Return-to-Field & Targeting: The Community Cat Program

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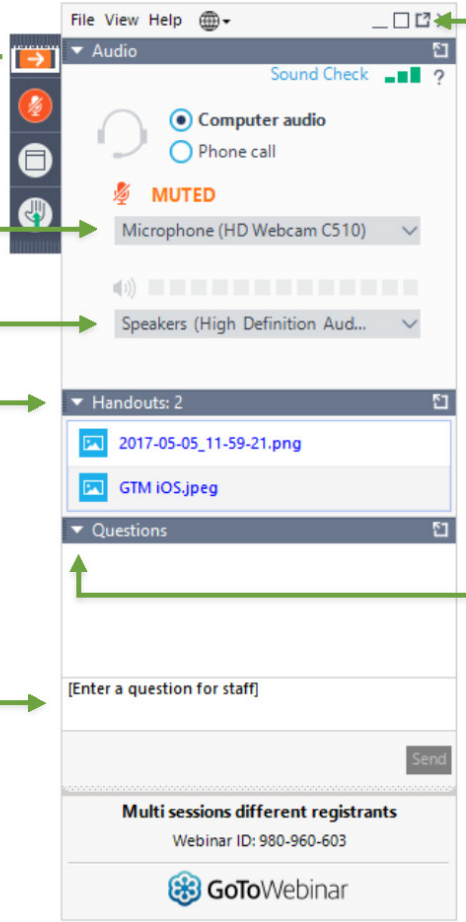

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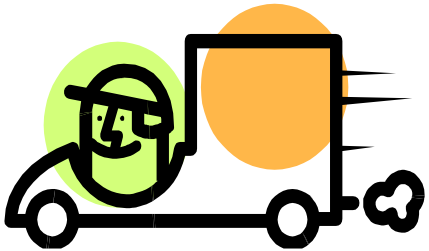
Community cat

- Free-roaming, unowned (aka “ferals,” “strays”)
- Socialization can range from friendly to feral

Colony

- A group of community cats who share a common food source and territory
- Can be 1 or more
- Might include roaming pets

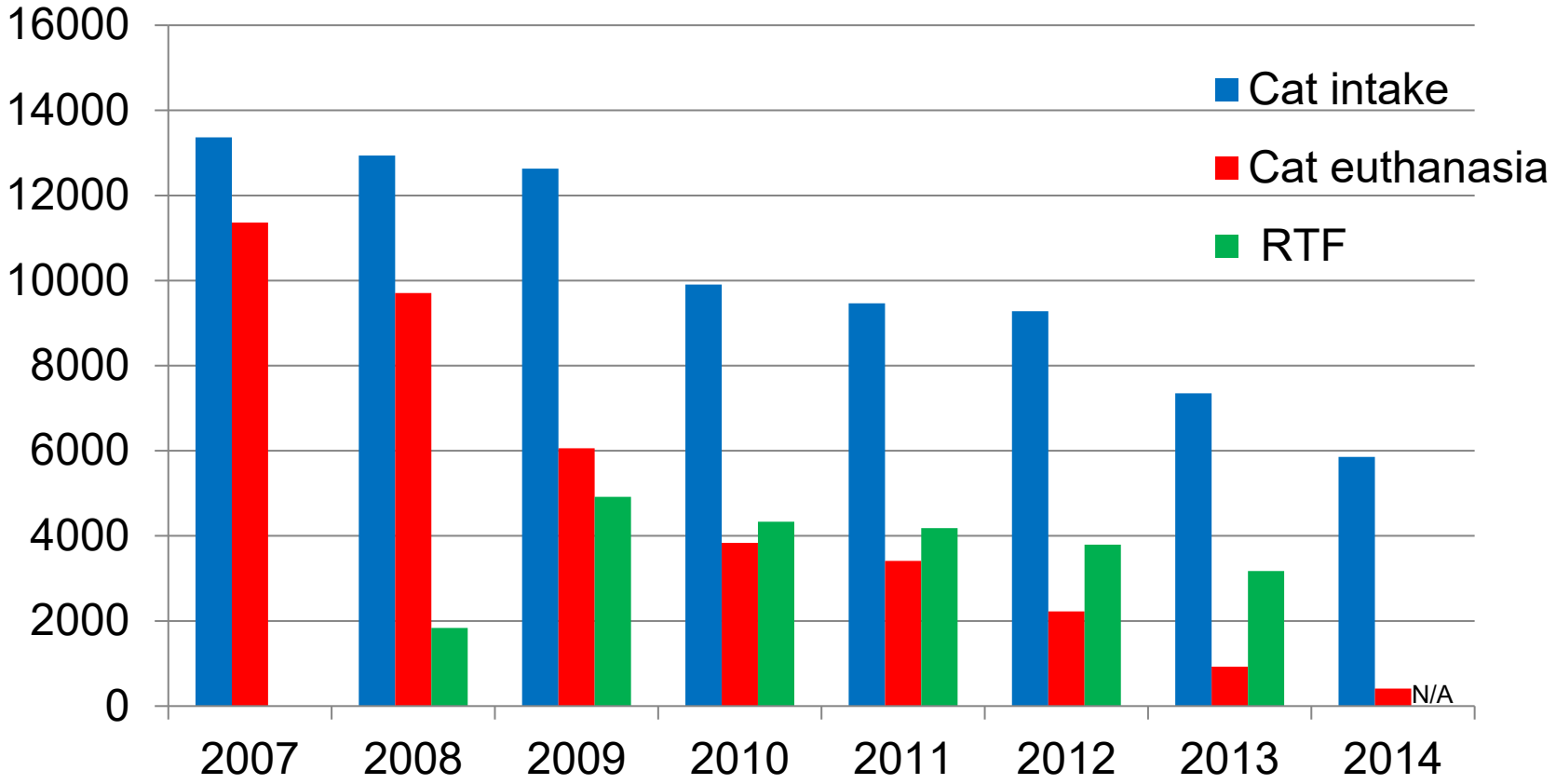
What is Return-to-field?



