

Over the last few weeks, the Highland Police Department and our Animal Warden have fielded several questions regarding how we handle feral and stray (community) cats.

There has also been some conversations on social media regarding this matter as well. First of all, we want to explain what a feral cat is. A feral cat is an unowned domestic cat that lives outdoors and avoids human contact. It does not allow itself to be handled or touched, and usually remains hidden from humans. Feral cats may breed over dozens of generations and can become an aggressive predator in urban environments. A feral cat is a wild animal.

Highland Animal Control partners with Humane Indiana in their Community Cat Return to Field (RTF) Program. This program represents an important alternative to shelter intake for outdoor cats. The RTF policy has benefits for the cats, the people in the community, as well as the area from which the cats come from. Cats may be friendly or non-socialized to humans and they do not require a specific caretaker.

Many outdoor cats have a home or have multiple homes and they are considered community cats. Since the cat return-to-owner rate at Humane Indiana is only 0.03%, we know that taking cats into the shelter is not an active way of reuniting them with their owners. RTF programs have been shown to be 7-10 times more effective at getting cats back to their owners than taking cats into the shelter.

Finally, by sterilizing and vaccinating cats and returning them to their outdoor homes, we are filling an “ecologic niche” in the community. That is, we know that there are free-roaming cats in the community. If we remove them from the street, and ultimately euthanize them, the “void” they leave behind will be filled by another cat who will likely produce more kittens and not be protected against rabies. If, instead, we return the sterilized/vaccinated cat to its outdoor home, we help to prevent the entry of other cats into that area, ultimately increasing “herd immunity” against rabies, and decreasing the population’s ability to reproduce.

At the time of intake, employees at Humane Indiana will evaluate the cat and determine if the cat's health will meet the criteria for the Community Cat Return to field (RTF) program. If so, the cat will be sterilized, receive a rabies vaccination, and then be ear tipped, which is the universal symbol of a sterilized and vaccinated outdoor cat. After these steps, the shelter staff will evaluate the cat to ensure it is ready for re-release. If so, the cat will be re-released to where the cat was found by either the shelter staff, volunteers or the Highland Animal Control officer. If the cat does not qualify for the Community Cat RTF Program, it will remain in the care of Humane Indiana.

This procedure comes at the recommendation of Humane Indiana and follows the suggestions of The Humane Society of the United States, laid out in their Guide for Municipal Leaders. We want to take a minute to explain our policy.

While we normally only handle domesticated animals and not wild animals, we realize feral cats are a problem so we are trying to address this matter. Should a resident wish to report a problem with feral or stray cats and they are requesting a trap in order to have the cat to be taken to Humane Indiana for TNR (trap, neuter, and release) services, we want you to be aware of the process that will take place.

First, you need to contact our Animal Warden to make your request. The Animal Warden will then request a TNR date from Humane Indiana. Once that date is obtained, the Animal Warden will supply you with a trap to use for free and show you how the trap can be set and this will be done 1 to 2 days before the TNR date. The reason for needing a TNR date is because Humane Indiana does not perform TNR services on a daily matter due to the volume of requests. By abiding by a scheduled TNR service date, the cat is not put into a stressful situation by being in a cage trap for any longer than necessary.

If possible, we ask that you then transport the trap and cat to Humane Indiana on the designated date. If you are unable to make

the transport, we will make arrangements to have the cat transported there for you.

Once the TNR is completed, the Animal Warden will pick up the cat from Humane Indiana and return the cat (RTF) to the neighborhood it was captured from.

We want to emphasize that Humane Indiana provides exceptional service to the Highland Police Department, but we are limited to the availability of appointments that they have available to us. The Highland Police Department will absorb all of the costs for this TNR service. You may contact the Animal Warden at 219.838.3184 or via email at animalwarden@highland.in.gov.

Should anyone wish to make a donation for this cause, you may make a donation in person at Humane Indiana (421 45th Street, Munster, IN 46321 - Please enter the Intake Center doors) telling them you want the monies designated to the Highland Animal Control fund, you may mail them a check made out to Humane Indiana (please put Highland Animal Control fund in the memo line) or you may also drop off a check at the Highland Police Department made out to Humane Indiana (please put Highland Animal Control fund in the memo line) and we will forward the check to Humane Indiana.

If you have any questions regarding our Animal Control policy, you may contact Commander John Banasiak at 219.838.3184 x 3304 or via email at jbanasiak@highland.in.gov.