



Jane Charmelo

out & about

Working to reduce county's feral cat population

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) estimates that there are anywhere between 60 million and 100 million homeless cats in the United States, and Tammy McAuley has been working well over 10 years to reduce those numbers in DuPage County, using a method called trap-neuter-return, or TNR.

McAuley had volunteered with the West Suburban Humane Society as a shift coordinator on the cat side, so she could see how the society and other shelters did not have the capacity to keep taking in the cats.

"They just didn't have the resources," she explained.

The Lombard resident said she got the idea to start a non-profit organization to use TNR when a fellow postal carrier told her about some homeless kittens.

"It kind of started from there," McAuley recalled, adding that she started Feral Fixers in September 2007, and has been dedicated to the project ever since. She is now looking forward to having a base of operations—giving her more space in her garage.

Through the past sale of her craft items, as well as with the help of donations and volunteers, Feral Fixers has performed TNR on nearly 11,800 cats, she said, and over the last five years has been able to find homes for 1,800 cats.

How it works is, "caretakers" who feed the outdoor cats can get a trap from Feral Fixers to capture the cat, then take it to McAuley's home until it can be taken in for surgery.

However, she said, catching an animal can be tricky: "It can be easy; on the other hand, it can be difficult" to get a cat into the trap.

Not catching the mother cat means more and more kittens, and "her kittens can affect blocks and blocks away," McAuley described. "The ripple effect is just crazy."

McAuley said at first she worked with PAWS Spay and Neuter Clinic in Chicago, "where we did our first 9,000 cats," and now uses the spay and neuter package services of A.D.O.P.T. in Naperville and DuPage County Animal Services, the latter of which got a grant to purchase a mobile unit from which to perform the surgeries and where about half the procedures are performed.

She holds on to the cats for up to two days before they go for surgery, and "I feed them and clean them up."

She mentioned that sometimes it is determined that a cat may be suitable for adoption, and "If they have any interest in becoming friendly, they show it then."

The cat is taken in for surgery and comes home the same day. McAuley keeps it up to a day-and-a-half before it is released, "returned to its original location."

With a cat deemed to have the potential for being adopted, she tries to find volunteers to foster the animal,

and also recruits fosters to take in the younger cats until they can get the rabies vaccination at four months. The kittens have to weigh at least 2 1/2 pounds to undergo the surgical procedure, and at that time get a physical and distemper vaccination.

The tip of the left ear is also clipped to identify that a cat has undergone TNR, McAuley emphasized.

Typically TNR season begins when "overnight temperatures are above freezing consistently," McAuley related, usually in March. That's because the cat has to be shaved for surgery and would not have the protection of its belly fur in the extreme cold.

When a cat gets returned to its original location, "We try to put it back on the caretaker as much as possible" to continue feeding it, she noted.

However, there are some cases where the cat cannot be returned to its original location. The caretaker may have moved or fallen ill, or otherwise cannot care for the animal anymore. Or, there may be a large colony already in the area.

Some of the animals may become "working" cats, where they are sent to locations such as barns and warehouses to help control the rodent population.

McAuley cited as an example a brewery in Chicago that uses the cats



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAMMY MCAULEY Lombardian

Feral Fixers is getting its own building in Lombard, according to founder Tammy McAuley, who said her garage and basement serve as holding areas for feral kittens and cats that are waiting to be spayed or neutered, or have just had the procedure. "It took us a long time to find our new building," she related, adding, "There are many changes and updates to the building planned in the next few months before we move in—hopefully in December!"

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While he was getting neutered, feral cat Mowby was found to have some serious dental issues that could have become life-threatening. Donations to Feral Fixers pay not only for spay/neuter procedures but for other medical care.

(Right) Feral Fixers recently transported 16 "friendlies" (15 kittens and one adult) and 11 feral cats, in two vehicles, to DuPage County Animal Services for spay/neuter procedures. They recover at Tammy McAuley's home before being released to their original location. She said kittens and some adult cats can be suitable for adoption as well.



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because the rodents are attracted to the grains.

She mentioned a statistic that DuPage County Animal Services did not have to euthanize any feral cats during 2019, adding that in the past, people would bring in litters of kittens too old to be tamed, "and there was no answer but to euthanize."

The county service now participates in the working cat program to help relocate cats that cannot be returned to their original locations.

Besides this partnership, Feral Fix-

ers also works with area shelters, and police departments "refer people to us instead of handing out fines, etc.," McAuley outlined.

This year, though, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, "We really couldn't kick in until the end of April," she said, which means the delay has brought about another generation of cats, and likely "at the end of July another rush of kittens."

She currently has roughly 130 kittens that will be fixed when they reach 2 1/2 pounds, and she is look-

ing forward to the new Lombard building that will house a heated and air-conditioned TNR room, among other amenities.

"We've done so much out of my garage," she said with a chuckle, but with a physical facility, "We may be able to do more cats as a result."

McAuley believes, too, that "If you don't have a building, you don't attract enough volunteers," and realized, "No way we could continue without a building."

And with forward thinking to offer

cat adoptions, she continued, "People always like to have a building to come to."

Feral Fixers is not yet taking cats at its new location, as McAuley doesn't see the building being open until around December, in part because of delays in remodeling due to the pandemic.

Calling Feral Fixers "the shel-

ter for the outside cats," she said, "Our goal is, every cat should have a home, but it is up to them [cats] to decide."

And, McAuley advised, "If you see kittens, leave them alone and call us."

Call 630-881-3977 or visit the Feral Fixers Facebook page to find out more about the TNR program.