

# SUCCESSFUL RETURNS

Communicating How Returning Cats to Their Outdoor Homes Saves Lives



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- **Cats in Action** founded in 2020 as a **Chicago** area TNR resource group
- 2022 Established non-profit

Combined 29 years of experience

**TNR**

Dispute management

Intake diversion

Hoarding projects

Working cats & Barn cats



# Definitions

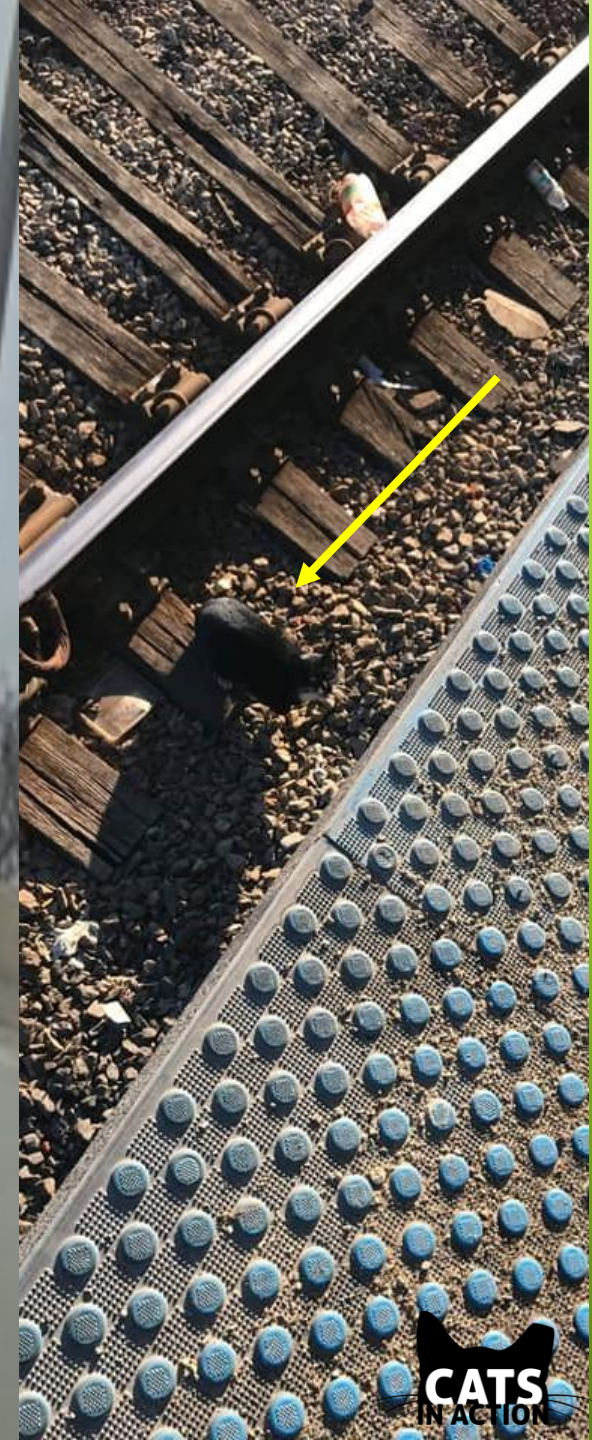
**TN(V)R: Trap-Neuter-(Vaccinate)-Return –**  
Caretakers trap their own colony cats or utilize the services of volunteers or shelter staff.  
Usually permission-based

**RTF: Return to Field –**  
People bring cats to a shelter, the shelter sterilizes and vaccinates them, and shelter staff or volunteers return them



# Which cats are we *not* returning?

- Sick/injured, at least initially
- Cats in imminent danger
  - Side of the highway
  - In the train tracks
  - Forest preserves
  - Airport
  - Confirmed poisoning (very rare; usually panleuk/distemper)





