



Cat Intake and Pathway Planning

Stray Cat Pathway Planning and Decision Tree

Utilize the guidance and recommendations below to determine the most efficient pathway for cats from outdoor living situations.

Options include:

- Fast track to adoption and return-to-home
- Intake for traditional sheltering, which may include adoption and placement as working cat

Pathway Planning: General Guidelines for Outdoor Cats

Fast track healthy kittens (<6 months) for adoption

Reasons cats would exit pathway and be returned-to-home:

- Unsocialized kittens not likely to become social with reasonable efforts within the capacity of the organization
- Supported self-rehoming by caretaker

Fast track healthy adults (>6 months) for return-to-home

Reasons cats would **exit pathway** and be admitted for traditional sheltering:

- Cat has identification (tag, microchip)
- Cat is declawed
- Evidence of genuine abandonment
- Credible risk of harm or malicious intent at home location. This may include when a resident threatens violence against a cat who is seen as a nuisance.
- Exigent risks, such as a destroyed building at location of origin or environmental conditions (e.g. protected natural areas, serious nuisance that is unable to be mitigated, high rate of disease)

Cats to place directly on traditional sheltering track:

- Traditional owner surrender cats
 - Avoid classifying community cats or potentially lost cats who have only been in the care of the finders for a short period of time as owner-surrenders
- Sick or injured cats or kittens, orphaned kittens, cats not thriving outdoors
- Cats from hoarding cases, or other unhealthy, unsustainable living situations
- Cats on this track may be evaluated for return-to-home, where appropriate, after receiving services

For more detailed information, see [Million Cat Challenge Pathway Planning](#) and HASS [Community Cat Decision Guide](#).

WHY IS THIS CAT BEING BROUGHT IN TODAY?



This is an initial assessment of Public Drop Off for Stray Cats. A cat identified for SNR on intake may be rejected for return by CCP or Medical Staff.

In-Depth Training Guide for Decision Making

For stray cats, pathway planning starts at the admissions door. When a resident brings a found cat to your facility, use this interaction as an opportunity to gather information about the cat and the community. The following is a step-by-step guide for front-line staff to get incoming cats started along the most appropriate pathway and gather information that can help the organization to provide the cat with the best available outcome.

Cats have two main paths they can follow depending on age.

- Kittens who appear under 6 months of age follow the superhighway to adoption.
- Cats 6 months and older will follow the fast track for return-to-home (SNR).

However, there are a few reasons the cat may exit that pathway. Use this guide to help you gather information needed to determine if the cat needs to leave the fast track for another pathway.

Initial Contact: Gathering Information

Sample Cat Intake Form

Note: This [sample intake form](#) is designed to collect information on where a lost or stray cat was found and the reason they were brought to the shelter, as well as contextual information on the cat's prior environment, history, age, medical status, and more. The goal of this intake form is to be able to appropriately analyze whether the cat may have an established community they reside in that should be returned, if they have an existing caretaker, if they need supplemental care, and what actions, if any, the finder can take to help support reunification efforts as appropriate. **The steps below highlight a more detailed initial contact process that can be supported by this intake form.**

1. Get the Cat's Address:

- The most critical piece of information for stray cats brought in is the exact location the cat came from.
- The cat's well-being depends on your ability to establish rapport with the person bringing the cat in so they feel comfortable being truthful with you and giving an accurate account and reliable information.
- The first minute of discussion with a person bringing in a cat is the most critical. Accurate information can be challenging to attain from a member of the public that may not be willing to share personal information.
- Get this information as quickly as possible after they enter the building in case they become impatient and walk out.
- One strategy is to pass the person a "[found animal form](#)" to fill out and say, "If you could please fill out this form with the exact location where the cat was found, I'm going to grab a towel or blanket to cover the cat up so it's more comfortable."
- For some people, it may be more appropriate to ask them questions and fill out the intake form yourself.
 - People may have different levels of reading and vision abilities, or other constraints that make completing the form a challenge.
 - You need to develop rapport with the person, based on their reasons for bringing the cat in, in order for them to provide the information needed to determine the best pathway for this cat. I
 - If the person doesn't have an exact street address for the cat, get cross-streets, landmarks, or other details. Use a map with photos (Google Maps) of the area to help the person identify exactly where the cat was picked up.
 - People often do not know street addresses but can recognize photos of streets/alleys/buildings. Ask yourself: "Is there enough information to return this cat to the location, if not, then more details of the area are needed."

