

ACO Larry Valiz shows off a trapped feral cat who's going to the veterinarian to local youngster Audrey Thibodeaux.

## Talking TNR

Promoting a better approach to feral cats to your local officials

BY NANCY PETERSON

**As the lone animal control officer in** Gonzales, Texas—a community of 7,200 people—Larry Valiz has a big job. He's been handling animal control in Gonzales for nine years, and although his job has long involved responding to calls about "nuisance" cats, until he partnered up with the Friends of Gonzales Animal Shelter's trap-neuter-return (TNR) program in 2008, most of those calls ended badly.

"We couldn't get a lot of [the cats] fixed, but we can now," says Valiz. "It makes things

better. Now we've got places to go with them; everybody wants them. I just hope [the program] keeps getting grants so I can keep doing what I can do to help the animals in Gonzales. It's part of my job, like this is what I'm here for, to help the animals, and I love doing it."

In 2004, soon after Friends of Gonzales Animal Shelter (FOGAS) was founded as a nonprofit promoting spay/neuter and adoption in Gonzales County and surrounding areas, it established a cat shelter, working

out of a newly remodeled building provided by the city. But it didn't do TNR until about 2008, "when we became more effective in convincing property owners to let us return the cats," says Mary Anne MacLean, founder of FOGAS.

Now, although Valiz continues to trap nuisance cats in the city, he has new options. He transports them to veterinarians for spay/neuter and vaccinations paid for by grants acquired by FOGAS, then releases the cats back where he found them or relocates them to a



With help from ACO Larry Valiz, veterinarian Kenneth Gottwald of the Guadalupe Valley Veterinary Clinic checks out a friendly free-roaming cat.

suitable barn or stable. He can't trap outside the county, but he loans traps to residents who live outside the county, so that they can TNR cats as well. Feral cats are no longer automatically euthanized, and he's seeing fewer kittens. Trapping cats is still part of his job, but he's happy to be trapping them for TNR instead of euthanasia.

"Once you get a program like this started, a lot of people in the community will pull together," says Valiz. "They come up here and sign for a trap, or they have cats that showed up at their house which were strays, and now they're pets." And once the community gets involved, Valiz says, the cat population doesn't grow as much. "It takes time, but with a program like this, it really helps."

### An Evolving Approach

When it comes to managing community cats, especially feral cats, there's traditionally been a big divide between advocates and municipal officials who oversee animal control. Often left out of animal care and control budgets, in some communities free-roaming cats have been ignored by field officers who have neither the mandate nor the training to take them in. Many animal control departments—

whether by choice or by regulation—continue to deal with feral cats only when there's a specific complaint about them.

But many agencies are beginning to believe that doing nothing, or just trapping and euthanizing them, amounts to ignoring a community animal issue. Traditional strategies have turned out to be short-term and costly, so more and more communities are turning to TNR programs—and through partnerships like the one in Gonzales, are starting to change the rules.

But legal, practical, and financial constraints may hinder a municipality's support of TNR. If you're a feral cat advocate aiming to implement a community-wide program to improve the lives of feral cats, understanding the role, perspective, and limitations of animal control agencies and animal control officers is essential. With that knowledge in hand, along with your passion, persistence, patience, and professionalism, you'll be on

better footing to navigate the slippery slope ahead.

### Knowing the Laws

Understanding how local laws—such as those that address abandonment, cruelty, and cat restraint—may prevent animal control agencies from participating in a TNR program is critical to honing your approach to the issue. It's also important for you and the safety of the feral cats you care for. You don't want to find out later that you're doing something illegal, and have animal control take cats away, after you've gone through the effort and expense of doing TNR and maintaining and bonding with a colony of cats.

Even if TNR isn't outlawed outright, existing laws may have components that make TNR a struggle; for example, feeding cats outdoors may be considered a public nuisance. Returning unowned cats to their territories may, under the law, be considered abandonment. In such cases, participating in TNR may require animal control officers to violate the very laws they are charged with enforcing—clearly a barrier to a more progressive model.

On the other end of the spectrum, in some locales, cats may not even be included in animal control ordinances. Because of animal control's role protecting public safety, many departments have evolved with a focus on overseeing stray dog issues. Other con-



The Gonzales Pioneer Village, overseen by Cindy Munson (pictured), has taken in 20 local ferals who have free run of the historic attraction.

straints, such as budget and manpower, may have traditionally compelled animal control to focus on issues that citizens and legislators have deemed more important.