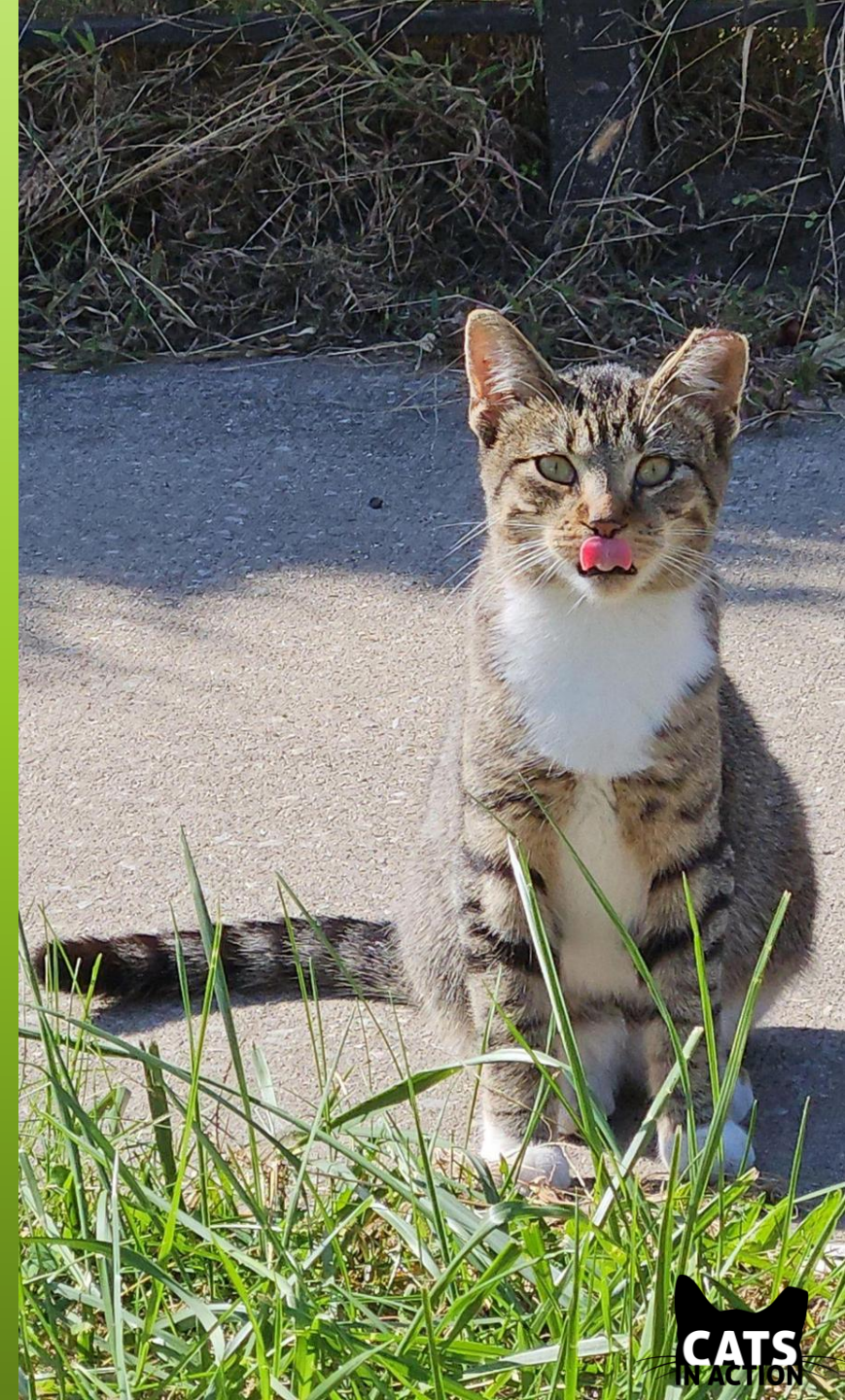
# Which cats are we *not* returning?

- Young kittens that will easily socialize
- Known abandoned pets
  - Microchipped cats
  - Neighbor intel of eviction or move
- Extenuating circumstances (e.g., extreme overcrowding, no resources, etc. These are very rare.)



# Which cats *are* we returning?

- Healthy cats that are feral or semi-feral
- Healthy friendly cats
- Cats that have recovered from illness or injury, regardless of time passed
- Healthy kittens at least 2 lbs that are fractious or during peak season





# TNR: Types of Pushback

- These are “not my cats”
- I want to find them a home/get them to a shelter
- I can no longer feed them/don't want to feed them
- My neighbors are complaining
- People will hurt them
- Newcomer cat is attacking existing cats



# TNR: Types of Pushback

- This is an “unsafe neighborhood”
- Garage/abandoned house is being torn down
- Has been fined/received citation
- Landlord or management company wants cats gone
- They are all going to die in the winter temperatures!





# Strategy for Successful Returns

**L**isten

**A**cknowledge

**S**hare

**E**mpower

**R**esolve



# Listen

- Listen to your caretaker or complaining neighbor - phone vs. in-person
- Don't talk over them
- Make eye contact, nod, indicate you are hearing them
- Take time - don't act rushed
- Be mindful of your body language and stand or sit as if you are talking to a friend

Listening allows you to put the caretaker at ease and gain valuable information as to what the roadblocks truly are and will inform your responses and plans to proceed.

