ALLEY CAT RESCUE

AN ALLIANCE FOR CAT PROTECTION

CATS IN THE UNITED STATES 2025

The Cat Report is published annually as part of Alley Cat Rescue's commitment to help community cats in the United States and around the world by promoting humane, nonlethal care that improves cats' lives.

Introduction

Looking back at the end of 2024 and the first few months of 2025, we see significant progress and a strengthened commitment toward enhancing the well-being of cats through our collective efforts in rescue, adoption, trap-neuter-return, advocacy, and public education.

Alley Cat Rescue works tirelessly to improve outcomes for cats nationwide by strengthening our programs, expanding our community outreach, and advocating for sustainable humane solutions for every feline.

A few years ago, the American Pet Products Association published results from a national survey of pet owners. They found that 14% of all U.S. households provide care, food and water for free-roaming cats. That is 18.4 million people. Among households with pet cats, 26% feed and care for outdoor cats. However, only 20% of those households ensured that the cats were spayed and neutered.

While these numbers are encouraging and do show a level of care for community cats, we must help those that feed colonies understand how important it is to spay and neuter those cats. The importance of sterilization of all domestic cats cannot be overstated; cats are prolific breeders and a couple of community cats without sterilization can soon turn into 50 cats.

This year, let's continue to work together to get outdoor cats spayed and neutered. While TNR'd cats live well outdoors if fed and monitored, the same cannot be said for those not sterilized. Males suffer from fight wounds that could kill them, and females suffer from the stress of having too many kittens.

Alley Cat Rescue teaches about the harsh realities facing kittens born on the streets.

- High Mortality Rate:The vast majority of feral kittens—estimates often suggest around 75%—do not survive to adulthood without human intervention. This extremely high mortality rate is due to the many hazards these kittens face from the moment they're born.

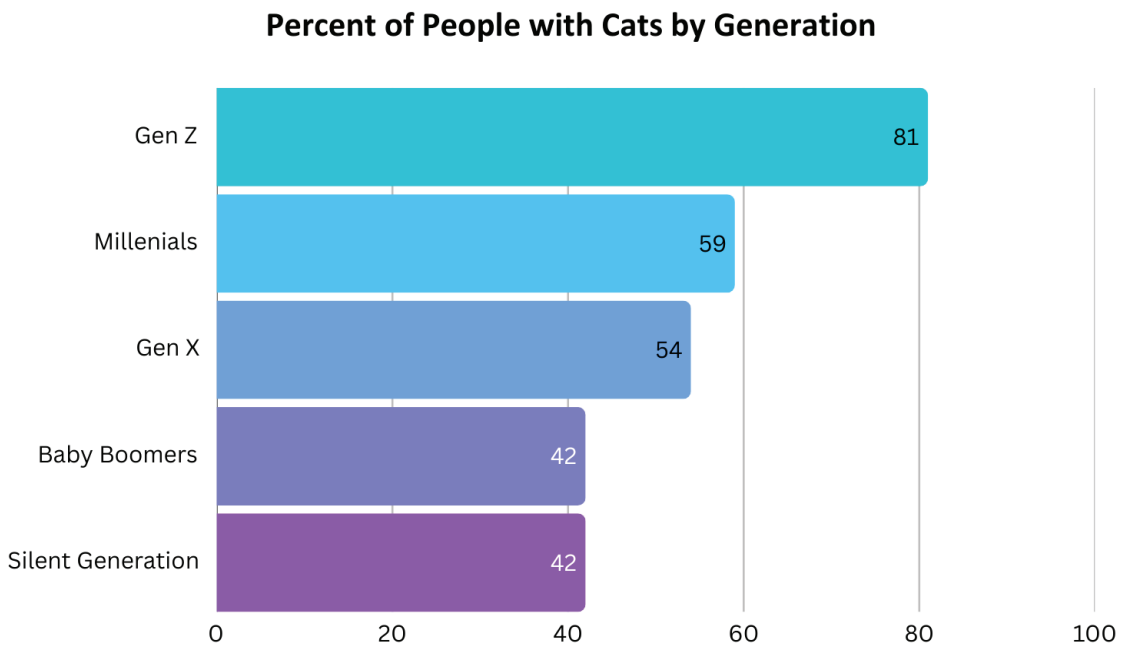
- Treatable Illnesses and Preventable Deaths: Many of these kittens suffer from illnesses that, in a more controlled environment, could be treated. These include respiratory infections, parasites, malnutrition, and other conditions common in feral populations. With proper veterinary care, many deaths could be prevented.