Some municipalities would rather not be in the business of animal control at all, and without substantial public pressure on decision-makers to raise both standards and budgets, this attitude can trickle down into animal control efforts, leading to an approach to the job that's just enough to avoid public criticism. In places where the law simply mandates that the government shall pick up stray dogs, that may be exactly what animal control does—and no more.

In such cases, developing a successful relationship with animal control may mean you have to start by working to change the laws in question. An organization with experience and success in pro-TNR lobbying—such as a nearby feral cat group that successfully lobbied for TNR, a feral-friendly humane society or SPCA, and organizations such as The HSUS and Neighborhood Cats—may be able to provide advice and resources.

### Understanding Animal Control's Role

Many animal care and control departments around the country have long been moving toward more progressive, lifesaving standards, but there's still a vast spectrum in the levels of support, both financial and moral, that animal control agencies receive. There's also variety in how departments are structured: Depending on location, animal control may be overseen by the board of health, police or sheriff's department, or by a non-profit animal welfare organization with a contract to provide animal control services. A basic element of animal control is protecting both the public and animals by enforcing laws related to dangerous, neglected, and injured animals, nuisance complaints, and public safety.

It's useful to understand how these mandates color animal control priorities. "What surprised me," says Scottie Moore, founder of Save Our Cats and Kittens Sensibly (SOCKS) in Rancho Cordova, Calif., a community of 65,000 people, "were the issues that

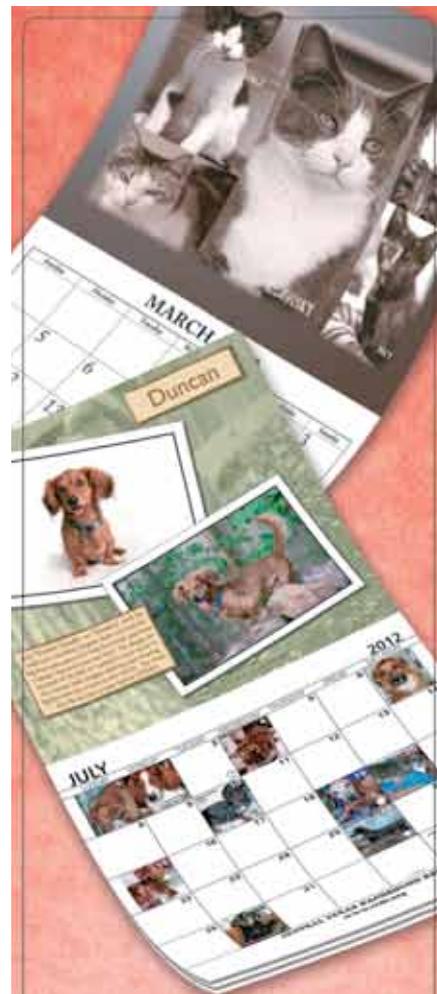
concerned [the officials] with going forward with a TNR program." One of their main concerns, she notes, was the potential impact of feral cats on human health.

Advocates should educate themselves to prepare for this issue. Early animal control programs were typically started to protect public safety by dealing with such issues as disease, nuisance animals, and those running at large. Attitudes about feral cats may stem from this mandate and the related training and mentoring an ACO received. In most instances, ACOs don't have the time to search for and trap cats. In smaller communities, ACOs may be in the field responding to a never-ending list of calls from people who want immediate results. Some of the calls may involve dangerous or injured animals, or animals in imminent danger. ACOs may also be responsible for maintaining the shelter and caring for the animals there.

Even in larger communities with animal control departments staffed by more than one officer, those staff are likely to be overwhelmed. Ann Potter, a behavior specialist at Multnomah County Animal Services in Portland, Ore., spearheaded its Apartment Cat TNR (ACT) program to increase the shelter's live release rates for cats—but she says that adding another responsibility to her full plate has been daunting. "This is easily a full-time job, and for me it's one of four or five major things that I'm in charge of," she notes.

If you're asking your local animal control department to help you address feral cat issues in a new way, be sensitive to its workload, and demonstrate your own commitment to helping as much as you can.

Even when ACOs personally support TNR, funding is usually scarce for cat management. Fortunately for the cats in Gonzales, FOGAS has gotten grants to support the feral cat program, and ACO Valiz is keen to trap cats, take them to the veterinarian, and return them. He and MacLean keep an eye out for barns, stables, and other suitable locations for cats who must be relocated. Valiz's vital role in trapping and transporting cats, and identifying properties that welcome them, recently allowed 63 "barn tigers" to be placed; some of them never even had to come through FOGAS.



