
THE
CARETAKERS'
CHALLENGES
AND
SOLUTIONS

As caretakers we go about our daily tasks. We gather strength from the feral cats and kittens we care for. We experience their delight and their joy of the moment, as well as their unconditional love and their pain. Our lives are touched in an unexplainable way by their presence. They show us things we never dreamed of and inspire us to do the impossible. Only those whose lives have been touched by a feral cat or kitten can truly understand the passion, depth of commitment, respect and affection that is forthcoming from a place within that few of us realized existed.

Dona Cosgrove Baker, Founder
Feral Cat Caretakers' Coalition

The feral cat caretaker is the direct lifeline to feral cats and kittens. They offer them the right to life and provide the solution for humane population control, and long-term managed care. This can be a lifetime commitment. They personally furnish services to feral cats and kittens that should be made available through funded shelters, sanctuaries, foundations, humane societies and many other organizations. Unfortunately, few of these organizations provide for feral cats. The fact that most of the cats have not had an opportunity to bond with humans, and must be captured in traps, impacts their image and suffering, and renders them unadoptable. In affirming their right to life, their plight then becomes the responsibility of thousands of concerned citizens who commit to their care with little or no resources, no rights and no recognition.

CARETAKING ENTAILS MANY RESPONSIBILITIES

Caring for feral cats and kittens, living outdoors requires dedication and perseverance. Feral cat caretakers provide outdoor sheltering, food, medical attention, veterinary care, spaying/neutering, vaccinations and whatever else, within their means, to increase and maintain the quality of life of those within their care. They do this in all kinds of weather, under the most difficult conditions and sometimes miles from home. They find homes for, and take responsibility for kittens as well as adults that have bonded with them and have become too domesticated to survive outdoors. The stray cats who join colonies in search of food must also be taken out and given the opportunity for a good home. The caretakers manage colonies by knowing each cat and identifying any newcomers that need to be trapped and require surgery. Long-term managed care includes on-going trapping, arranging for foster care and kitten adoption. Caretakers attend to cleanliness of the area and minimize dangers when possible. Much of their work is labor-intensive and generally performed under adverse conditions.

Feral cat caretakers who encounter a magnitude of indifference by their communities, often extend themselves to help other feral colonies, become ardent activists and form networks. If given the proper support, caretakers can offer a comprehensive solution for their communities by implementing humane treatment and population control of feral cats. By working with property owners and concerned citizens they can establish an outreach program that will enable all parties to participate in this most worthy endeavor.

CARETAKERS MEET MANY CHALLENGES

The caretakers ameliorate the plight of the ferals, which is often dire and deplorable, including:

Starving and malnourished feral cats and kittens, as well as strays that have been abandoned, with little or no food available and no population control in place.

Abandoned kittens (from hours to weeks old) found in all areas of the city.

Cats and kittens that have been injured by traffic, guns, packs of wild dogs and other circumstances.

Cats and kittens boarded up and trapped inside buildings.

Demolition of habitat in areas under construction, such as houses and abandoned buildings.

Emergency need for relocation or sanctuary

Cats and kittens, starving and malnourished, being used for rodent control on private property.

Cats and kittens discarded on freeways and in public places.

The caretakers are subject to the realities of limited financial resources and assistance, including:

Depletion of personal funds to cover large veterinary bills and additional caretaking expenses, resulting in inability to sustain themselves or their cats.

Inability to purchase “minimum” food requirements for their colonies.

Inadequate shelters and feeding stations for winter months.

One or more cats and kittens in need of immediate emergency care.

Illness or death of the persons caring for several ferals, perhaps after many years of managed care.

The caretakers would benefit from an informed public and effective intervention. This support is needed to assist with:

- . Countering the influence of persons who oppose spaying and neutering.
- . Countering the influence of persons who oppose implementing trap, neuter and return.
- Feeding and trapping under hostile conditions, including threats of physical violence to the caretakers and/or the feral cats and kittens.
- Educating and assisting persons who are feeding feral cats, who do not have experience in trapping or are unable or hesitant to do so.
- Educating and negotiating with private and commercial property owners, management in large corporations, universities, refineries, government bases and other locations, regarding the successful trap, spay/neuter and return method, with managed care.
- Negotiating the rights of the feral cats to remain at their original location (if safe).