Origins of RTF

- 2008: First Coast No More Homeless Pets meets with Jacksonville Animal Care & Protective Services
- FCNMHP asks to return eartipped shelter cats to their colonies
- Director of JACPS offers to let FCNMHP s/n and return all impounded community cats

Jacksonville Animal Care & Protective Services



Why stop euthanizing?

No improvement in:

- Intake & euthanasia rates
- Complaint calls
- Number of community cats

Costs of euthanasia:

- High stress
- High turnover
- Poor public relations
- Lower adoptions

Why does lethal control fail?

- Too many cats, too few animal control resources
- Caretaker resistance
- Failure to capture all colony members
- Vacuum effect

The vacuum effect

Cats are removed

Problem?

The grocery store is not an island

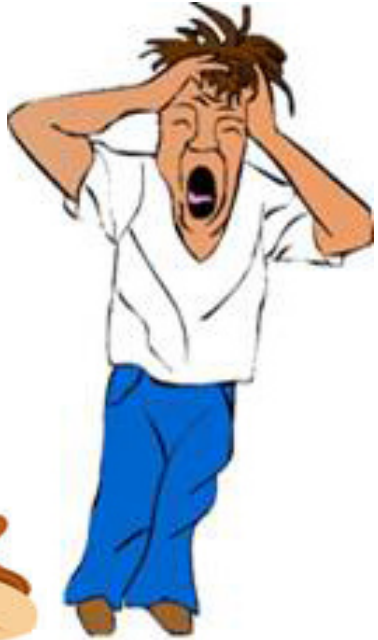
Adam & Eve show up

Vacuum is filled

RTF benefits

- Lower euthanasia
- Freed-up resources
- Healthier shelter environment (less crowding)
- Public support (fundraising, adoptions)
- Culture change – inside and outside shelter
- Avoid euthanasia of roaming pets

Won’t everyone freak out?!



2007 national survey

commissioned by Alley Cat Allies

Question: If you saw a stray cat in your community and could only choose between two courses of action—leaving the cat where it is outside or having the cat caught and then put down—which would you consider to be the more humane option for the cat?

a) Leave the cat where it is

b) Have the cat put down

c) Don't know/refused to answer

2007 national survey

commissioned by Alley Cat Allies

Question: If you saw a stray cat in your community and could only choose between two courses of action—leaving the cat where it is outside or having the cat caught and then put down—which would you consider to be the more humane option for the cat?

a) Leave the cat where it is	**81%**
b) Have the cat put down	**14%**
c) Don't know/refused to answer	**5%**

2014 national survey
commissioned by Best Friends Animal Society

Question: What is your preference among these 3 options for managing community cats?

a) Sterilize and vaccinate healthy stray cats, and return them to where they were captured (sometimes called trap-neuter-return)

b) Impoundment by shelter staff, followed by lethal injection for any cats not adopted

c) Do nothing/leave stray cats alone to fend for themselves

2014 national survey
commissioned by Best Friends Animal Society

Question: What is your preference among these 3 options for managing community cats?

a)	Sterilize and vaccinate healthy stray cats, and return them to where they were captured (sometimes called trap-neuter-return)	**68%**
b)	Impoundment by shelter staff, followed by lethal injection for any cats not adopted	**24%**
c)	Do nothing/leave stray cats alone to fend for themselves	**8%**