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## Accentuating the Benefits of TNR

When you first approach municipal officials about TNR, you may encounter skepticism and resistance. Officials may realize they need a new way to address feral cats, but they may not be convinced that TNR is the solution. The best arguments you can make include TNR's ability to reduce the community cat population, protect public safety, lower nuisance complaints, and save municipal dollars by keeping cats out of the shelter.

When MacLean first took the idea to local officials, she says, they assumed it wasn't going to work. Officials believed

that MacLean would eventually drop the ball, which would end up costing the city. MacLean didn't want people to envision large cat colonies or neighborhoods overrun with cats, so she didn't use the term "TNR" or talk about the program as separate from the rest of FOGAS's work. She also didn't want to distinguish between feral cats and friendlier community cats. She presented the program as part of an overall effort to get all the pets fixed, and solve the pet overpopulation problem.

In California, Rancho Cordova mayor David Sander is delighted by his city's collaboration with SOCKS, noting that it saves the city money and reduces the time officials spend on feral cat issues. "There is no downside to this," he says.

It's useful for you to know the general benefits of TNR and the broader scope of the issues, but remember that all politics is local. You can strengthen your argument by being aware of what the municipality is specifically dealing with—and what it's costing taxpayers.

Shelter data is accessible as part of the public record if your shelter is run by a municipality or operates under a municipal contract. Call the agency that oversees animal control, and explain that you're working to reduce cat overpopulation, and politely ask how to get statistics about its operation. Some agencies may happily provide it on your request; others may require you to file a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request (you can get sample FOIA letters at the website of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press at [rcfp.org/foia](http://rcfp.org/foia)). Answers to some of the questions mentioned below may be available in the data; others may not, so be prepared to touch base again if necessary.

- What approach does the agency take toward stray and feral cats: do nothing, trap and remove them, do TNR?
- How many and what kind of complaints are received yearly about stray and feral cats?
- Has the number of complaints dropped, remained the same, or increased over time?
- How many cats are taken in each year?

- Of those cats, how many are stray (owned cats who are lost or abandoned)/feral/surrendered?
- How many stray cats are reclaimed by their owners?
- How many cats are adopted?
- How many stray, feral, and surrendered cats are euthanized?
- How much does it cost to euthanize a cat?
- How much is spent each year to euthanize cats?

## Making Your Case

Once you've learned about state and local laws, as well as the role, limitations, and concerns of animal control, and you can rattle off the benefits of TNR in your sleep, call your local animal control department, explain what you do, and ask who to speak with—likely an animal control supervisor or chief. Set up a time to meet. Prepare your questions and your own information in advance of your discussion and have an open mind and a positive attitude. Use terms that are respectful, referring to the staff as "animal care professionals" and "humane law enforcement officers," and make sure to acknowledge the valuable role that animal control plays in your community.

Many people don't realize that feral cats can and do live decent lives outdoors. One of animal control's concerns about adopting TNR is that it may still seem, to them and to some of their constituents, like a form of abandonment. Emphasize that feral cats should be looked at as a unique group of animals, and not as poor house cats who have been left outside.

Once you've explained how you and TNR can help the agency, you can suggest ways that animal control can help your program, such as:

- Contacting you to reclaim an ear-tipped cat brought to the shelter.
- Letting you know the locations where feral cats are coming from (either when brought in by members of the public or by animal control), so you can target those areas for TNR.
- Referring people to your program when they call the shelter about feral cats.



Top: Scottie Moore not only feeds the ferals of Rancho Cordova, Calif., she was instrumental in persuading the town to revamp its approach to feral cat management.

Bottom: By partnering with Mary Anne Maclean's Friends of the Gonzales Animal Shelter, ACO Larry Valiz is able to provide more humane options for feral cats.



Mary Anne Maclean of Friends of Gonzales Animal Shelter provides tasty treats to some of the resident cats.

- Providing access to spay/neuter for community feral cats.
- Offering its mobile spay/neuter unit for feral cats.
- Loaning humane traps to your program.
- Supporting TNR's legality and providing access to public spaces for your trappers and caretakers.
- Providing meeting space.
- Distributing your literature to the public.

### The Right Approach

It seems like a perfect partnership; trap-neuter-return programs make so much sense. So how come they're not happening in every community?

In some cases, it's the fear of doing something new. But in other cases, TNR has gotten off on the wrong foot when feral cat advocates approach the issue by starting off with public

criticism of animal control in the media, or by making the argument in a way that ignores the primary goals and motivations of those in local government. And sometimes, local government digs in its heels, refusing to consider the possibility that there may be a better way to handle the issue. If you want to make change, know your audience.