CARETAKERS NEED SUPPORT TO COVER THE COSTS OF CARETAKING

MEDICINE AND VETERINARY SERVICES

In addition to the costs for spay and neuter, caring for feral cats and kittens requires veterinary care and treatment. This includes vaccinations, parasite control, flea control, boarding fees, diagnostic costs, x-

rays, blood tests, extended care, injuries, emergency care, surgery, medicines and miscellaneous medical supplies.

Spaying, neutering and veterinary care can be prohibitive. Currently, few veterinarians offer a sufficient discount to caretakers. The caretakers generally pay for services out of their personal finances. Some caretakers have the money to pay for these additional costs, but many do not. If money is not available for these expenses the caretaker will be financially depleted and emotionally drained. Lack of financial assistance and food will make it impossible for a caretaker to continue to spay and neuter the feral cats and kittens and implement long-term managed care. All too often, this miserable and inequitable situation confronts the dedicated caretaker.

Caring for kittens can also incur extensive veterinary and medical costs. Costs for each healthy kitten for surgery with the required tests can be a minimum of \$75-\$100. Multiply this by 10 to 20 kittens, which may be just the first of those captured during kitten season, and you have a financial situation that is beyond the means of the average caretaker. If the kitten is not healthy, expenses can total hundreds of dollars or more. If the kitten is under five weeks of age or hours or days old, they will require specialized foster care and feeding. In these instances, an experienced caretaker to care for younger kittens and those with compromised immune systems is necessary. The lack of availability of experienced persons who can commit to this type of intensive care for kittens is overwhelming. Providing them with financial assistance, equipment, support and training would allow more persons to commit to this most important service.

Special food plus additional veterinary care and medicines may be required for eye infections, worms, ringworm, mange, upper respiratory infections, debilitation, and other problems associated with kittens born of malnourished feral mothers can add to the caretaking costs.

The personal cost to the caretaker for preparing one healthy feral kitten for adoption, from the moment it is trapped until socialized and ready for a new home, averages about \$275.

FOOD AND SUPPLEMENTAL NOURISHMENT

Adult cats

The cost of feeding a feral cat an average quality food is about \$5 per week. The cost for above average food can be twice that amount. Cats that live out of doors that consume low quality food develop weakened immune systems. They can become sickly and require veterinarian care. Caretakers should be able to provide their cats with a good quality of food, but many cannot afford to. Food supplements should also be added to the food as most ferals live in highly stressful situations. Powdered garlic in small amounts and powdered Vitamin C, about 150 mg. per can of food are minimum supplements. You can resource holistic supplement web sites for additional information regarding food and supplement requirements.

Kittens

Food for kittens is expensive. Special kitten food is necessary, as well as milk replacement for those not yet weaned. Good quality kitten food is \$20 plus a case, with dry food around \$12 for four pounds. Milk replacement is approximately \$5 for 8 oz. to \$22 for powdered. The food costs for one kitten each month

are huge. During kitten season a caretakers can encounter from 10 to 40 kittens, and foster care may be required for several weeks to months. What does the caretaker do in such circumstances when finances are not available to provide proper care for those they have taken into their hearts and homes? Kittens show up in the bushes, on doorsteps, under houses and apartment buildings, in alleys and so on. Children bring them to their friends and families in an attempt to save them. Assistance for the feral kittens and recognition of the caretaker's commitment to them must be brought to the attention of an uninformed public and city governments. 90% of all kittens are born to feral mothers.

SUPPLIES AND EQUIPMENT

Examining the list of supplies a caretaker uses provides a small glimpse into some of their requirements. Following is a minimum suggested list of supplies.

Ant Powder	Garbage Bags
Boots	Paper Towels
Bowls	Plates
Cages	Raingear
Carriers	Scissors
Can Openers	Storage Containers
Cage Liners	Tools
Enclosures for transit	Towels
Flashlights	Traps
Food Containers	Water Containers

Then add in large carriers and large cages for recovery and special enclosures for kittens during foster care. Supplies for building innovative shelters and feeding stations, bedding, camouflage and waterproofing for shelters and feeding stations.

Shelter materials must be waterproof and warm for the winter months. Providing customized shelters for a colony of 20-30 feral cats can cost a minimum of several hundreds of dollars. Additional ongoing costs involve laundering, replacing bedding, flea control and refurbishing feeding stations and shelters.