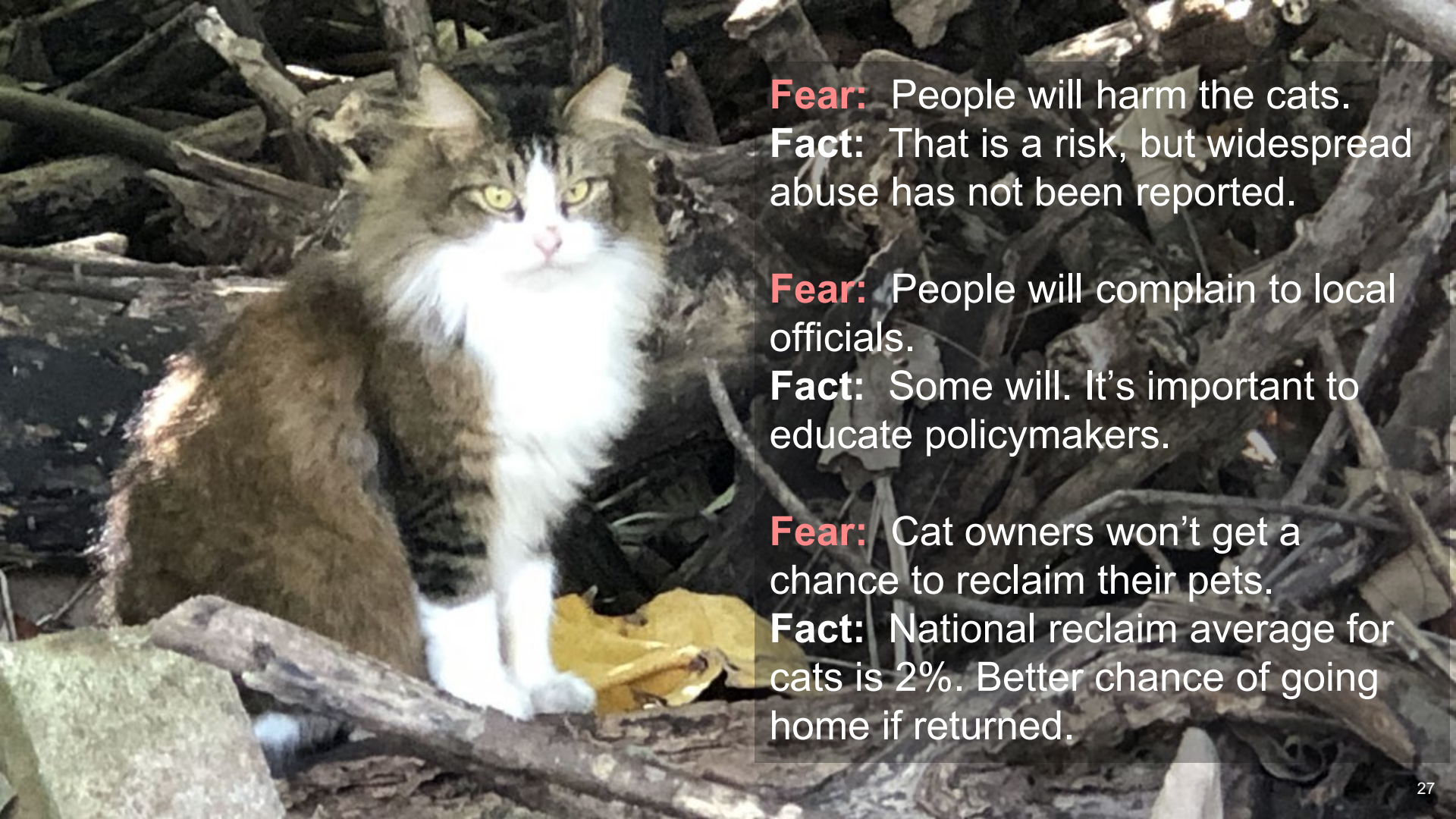
2008 survey of Ohio adults

- 43% of participants saw free-roaming cats in their neighborhoods on a daily or weekly basis
- 26% had fed free-roaming cats during the prior year

Lord, L., *Attitudes toward and perceptions of free-roaming cats among individuals living in Ohio* (2008) Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, Vol. 232, 1160-1167.

Return-to-field is aligned with the majority who favor live outcomes and are willing to leave community cats in the environment

Euthanasia is aligned with the minority who complain about the cats and want them removed



Fear: People will harm the cats.
Fact: That is a risk, but widespread abuse has not been reported.

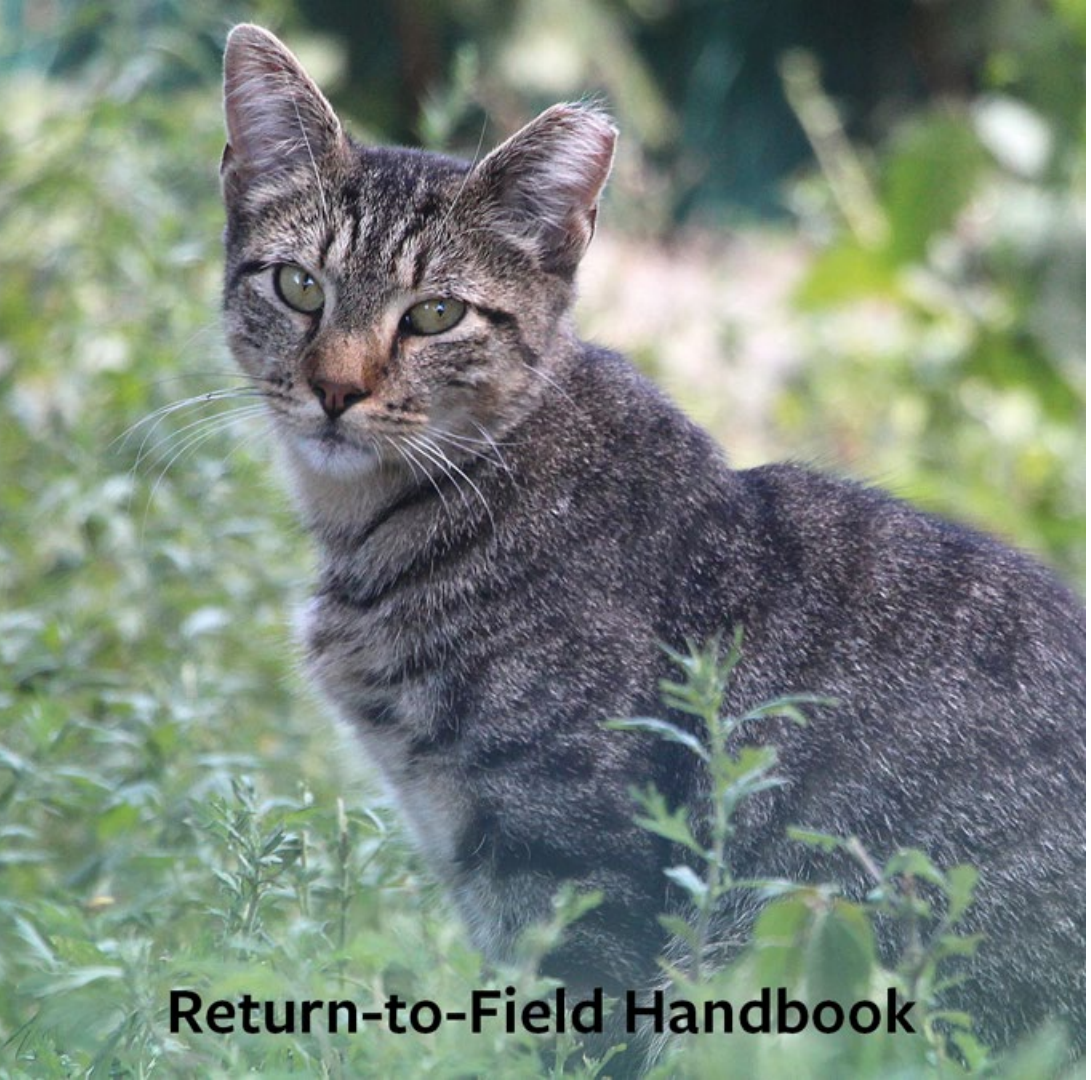
Fear: People will complain to local officials.
Fact: Some will. It's important to educate policymakers.