*Empathize!*





# Acknowledge

- Acknowledge what the person is telling you
- Tell them you really understand their predicament - don't say "no" to anything at this point
- Ask clarifying questions to demonstrate concern and investment in the conversation
- Take notes if the person is very difficult - this indicates you're registering and retaining what they are telling you and taking them seriously

Thank them for explaining everything so you could get a clearer understanding of what they're dealing with - Engage!



# Share *your* story

- Be personal - tell them who you are, your own TNR journey, and what you can and can't do and why. Paint your picture - manage their expectations
- Tell them if you're a volunteer, or about your role in the shelter or municipal org you work for
- Be reassuring - share a success story about how you helped someone in the same situation. Give them examples

*Storytelling, not Schooling!*





# Share *the bigger picture*

- Address pushbacks. Explain *why* many outdoor cats don't do well at shelters
- Even friendly cats can completely shut down, become depressed and stop eating
- Cats that were free-roaming are often miserable in captivity
- Just because they are friendly to you doesn't mean they will be friendly to others away from home
- Unsocialized cats are not adoptable; shelters won't socialize them for you as this increases length of stay and they will help fewer cats
- Stress triggers illness, which spreads to other cats in the shelter



# Share *the bigger picture*

- Explain that TNR is specifically intended for community cats
- Explain how the shelter system works
- Define Open Intake vs Managed Intake
- Cats grow thick coats and find good sheltering spots - they're not "freezing to death"
- Garages being torn down: cats already have other places - they'll be fine
- All neighborhoods are the same to a cat
- Demonstrate how to migrate feeding stations if landlords object to feeding
- Ask for copies of any citations





# Empower

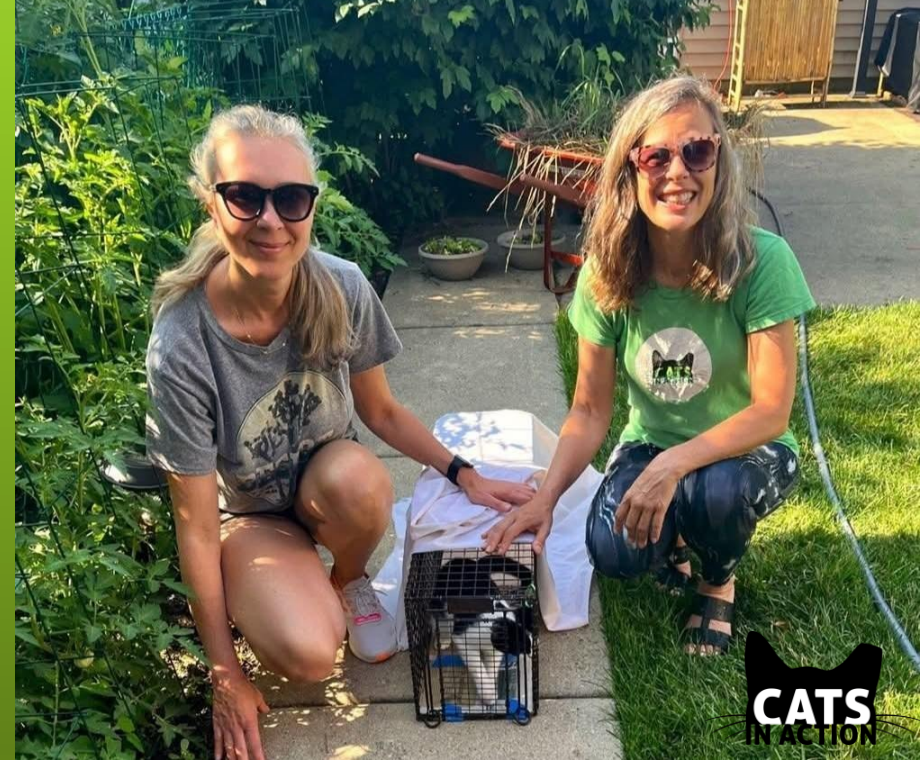
- Instill confidence by assuring them they are doing the right thing and doing a great job
- Explain the project plan - tell them what you are going to do and how you're going to do it. Emphasize that this is a *process*
- Invest them in the process, provide handouts, explain how they can help you help the cats
- Emphasize the benefits of the outcome: preventing new kitten births and also kitten *deaths*, keeping food costs under control, reducing injuries from fighting and spread of disease through mating - *Embolden!*





# Empower

- Celebrate the success with your caretaker
- Make your caretaker the hero
- WOM is huge - let your caretaker tell her neighbors what she's accomplished
- Neighbor buy-in
- Flyering, community outreach
- Ask for pics/video





