



Maddie's Institute

***The Million Cat Challenge***  
**Live Webcast Audience Q&A**  
**By Dr. Julie Levy and Dr. Kate Hurley**  
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- 1) **Q: Regarding alternatives to intake: If someone becomes angry at your policy and walks out/threatens to abandon an indoor cat, for example, are you recommending that the shelter attempt to intake those animals as they previously would?**

A: The key for giving every cat what she needs is flexibility. Managing the flow of intake and matching intake to capacity for care allows the shelter to be nimble in responding to emergencies and making timely exceptions for cats that should be admitted right away. An overcrowded shelter is less likely to be able to provide positive outcomes for cats that are already there or that are admitted haphazardly when the shelter is already full. It is our experience that most people who are bringing cats to shelters are hoping for a positive outcome. Even if they are exasperated, they don't want the cats to be harmed. If it's not in the cat's best interest to come into the shelter at this time, we can still help that person overcome obstacles to keeping the cat or help them find another home. Just knowing that we are trying to help them find the best solution for each cat and that they are not in it alone is enough to calm down most shelter visitors.

- 2) **Q: You say alternatives to intake are not foisting the problems on other organizations, but most of the suggestions were referring them to other orgs. How does that not just shift the problem?**

A: Referring to other organizations can be the best response in several circumstances:

1. Better match between organizational mission/resources and the needs of the cat and community member. For instance, a publicly funded animal shelter may not be able to legally sterilize and release a feral cat back to the location found, but as an alternative to admitting cats for euthanasia may be able to refer to a private group in the community that performs or assists with this activity. In some communities this is offered as an option only should the finder actively seek out the alternative; however, in other communities the shelter has discontinued intake of feral cats entirely (unless causing a special risk or injured/sick/suffering) and substituted admission/euthanasia with information/advice on managing the situation along with referral to a private TNR group in the region. This example is TNR but could apply to referral to a shelter or rescue that specializes in that type of cat – if the original shelter knows the likely live outcome for a cat will be transfer to that organization, bypassing the original shelter via referral will save stress for the cat, free up space at the shelter for cats that must come in, and may even result in savings for the transfer organization as the cat may be in better health when admitted directly versus after a stay at another shelter.
2. Variation in resources at a given time: Sometimes just due to the ebb and flow of populations and staffing levels at different shelters within a region, one shelter may find themselves at capacity while another may have some room. For instance, if one shelter has just been hit with a hoarding case, another shelter may be better able to handle admission of a cat. One shelter may find itself over-capacity for a certain kind of cat (e.g.

they already have tons of kittens) while another shelter happens to have room , and later in the summer find that the roles have reversed. When each shelter focuses on their mission and works within capacity most of the time, it is more likely that they will be able to help each other in this way when needed.

Of course, these efforts work best in coordination. If one or more shelters within a community manage admissions to match their capacity over time, while other shelters nearby continue to accept all cats that come their way regardless of capacity, people told that one shelter is full may turn to the shelter practicing unmanaged admission – just as when one parent says no, a child may turn to the other parent in the hopes of finding an answer more to their liking. Ideally all shelters will develop a consistent message and allow the community to become the additional partner in allowing each organization to operate at humane capacity. Remember, when shelters operate at capacity *at any one time*, stick to their mission and relentlessly seek live outcomes for healthy cats, they tend to be able to serve MORE, not fewer, cats *over time*.

**3) Q: If someone traps or brings in a healthy cat, and we say we can't take it at this time, is it okay to tell them to just let it go?**

A: Ideally, the person would be referred to other alternatives to have the cat sterilized, such as TNR groups or veterinarians within the community that offer this service. Additionally, you can provide the finder of the cat with information on how to mitigate whatever nuisance or concerns are associated with the cat, whether that be putting mechanical cat repellants in their garden or covering their car; or offering food and shelter to the cat if they are worried about it and eventually re-trapping to get it sterilized. But yes, if the alternative is admission of the cat and holding to almost certain euthanasia – which will not solve the problem in a long term sense, letting the person know they need to just take it back where they found it and let it go would be an appropriate response. This has long been the response most shelters have made to people trapping wildlife, recognizing that allowing the animals to be killed or relocated will not solve the problem.