2. **Cat's behavior:** While you are gathering the cat's information: If you can see the cat, make a quick mental note of the cat's fear, anxiety, and stress score ([FAS score](#)) as it enters the shelter.
 - a. If they in an uncovered trap or wire kennel, does she appear to be calm? Is they at the door of the plastic crate looking around? Or is they hunkered down in a container trying to remain unnoticed? Also, note if the cat is an adult or a kitten (or multiple kittens!)

3. **Gather history:** Once the customer has been pleasantly greeted and has provided an address that we believe to be accurate, proceed to gather any potential history on the cat.
 - a. Aim to get as complete history on the cat as you can before the person leaves, reviewing responses written on the form and clarifying information as you work through the cat's assessment.
 - i. Consider the reasons your organization may decide that it is not in the cat's best interest to be returned, such as if a resident of the area has threatened the well-being of this or other cats in the neighborhood.
 - b. Some people may not offer the information you want upfront, particularly if they don't know that it is important.
 - i. You can also glean information on the cat and the reasons she ended up at the shelter based on how she arrived and the reasons the person gives for bringing her in.
 - c. Is the cat in a trap, a carrier, some other closed container (crate, wire kennel, cardboard box, plastic tote), or were they hand-carried or in an open container (plastic tote without a cover, unsealed cardboard box)?
 - i. Does the person think they found someone's lost cat? Are they concerned with the cat's health or do they find the cat a nuisance?

4. Add all the information you collect from the stray [cat intake form](#) to the cat's electronic record once you are finished with the person in front of you.

Note: Review your organization's found cat form to ensure it allows for each of these steps to occur as thoroughly as possible.

Additional Considerations

How Was The Cat Brought In?

1. The cat was hand-carried or arrived in a container that they could have easily escaped.
 - a. This is a very friendly cat!
 - b. They allowed themselves to be picked up by a random stranger, placed in a car, and brought to the shelter.
 - c. Because they are very social, and very confident outdoors, they are most certainly someone's cat or a community cat that is used to living outdoors.
 - d. Cats don't become this trusting of humans unless a human has made them so. T
 - e. hey also generally are not confident outdoors unless they are used to being outdoors.

- f. This is not a reason to exit the pathway of return to home (SNR). Unless this cat is identified as a lost/abandoned cat, the best chance this cat has of getting back to a person that was good to them is to be put back where they were found so they can head home.
2. The cat is in a trap.
- a. The person bringing the cat in has made a considerable effort to get the cat and bring it to you, either because he wants to help the cat, or because he is committed to the cat being removed from the area.
 - b. Establish rapport so we can get as much information as possible to better help the cat.
 - c. Cats brought in traps may not be feral, but may be very fearful and would not allow a stranger to handle them.

Why Was The Cat Brought In?

1. Does the person believe they have found a “lost” cat? They may have found a displaced cat.
 - a. It’s common for people to think they have found someone’s lost indoor cat.
 - i. They often haven’t! Lost indoor cats are very frightened to find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, so they hunker down and hide.
 - ii. They aren’t confident outside, so they try to remain unseen and they don’t approach strangers.
 - iii. They may hide in bushes or under cars and they wait for it to get dark and quiet, and then under the cover of night, they look for a way back into the house.
 1. If a cat is comfortable being seen outdoors, they are likely an indoor/outdoor cat.
 2. If a cat is comfortable being approached outdoors by a stranger, they are likely not an indoor-only cat.
 - iv. Regardless of outdoor comfort levels, always scan the cat for a microchip and check lost cat reports.
 - b. Get a good history to provide better advice.
 - i. Asking questions like ‘how long has the finder seen the cat in the area?’ can help establish a timeline.
 - ii. It can also help to know the finder’s relationship to the area where the cat was found. A new resident or someone just passing through a neighborhood may not be familiar with the local cats. This information can help your organization choose if it is best to put the cat back or to create an intake for stray hold and services.
 - c. Ask if they have seen signs of a caregiver, such as cat food bowls or empty cans of cat food nearby, possibly in an out of the way area like near a dumpster.
 - i. Advise them that the cat may be released back to the neighborhood after medical services or once a stray hold has ended.
 - ii. Provide a person with information on how to help find the cat’s caregiver, or refer to another staff member or volunteer who works with community cats in your area to identify community cat caregivers and resources. This may help the finder be more comfortable with a cat returning.
 - iii. See [HASS Public Communication Guide for Lost Cats and Found Cats](#).

