

Curbing cat population an ongoing battle

By Glenn Rolfe, Sussex County Post | June 12, 2014

SUSSEX COUNTY — Breakfast and dinner time at Roland Dukes' mobile home residence in rural Dagsboro is literally a feline feeding frenzy.

From nearby woods, vacant mobile homes and other structures about two dozen cats — the count as of mid-Spring — of assorted shapes and colors gather twice a day on his back porch for a feast of dry cat food and water.

Mr. Dukes, now living on a reduced fixed income following the death of his wife last October, says he honestly doesn't want the cats.

But the 84-year-old Korean War veteran doesn't have the heart to turn his head and look the other way. Each week, he goes through about two 22-pound bags of dry cat food that for a while was furnished by Safe Haven, which also provided some trap and release efforts until the shelter shut down.

"So here we are. But I can't see mistreating them," said Mr. Dukes. "I'm living on my social security. When my wife passed away that hurt me bad. I try to take care of them. I do what I can."

The cats Mr. Dukes feeds for are a mix of feral, those born in the wild, and those abandoned. He suspects one calico - whose mother was hit and killed by a car - was going to have kittens.

Several years ago area cats migrated to his and neighboring properties.

It's not an isolated problem.

"It is estimated that 200,000 cats live outdoors in Delaware; over 82 million across the country. That is the estimate by Alleycat Allies," said Diane Meier, who writes a blog for No Kill Delaware, an online social media community.

"It's a huge problem," said Amy Royal, a volunteer with Whimsical Animal Rescue/Sussex County Animal Association. "This is not just a little issue anymore, it's everybody's problem. I think people need to see really how serious it is."

A main problem, says Kevin Usilton, Executive Director of First State Animal Center/SPCA, is that Delaware is not exactly a feline-friendly state.

State legislation — the Companion Animal Protection Act that went into effect January 2011 — basically slammed the door on cats in Delaware, he said.

"It's nowhere in America that I know of that stray cats are left to the streets except in Delaware, because our legislators only want dogs controlled. They do not want anything controlled about cats," said Mr. Usilton. "In July 2012 the First State Animal Center shut the door to stray cats, and only accepts cats that are adoptable. And that also depends on if we have space. We have capacity for typically 300 animals, of which probably 85 are cat cages. So if we have 85 cats in our custody we can't accept anymore. And we're not bringing them in to euthanize them. We quit doing that. We only take ones that we have space for."

Like the FSAC/SPCA, the Delaware SPCA, Faithful Friends and Delaware Humane are in the same boat, according to Mr. Usilton.

"None of them have an open door for cats. We accept owner surrender cats when we have space, just like everybody else," said Mr. Usilton. "We have an open door for dogs. We've tried to have an open door for cats; we've been bombarded by the no-kill movement so much that we just shut the door. Our state has very little resources for cats and our elected officials don't care. They have to hear it from the public before they understand how important cats are to people."

"Delaware law changed several years ago concerning animals, so a lot of the shelters just completely shut down as far as accepting cats," said Ms. Royal. "There's a big battle between the animal rescue groups over that - the Companion Animal Protection Act. It has some good points, but it also has some serious issues."

"Basically what that caused, is it makes statistics look good in shelters, because they've become no-kill shelters," Ms. Royal said. "Well, it just reverses everything and puts the killing on people who are dumping them out on the street because they have nowhere to take them. That doesn't take rocket science to figure that out. If there is nowhere to take the cats, those people are still going to figure out a way to dispose of a cat or kittens they don't want. That makes statistics look fantastic."

Tammy Magaha, another longtime Whimsical Animal rescue/SCAA volunteer, echoes that.

"Because you either have the people who 100 percent believe in the no-kill and the way that it is being done here in Delaware, and then you have the people on the other side that are saying, 'Look, we want to be no-kill, but this isn't the way to get there,'" Ms. Magaha said. "The problem is if they don't get the cat population under control there is going to be a mass killing. You have the issues of the diseases that they carry. We could be headed for a rabies epidemic. It's scary. We're in the trenches so we're dealing with it every day."

"The problem started back in 2010 when the shelter standards were put into place. What happened there was the euthanasia numbers - each shelter wanted to get them down — so the answer to it was to close the doors to cats," Ms. Magaha said. "We all want to be no-kill. But there has got to be a better way to get there."

Whimsical Animal Rescue's answer: aggressive spay/neuter.

"You cannot adopt your way out of this issue," said Ms. Royal. "The only way you can stop it is by spay and neuter. It's quite a war in Delaware. The battle line is drawn right down the middle."

"The next problem is what you find outside. They have now changed it in legislation, it is no longer feral cats, it is community cats, is what they are calling them. The majority of what we are finding is not feral cats, it is abandoned pets. The pet owners have nowhere to relinquish animals. So if they can't find a place to owner surrender them, what are they going to do with them," Ms. Magaha said. "If they don't want them they are going to get rid of them. So they are dropping them on the street. And a majority of them are not altered. So now you are just adding to the problem. If it were just ferals outside the T & R (trap, spay/neuter and release) would work. That would work. But now that we are adding to it, the fact that you have people's pets out there, the number is getting just astronomical."