**4) Q: Can an open admission, public shelter limit intake hours or create waiting lists and still qualify as open admission?**

A: Absolutely! Many of the shelters featured in the webinar that provided Alternatives to Intake, offered limited (strategic) intake hours, utilized waiting lists or even appointment based managed intake system are public open-admission shelters. Just as other publically operated offices offer certain hours and utilize appointments to match their ability to offer timely services, this is a responsible, fiscally sound and service-oriented way to manage an animal shelter. A good example is a public health clinic – only emergencies are admitted on an unscheduled basis. Beyond that, there is no turning away of people in need of service (other than meeting income or insurance qualifications) but appointments are scheduled to match the doctors' ability to see patients reasonably promptly. It wouldn't make sense for such a clinic to just line everyone up in the waiting room and have them wait for days or weeks for care. Likewise, a public shelter can still be available to the same number of animals (or even more) but schedule intake or use waiting lists to match the ability to provide humane conditions and appropriate care and outcomes. This doesn't mean some animals won't be euthanized or that fewer animals will be cared for

over time, but the conditions in the shelter will be much better for animals and people, staff can be used more strategically (intake on days when this is scheduled, adoptions on days emphasizing getting animals out the door alive), costs will tend to decline, and in turn this can lead to more adoptions, more volunteers and greater support for the shelter.

**5) Q: If a shelter were to refuse a hoarding situation because of risk of spread of illness, doesn't that go against what shelters and rescues are there for? Don't they need our help even more?**

A: Whenever thinking about Alternatives to Intake or Managed Admission, it's important to try and get out of the binary mindset of thinking either shelters/rescues must offer unlimited admission regardless of capacity (leading the shelter/rescue to get overwhelmed with crowding and disease) or offer no service at all. What we've seen very consistently is that when shelters and rescues set an absolute bar for humane care below which they will not go, all kinds of creative solutions can be found.

For one thing, when shelters and rescues generally operate within Capacity for Care at their facility, and build community capacity through programs like foster care, rescue partnerships and offsite adoptions, there is more flexibility to respond to real emergencies like hoarding situations. When the shelter is truly at capacity and can't respond to a hoarding case without going over the line into crowding, that is not a solution – it will leave the cats that have already been subject to hoarding at risk, just moving them into another overcrowded environment, as well as jeopardizing the cats already in the shelter.

However, with the mindset of reaching out to the community and other partners, other solutions could include “impounding” the cats on-site and having one or more staff visit daily to ensure adequate care is provided (actually taking into the shelter only those at immediate medical risk); partnering with other shelters/rescues even outside the region that could each take either a few cats from the hoarding situation, or a few cats from the shelter in question to make room for the hoarding case cats (10 groups taking 5 cats each has a lot less impact than one group trying to take on 50 cats); finding an offsite location such as an enclosed barn where the hoarding cats can be temporarily safely housed; impounding the hoarding case cats but holding a big fee-waived adoption event to make room and then putting a waiting list in place to limit intake of additional cats to the shelter, etc.

In the long term, a shelter that is routinely called upon to respond to hoarding cases would ideally be able to invest in resources such as rooms, temporary pens set up in a basement or meeting room, enclosed barn stalls or other solutions to allow impoundment and humane housing of large numbers of cats without jeopardizing the welfare and health of the rest of the population.

**6) Q: how do you feel about adopting out ferals as barn cats?**

A: Barn cat homes are a great option for feral cats when they cannot remain in their existing neighborhoods. Relocating cats takes special efforts to acclimate them to their new home and to overcome their intense instinct to return to where they used to live.

- 7) **Q: We get a lot of old farmers that like to trap dozens of feral cats and bring them to the shelter or they threaten to shoot them. They want nothing to do with a TNR program. What's the best approach?**

A: It's always important to get to the bottom of why people have more cats than they can handle. Most farms like to have some cats around to control rodents, but they can be quickly overwhelmed if the cats are not neutered. We've handled these cases by making a visit to the farm and learning about the history of the problem. We can usually negotiate a compromise in which they will agree to try TNR if we do the work and promise to come back if it's not working out for them. Sometimes we can help by removing kittens or friendly cats for adoption, which reduces the population immediately. They are usually more willing to work with us if they know we'll stay with the situation until everyone is satisfied. Since TNR is so successful at reducing nuisance behavior and controlling the cat population explosion, the situation usually resolves itself once the cats are neutered.

- 8) **Q: After spending weeks to bring a cat or kitten to full wellness, how do we let go of our tendency to put some of the "barriers" in place to keep irresponsible people from adopting? Example: People who lie about their intentions (i.e., indoor vs. outdoor requirements)?**

A: Gosh, we know the feeling! It is especially hard when you have personally gotten to know the cat, whether through foster care or a longish stay in the shelter. The "Adopters Welcome" handbook recently put out by HSUS has lots of good information about this issue: <http://www.animalsheltering.org/how-we-help/strengthen-your-shelter/adopters-welcome/>. A couple of things we've found helpful when it comes time to send our own beloved foster kittens and cats out into the world:

1. Remember that people who want cats, WILL GET CATS. If they don't get them from us, they are likely to get a cat that is not spayed/neutered/vaccinated/microchipped, and will be at even more risk if the adopter is someone with limited knowledge or ability to provide the cat with care. More importantly, denial of a potential adopter who already needed a little education to make a great pet-owner will only turn them off of the one best information source they had – you! The very best way we can protect ALL cats is to keep the doors of communication open with adopters so if they run into trouble we can help, and make sure every available home is filled with a spayed/neutered/vaccinated/ and microchipped cat. And remember, people won't lie nearly as much if they're not being judged or denied dependent on their answer. Some people want to have cats and let them outdoors. If they know they'll be denied adoption from a shelter or rescue over this, they will either lie, or get a cat somewhere else. No opportunity for discussion, and still an indoor/outdoor cat is the result. However, if they know they can still adopt if they tell the truth, you have time for a conversation about cat fencing, screened in porches and other cat-friendly means to have the best of both worlds. If they still decide at the time to allow the cat to be indoor/outdoor, at least they will have an identified, spayed/neutered cat that is less likely to roam, and they will have information for future reference.

2. Call to mind a time when we ourselves were less than perfect pet owners (if ever). This is Kate Hurley writing here – I grew up poor, with a single mom who grew up petless and afraid of animals. After I spent my first four years pleading for a cat, my mom let me get a free kitten for my 5<sup>th</sup> birthday (joy of joys!!!!). I christened her Pussywillow and she

promptly became my best friend. However, we did not have the money or knowledge to get Pussywillow spayed or vaccinated. She had several litters of kittens, which we gave away to others who likewise didn't have the means or knowledge to provide that care. We didn't even know to deworm her and she spent a couple of years ravenous and wormy before a friend finally tipped us off. After five years, when we moved across country and left her with a friend for transport after we settled in, my beloved Pussywillow ran away. It had never crossed our minds to put a collar and tag on her, and so to this day I don't know what became of her. I still managed to grow up to be a veterinarian and a cat lover, largely due to her influence. And for her five years with me, I guarantee Pussywillow could not have been more loved. Most people want to do right. With education and encouragement, most people will, or at least come to an ever closer approximation. Sometimes the very best adopters don't fit the mold – they are the ones with time and love to give, and just need a little help with the material parts of the equation.

**9) Q: How do you feel about same-day adoptions? My organization is scared stiff to do this but it might remove a huge barrier. Our process currently takes about a week.**

A: We've been doing same day adoptions for years. Remember, we are the equivalent of a retail outlet competing with all the other places people can get cats. If our services are more cumbersome, expensive, and unpleasant than the completion, our cats are going to lose. We can't control if people will get cats, but we can control whether they get a cat that is neutered and vaccinated and comes with education about responsible pet ownership and the safety net of a shelter or rescue group ready to help. If we drive them away from shelters and towards Craig's list, we are not sabotaging our efforts to save more cats. We could suggest that you perform a careful analysis of your historical records to see how many people are denied over the period of a week that could not be adequately screened on the same day, but instead, we'd suggest that you give same day adoptions a try. It's become the norm in shelters and rescue programs now, and we only see an upside.

**10) Q: Has there been any feedback on the best way to approach other groups with the changes you want to make and ask them if they want to get involved?**

A: It's always helpful to build a local collaboration that connects regularly to address community-wide issues and to work on shared projects. That kind of culture builds trust and a willingness to try novel ideas. If collaboration has not been the culture historically, a joint project to try one of the 5 Million Cat Challenge initiatives might be the perfect place to start. It's important to work with the other groups that might be affected so that no one feels dumped on.

**11) Q: Should we encourage all of the shelters to microchip all animals even the strays and ferals being returned outside?**

A: Microchipping is wonderful when it is paired with a good owner/caregiver contact registration protocol. Microchipping increases the chance of a lost cat being reunited with her owner 20-fold. Microchipping ferals and community cats can help them get back to their colonies safely. The only reason microchipping community cats is not universally recommended is cost. Trap/Neuter/Return (TNR) and Return to Field (RTF) programs



must focus resources on maximizing the number of cats that are neutered. Diverting some funds away from neutering to microchipping can reduce the impact of the population control program. An alternative is to maintain a robust log of colony locations so that cats with tipped ears can be returned if they end up in the shelter.

**12) Q: Our local Audubon groups are fanatically opposed to Feral Freedom. They claim cats kill birds at an alarming rate. Suggestions?**

A: This is the most controversial aspect of TNR/RTF programs. The bottom line is that birds are not served by a freely reproducing cat population. It's also impossible to trap and cull enough cats to reduce their population. Increasing the proportion of cats that is incapable of reproducing is a long-term investing in protecting birds AND cats. We do need to be aware that there are some places in which the risk to the bird population is so great that cats shouldn't be there. In those cases, we can help by relocating the cats to a more appropriate environment.

