

Addressing the Needs of Feral Felines in Your Community

Article by Roxanne Hawn



More veterinary clients than you think may be caring for feral cats. Whether it's through a community-wide action plan for ferals or individual caretakers with a few feral cats in addition to their pets, you may not see or even know about these other feline patients—unless you ask or promote your willingness to help, if that's the case.

The needs of clients with ferals, however, often differ from the needs of traditional cat clients. It's common for even engaged and high-end clients to take any ferals in their care somewhere other than the veterinary practice they use for their own pets because of concerns about:

- Pet care budget for an additional few or sometimes many more cats
- Appointment flexibility once a feral cat is trapped
- Bias or assumptions about ferals in the exam room or in treatment planning

To be clear, we're talking about the needs of feral cats beyond the sterilizations and vaccinations (and ear tipping) provided through low-cost trap-neuter-return (TNR) programs.

The word feral, itself, can feel loaded with a variety of meanings to different people. More animal shelters and rescue organizations now offer "working cat" or "community cat" adoptions, where unsocialized cats get placed for rodent control in barns and such. In a traditional model, these truly wild cats often were euthanized because they were not suitable as typical pets. These adoption programs give felines the chance to live a life they understand, with at least some of the protections of a caretaker.

Working cat adoptions include the requirement of providing lifetime veterinary care but, in many cases, the organization doing the adoption does not have the resources or in-house veterinary services to provide that care if the cat gets injured or becomes ill.

So, where are people supposed to get veterinary care for ferals? That's a good question, without easy answers in many communities.

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Here is the bottom line: If even one or two veterinary practices in any community would be willing to serve the needs of clients with feral caretaking responsibilities, it could go a long way in helping these often-overlooked cats live longer and better lives. If you're interested in serving the needs of clients with feral cats, here are some ideas on getting started.

Gain experience and find partners

Adam Bauknecht, DVM, earned a graduate certificate in shelter medicine, and works for the Madison Cat Project in Wisconsin. His organization provides low-cost sterilization surgeries and runs a cats-only shelter which he says, "works primarily with other shelters to take in cats they don't feel able to place due to temperament." This includes feral cats as well as those doing poorly in a shelter environment. About 60 percent end up in traditional pet-cat homes. The others go live in rural spots such as barns, with people committed to caring for them.

Bauknecht understands that not all veterinary teams feel comfortable handling cats that essentially cannot be handled. "If somebody from the local community contacted me and said they wanted to expand services to do more for feral cats and said, 'We're not comfortable. Can we come hang out with you for a day, see what you do and talk with you about how you do that?' I would be thrilled," Bauknecht says. "I'd be like, 'Wow! Can you bring some business cards because we want to refer people to you?'"

In most cases, feral cats require humane trapping and sedation to be examined, diagnosed and treated. It can get

increasingly hard, though, to trap wary ferals again and again.

In addition to feral cat organizations, consider partnering with large animal veterinarians in your area. They may be able to provide some expert eyes on a feral cat in its environment to help you assess its needs before you prescribe a treatment plan. If other veterinarians are already at the barn regularly for the horses or other livestock, they may be able to bridge the gap and satisfy your state's practice act for active veterinary-patient relationship.

Create flexibility and solve problems

Chelsea Mathews volunteers for Creature Comfort, an organization among many in Whatcom County, Washington, addressing the needs of feral cats. Soon, she may become the organization's next leader.

Mathews and others work with a few veterinary practices in the area that provide discounted care to ferals. Mathews says the discounts range from 20–50 percent, but she also points out that the organization often needs to pay full fees for certain veterinary services such as lab work, which has set external costs.

Mathews encourages feral caretakers to contact her if veterinary care is needed. She can help arrange the trapping, veterinary visit, and follow-up care as needed. "You never trap without a plan," she explains.

That plan may include, for example, never humanely trapping a feral cat until the caretaker is 100 percent sure that a veterinarian can see the cat right away or soon enough that being in the trap isn't unduly stressful. "[Traps] are designed for cats to recover in after surgery for TNR," Mathews explains. There are forks that go through the trap and section it off so that the back of the trap can be accessed without the cat escaping. That way, newspaper can be replaced or food and water refreshed. "But that's usually just for holding cats before or after surgery," Mathews says. "If you had to hold a feral long term to do treatment, then we would recommend a kitty condo or playpen to keep them."

She says having a community that's committed to the care of ferals doesn't have to be rare, even though her county sounds unique. "You can make a community feral-friendly by bringing together people who are willing to learn, are open to problem solving, and are not like, 'I don't want to

Feral Cat Resources

Alley Cat Allies (alleycat.org) maintains online resources for veterinarians and caretakers interested in helping feral cats. Its Feral Friends Network database includes individuals, organizations and feral-friendly veterinarians sorted by location.

"Plan ahead! It's important that community cat caregivers have an action plan in place, in cases where there is a sick or injured cat," says Becky Robinson the organization's president and founder.

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deal with this scary feral,’ but more like, ‘Okay how can we get this done?’”

Being willing to see and treat ferals may mean setting up protocols such as:

- Setting aside one always-open appointment slot per day (or per week) that you hold for ferals in need
- Creating appointment scheduling plans for clients who are feral caretakers so that they contact you with patient history information and observations before putting a trapping and possible treatment plan in place
- Considering what kinds of discounts, if any, you can afford to offer for feral patients

Understand cost issues

Bauknecht says, “In order for a clinic to develop [a feral cat] clientele, the veterinarians or practice manager needs to have a passion for it because these patients are not necessarily going to be great sources of income.”

Sheryl Blancato, CEO, Second Chance Animal Services in Massachusetts, says, “I would advise [veterinary practices] to be honest and upfront with the client on whether they are able to handle ferals. They need to assume that most ferals cannot be handled without sedation so that has to be factored in. The other issue is that wounds of unknown origin, at least in Massachusetts, have to be quarantined and the caregiver has to be agreeable to follow those guidelines. I can’t advise another vet hospital about the cost of care since that is up to them, but they should discuss all of this with the caregiver up front.”

Blancato has seen, however, neighborhoods come together to help pay for feral cats’ care to help lessen the individual cost burden—beyond TNR-related services.

Some community cat coalitions allow feral caretakers to submit paid veterinary invoices for possible reimbursement, but Mathews says, “A lot of people do try to do it on

their own, and it’s costly. Some people feel it’s a shared responsibility with the community, and that they shouldn’t have to shoulder all of the cost, but some people have a closer relationship with their ferals ... You can ask for discounts wherever you can, but it’s hard. To expect it? I don’t know.”

Bauknecht points out that many feral caretakers also have traditional pets at home who likely already receive standard care. If they are new to a community, their interest in you or their long-term loyalty may increase if you advertise that your practice is feral-friendly.

Choose a cause (or not)

At a time in the profession where the realities of how underserved feline patients often are, don’t forget those barely seen slinking around the neighborhoods, wildland areas or barns. Just because they are not pet-pets in the traditional sense, that doesn’t mean they don’t have veterinary needs beyond TNR efforts and end-of-life services, if a caretaker finds them in desperate shape.

As rescue organizations continue to place these working or community cats into outdoor homes, the need for feral care will likely increase.

The plight of feral cats and the people who care for them may or may not be a cause to which you commit time and resources. It’s an ethical, and even a strategic, decision each veterinary practice will make based on its values, mission and community make-up.



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