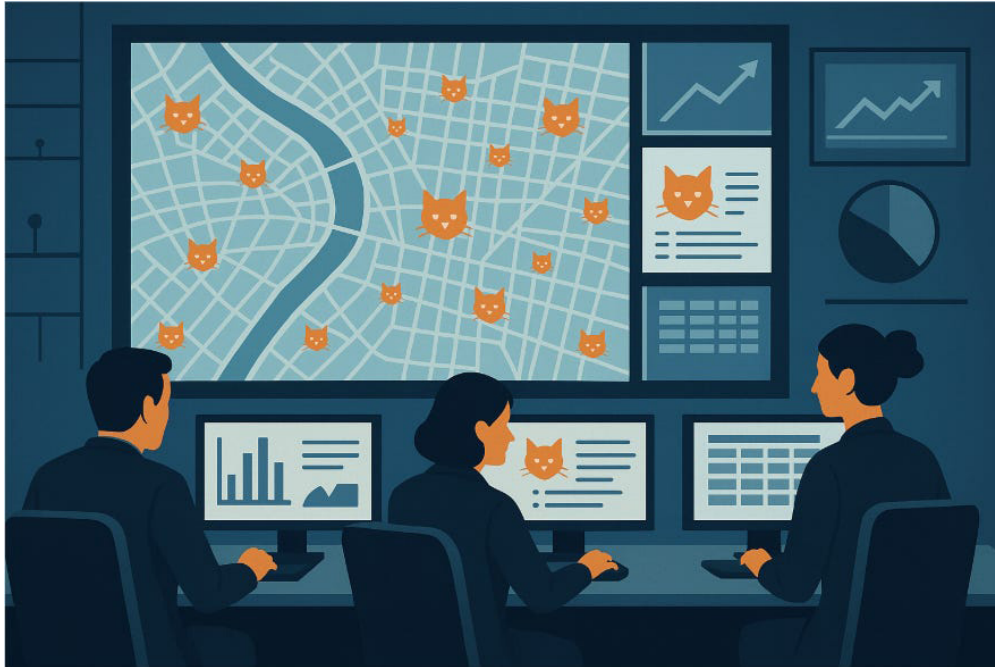


## Beyond TNR: A New Blueprint for Managing America's Free-Roaming Cats

The Summerlee Report calls for systemic change, data-driven strategies, and a renewed focus on spay/neuter to finally turn the tide on cat overpopulation.

By Ed Boks, From Animal Politics with Ed Boks ([see the original article here](#))



*From alleyways to algorithms; from chaos to control; tracking the path to fewer feral cats with maps, metrics and a mission!*

Before dawn one April morning in Córdoba, Spain, volunteers laid out feeding stations across 225 cat colonies and prepared to count every whisker. Four years earlier, the city had launched its first coordinated Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program, vowing to spay or neuter every free-roaming cat it could find. By spring 2024, those teams had reached an astonishing 95 percent sterilization coverage—but when they tallied the numbers, the total cat population had fallen by just 2.7 percent. It was a moment of triumph and frustration in equal measure: proof that high-intensity TNR works—and that it cannot work alone.

That tension lies at the heart of the Summerlee Foundation's new report, *Free-Roaming Cat Management: A Funder's Guide to Better Impact*. Its authors argue that America's animal-welfare professionals must upgrade TNR with a four-pillar blueprint—Integration, Targeting, Multi-Year Duration, and Use of Information—if we're ever to see sustained declines in street-cat numbers.

## The Four Pillars

### Integration: Filling the Gaps

TNR has always focused on surgery. The Summerlee Report insists we widen the frame: pair high-volume spay/neuter with adoption of socialized cats, sterilization for owned outdoor pets, pet-retention support, public education on indoor living, and anti-abandonment campaigns. Only by attacking the root causes—new arrivals from abandonment or lax pet-care—can communities stop colony sizes from rebounding.

### Targeting: Phase by Phase

Smashing a citywide population in one go spreads resources thin. Instead, the Report urges funders to back phased, neighborhood-by-neighborhood campaigns. Hit one zone until at least 70 percent of its cats are sterilized, then move outward, creating a contiguous buffer that blocks “edge effects” (also known as the “vacuum effect”) of incoming cats.

### Multi-Year Duration: Playing the Long Game

Cat colonies turn over slowly. Short grants of one to two years deliver no more than charity; only five- to ten-year commitments consistently bend population curves. Córdoba's modest 2.7 percent drop over four years illustrates why—a longer horizon is essential before dramatic results emerge.

### Use of Information: Measure What Matters

Counting surgeries is simple; counting cats is work. The Report calls for quarterly—or even monthly—cat-count surveys using camera transects or mark-recapture methods. This real-time intelligence lets programs pivot when a neighborhood stalls, rather than wait years to discover a missed target.