# Resolve

This is the action phase, where you work through the plan you put together and provide the caretaker with the resources:

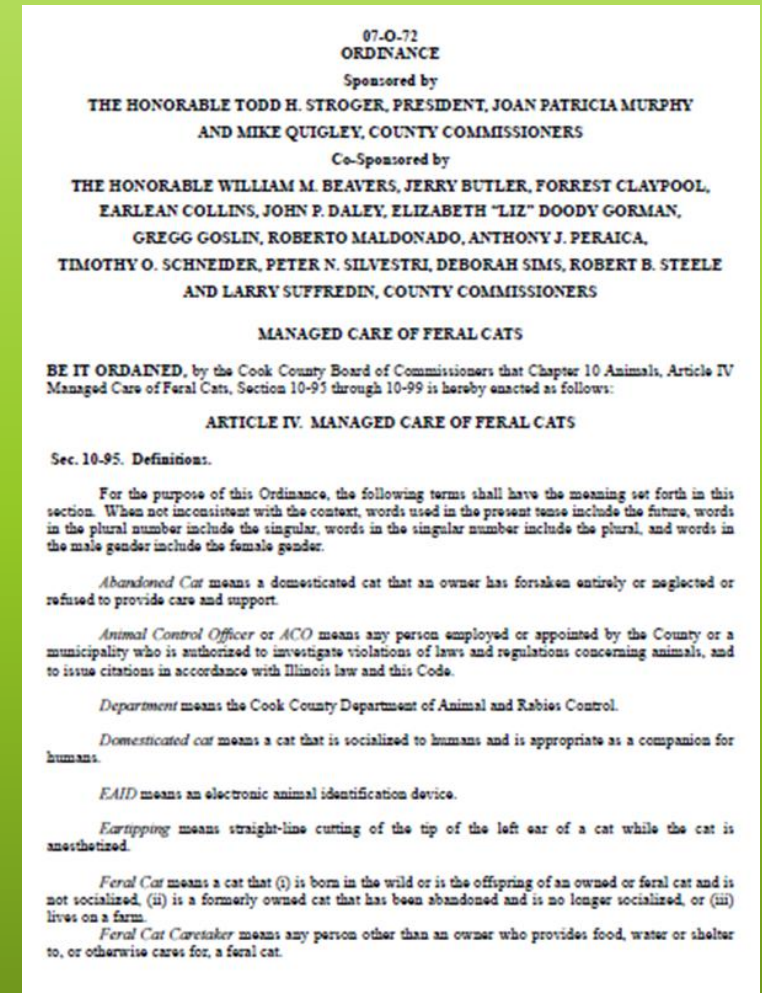
- TNR, vet care for injured ferals
- Connections to intake
- Pet food pantry info
- Outdoor shelters
- Caretaking advice, dispute mitigation
- Any donated items you can offer
- Provide progressive updates to caretaker and complainants

Mitigate!



# Law Enforcement

- Keep it SHORT, respect their time, be professional
- Police want to diffuse a situation quickly and move on - cat complaints NOT high on their priority list
- Look and act official: have ID, preferably a lanyard, business card, and handouts ready
- Introduce yourself, state your mission and intentions at the site
- Know your local laws. Keep printouts in your car
- Offer police handouts too!







## ANIMAL INTAKE POLICY

To provide the most efficient service, we kindly request that residents make an appointment for animal intake.

Animal Intake Services are available from  
12 p.m. to 7 p.m. daily.

- CACC accepts Owner Surrendered pets from CHICAGO RESIDENTS ONLY. Owner Surrenders **require** an appointment, please email [VisitCACC@cityofchicago.org](mailto:VisitCACC@cityofchicago.org) or call 312-747-1406.