THREE ADDITIONAL COMPONENTS ARE NEEDED FOR THE LONG TERM SOLUTION

FOSTER HOMES

Foster homes are a critical component of feral cat caretaking. Feral cats and kittens born and raised outdoors are in constant jeopardy. There is a life without security. However, when this is provided to them in a loving foster home, it is possible for them to go from a semi-feral cat or kitten to a trusting and loving feline presence. We do not recommend that adult cats be taken from their colonies to be domesticated. This is an individual choice that each caretaker must make. If the home site is safe and is being managed by a caretaker, it is best that they remain. However, feral cats can range from those who walk up to you while feeding and rub against your legs and allow you to pet them, to those that fly away

the moment they see you. When an adult cat bonds with the caretaker and becomes “almost domestic”, it is recommended they be taken from the colony. They are no longer as instinctive for survival as they should be and seek the love and companionship of humans. This happens quite frequently, but the cats will still need an extended period of adjustment in a home environment, once they are taken from the colony. The caretaker’s home is usually the foster home.

Rescued kittens need foster homes while they are being socialized for adoption. If the caretaker does not have available space other persons who have offered to help and have room in their homes, such as bedrooms, bathrooms, laundry rooms, storage rooms and even garages, are contacted to help place the kittens and provide them with a loving and secure place to adjust before they are ready for adoption. Foster care is a commitment by very special people who are willing to give of themselves, their homes and their time to lovingly prepare the kittens for adoption. They are essential for the kitten’s survival and introduction into society. This can take several weeks or months. Under the best conditions, not all kittens or cats will be adopted. This will add to an already overburdened responsibility in many households. The need for foster homes is an ongoing urgent need and many homes could be available through networking, financial assistance, equipment, and education.

RELOCATION FACILITIES

Relocation facilities for feral cats are a vital part of providing a humane solution for ferals. With the expansion of our cities and construction on locations that have been available to feral cats and kittens, their homes are increasingly threatened. Abandoned buildings, homes, apartment houses or any properties that may either be torn down or under construction, may suddenly become uninhabitable for the feral families that have been living there. When the bulldozers arrive, they scatter in terror, sometimes leaving behind the kittens, older cats, and those unable to escape in time or are injured. The caretakers are usually the first ones called to help, as they are all too familiar with the urgency of the situation.

The first objective is to negotiate for time to assess the situation. If no other alternative is available, the ferals will need to be relocated to new location. Since we are dealing with feral cats and kittens, this will mean trapping with possible immediate relocation. As of this date, there are few places to relocate a feral cat colony. The need is so great, that many caretakers end up bringing them into their garages and homes or even boarding them, to prevent them from being injured, killed or facing an agonizing death from starvation. When the call goes out that a feral colony is in eminent danger of being destroyed, it is one of the most paralyzing situations that a caretaker can face. There are literally no feral cat sanctuaries available on an as-needed basis for the majority of feral cats in peril. Feral cats are in desperate need of safe relocation sites and sanctuaries. As the cats grow older, their need for a sanctuary can be vital to their survival.

FERAL CAT SANCTUARIES

Imagine that you are a caretaker and have been feeding and caring for a colony of 20 cats for the past five years in an undeveloped location somewhere in the city. You have devoted your time and resources to their survival and they are your passion and joy. All of a sudden, fences appear, places are boarded up and signs are posted that construction will begin on a certain date. Strangers and equipment are showing up daily and you know that the lives of the 20 beloved cats you have cared for so lovingly are now in

jeopardy. The thought of them being homeless and destroyed or injured is beyond comprehension. You know, that you must fight for their survival and find a new place for them. But who can give a home to 20 feral cats? Property development and construction managers may tell you to “get rid of the cats or they will be destroyed during construction.” You may have 30 days, if you are lucky. The feelings of vulnerability, fear and grief can overwhelm even the most experienced caretaker.

These destructive circumstances are prevalent in all our cities and occur daily. As the cries go out for help, there is little that can be done under the present confines of our laws and the scarcity of facilities available for feral cats and kittens. Currently, the caretaker and their feral cats have no rights and there are few safe places to take them.

Feral cat sanctuaries are urgently needed as a safe destination. They can be established on modestly priced acreage away from the cities. The sanctuary would become the home for ferals that have no other place to welcome them and they could live out their lives in a safe and secure environment. The sanctuary could also serve as a center for workshops as well as educating the public and school children about the humane care of feral cats.

There is a pressing need for feral cat sanctuaries.