

## Resolving Neighbor Disputes – Tips for managing conflict over community cats

This document is to help cat caregivers respond to complaints about cats.

### **“Help! Someone complained about the cats!”**

It’s upsetting to think that someone is complaining and that this might result in harm coming to the cats you are caring for. But don’t panic. There are solutions.

We’ll walk you through, step by step, how to address the concerns, and share some tips for successful communication with your neighbors. The goal is to find a mutually agreeable solution that addresses the concerns so that the people who complained can accept the cats in the neighborhood.

The first step in resolving any issue is to determine exactly what the root of the complaint is. Perhaps the cats are going someplace they are not wanted, digging in a garden, walking on cars, or making a lot of noise at night. The good news is that there are straightforward solutions to most concerns about feral cats.



### **Helping the cats to be good neighbors**

The old adage about an ounce of prevention is true. Even if a complaint has already been lodged, there are a few things you can do right away to help alleviate any stress in the neighborhood around the cats:

- **Be sure all the cats are spayed or neutered.** Neutering the cats is the best way to reduce feline mating behaviors that can be annoying to people. If all the cats are not neutered, seek help from a local community cat organization, your local humane society/SPCA or spay/neuter clinic.  
Once you get the cats neutered, keep a copy of each cat’s medical record and rabies certificate, along with a photo of the cat, in a file folder.
- **Move the feeding area and shelters out of public view.** If you are feeding the cats in plain view, you can move their feeding place to a more discrete location nearby. Cats adapt quickly to such a change.
- **Keep the feeding area neat and clean.** There should not be any trash or excess food lying about. Do not overfeed the cats, and never feed them directly on the ground. Always use a bowl or tray.

### **Successful negotiation step-by-step**

**1. Contact the people who have complained and really listen to them.** Listening is the first step to successful negotiation. When they are done talking, ask questions to gather more information about what is happening and about their concerns. The time put into listening and

asking questions is a worthwhile investment. It gives you the information you need to address the issue and it allows them to become more open to you.

When you ask people about their concerns and just listen – without trying to jump in immediately with explanations and solutions – it puts them in the mood to listen to you. Let them get it all off their chest. Once they have had their say, most people are in a better frame of mind to listen to you.

**2. Understand their perspective and look for any common ground.** Try to see things from their perspective. Perhaps all you can agree on initially is that they feel upset. In that case, perhaps you can honestly say something like, "I can see how this has created a problem for you." From their perspective, it *has*, so you can be genuine in saying this. We all feel better and more open when we feel understood.

Perhaps you can also agree that you want to find a solution that works for all involved.

If you can find some point of agreement, some common ground, then you are on their side and are looking for a solution with them, rather than being against them.

**3. Use active listening.** Explain that you want to be sure that you understand their concerns so that you can develop effective solutions. Then try recounting the concerns back to them, so that they can further clarify them for you.

Take care to be sincere and not to sound judgmental. Even if you do not think their concerns are very serious or legitimate, trivializing them will cause you to lose credibility and the opportunity to advocate effectively for the cats

**4. Explain why there are cats out there.** Feral cats (often called community cats), like raccoons and possums, have become part of the landscape of our communities. They are found in virtually all communities across the country and around the world.

These cats and their offspring are the victims of abandonment, accidental loss, and human failure to get their pets spayed or neutered.

It might appear that if you just stopped feeding them the cats would go away, but in practice this is not what happens. Instead it usually leads to an increase in nuisance behavior, such as scavenging through trash, as the cats search for food.

**5. Explain why removal is not a good option.** Removing the cats is not the solution it might appear to be. In reality, when cats are removed, new cats and other animals migrate into the area to fill the void. This is known as the vacuum effect.

With Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR), the cat population is controlled and the resident cats maintain their turf, preventing other animals from migrating into the area. (If the neighborhood has removed cats in the past, that would be evidence that removal doesn't work.)

Providing examples of other local TNR successes (or trap and remove failures) may be helpful.

**6. Explain that if the cats are removed, they will be killed.** Many people are not aware of the fate of most animals that end up in shelters. Feral cats are not adoptable, so most are killed right away.

While some people will not care about their fate, many others will be more open to exploring other solutions – they may not want the cats around, but they do not want them to be killed.

**7. Propose some solutions to their specific concerns:** Once you know what the specific complaint is, you can respond to it, whether by moving the feeding station, providing litter boxes and deterrents to digging in gardens, or building new shelters to keep cats off cars.

You will need to let your neighbors know exactly what you plan to do, and why this ought to help solve the problem. While you do not want to let the situation drag on, it may be helpful to tell your neighbors that you are going to do some research and will get back to them in a day or two with a plan to address their concerns. This gives you time to consult the “Addressing Common Concerns about Outdoor Cats” fact sheet, think through possible solutions, and devise a plan. Also, taking time to work out a solid plan helps demonstrate that you are taking your neighbors’ concerns seriously and not just giving them a canned response.

Include in the plan a timeline for when each action will be taken and for checking back with the neighbors to see if there has been an improvement.

**8. Follow up.** Be sure to do what you have promised to do promptly, including contacting the neighbors to see if the solution is working. If it is, that’s great! If not, don’t give up. Try a different strategy to address the problem, again setting a time frame for checking back. Persistence usually pays off!