Fear: Cat owners won't get a chance to reclaim their pets.
Fact: National reclaim average for cats is 2%. Better chance of going home if returned.

Friendly cats

To consider:

- Shelter's capacity for care
- Cat's history, community ties
- Goal of reducing free-roaming population
- Recommended: an individual assessment of what is the best available outcome
- Avoid an auto-pilot approach



Return-to-Field Handbook

Published by HSUS

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RTF + colony-level targeting

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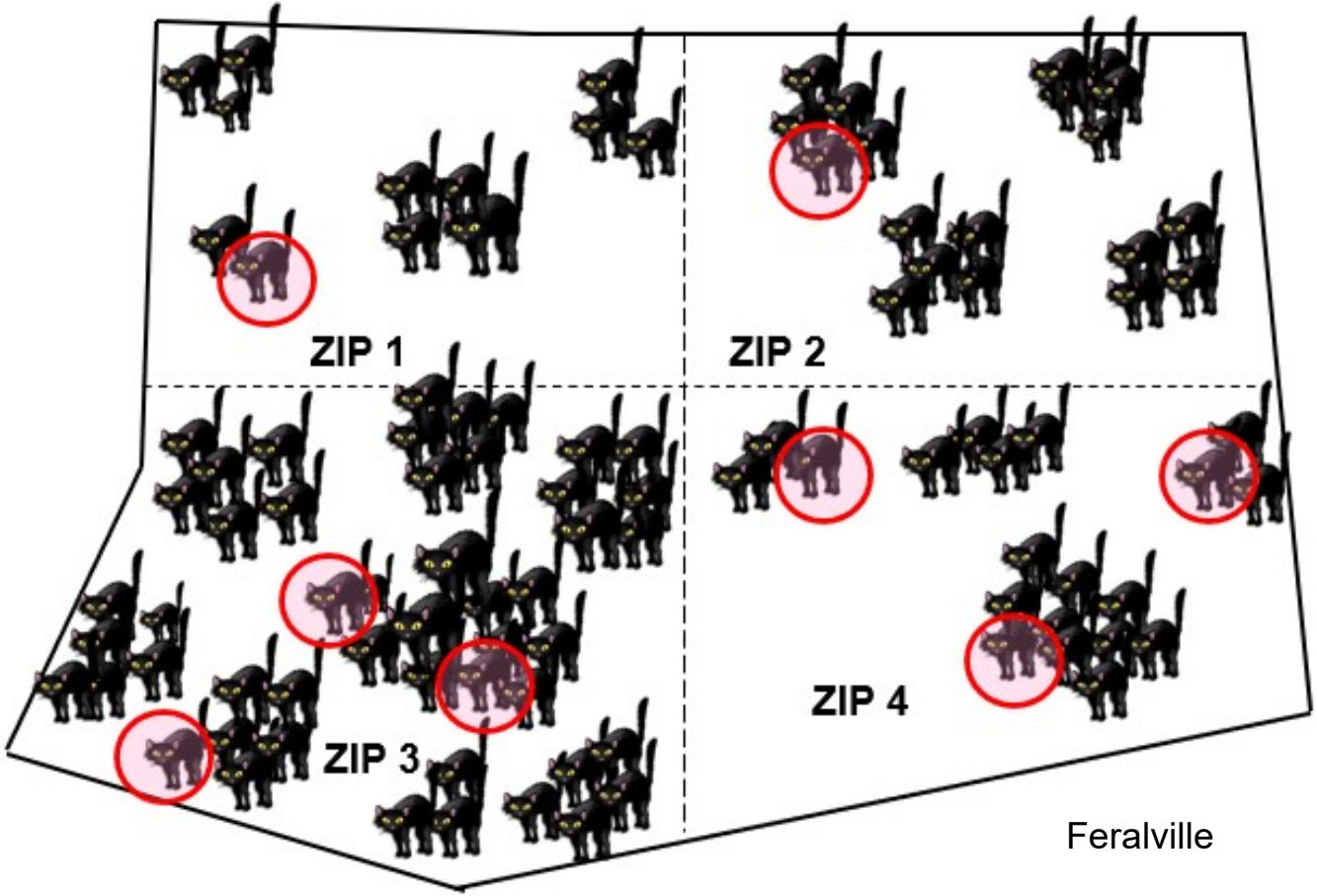
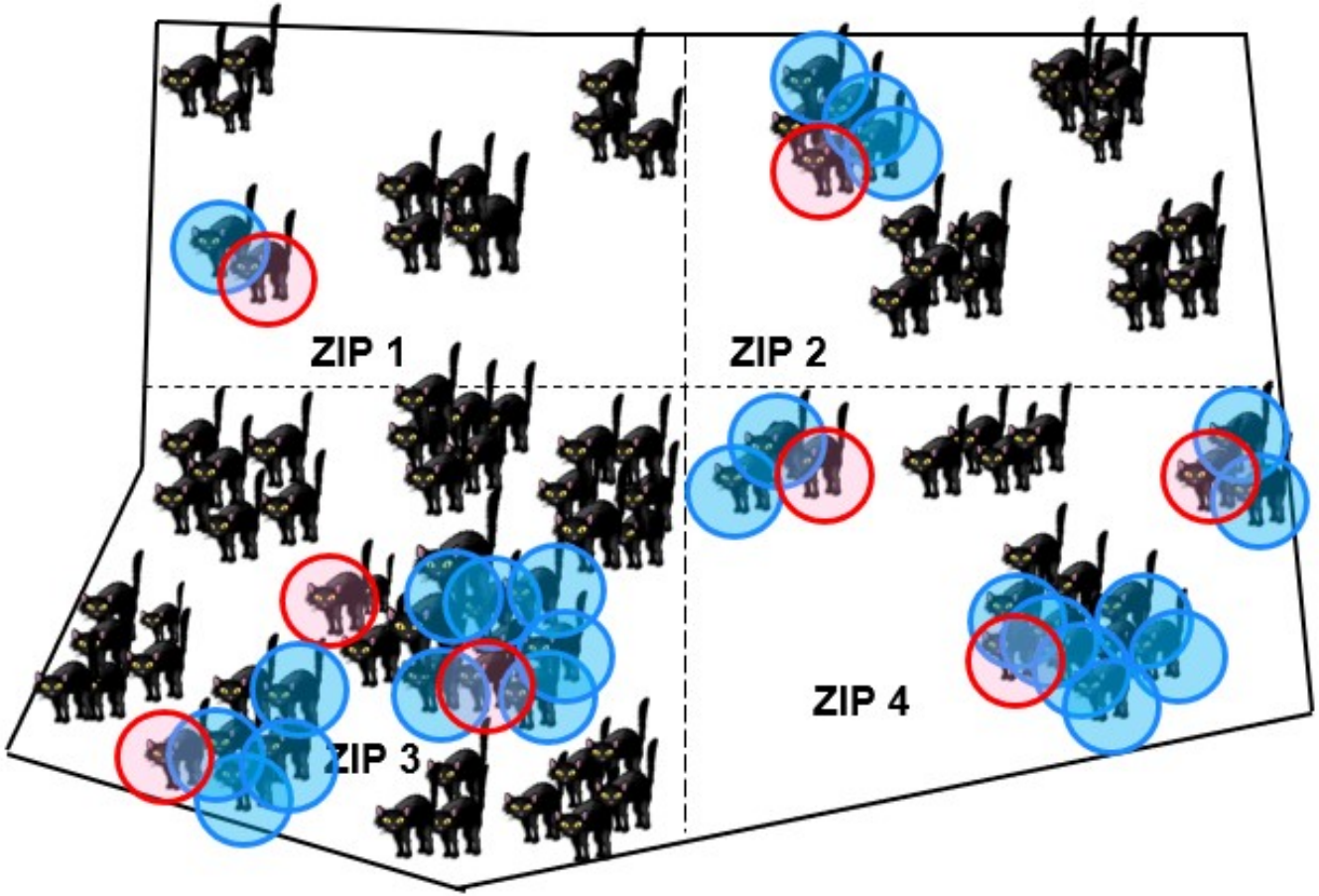