These points underline the importance of programs like trap-neuter-return (TNR), fostering, and community outreach, which all provide lifesaving interventions to these vulnerable animals.

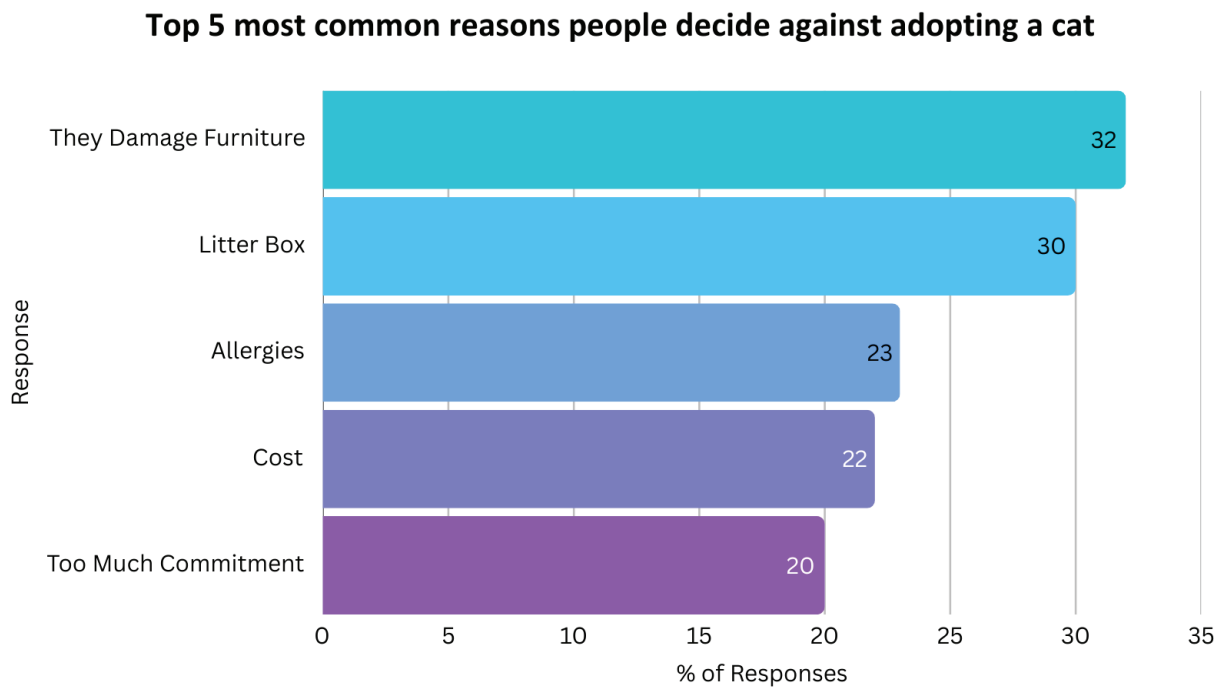
America's Cat People: Trends and Insights

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association's (AVMA) 2024 report, approximately 32% of U.S. households have cats, totaling an estimated 73.8 million pet cats [1].

Data from *Forbes.com* reveals that members of Generation Z (roughly ages 13 to late twenties) are currently the most likely to have pet cats [2]. While this trend may be partially influenced by minors still living at home—where their pets may technically belong to their parents—it still highlights a growing affinity for cats among young people. Following closely behind are Millennials (late twenties to early forties), suggesting that cats are becoming an increasingly popular companion animal in the U.S.



Common Reasons People Decide *Against* Adopting a Cat
The numbers below come from the latest *State of Pet Homelessness* report [3].



In many cases, these obstacles can be easily resolved with a bit of creativity and thoughtful planning. And when you consider that adopting a shelter or outdoor cat could quite literally save her life, the extra effort to make your home a welcoming space is a relatively small and meaningful investment—for both your family and the cat you are rescuing.