**13) Q: How would you suggest dealing with other feline groups that are anti SNR, so much so, that they are turning colony managers away from our SNR and/or sterile feral programs? We've been attacked more by one feral group than the public!**

A: It's always great to collaborate with other organizations when you share a vision for saving cats. It's worth finding out what the objections to SNR are and if they are based on unfounded fears. Reviewing shelter and community data together might help identify the need for an SNR program to save cats. It's also important to review the SNR program policies to assure they are meeting best practices. For example, SNR should be performed as quickly as possible after intake so the cats are not stressed by being in the shelter, are not exposed to infectious diseases in the shelter, and don't lose their social status among other community cats in their neighborhood.

**14) Q: Where is the funding for the costs of SNR programs?**

A: This depends on the community. Sometimes it comes from the shelter budget because it can be cheaper to perform SNR (return to field) right away than to house a cat in the shelter for a few days or a week. In other cases the SNR program is funded by a nonprofit partner or grants. Currently, both Petco Foundation and PetSmart Charities have grants available to support SNR programs in municipal shelters.

**15) Q: As a private shelter our municipal shelter takes in the strays so RTF is not really an option for us but we do all the rest. How can we best get the city shelter to be more open to participating ... have any other participants have things that have worked for them?**

A: This would be a great question to pose to the Million Cat Challenge discussion forums. We hope you'll join up and become a member of our email group! Sometimes it is helpful for a municipal shelter to hear directly from other municipal shelter leaders. I hope you'll encourage your city shelter to join the Million Cat Challenge – remember they don't have to be “all-in” in order to join and become part of the conversation, they just need to be working with one or more initiative to save more cats. Even if they're just thinking about toying with the idea, we'd love to have them participate!

Even if your local municipal shelter isn't fully on board with the idea, you can help "shape the path" to TNR for your community members. Think about ways to make it more obvious, convenient, morally palatable and/or cheaper to deal with cats through your group versus taking them to the shelter. The municipal shelter is very likely to be grateful for any cat you can divert from their doorstep, and that may help form the basis for greater collaboration to respond humanely and effectively to feral cats in your community.

**16) Q: Why is return to field not considered abandonment? We keep running into that question.**

A: Abandonment refers to releasing an animal that has been in the care of someone and that depends on that person. RTF is simply TNR of cats that have been thriving in their neighborhoods. The cats were already there, we are simply providing them with birth control and vaccines. (See Best Friends: Legal Considerations for Community Cat Programs in the Related Links section).

**17) Q: How do we make certain that achieving the Million Cat Challenge goal doesn't become a number reaching process rather than a life-saving process?**

A: Every number represents a real live cat that can be saved. Every year, millions of cats lose their lives in North American animal shelters simply because there are not enough live outcomes for them. The Million Cat Challenge is sharing life-saving lessons developed by innovative shelters in order to change these tragic numbers. Shelters are invited to participate even if they can save just one more cat than the year before. There are also shelters already enrolled that have predicted they will save thousands of cats in the coming year.

**18) Q: Are RTF programs primarily for cats deemed feral or too unsocial for adoption? Is RTF recommended for a healthy social cat?**

A: Any cat that is thriving in their environment is a candidate for RTF. When opportunities for adoption of socialized cats, especially kittens, are available, that is usually a preferred outcome. However, when shelters and rescue groups are full, and lengths of stay become prolonged, leading to crowding, stress, and the risk of shelter-acquired disease, RTF of healthy socialized cats may be a better option for their quality of life.

**19) Q: We have a 7 day holding time for strays. Is that too long a period for return to field?**

A: It's longer than ideal. Several municipalities have exempted RTF cats from the "stray" holding period on their grounds that:

1. Without evidence of ownership, there is no basis for holding these cats awaiting the appearance of an owner, and...
2. The cats are not being euthanized, but instead are being returned to the location of origin, which is a more effective means to reunite them with the owner, if there is one, anyway.

However, if you're stuck with a 7 day stray holding period for now, you can still release cats to the location found after this time period (you will be able to tell that the cats have not forgotten where they live when you go to release them). If not prohibited by ordinance, you may still be able to perform sterilization surgery during the 7 day hold, so at least you can release them on day 8. But ideally in conjunction, work towards a change in ordinance that will allow a shorter stray hold for these cats – reduces costs for the shelter, reduces stress for the cat, lowers disease risk and crowding in the shelter overall so the friendly cats on adoption track also have a better chance, and these cats are more likely to get back to their hypothetical owner when they're returned to their habitat than sitting in a cage in a shelter, so it's really a win/win/win.