RTF + colony-level targeting



RTF first cat impounded

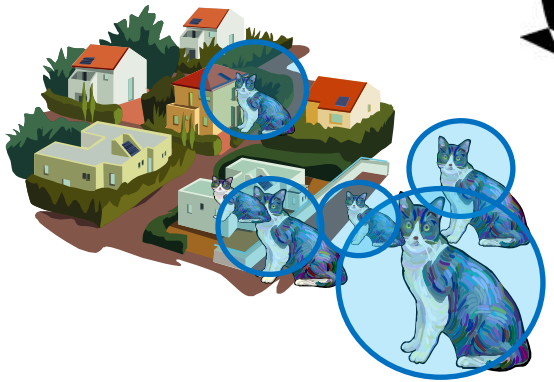
Red flag approach

Population declines over time

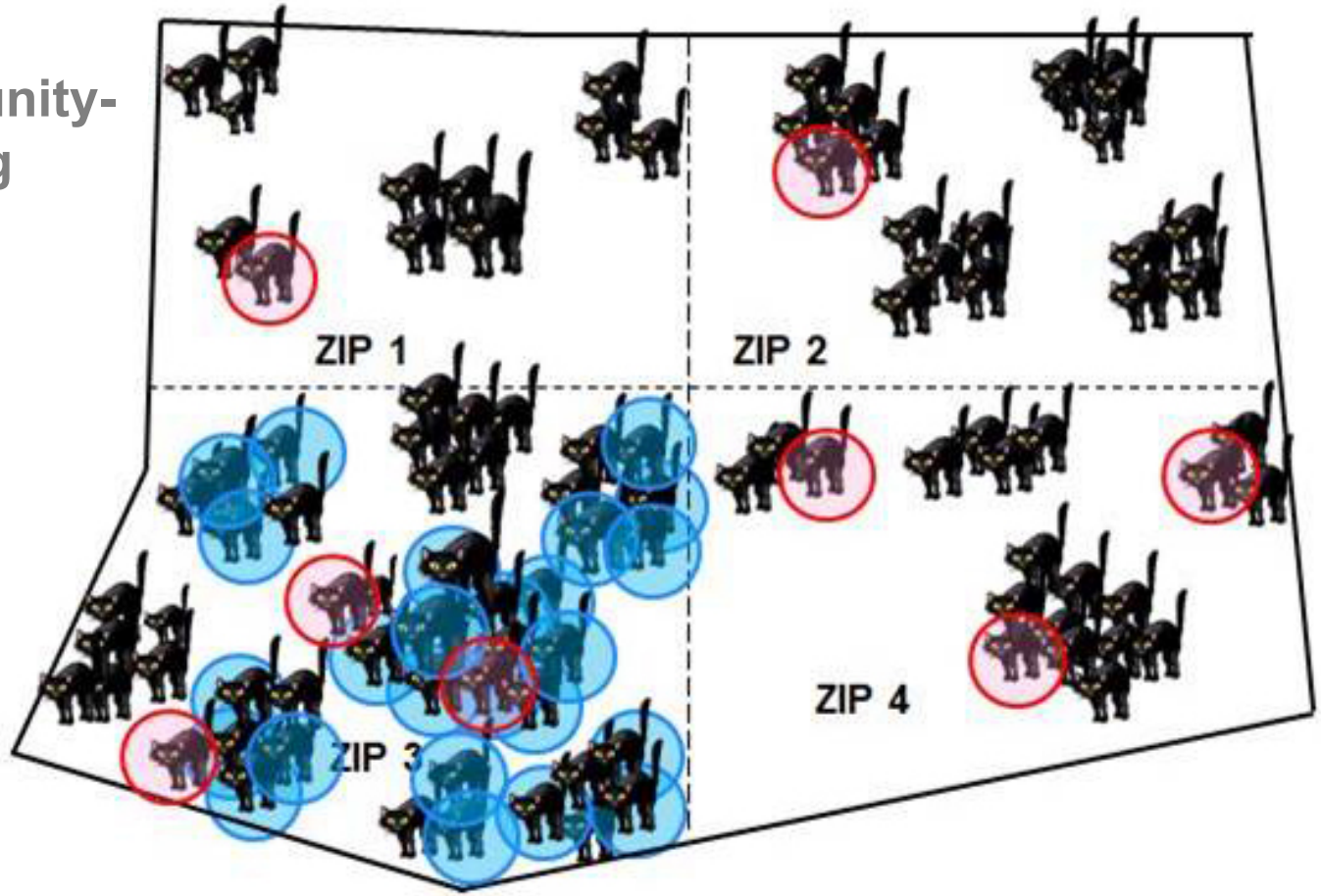
The grocery store is still not an island

