and decides if it qualifies for Feral Freedom program. Cats basically – what qualifies is cats are living outside and doing all right.



Now, sure, if you just moved out of your apartment and you left your cat in your apartment, that cat doesn't qualify for this program. Or if you have a pet cat and you don't want it anymore, that cat does not qualify for this program. Or if you leave a cat in a carrier at a veterinary clinic and they take to the shelter, that cat doesn't qualify for this program. If you bring in a cat that you've seen in the neighborhood for the last couple of weeks or it's been in your neighborhood for months and given you litters of kittens, that cat qualifies.

Basically any outdoor cat qualifies. It doesn't matter if it's feral or the sweetest little kitty cat you've ever seen. If it's been living outside and doing well, we're going to fix it and return it. Now we do divert some of these cats to adoption programs either at the city shelter or at our facility. The fact is our adoption programs are full. If we take a cat that already has a home outside somewhere, and put it into an adoption program, there is a chance that a cat that needs a home will never get a home. We do not try and do that, whenever possible.

Now obviously who doesn't qualify? Who doesn't qualify are sick cats, really sick cats that cannot be put outside. Cats that are not thriving in their environment, we're not going to return them. Cats that are declawed, we do not return. We try and find them homes. Friendly cats get returned. Cute cats get returned. It's not, "Oh, this cat is too cute to go back

outside.” They’ve got to go back outside because we’ve got other cats that need homes. We’ve got cats that cannot be returned that need homes.

How the Feral Freedom program works. Then they come to our clinic and we do the spay, the neuter, the vaccination. We do treat them for ear mites and fleas if needed. Now, when we first started this program every cat got treated for fleas and every cat got treated for ear mites. Well, you know what? I finally realized after being preached to from my veterinarians and others was that the flea treatment was really making me feel better.

It only helped the cat for a very short time, and really didn’t have any impact on the cat’s overall life or quality of life. It made me feel better because I could say, “Oh, these cats are going back out flea-free,” but it really didn’t matter to the cats and it cost us a lot of money.

Now we only do flea treatment as needed. All kittens receive rabies vaccinations even if they are underage. Even if it’s under three pounds, it still get a rabies vaccination. There is no proof that it does anything, but there is no proof that it doesn’t. And they just do not get a rabies certificate. Is that correct? My veterinarian is over here, Dr. Farrell, you’ll be hearing from her later too. We’ve got a lot of people to keep me straight in the audience. And then we do just as a community service in

our clinic, which you'll see later, we do free rabies updates for any cat that comes into a trap or has an ear tip.

If you bring in a cat that's already ear tipped, we'll give it another rabies vaccine at any time. Just bring it in at no charge. I don't think we do a lot of those but that is available. Then of course additional care, and we do a lot to these cats. If we can do – if a cat has a medial issue that we can cure within a few days and still return it where it comes from, then we'll go ahead and do that. We do remove eyes; we do tail amputations, and so on. We don't put three-legged cats back out, but we do remove legs and those usually end up getting into an adoption program, which we can find homes for tripods pretty easily.

If we can keep a cat at our clinic for a couple days and make it healthy so we can return it, then we'll go ahead and do that. If it takes much longer than that, of course we hesitate to return a cat somewhere where it's been away from for too long. I missed a little bit here. The cats come into animal control, and twice a day our staff, our transport drivers pick up the cats from animal control, and then transfer them to our clinic where we sterilize them, vaccinate them, and ear tip then. Then the day after surgery we try and return them to where they come from.

When we say we return them to where we come from, obviously if you brought us these cats and you don't want them back. You are at 123 Main Street, we're not going to return them right to 123 Main Street, but we're going to return them to that block so the cats are going back to their territories. Because obviously you're not feeding the cats and you didn't want them back, but somebody on that block or somebody close to you is feeding those cats and does want them back.

We're going to return them to that territory, but not necessarily to your address. Then we do have door hangers, and if we don't have a sample of these in your bags, we do have samples at your clinic. I think we do have them in the bag. Good. Those door hangers then are placed on the doors of the surrounding house so that people are notified about the program and they can call us direct if they have additional cats that they want to get sterilized. We do that and have been doing that for a long time now.

I got to tell you, we do a lot more feral cats and TNR over-the-counter than we do through the Feral Freedom program. This year we got about 3,000-3,200 cats through the Feral Freedom program. Over-the-counter, we get somewhere around 10,000 cats a year for TNR. The community brings us a lot of cats to fix and return. Some of the concerns and myths, of course, we've all probably heard this one. Dr. Julie Levy is here, and she can tell you they have done studies that show that feral cats are not

any less healthy, and maybe even healthier than pet cats. Certainly what we found with feral cats is they are pretty healthy until they enter the shelter, and then they pick up disease in the shelter.

Of course the stress alone will cause upper respiratory in cats. As long as we can keep them out of the shelter, we can keep the cats a lot healthier and get them returned as quickly as possible. In fact, the majority of cats living on the street are healthy in a good way, and we really don't see cats coming in with a lot of wounds, a lot of fight issues, and stuff like that. Less than one percent of 21,000 cats that we've done through this program had to be euthanized due to health issues.

It just tells you these cats are not living horrible lives; they are living a life. It's much better – I'm sure if you'd ask the cat, it's much better than us bringing them into the shelter and euthanizing them. I'm sure the cat would agree. Another myth: It's not humane to abandon cats to live on the street. Of course we're not abandoning cats. They are already there. We are returning cats to where they've already been living. That's really the key with all TNR programs is to stress we are not creating colonies.