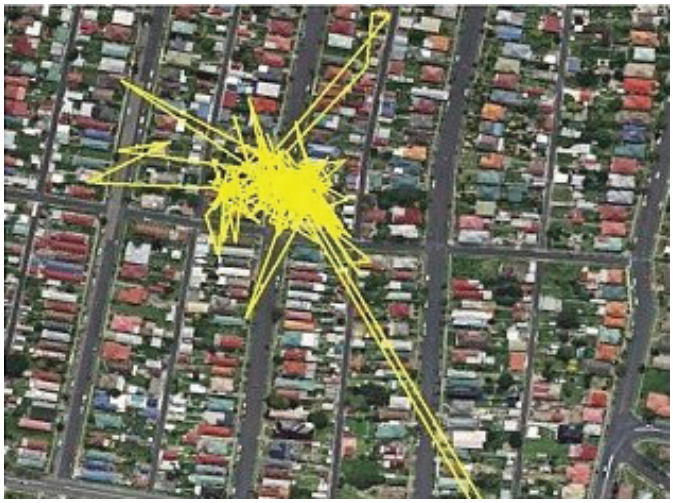
Reasons for Relinquishing Cats

According to the *State of Pet Homelessness* report [3] and data from *Human Animal Support Services* [4], the top reasons people relinquish their cats include financial hardship, lack of time, and housing issues. Interestingly, neither source lists behavioral problems among the top five causes. This contrasts with findings from a large 2023 study [5] and a report by *Best Friends Animal Society* [6], which analyzed surrender logs from over one million animals and identified behavior-related issues as a more significant factor.

Taken together, these four data sets highlight a clear need for greater support for pet owners, including more affordable, pet-inclusive housing and increased access to behavioral education and resources. Providing these tools can help pets and their families stay together and reduce the number of cats entering shelters.

Pet Cat Sterilization

While 77% of household cats in the U.S. are sterilized (spayed or neutered) [3], that still leaves roughly 21 million pet cats unsterilized. At first glance, 77% might seem like a solid majority, but the remaining percentage represents a significant number of cats capable of reproducing. Even if just a small fraction of these unsterilized cats are allowed outdoors—whether intentionally or by accident—they can contribute to the birth of countless kittens outside.



Tracked paths of one wandering cat from NSW study

Some cats are known to roam, and some wander quite far from home. Male cats in particular will travel considerable distances in search of a female in heat. A study conducted in New South Wales, Australia, used GPS trackers to follow 13 pet cats with outdoor access over a 10-day period. While some stayed close—within a few dozen houses—others ventured much farther, with one cat traveling nearly two miles from home [7].

Currently, 26 U.S. states require that cats and dogs adopted from animal shelters be spayed or neutered [8]. However, no state mandates sterilization for pets already living in private homes. Without broader policies or increased public education, unsterilized pet cats will continue to contribute to the growing population of outdoor and homeless kittens.

Rising Veterinary Costs and Their Impact on Sterilization Efforts

Veterinary clinic prices have steadily increased across all U.S. states over the past decade. A major factor behind this is the growing demand for veterinary care outpacing the supply of qualified veterinarians. Inflation has also played a significant role, but veterinary costs have surged disproportionately: while the average price of goods and services has risen around 30% over the past 10 years, veterinary care has increased by roughly 60% [9]. As a result, routine visits—let alone sterilization surgeries—are becoming financially out of reach for many pet owners.

Hillsborough Pet Resource Center, Florida

The challenge is even greater for community cat caretakers, whether individuals or nonprofit groups. They not only face the cost of multiple spay/neuter procedures at once, but also the difficulty of securing appointments in an already overburdened system.

Thankfully, there are low-cost spay/neuter clinics across the country, though more are urgently needed. Alley Cat Rescue maintains a list of nearly 1,700 such clinics, organized by state, at saveacat.org/state-low-cost-spayneuter.html. These clinics also offer affordable vaccinations and other treatments. However, due to high demand, trappers and new adopters often face wait times of a month or more for available appointments.

One powerful solution is early-age spay/neuter—typically performed between 8 and 12 weeks of age. This approach not only prevents future litters but also ensures that kittens are sterilized before adoption, eliminating the risk of adopters delaying or skipping the procedure due to cost, access, or misunderstanding its importance. Early spay/neuter is also safer for kittens, with studies showing fewer surgical complications compared to procedures done on older cats.

For more on early-age sterilization and managing community cat populations, refer to Chapter 13 of *Alley Cat Rescue's Guide to Managing Community Cats* (saveacat.org/handbook-2023-ed.html).