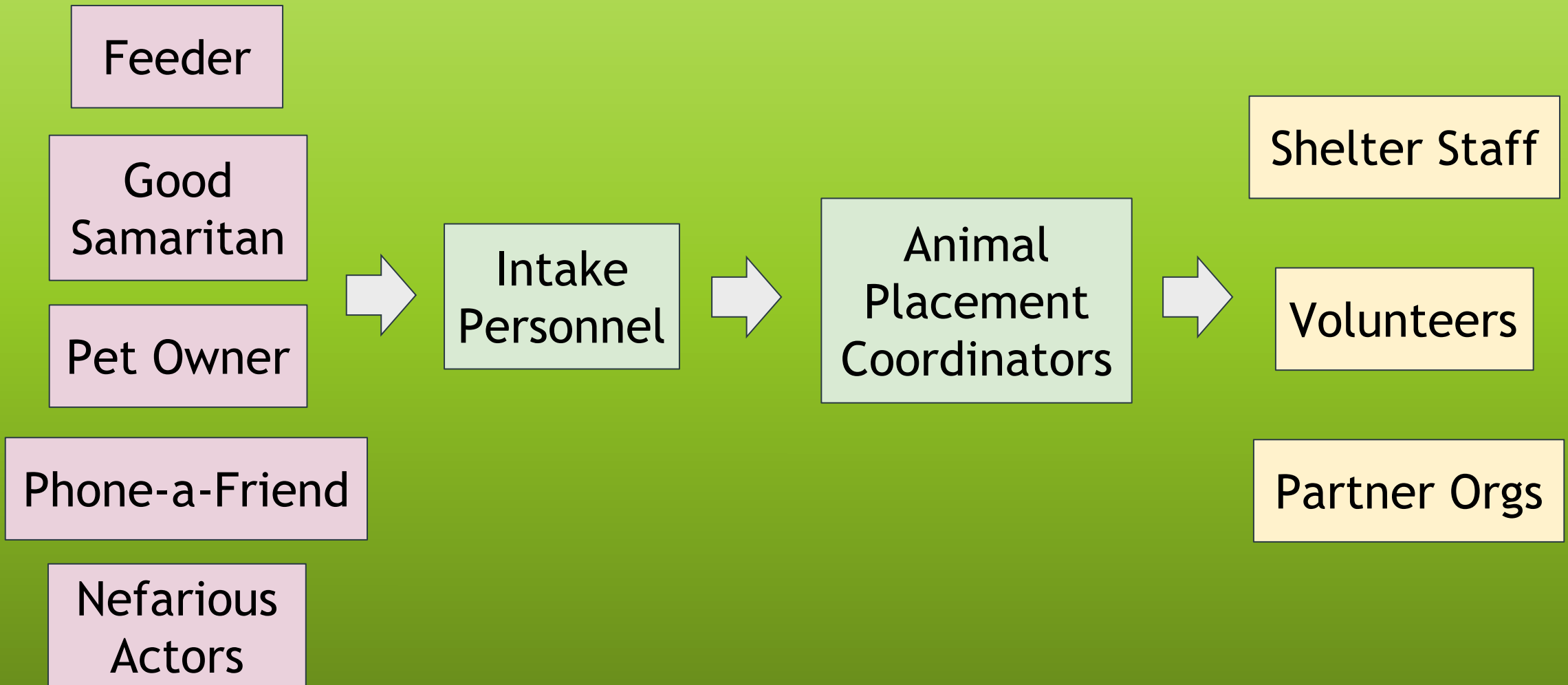
- CACC accepts Stray Animals found in Chicago Only. Making an appointment is suggested by emailing us at [VisitCACC@cityofchicago.org](mailto:VisitCACC@cityofchicago.org) or calling 312-747-1406. If you cannot make an appointment, you may experience a longer wait time.

- If you have an urgent situation or need services outside of the hours of 12 p.m. and 7 p.m., please step inside and ask to speak to a supervisor.

# RTF: Successful Returns Can Be Challenging

- Bad data obscures good outcomes
- Claiming house cats were “found outside”
- Borrowing friend’s ID who lives in the shelter’s jurisdiction
- Providing home address when cat wasn’t found at home
- Approximate addresses (35th & Damen)
- Are your policies driving the right behavior?
- It’s not *just* about body condition

# RTF: The “Telephone Game”





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# RTF: The "Telephone Game"

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Feeder

Good Samaritan

Pet Owner

Phone-a-Friend

Nefarious Actors



Intake Personnel

Animal Placement Coordinators

Shelter Staff

Volunteers

Partner Orgs



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# RTF: Tweaking the Traditional Model

- Desperate times have called for desperate measures
- The extent to which you can research each cat's situation  $\propto$  no. of cats that come in
- Investigating each address takes a lot of time
- Data privacy restrictions can hamper volunteer efforts





# RTF: Gather Better Initial Information

Develop an intake questionnaire to capture detailed info up front:

- What's the backstory?
- Is admitter feeding cats?
- Is a neighbor feeding?
- How did they catch the cats?
- Have they handled the cats?
- Would you continue to care for the cats outside if they were sterilized?



# RTF: Gather Better Initial Information

- Ask for permission from relinquishers **up front during the intake process** to share their contact info, so someone can contact them later
- Keep a TNR lead referral list from intake requests
- Analyze intake data, feed back to TNR groups
- Work *together* to make RTF better.





# Thank you!



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