New cats arrive (the vacuum effect again!)

Community-level targeting



RTF + community-level targeting



Return to Field

- Program of Albuquerque Animal Welfare Dept.
- Launched in 2011

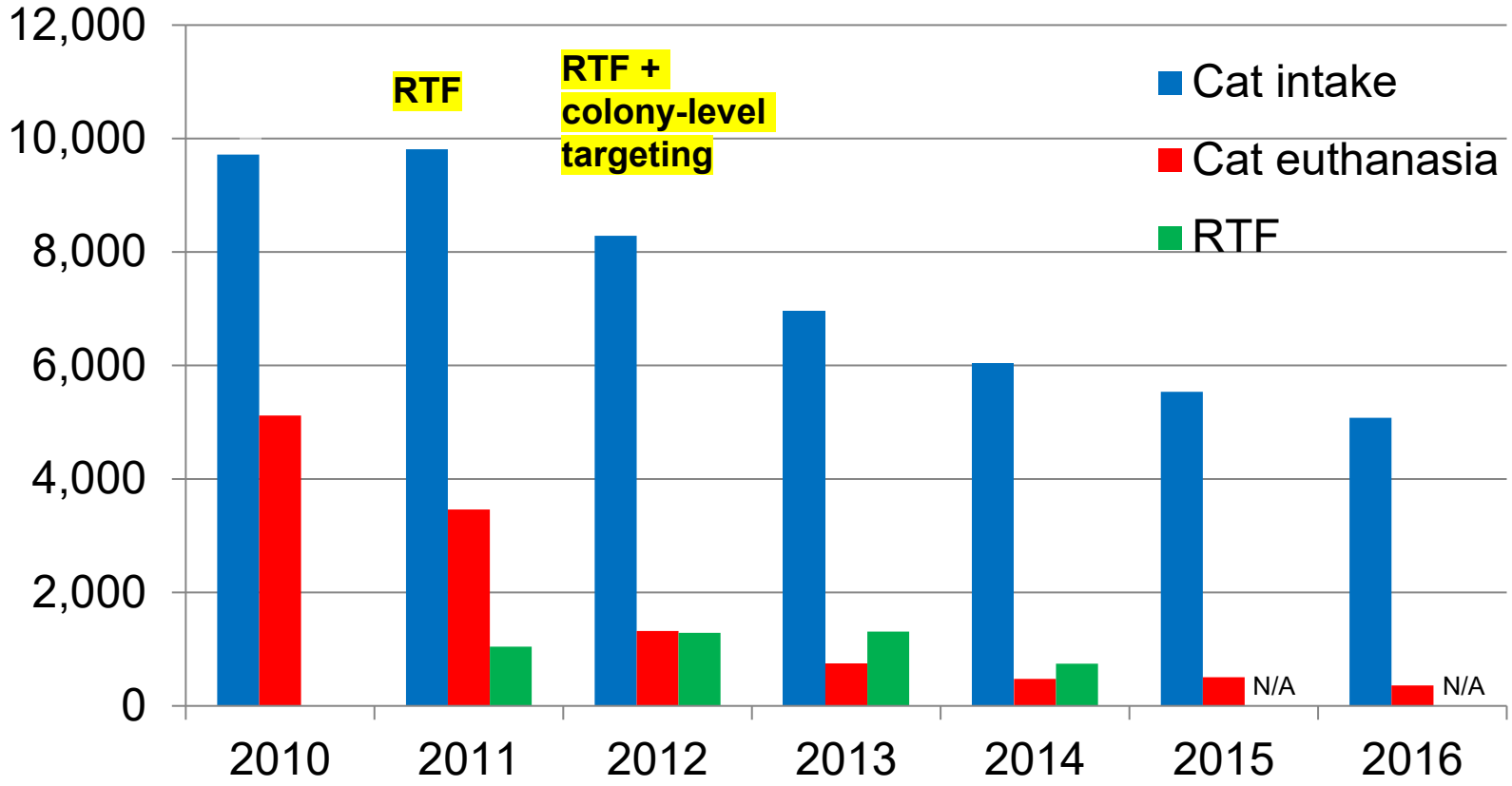
Colony-level targeting

- Added to RTF program
- Program of AAWD with support from Best Friends
- Launched in April 2012