Animal Shelter Demographics

The estimated number of cats who entered shelters in 2024 is around 2,412,000 [10].

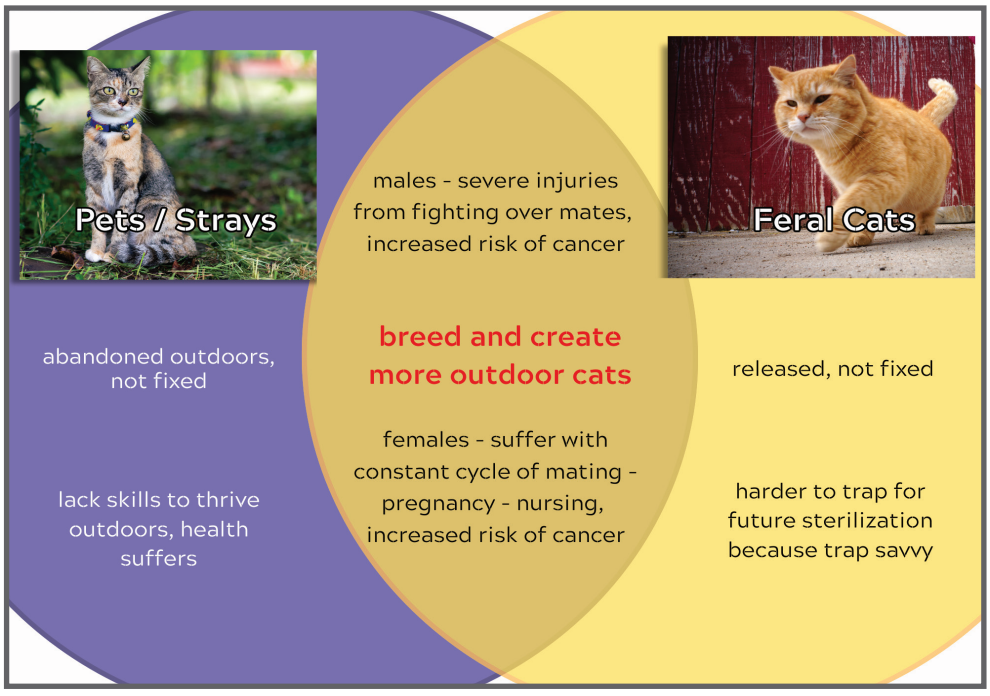
Live and Non-Live Outcomes for Shelter Cats
According to the most recent report from *Best Friends Animal Society*, cat adoptions have increased by 3.4% since 2023, with the most significant growth coming from government-run shelters [10]. Best Friends' data also shows a 10.1% decrease in the number of cats euthanized in municipal shelters over the same period.

In comparison, data from *Shelter Animals Count* reflects a more modest decline in lives lost in shelters—just 2.43% [11] —a figure that includes not only euthanized animals but also those that died in shelters from illness, injury, or age-related causes.

The overall decline in euthanasia is likely due to multiple factors, including rising adoption rates and the expansion of shelter-based return-to-field (RTF) programs. In RTF programs, feral or unadoptable cats brought in by animal control are sterilized, vaccinated, and then returned to their original outdoor locations rather than being euthanized.

However, the reduction in euthanasia does not reflect improved outcomes for all cats. An increasing number of shelters are turning away cats brought in by the public, particularly when the shelters are at or near capacity. These turnaways may include surrendered pets, friendly strays, or feral cats—many of whom are then left without sterilization, veterinary care, or protection.

