

About eight of every 10 cats brought to the county's animal shelter — most of them plucked from life on the streets, alleys and backyards from Boca Raton to Jupiter — are put to death at the shelter.

Last year, that was more than 8,000 cats euthanized, while another 220,000 feral cats are believed still out there, posing health risks to humans and survival risks to the wildlife they hunt.

Now, the people who manage the shelter and the Peggy Adams Animal Rescue League want to winnow those deaths closer to zero over the next decade by embracing some tactics that are spreading nationally.

Today, they will ask Palm Beach County Commissioners to support that goal — they're calling it a Countdown to Zero.

While there is no easy fix for the problem, and no exact approach has yet been formulated, officials believe a key is preventing thousands of animals from ever entering the shelter in the first place. One such tactic includes trapping, neutering, then releasing the cats back into the wild.

In fact, several policy changes in Jacksonville have allowed that city, similar in geographic size to Palm Beach County, to cut the number of deaths, cats and dogs, at its shelters in the last decade from 23,000 to 2,150.

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Jacksonville's tactics:

- Massively increase neutering efforts — they went from roughly 2,000 surgeries in 2003 to 25,000 in 2013.
- Encourage owners to keep their pets or pay to surrender them — this cut surrenders by a third.
- Give away pets immediately without background check or fee.

“We've had to kind of change even our staff's viewpoint,” said Jacksonville's chief of animal care Scott Trebatoski. “For at least two or three decades we've trained people to bring their animals to a shelter,

when we should've been saying what can we do to help you keep them or find an alternative home for that pet yourself.”

But perhaps the biggest change Jacksonville authorities made was adopting a policy that returned every healthy, but feral-living cat to the outdoors after being vaccinated, neutered or spayed as long as there was a plan to feed the animal and any of its brethren.

This was done while laying down penalties of \$250 and \$350 for anyone who fed a cat that wasn't fixed or anyone who failed to follow strict rules about when and where to feed the cats.

The method is often referred to in animal advocacy circles as TNR, trap-neuter-release.

The ASPCA says it's the most humane and effective way of managing the free-roaming cat population.

The American Veterinary Medical Association appears to have no published opinion on TNR, but expressed reservations in a 2005 policy statement that said it “neither endorses nor opposes appropriately managed cat colony programs.”

Trebatoski in Jacksonville says the method has cut down on colonies and allowed for the population to spread out. Being fixed and fed cuts down on cat fights, aggressive cat behavior and complaints of predator cats. This, while the agency's budget and staff have dwindled.

“Most shelters are underfunded and understaffed and really there isn't even time to think about doing things a different way and developing new protocols,” said Julie Levy, an expert in TNR at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Managing wild cats in the wild instead of housing and then killing them benefits those in the wild, and frees up staff and money to manage the pets that are more likely to be adopted, she said.

David Leavitt says he's seen these methods work on Palm Beach.

Leavitt is president of Palm Beach Island Cats, a non-profit which manages the free-roaming felines in the town.

Five years ago, about 700 cats, some more friendly “community cats” others more wild and “feral,” were counted on Palm Beach. In 2013, the population fell to 558, with only 28 kittens born, Leavitt said. The decrease came after the town agreed to allow a charity to pursue trapping, spaying and vaccinating.

Now complaints are falling, town officials in the manager's office and code enforcement said.

Leavitt's volunteers feed cats at 71 stations every day, return and clean up any leftover food or waste 12 hours later. Any new arrivals are trapped and treated. Per industry standard, their ears are notched so anyone can know upon seeing them that they have been spayed.

“Now the cats are much quieter. Their breeding behavior has stopped. Through daily feeding, they are less visible and their population should continue to go down,” Leavitt said.

But Palm Beach is an island. Fixing the countywide problem, is assuredly going to be a bigger task. Sheltering won't work. Even the house-friendly pet cat has few places to go if the owner chooses or is forced to surrender the pet.

The county has space for only 150 cats at a time. Sauve said only two other animal rescue groups take in cats and there's always a waiting list.

If the county adopts the trap-neuter-release program, it would almost double the number of cats spayed and neutered from about 17,000 a year to close to 30,000, estimates Richard Anderson, Peggy Adams executive director.

At about \$75 a pop, that would cost \$2.2 million, said Anderson, whose organization operates solely on grants and donations. So the plan is to target zip codes where the complaints and the problems are greatest.

Peggy Adams is already targeting one zip code in Lake Worth. This month, Animal Care and Control began focusing in a two-mile radius in central Palm Beach County west of Florida's Turnpike. And Sauve boasts she's landed a grant to hold an around-the-clock spay/neuter clinic for 425 cats in February.

“We have to work on a way to embrace a community cat program in our county that has compassion for our cats and respects the rights of property owners. You need people will to sterilize them and feed them,” said Animal Care and Control Director Dianne Sauve.

“If you simply remove the colony and kill the colony, other cast will move in,” Sauve said.

But it can be a hard sell. Ask Jaye Rodrigues, the TRN coordinator for the Jupiter charity Save A Pet. Rodrigues invested years convincing a church in Tequesta to manage a population of cats that had burgeoned on its property. And once the church agreed, Rodrigues worked for six more months, recruiting experts to convince the Village of Tequesta to permit someone to feed the cats once they were sterilized.

“Most officials and homeowners associations and municipalities want the cats removed rather than adopt a trap, neuter, return program,” Rodrigues said.

But in May, she won their permission, narrowly: 3-2.

Palm Beach County Animal Care and Control in FY 2013 reported:

10,401 cats admitted to shelter

79 percent killed

220,000 cats estimated to live in the wild in Palm Beach County

17,000 - 18,000 animals were neutered/spayed last year by county and Peggy Adams

4,000 of those at Peggy Adams were community cats (living in the wild)

Cost to spay/neuter varies averaging \$75