Community-level targeting

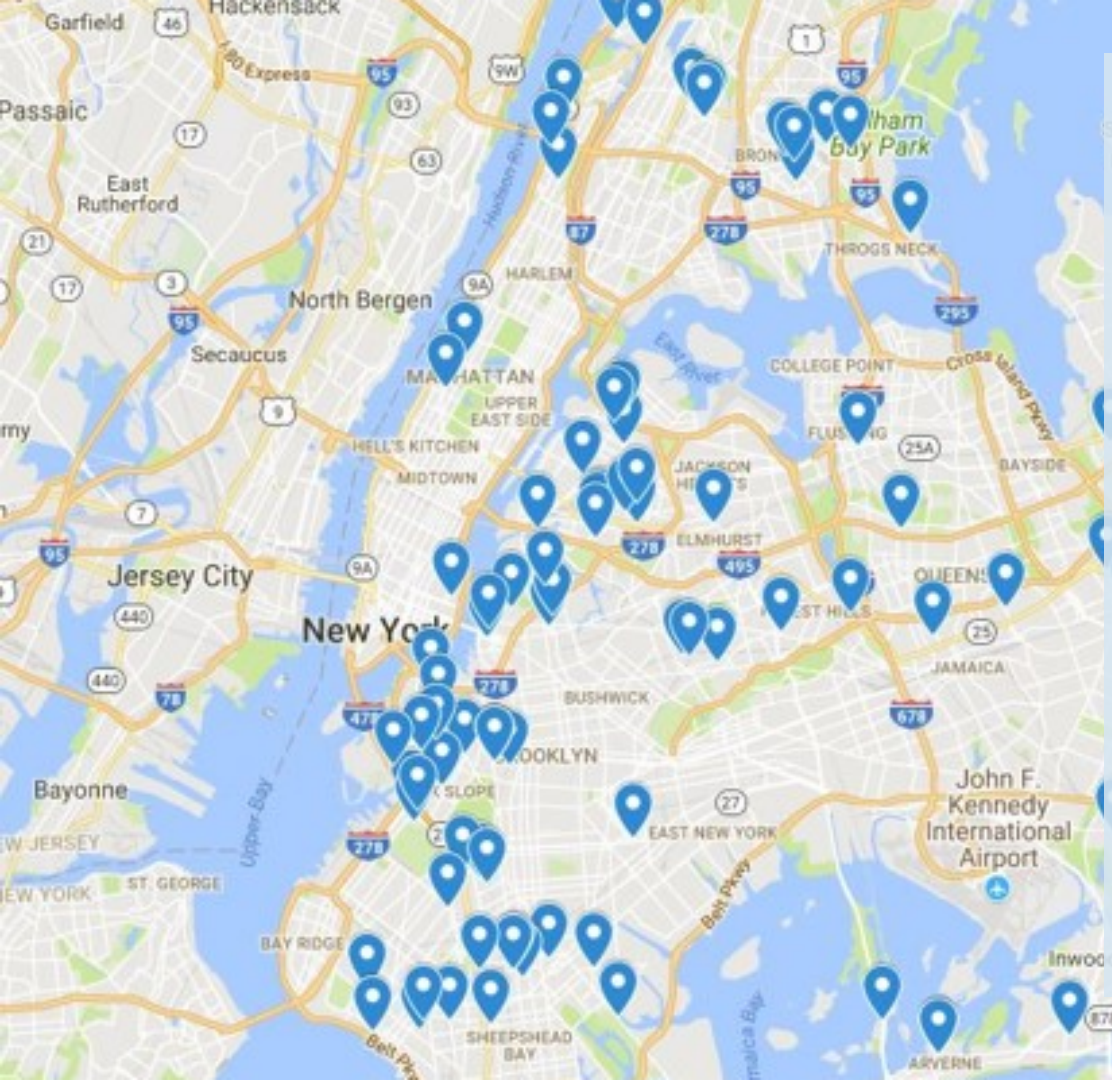
- 7 zip codes
- Program of Animal Humane New Mexico & New Mexico Animal Friends
- Launched in July 2010

Albuquerque Animal Welfare Department



Shelter Metric	Six-CCP Median Change	Albuquerque	San Antonio	Baltimore	Philadelphia	Tucson	Columbus, GA
Feline Intake	-32%	-38%	-1%	-14%	-33%	-31%	-45%
Kitten* Intake	-40%	-44%	+12%	-39%	-40%	-43%	-26%
Feline Euthanasia	-83%	-84%	-82%	-59%	-67%	-91%	-85%
Kitten* Euthanasia	-87%	-90%	-86%	-64%	-79%	-95%	-87%