"There is no way all of those cats can be taken in by our shelters. There is no way," said Ms. Meier. "The best thing we can do for them is trap/neuter/return."

"It is not only my problem. It's up here in Dagsboro and everywhere else has got a problem with these cats in this area," said Mr. Dukes. "Nobody seems to want to help you with cats, for some reason. I don't know why. They do with dogs but they don't with cats."

“What is happening now is a lot of trap and release, you don’t have colony caretakers - a person that gives them housing so they can get out of the weather, offer them food and water, so that they are taken care of on a regular basis,” said Ms. Magaha. “So they are trapping, they are fixing them, they are releasing them but you are not having the follow-up of somebody caring for them. So now they (cats) are wandering. Where are they ending up ... in people’s yards because they are looking for food and looking for shelter. This is all falling back on the community, and there is where that the community has to pick up the responsibility that legislation has put into this position.”

“What kills me about this is that basically they are wildlife, the feral ones. They are part of Delaware’s wildlife. We protect wildlife in Delaware. So we need to protect these cats.

If people are feeding them, we need to help those caretakers,” said Ms. Meier, a cat colony caretaker near Lewes.

“We need to get the cats in their colonies neutered. We need to support them, not harass them. Yes, there are going to be some cats living outdoors. That is not a tragedy. These cats are very resilient and live happy lives. I can tell you from watching my cats. These are happy cats and they having a great life. Yes it really helps when people feed them and provide shelter for them. They do pretty well in abandoned trailers. They are doing as well as the other animals that live indoors.”

In large part, Mr. Usilton blames unfunded mandates:

“In the shelter world there are a lot of those. And they have really hurt the cat population,” he said. “About eight years ago there were a lot of really great things happening for cats - spay/neuter program, adoption program. There were a lot of aggressive spay neuter programs going on. When funding started to dry up and then state passed this bill it shut the doors to the shelters. You can only handle so many animals on so much money. That is where we are now, that the shelters don’t have funds to accept the cats or pay for them for that matter. And so now residents are squealing and they have no resources.”

“I’ve been saying this for a year and a half; we shut our door only to get people off of our back. Because we are getting all of this negative press, which was impacting our fundraising which then means we can handle less animals,” Mr. Usilton said. “So shelter bashing is a very common phenomenon now. That is happening across the country. But what people don’t realize is that when you bash the shelter you hurt the animals living in that shelter.”

“I think spay neuter needs to be the priority. Right now their priority is all about the adoptions and shelter numbers to fit into this no-kill box that they’ve made,” said Ms. Magaha. “I do think we can get to no-kill. But instead of spending the money on more warehouse space for animals why not put the money into spay and neuter programs. There is only one area I know that got to no-kill and they actually import animals in, and that’s New Hampshire. New Hampshire did it through spay and neuter. I would love to see Delaware do that, if we could get that through to our legislators. If we can put our priorities just into spay and neuter being the first thing I think we could see a big difference. I would love to see the day that we are no longer needed.”

Among those involved in the cat world are Kristi Idnurm, founder of Kristi’s Kats, and D.C. Brown, founder and executive director/president of Homeless Cat Helpers Inc., and president of Friends for Rescue and Pet Care, an organization which sponsors billboards promoting low-cost spay/neuter.

Kristi’s Kats

Based in Georgetown, Kristi’s Kats was born as an effort to help the feral cat colony in Ms. Idnurm’s neighborhood.

“It started in 2010, when a neighbor moved out of my community and left seven cats behind. That’s how it all got started. I started taking care of the neighbor’s, they were outside. One of them had a littler, so I

took the litter in and started working on getting those community cats fixed, because of course you don't want more cats.

I would get calls from other people that knew, and it was kind of like, 'Oh, what's one more. ... that's how it got started.'

Today, Kristi's Kats only takes cats from other rescue groups - felines that have special needs, such as eye issues, upper respiratory infections, lack of appendages, and other needs.

"I really try to work with the other rescues in area," Ms. Idnurm said. "It is really important that we all work together."

Homeless Cat Helpers/Friends for Rescue and Pet Care

An advocate of spay-neuter, Ms. Brown has made two trips to the Albany, N.Y. region, taking homeless cats for adoption. A third trip is planned in the fall.

"They have a very high adoption rate. They are a very progressive shelter. I can't keep them in stock. They must do a wonderful outreach program," said Ms. Brown. "Most of all they do a lot of spay-neuter. They have been doing a lot of spay neuter for years into decades."

"More than anything we need volunteers. We need people that can help us fundraise, we need people that can do local transports, we need people that can help with the long distance transports, and we do need foster families, although too often the public thinks fostering is the only thing we need. It is obviously our bread and butter of what we need help with but it is not the only thing," said Mr. Brown. "Everybody wants no kill, and everybody wants it to cost very little of anything. But very few are willing to open their homes, or their cars or their wallets. So we do need to let the public know we exist. And I am praying for response from those that can help as well as those who need help."

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