Kathy Beer was on Lakeshore Humane Society's board of directors when she founded the Free Roaming Feline Program in 2008. She wanted to alleviate the euthanasia of feral and stray cats in the Wisconsin cities of Manitowoc and Two Rivers and the surrounding townships, the areas served by the shelter.

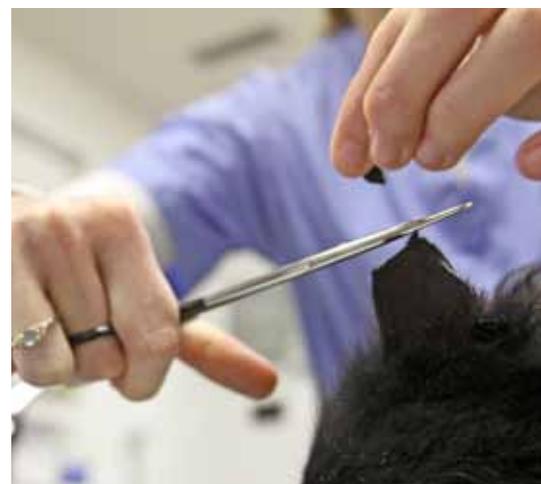
When the humane society submitted a new contract to the cities, they felt that the fees per animal were too high. Beer thought the Free Roaming Feline Program could provide them with a better alternative for com-

munity and feral cats. "For less than half the price, a cat can come into the Roamer program, be sterilized, vaccinated, and rehomed, and live," says Beer. When she heard a rumor in December 2010 that Manitowoc planned to use a vacant city building to hold strays and feral cats from Manitowoc and Two Rivers and euthanize the animals who weren't claimed, Beer took action. She approached the Manitowoc police captain—animal control is a police function in the town—and he met with Beer and Two Rivers police captain Robert Kappelman.

At the meeting, Beer recalls, "I said, 'Well, this is what we do. How can we help out?'"

What surprised her was that the officials trusted her enough to try a different approach. In January 2011, Beer's program began working with Manitowoc and Two Rivers. The cities do the trapping and pay the sterilization, vaccination, and boarding fees for cats who go through the program.

"Kathy Beer's program ... essentially saved us at least half the cost of using the humane society" to house, euthanize, or (very rarely) adopt out the cats, says Kappelman. He liked the idea of saving money, addressing the cat population, and taking care of a public safety issue. The only potential downside was that officials feared they would have more animals than Beer could handle. "But, for the most part, from our city's perspective, that hasn't happened," Kappelman says.



A feral cat gets his all-important ear tip, showing him to be a neutered member of a managed colony.

Likewise, Moore's approach won the day with Rancho Cordova officials. "She appeared at an uncountable number of city council meetings, behaving in a very professional way, and not arguing 'please save the kitties,'" says Sander. The mayor adds that Moore explained her position and backed it up with evidence, demonstrating the value of TNR by showing the economic benefits, referencing other communities that had implemented it successfully, and presenting videos on the issue. "One by one over a period of years, she won [the council members] over," Sander says.

### Meeting in the Middle

Though every feral cat advocate might hope for results like Beer's, in this era of ever-contracting budgets, most municipalities probably won't be in a position to fund your program. And when meeting with officials, it's best to put aside past judgments and avoid expectations about what they "should"

### Web Resources

For further information on finding out about local laws, Scottie Moore's top tips for promoting TNR, a list of the benefits of TNR, and other useful resources, visit [animalsheltering.org/talking\\_tnr](http://animalsheltering.org/talking_tnr).

offer. Don't demand everything up front or take an all-or-nothing approach. And remember: Even if animal control isn't prepared to help you now, making a good impression, informing them of your work, and keeping the lines of communication open could lead to support in the future.

If you only get approval for a one-time pilot project instead of permanent exemption to an existing law, accept the lesser condition and get started showing officials what you can do. A colony that you're already working on that's showing great re-

sults can make a strong impression. Be sure to document everything, including the number of cats in the colony before TNR, the number of kittens and tame cats removed for adoption, and the number of cats remaining in the colony at the end of a given period. More doors will open once you've demonstrated success.

Feral cat advocates interviewed for this story largely suggested that, with the right approach to working with animal control agencies, advocates can accomplish much more than they imagine. Municipal and animal control officials interviewed believe that their peers might be pleasantly surprised by what advocates can do for them.

Working together, feral cat advocates and animal control agencies create a solid foundation for a community-wide TNR program. The payback is better use of municipal funds, staff and resources; increased engagement with volunteers, caretakers, and rescue groups; and more cats saved. **AS**



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