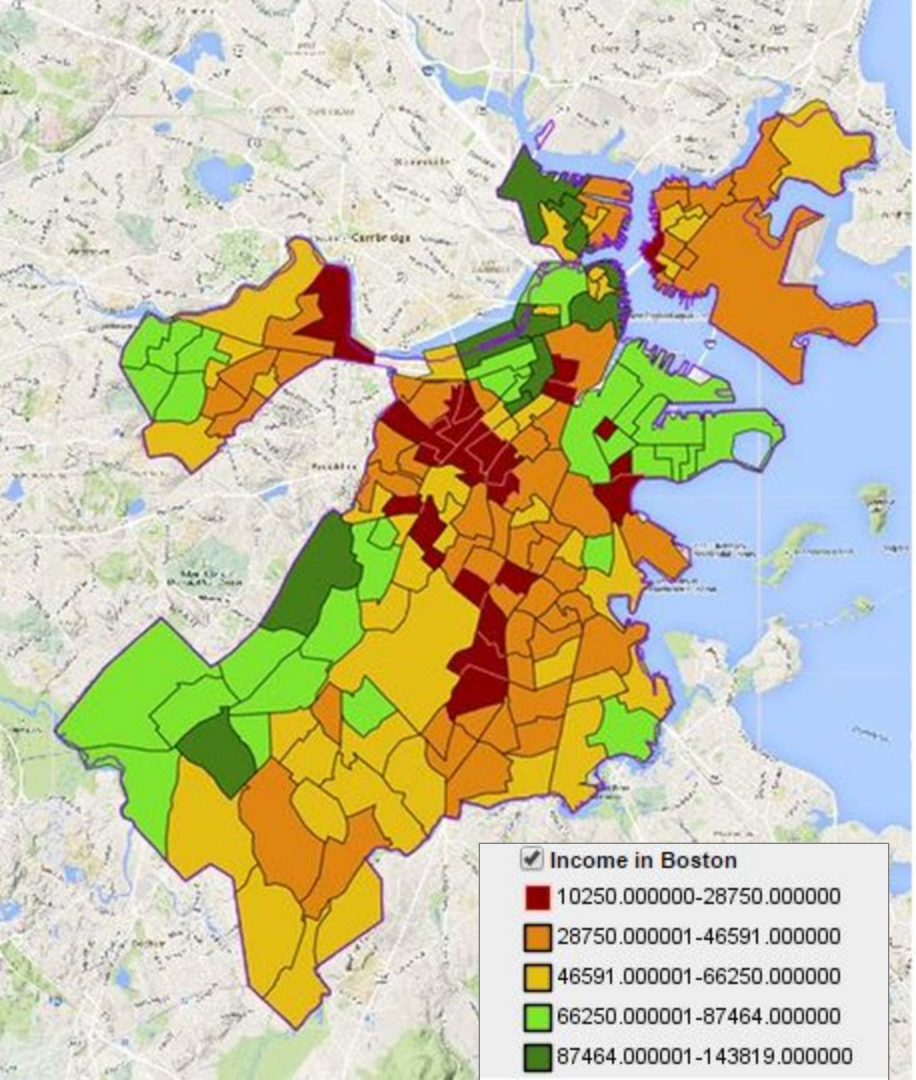
Spehar DD and Wolf PJ (2019) *Integrated Return-To-Field and Targeted Trap-Neuter-Vaccinate-Return Programs Result in Reductions of Feline Intake and Euthanasia at Six Municipal Animal Shelters,* Front. Vet. Sci. 6:77. doi: 10.3389/fvets.2019.00077

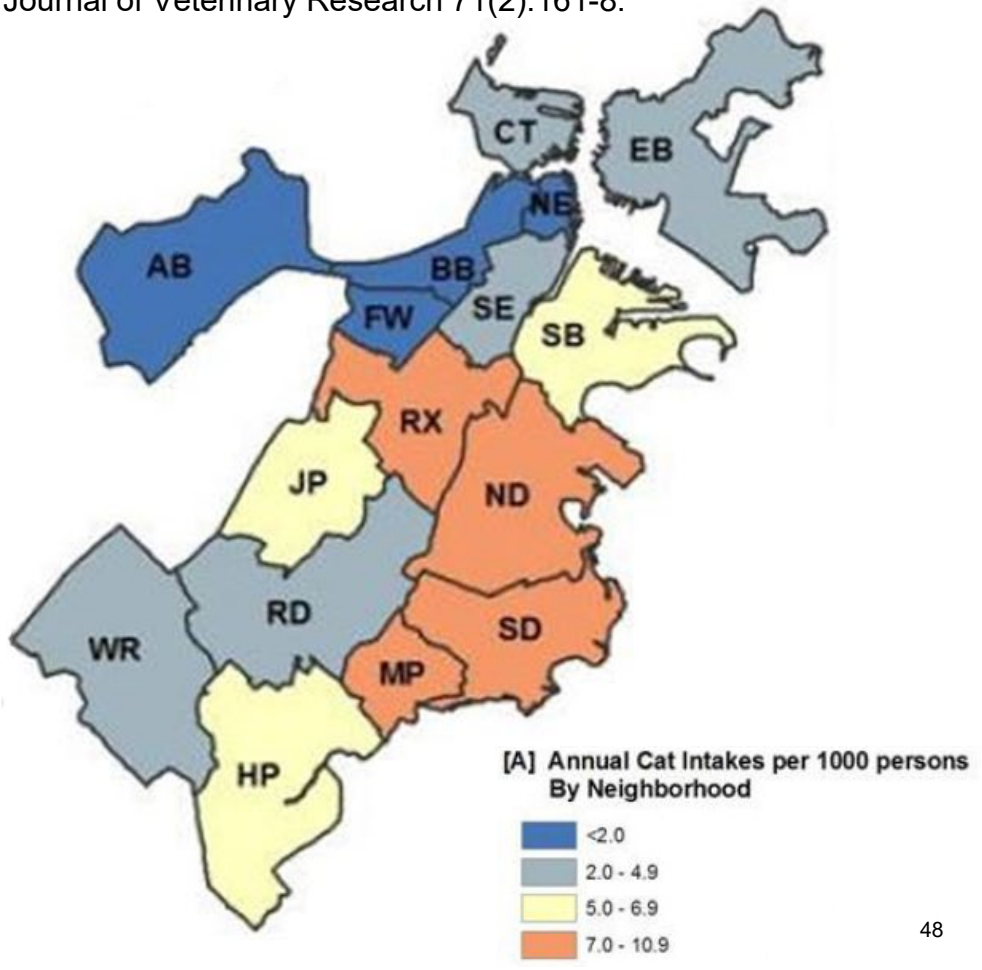


Identifying high need areas

- Intake into local shelters broken down by location of origin (GIS mapping)
- Complaint calls/requests for assistance by location.
- Tribal knowledge (experience of local animal welfare groups, animal control, shelters)

Patronek, G., *Mapping and measuring disparities in welfare for cats across neighborhoods in a large US city* (2010) American Journal of Veterinary Research 71(2):161-8.





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