We are not adding cats to the population. We're returning cats that were already there, and the cats that we are returning are not going to be adding to the population so they are not going to be adding to the problem. We

found, without a doubt, that the cats we return are not nuances anymore because we know because we hardly ever get ear tipped cats into the shelter. In fact, most of you guys probably have the same response. So for the most part, these cats are not being abandoned and they are living just fine.

It's amazing to me some of these concerns and myths that we hear, I mean it's just – the ones that we really are the most concerned about when we start these programs are the ones that really never come to happen. That's the thing; we make these huge mountains out of these little bitty molehills or even these ant piles, and it's amazing to me. What if they are someone's pets? Well, we know for a fact that shelter cats get returned to their owners usually at about less than one percent. There is a less than a one percent chance that you're going to get somebody's pet that's looking for it.

The fact is that if you fix that cat and return it to the area that it came from, it's a lot more likely to find its way back to its owner than it is at the shelter. We're actually returning people's pets to the neighborhood where they are a lot more likely to get back to their owner. We know that very few of the cats that enter the shelters are sterilized and they never get returned to their owners. They are both sterilizing them and returning them to the neighborhood where they've got a lot more likely chance to

get to their owner. What if an owner is upset that that cat is now fixed?  
*[Laughter]*. So? *[Laughter]*. I mean really.

We have had one person that we returned the cat to, and she was very upset. The cat was already sterilized. Of course we didn't know that so we shaved its little belly and ear tipped it and vaccinated it. She was pretty upset that her cat was now ear tipped. When you point out to them in Duvall County, if your cat is out running about and it's not ear tipped, it's required to have a license. If it doesn't have a license, there is quite a few findings that go along with that. I guess if they really wanted to make an issue about it, we could give them a few tickets. Scott would probably be happy to for us. *[Laughter]*. It's really only happened once.

That's something a lot of people seem to worry about with TNR programs is, "Oh, what if we get somebody's pet?" Well, the fact is they probably weren't caring for it the way they should have been if it's out running around and you've trapped it. Unless you are going on somebody's private property and trapping their private pets, you probably don't have an issue with that. What about public outcry? This is always one that gets me because we know in politics and in government and stuff; the squeaky wheel always gets the grease.

The fact is when you ask most people, “Should we pick up these cats and kill them or should we pick up these cats and fix them and return them?”

There have been studies done, and we’ll hear about them later, most people will say that you should fix them and return them, or just do nothing. Just leave them where they are at for that matter. There are studies out of Ohio that we’ll probably hear about later that say 75 percent of people would prefer to save the cats and not kill them if that’s their only choices.

Really, the public outcry that we can create, as animal welfare people, by getting people to go to their county commission and to talk about feral cats issues is really our strength. Public outcry can be an advantage for us, as well as an advantage for those on the opposite side of this. That is something we got to keep in mind is that, really, the public opinion is on our side in this, and not on the side of whatever ideas are out there. That is really the key is that we’ve got the advantage here when it comes to public opinion.

Educating is often an important part of that. Once you educate the people to the limited options of what to do with cats outside, I mean really your options are pick up the cat, take it to the shelter and kill it, or fix it and return it, or maybe just leave it there to start with. I mean, really, most



people are not going to go for the death option. The cat doesn't like it. The people don't like it, so why the hell are we doing it?

How to implement feral freedom program in your community: This is something that we work with a lot of communities around the country on, and it's starting to happen all over the country. That's exciting. Often, you have to look at the ordinances and so on, and you'll get the ordinances in place. But in Duvall County, we just sort of started the program. We didn't change the ordinances, we just did this as a policy and as a pilot program, and so we just sort of took off and started doing it. It worked. A few years later, we caught the ordinances up to match reality.

The fact was that we just went ahead and got started. There is a quote by Martin Luther King that somebody sent me once that said something like, "Take the first step. Even if you can't see the top of the staircase, take the first step." Really, that is the case of so many other programs that we start. If we know it's the right thing to do, then let's do it. That's really – I mean you don't need a lot to do this program if most of you already are doing TNR. Sometimes it's a matter of refocusing resources. A lot of TNR groups are doing a lot of TNR but not really in a focused or targeted manner.

Maybe the idea would be to focus your TNR on the cats that are coming into the shelter. For every surgery you're doing, you are saving a life and

returning the cats that way. But there are lots of ways to be able to get this program started, and we can help you with that. In your packets, there are programs that describe exactly how this program works in Duval County, both from the point of view of First Coast No More Homeless pets, who is the nonprofit, and from Jacksonville Animal Care and Protective Services. There are two booklets in there so be sure and look through both of those.

Then of course check out the Target Zero website: Target Institute dot-org because we do want to help you implement these programs and other life saving measures in your community. This is pretty cool. This is a chart that just shows cat intake, cat euthanasia, and cats released alive. It's interesting to note, you see the cats released alive is starting to decrease, not because we're killing cats and not releasing them because there aren't that many cats in the shelter, I mean basically Duval County, except for kittens during kitten season, is no kill for cats.

Our live release rate at the city shelter this year was 83 percent. This year, 2,240 dogs and cats died in our shelter out of about 17,000 intake. We really, really made big progress. The feral freedom program was really the light at the end of the tunnel that gave us that boost that allowed us to get this way. We made most of our progress in the last four years, although we've been working for ten years on this issue.

A lot of that, too, comes from the partnerships in the community that we have here, and the community collaboration, which we'll be talking a lot about that later in the week at a Best Friends Seminar on community collaboration. Be sure to visit that as well. I think we've decided that we're going to take questions and answers at the time. I was supposed to be done at 8:45, and it is 8:45.

*[Applause]*

*[End of audio]*