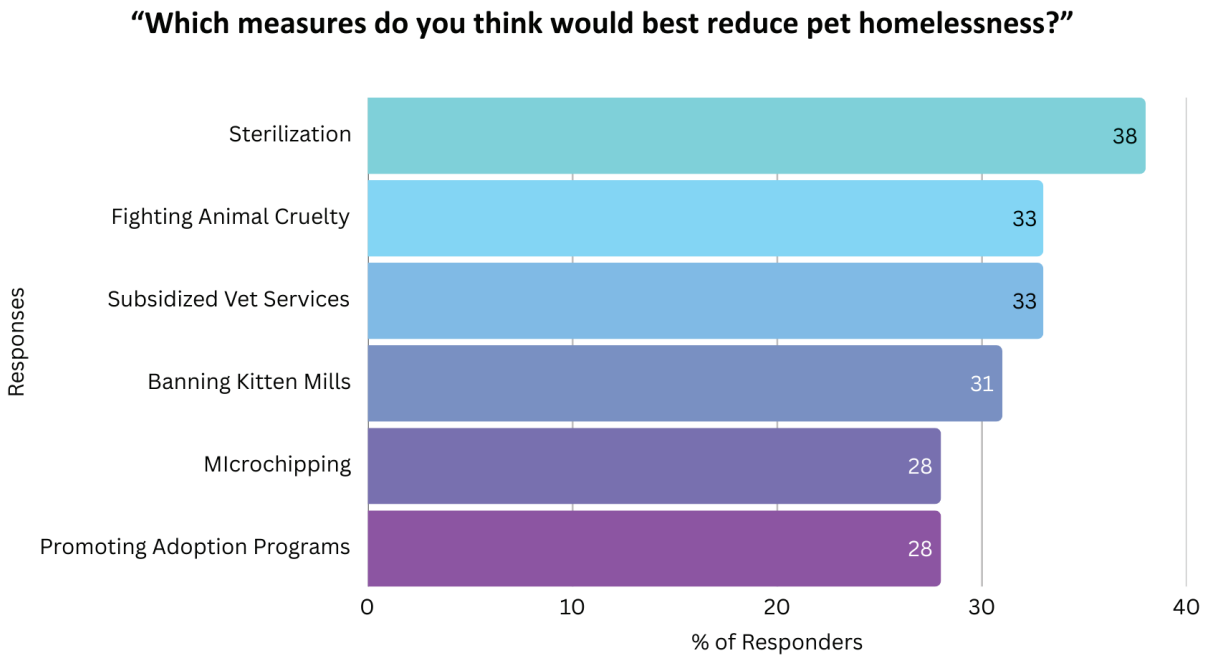
Often, this refusal policy is motivated by pressure to keep euthanasia numbers low as shelters face mounting public scrutiny over live outcome rates. While refusing cats may improve statistical outcomes, it does not help the cats themselves. Unwanted pets are frequently abandoned outdoors, where they may struggle to survive without the skills to find food or evade predators. Meanwhile, unsterilized feral cats continue to reproduce, and the majority of kittens born outdoors will die before reaching six months of age.



Community Cats

Estimating the number of community (or outdoor) cats across a large region is inherently difficult. The wide variation in geography, urban development, and public attitudes toward free-roaming cats in the United States makes it especially challenging to arrive at a reliable national figure. As a result, estimates vary by source—but most place the population between 30 and 40 million cats.

In 2024, the *State of Pet Homelessness* data project [3] conducted a poll asking, "Which measures do you think would best reduce pet homelessness?" Among the 413 respondents—all of whom currently or previously lived with cats—the most common answer was sterilization. This is a promising sign that the importance of spay/neuter programs is gaining broader public recognition as a key solution to reducing the number of cats living and reproducing outdoors.



Public Support for Community Cats

A study published in the *Journal of Shelter Medicine & Community Animal Health* found that roughly 30% of people in the U.S. are likely to feed community cats [12]. The widespread willingness to care for outdoor cats suggests strong grassroots support for their protection and well-being—something policymakers should take into account, especially those who favor euthanizing unsocialized cats over humane alternatives like TNR (trap-neuter-return) or return-to-field programs.

Public sentiment clearly leans toward compassion. A 2014 survey by Beall Research found that 73% of respondents preferred allowing community cats to remain in place over having them removed and euthanized [13]. While this data does not explicitly address TNR, the connection is evident: people care about the lives of outdoor cats and generally oppose lethal management methods. TNR provides a practical solution that aligns with public preference—it allows cats to live, limits nuisance behaviors, and reduces overpopulation through sterilization over time.

Growing public support for humane approaches should empower local governments and animal welfare organizations to expand TNR and return-to-field efforts with confidence, knowing their actions are backed by the values of their communities.

Working Cat Programs

Trap-neuter-return remains the ideal option for most community cats, allowing them to live out their lives in their familiar outdoor environments. However, there are situations in which returning a cat to his original location may not be safe or feasible. These situations may include hostile neighbors, unsympathetic property owners, or land slated for major construction projects. In such cases, working cat programs offer a viable solution that provides these cats with a second chance while keeping them safe.

