



Community Cats and Municipal Officials

If you want to promote Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) to improve the lives of cats in your community, it's essential to understand the role, viewpoint and limitations of municipal animal control agencies. If there's no local organization you can assist in advocating on behalf of community cats, there's still a lot you can do as an individual.

Develop Relationships within the Community

Get to know and develop relationships with key people having influence over animal welfare policies, for example, the mayor, council officials and animal control personnel. Build genuine relationships based on trust and professionalism.

Be aware of previous actions officials have taken on behalf of animals. Attend a few council meetings. Even if the issues being considered aren't animal-related, you can get a basic understanding of how your local government works. Ask at least one question on animal issues. You'll become familiar with your council members and they may remember you if/when you ask to meet with them individually or ask that your issue be put on the agenda.

Call your official's office to make an appointment. Identify yourself as a constituent, stating where you live. Briefly explain the issue you would like to discuss. You may be given less time, but it doesn't hurt to ask for 30 minutes. If your official isn't available, ask to meet with an aide or other staff person.

Contact your animal control department, explain your desire to help and set up a meeting with an animal control supervisor or chief. Prepare your questions and information in advance and have an open mind and a positive attitude. Acknowledge the valuable role that animal control plays in your community and use respectful terms.

If your shelter is run by a municipality or operates under a municipal contract, shelter data is accessible as part of the public record. Contact the agency that oversees animal control, and explain that you're working to reduce cat overpopulation. Politely ask how to get information, for example, about its policies toward community cats, the number of cats and cat-related complaints handled annually, the number of cats returned to owners, adopted or put down, and the cost to put down a cat. In some communities, animal control is separate from the local shelter, so be aware of what structure exists in your municipality.

Understand the Laws Affecting Your Issue

Understand how laws, such as those addressing abandonment, cruelty and cat restraint, could prevent animal control agencies from participating in a TNR program. If you plan to seek exemptions to existing animal control laws or propose a new ordinance for managed community cats, you'll need to document the cat-related issues in your community and how effective the current laws are in addressing them. Check out our cat ordinance and law page for examples of language and other considerations at humanesociety.org/outdoorcats.

Know the Facts about TNR before Meeting Officials

You don't need to be an expert, but the more facts and arguments you have on your side, the better. 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. Emotion will rarely work so don't just plead for the kitties.



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Send written information to officials before the meeting. Include statistics and other facts which are important, but may be too long to cover during your short time to speak. Find out the time limit and practice what you'll say.

Explain What's in It for the Community – Government Officials Want to Know about Savings and Benefits

Focusing on TNR's ability to reduce the community cat population, protect public safety, lower nuisance complaints and save municipal dollars is the best approach to making a case for TNR.

Focus on the population control aspect of TNR and its ability to reduce the number of cats, and demonstrate that trap-and-kill is ineffective. Don't try to persuade public officials with arguments that TNR is humane and the cats have a right to their lives and territory. Public officials are responsible for the impact of the cats on the community.

Try to make your information as relevant to your community, or other similar communities as possible.

Have a Plan Prepared – You Don't Want to Convince Officials and Then Have Nothing Concrete to Offer

Don't overwhelm an official with too much information or paperwork. They don't have time for it. Provide them with whatever is key to your efforts. Explain how you and TNR can help your animal control officer (ACO) or agency.

Remain Professional when Speaking – Being Combative Will Get You Absolutely Nowhere

Put aside past judgments and avoid expectations about what animal control "should" do. Don't demand everything or take an all-or-nothing approach. Even if animal control won't help you now, making a good impression, informing them of your work, and keeping lines of communication open could lead to support in the future.

Be a Good Listener – Sympathy towards Their Concerns Goes a Long Way

The fear of doing something new, of taking on more responsibilities, or of having more expenses may be daunting. In addition, animal control agencies may have had "bad" relationships with advocates who publicly criticized their work without understanding animal control's primary goals.

Animal control programs were typically started to protect public safety by dealing with such issues as disease, nuisance animals and dogs running at large. In most communities, ACOs are busy responding to a never-ending list of calls from people who want immediate results. Be sensitive to animal control's workload and provide as much assistance as you can.

Always Send a Thank You to the Individual/s after Each and Every Meeting or Presentation

Although listening to citizen views is part of their jobs, this is a courtesy and a great opportunity to briefly restate your key points in writing and respond to outstanding questions and reiterate any commitments your official may have made.

Don't Get Discouraged

It may be an uphill battle, but with knowledge, passion, persistence, patience and professionalism, you'll be on better footing to reach your goal: reducing the community cat population and making your community safer for cats, wildlife and people.

Resources available at animalsheltering.org

- Managing Community Cats: A Guide for Local Leaders
- Lobbying 101 for Cat Advocates
- Taking a Broader View of Community Cats
- Talking TNR: Promoting a better approach to feral cats to your officials

Contact The Humane Society of the United States at cats@humanesociety.org for additional information and resources.