### **Tips for reaching an agreement**

**Stay calm:** Try not to react emotionally to the complaint. Remember that if you lose your temper, you will lose the neighbors’ desire to resolve the problem, and the cats will likely be the ones to suffer as a result.

If you are not able to remain calm, enlist the help of a cool and collected friend who is willing to talk to the neighbors on your behalf.

**Don’t dismiss the complaints as silly:** While the issue may seem silly to you, it’s real to the other party, and for the sake of the cats, you want to find a way to work with your neighbors.

Saying things like “Cats just don’t do that!” or implying that the issue is trivial will usually only make the other party dig in and cling to their position.

**Use the magical power of listening:** Listen respectfully and carefully to what your neighbors have to say. What you learn will help you resolve the concern and protect the cats.

Remember, the complainant is going to give you the clues to fix the problem. For example, you may learn that the concern is not about the feral cats in the area, but about someone’s pet cat that is wandering. Or you may gain an understanding of the specific concerns the neighbor has and be able to address them using the solutions offered in the “Addressing Common Concerns about Outdoor Cats” fact sheet.

**Show a genuine interest in understanding the problem:** Politely ask for any other information that may help you address the concern: What time of day do they see or hear this behavior? What does the cat look like? Where is the behavior occurring? Ask to see the location(s).



Ask if you may come by to observe the behavior so that you can see the cat in question. Sometimes you will discover that it is not a colony cat, but a neighbor's pet, a wild animal, or a new colony cat that you did not know about.

**Get into problem-solving mode:** Genuinely try to resolve the problem. Some neighbors will appreciate the mere fact that you are trying and will be more willing to work with you not to have the cats removed.

**Don't make it about you:** Remember, the goal is to get your neighbors to feel okay about having the cats around.

Don't tell the neighbors about how much you have done or how upset the complaint made you feel. If you are even tempted to start talking about you, stop yourself! Instead, focus on understanding how the neighbors feel and what their problems are. Then calmly explain how Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) rather than removing the cats is going to benefit them and how you will address their specific concerns.

**Know your facts:** Find out all you can about TNR. Explain why moving the cats away will not work. You'll want to be able to explain the vacuum effect to your neighbors. The list of benefits of TNR below may provide some helpful talking points.

**Go in pairs:** You do not want your neighbors to feel outnumbered, but it can be helpful to bring a calm friend or a skilled fellow cat advocate along. Let the neighbors know up front that you would like to work together to solve the problem, that you are there to gain an understanding of their perspective and to resolve the issues, and you have brought your friend along to help.

**Provide a timely response:** Once you reach an agreement, be sure to take timely action to keep your end of the bargain. Check back to see if the neighbors notice a difference.

**Know when to bring in outside help:** Sometimes it's not really just about the cats, it's about an issue the neighbors have with you or your family. If the cats are just one of several complaints, it's best to get someone else to help with mediating the grievances.

### **Avoid these three misconceptions**

#### **“How can people be so uninformed!??”**

Many people do not understand why removing all the cats will not solve the problem, or why they cannot be put into a shelter to be adopted or live out their lives. Others think that if you just stop feeding, the cats will go away.

Most people will not be as knowledgeable about cats as you are, but don't be aggravated with them. Instead, view it as an opportunity to share information. You need to be able to explain TNR calmly and in a tone that is not condescending – after all, no one likes to be spoken down to.

#### **“They must be cat haters!!”**

Many caregivers think that people who complain must be cat haters, but in fact, most people do not hate cats – but they do dislike having to cope with what they view as a problem. If you assume that the neighbors hate cats, you'll miss the opportunity to address the problem and protect the cats. In most cases, if you can resolve the concerns, people will agree to coexist with the cats.

#### **“To know cats is to love them!”**

Don't expect everyone to love cats: The fact is that not everyone will love cats the way you do. Telling people that cats are beautiful animals, or that they have a right to be there, is not going

to convince everyone. The more effective approach is to respect their viewpoint and focus on finding a solution to their specific complaints.

Providing factual information about why TNR works and removal does not can help win over people who do not “like” cats, but can accept that TNR is the most effective way to deal with them.

### **Explaining the benefits of Trap-Neuter-Return**

TNR has several advantages over removing cats from the neighborhood. Here are some of the major benefits:

- Reduces the number of cats in the area by ending the cycle of breeding.
- Prevents the spread of rabies, as the cats are vaccinated. Removing cats can actually speed up the spread of diseases, as infected animals may migrate into the area to fill the void left by the cats' removal.
- Ends annoying feline mating behaviors, fighting, yowling, and spraying.
- Keeps the rodent population under control naturally.
- Prevents the vacuum effect that draws new animals into an area when cats are removed.
- Reduces cost to taxpayers.
- Eliminates the risk of accidentally trapping and killing someone's pet cat.
- Is humane and has the endorsement of many animal welfare organizations.
- Is a proven effective strategy, used successfully in communities across the United States and around the world.

### **In Conclusion**

As a community cat caregiver, you are both the cats' guardian and their public relations agency. You are their only source of help should unhappy neighbors or property owners complain to you or to animal control. It's certainly a responsibility, but it can be very rewarding to be part of creating a lifesaving solution for the cats and helping people find ways to live in harmony with animals in your neighborhood.

Special thanks to Alley Cat Allies, Indy Ferals, Cat Welfare Society, No Kill Solutions, the City of Berkeley (CA) Animal Care Services, and Neighborhood Cats. Photos by Clay Myers.