Working cat programs adopt out unsocialized cats to safe, secure locations like warehouses, farms, and barns

where the cats can serve as natural pest controllers. According to a 2024 study, the optimal number of working cats on a farm is about 25, a ratio that helps ensure the success of these programs while maintaining a healthy population of cats for the job [14]. Working cat programs can be a lifesaving option for many displaced feral cats, allowing them to continue living rich lives while contributing to their new environments.

It is important to note, however, that working cat programs should always be a **last resort**. Community cats are often bonded to their environment and have strong social ties to other cats and their human caregivers. Removing them from these bonds should be done only when absolutely necessary, ensuring that their well-being and needs are prioritized.

Alley Cat Rescue maintains a list of 391 shelters and rescues that operate working cat programs, which can be accessed at saveacat.org/shelters-with-working-cat-programs.html.

Note: Relocating cats requires specialized knowledge and care. Only experienced individuals should run these programs, as there are specific steps involved in acclimating cats to new locations. For more details, see Chapter 8 of *Alley Cat Rescue's Guide to Managing Community Cats*.

The Latest Feral Cat Persecution

In December 2023, *The New Yorker* published an article by Jonathan Franzen titled *"How the 'No Kill' Movement Betrays Its Name,"* in which Franzen criticized trap-neuter-return (TNR) as ineffective in controlling outdoor cat populations. Franzen repeats several myths commonly associated with outdoor cats, including that they are especially vulnerable to diseases, they play a major role in spreading zoonotic diseases, and they pose an extreme threat to native wildlife. Unfortunately, Franzen's piece is riddled with misinformation and misrepresents key facts.

For instance, he points to the Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, Florida, as an example of a failed TNR program, citing the area's ongoing cat population despite years of neutering and adoption. Franzen neglects to mention that there were over 500 cats when the program began in 1995, and by 2013, the population had decreased by more than half. He also fails to acknowledge the significant issue of pet abandonment in the area, which has undermined the effectiveness of the program and, despite which, the overall population has been steadily declining over time [15].

Franzen's article is particularly troubling because The New Yorker is a widely-read and respected publication. The scientific studies and evidence that refute his claims are known to a much smaller audience, making his falsehoods all the more impactful.

This article was not an isolated case. In 2024, other publications published similarly misleading pieces targeting outdoor cats, some of which seem inspired by Franzen's work. Three notable articles include:

- "In Australia, 'Cats Are Just Catastrophic'" by Emily Anthes, published by *The New York Times* on April 16, 2024
- "A House Cat Was Brought To A Remote Island In 1894—A Year Later A Species Was Extinct" by Scott Travers, published by *Forbes* on July 14, 2024
- "One Of The World's Most Invasive Species Is Also Your Most Cherished Pet" by Scott Travers, published by *Forbes* on November 30, 2024

Each of these articles claims that outdoor cats are responsible for numerous species extinctions and dismisses the effectiveness of TNR. While Travers' articles stop short of advocating for mass euthanasia, Franzen and Anthes both suggest that euthanizing outdoor cats may be necessary.

In response, Alley Cat Rescue reached out to all of the authors, offering evidence-backed counter arguments supported by scientific studies, and provided links for further reading. Unfortunately, none of the authors responded. Scott Travers, notably, wrote his November article without acknowledging Alley Cat Rescue's response to his earlier piece.

The spread of misinformation about outdoor cats is a serious issue, especially when it appears in reputable publications with a large readership. It is essential that we continue to advocate for the truth—namely, that TNR is

an effective, humane solution to managing community cat populations, and that outdoor cats deserve compassion and protection. Our voices, supported by scientific research, are critical in combating these harmful narratives.

Conclusion

The majority of Americans value the lives of cats, including community cats, and recognize the importance of sterilization. However, significant barriers persist—such as the high cost of veterinary care, limited availability of low-cost spay/neuter appointments, and shelters turning away cats without sterilizing them. These obstacles continue to cause unnecessary suffering and take lives.

To address these challenges, local and state policies must be enacted to ensure community cats are protected and managed through TNR (trap-neuter-return), rather than being eliminated as pests. At the same time, individuals must continue to play an active role in helping cats in their communities. Whether through adopting or fostering shelter cats, caring for outdoor cats, challenging harmful misinformation, or advocating for TNR, every person has a part to play in improving the lives of these animals.

No solution is more powerful than the collective action of compassionate individuals working together to create positive change.

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