## Field Evidence: When the Blueprint Works

While the Summerlee Report lays out a clear theoretical framework, its power lies in how closely it aligns with real-world successes. Across the U.S. and beyond, communities that embraced the report's four pillars—Integration, Targeting, Multi-Year Duration, and Use of Information—have achieved dramatic, measurable declines in community cat populations. The following case studies illustrate just how effective a well-executed TNR strategy can be:

- **Key Largo, Fla. (1999–2013).** A 14-year effort in the Florida Keys cut the stray-cat population by 55 percent—from 455 to 206 cats—at a cost of \$442,568, compared with an estimated \$1.1 million for trap-and-euthanize programs.
- **San Francisco Bay Trail (2004–2020).** Along a two-mile stretch of waterfront, volunteers trapped, neutered, and monitored 175 cats. After 16 years, only one or two remained—a 99.4 percent decline that city officials hailed as a model for urban wildlife management.
- **CSUN Campus (2001–2023).** A handful of homeless cats on the California State University, Northridge campus grew into a colony of 75—but over two decades of systematic TNR, adoption, and monitoring reduced the population to just seven.
- **Randolph County, N.C. (2015–2017).** Six sterilized colonies saw a 36 percent population drop in two years, while three untreated colonies grew by 47 percent—an unambiguous demonstration of TNR's power when applied consistently.
- **Albuquerque, N.M. (2012–2015).** The city's Community Cat Program combined TNR, return-to-field for healthy cats, and adoption of sociable animals. Over three years—and 11,746 cats processed—euthanasia fell by 84 percent and shelter intake by 37.6 percent.

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- **International Parallels.** In Rishon-LeZion, Israel, keeping sterilization rates above 70 percent drove an annual 7 percent drop in cat counts—compounding to a 25 percent reduction over four years; Córdoba's program, as noted, produced a 2.7 percent four-year decline with models forecasting a 55 percent reduction by 2028.

## Where America Falls Short

- **Fragmented Funding.** Across the U.S., most community cat programs rely on short-term grants, seasonal fundraising, or overextended nonprofits. Without sustained investment, even successful efforts stall—leaving gaps that stray cats are quick to fill.
- **Narrow Metrics.** Many programs track how many cats are sterilized rather than how many are left behind. This focus on outputs over outcomes can create a false sense of progress, masking whether a program is truly reducing free-roaming cat populations.
- **Capacity Strains.** A national workforce shortage is quietly undermining spay/neuter capacity. Among 212 high-quality, high-volume spay/neuter (HQHVSN) clinics, surgical volume fell 13% in 2020, dropped another 3% in 2021, 6% in 2022, and 1% in early 2023. These aren't isolated disruptions—they reflect chronic staffing challenges that threaten to outpace gains made through TNR.
- **Equity Gaps.** The neighborhoods most affected by community cats are often the hardest to reach. Targeted zones often overlap with under-resourced communities. But without free transportation, multi-lingual outreach, or trusted local ambassadors, even well-designed programs risk missing the people and places that need help most.

## Dollars and Sense

Preventive spay/neuter repeatedly beats shelter-and-euthanize approaches on cost per cat and per percentage reduction. Beyond Key Largo's 60 percent savings over trap-and-euthanize, Port Orange, Fla., saved \$123,000 in a single year by switching to TNR, while national projections suggest billions in potential savings if high-intensity TNR scales up.

## A Missing Voice

It is worth noting, in the spirit of transparency and inclusivity, that the report's peer review process did not include input from some of the nation's most experienced TNR leaders. Notably absent was Karn Myers, co-founder of [FixNation](#) in Los Angeles, a nonprofit organization whose high-quality/high-volume spay/neuter programs have sterilized nearly 280,000 cats over the past 25 years (primarily community feral cats that are vaccinated and spayed/neutered free of charge). Karn and her late husband, Mark Dodge, played a pivotal role in transforming Los Angeles into a national model for targeted, high-intensity TNR.

*FixNation's* data-driven, collaborative approach and its long-term partnerships with local government exemplify many of the report's recommendations. Including such frontline expertise in the study might have further strengthened the report's practical guidance and ensured even broader buy-in from the field.

## Moving from Pilot to Policy

Still, the *Summerlee Foundation's* report doesn't just critique—it offers a roadmap. To truly manage community cat populations, national funders, local governments, and animal welfare leaders must move beyond piecemeal tactics. The recommendations are neither radical nor untested—but they do require political will and coordinated investment:

### 1. Commit to Integrated, Multi-Year Solutions:

Temporary fixes won't stem a long-term challenge. The report calls for well-funded pilot programs that combine TNR with adoption support, pet retention resources, public education, policy reform, and—critically—measurable outcomes. These aren't siloed interventions but ecosystem-wide approaches that can scale.

### 2. Invest in Data, Not Just Surgeries:

Too many programs celebrate the number of cats sterilized without knowing how many remain. The blueprint prioritizes rigorous population counts, long-term tracking, and adaptive management practices that allow programs to course-correct in real time. Success must be provable—and improvable.

### 3. Secure Sustainable Funding:

Relying on grants and goodwill is not a strategy. The report outlines realistic funding streams, including modest fees on pet food, surcharges on shelter adoptions, and ordinances requiring sterilization of free-roaming cats. With local leadership and community buy-in, these mechanisms can lock in the resources needed to sustain progress.

### 4. Center Equity and Community Partnership

The foundation warns that without intentional outreach, TNR programs risk overlooking the very communities most in need. Its recommendations emphasize free transportation, translation services, culturally competent education, and paid community ambassadors—so that targeted programs uplift, rather than alienate, underserved neighborhoods.

## Conclusion

If we close the gaps around TNR—by embedding it within comprehensive animal welfare strategies, grounding it in data, and funding it like the public good it is—we can stop spinning on the intake-and-euthanasia treadmill. With focused effort and long-term commitment, lasting declines in free-roaming cat populations won't remain aspirational. They'll become the new baseline. The blueprint is there. What's needed now is the courage to follow it.