2. Customer believes the cat is a nuisance
 - a. There are several options, all of which involve intake for at least a brief period of time as a de-escalation measure. First, find out what the specific nuisance is and then explain which provided services can address the problem.
 - a. Talk to the customer about TNR/RTH. The cat will be altered prior to return to the community and that will eliminate most nuisance behaviors.
 - b. Talk to the customer about ways to protect their property going forward including cat deterrents, keeping car garaged/under a car cover, etc.
 - i. Review our "[Uninvited Guests](#)" resource for additional details
 - c. If the customer is resistant or there is no time for a lengthy conversation, proceed with intake. The cat can be processed as an RTH to the address obtained at intake if, after assessment, that is what is deemed best.
 - i. The customer should be called back at a more convenient time to notify them that the cat will be returned to the neighborhood and/or to talk about cat deterrents further.
3. The person is the cat's caregiver or a concerned neighbor and wants the cat vetted and returned. The person is committed to continuing to feed the cat upon return. This is an opportunity to determine if there are other community cats or caregivers (feeders) nearby in need of services (TNR or shelter/food support).
 - a. Consideration: Often one person will bring in the cat that they are feeding but not the rest of the cats nearby.
4. The customer is worried about the health or welfare of the cat.
 - a. Regardless of the way the cat came in, the health of the cat may be in question. Ask why specifically the person is concerned about the cat.
 - b. If there is an immediate medical concern:
 - i. Ask about any injuries or symptoms they've seen and for what length of time. A cat with medical needs may exit the fast track to return but may rejoin that pathway after treatment and further assessment. Admit the cat for a medical exam and any treatments necessary.
 - ii. Advise the person that the cat will be RTH'd if it's reasonable to do so. This is a good opportunity to ask the person if they'd be willing to help by keeping the cat at their home for recovery after treatment if needed/appropriate. If that person regularly cares for the cat they may prefer this option rather than have the cat stay at the shelter for an extended period. A referral to another staff member/volunteer who works with community cats can assess the person's capacity for care of a recovering community cat.
 - iii. Additional resources can be offered for long-term community cat support such as weather-appropriate shelters, food pantries, and follow-up TNR in the area.
 - c. Someone may be concerned about a cat's welfare if they believe there is a threat to that cat or if the location where the cat is living is inappropriate or compromised in some way. A credible risk of harm or malicious intent at home location is a reason to exit the

pathway to return. Further investigation may be warranted to determine what action should be taken. Collect as many details about the threats as possible and pass the information on to management, animal protection officers, or the appropriate contact within your organization, including staff members or volunteers who work in neighborhoods where community cats are located.

Possible Exceptions

The following exceptions to the guidelines above could result in a cat exiting the fast track pathway.

Note: No two cats and no two communities are alike and exact procedures may vary

1. The cat is sick or injured. Minor injuries may not rule out returning a cat outdoors after treatment. Flag the cat for a medical evaluation before a decision is made.
 - a. Unneutered males in an area may engage in fighting over territory and result in injuries seen in multiple cats. Refer cats coming in with bite wounds for location evaluation by community cat staff, volunteers, and/or animal control officers.
2. The cat has a microchip. Check lost cat reports to see if there is a match and attempt to make contact with the microchip's registrar.
3. The cat is declawed. Declawed cats should not automatically be considered for Return to Home, but may be returned if no owner is located, and/or the cat's behavior is unsuited for traditional adoption. Safe, alternative placement, such as a Working Cat Program, may also be appropriate if the cat is unsuited for traditional adoption.
 - a. Example: House soiling, biting, aggression, etc.
4. Evidence of genuine abandonment or a cat that has been lost for a while.
 - a. For bony or skinny cats (you can feel the cat's backbone, the following scenarios may be possible and these cases require a little more investigative work to make sure the best decision is made for the cat. The fact that a cat is skinny doesn't necessarily mean no one is caring for them.
 - i. Cat's owner moved and the cat was left behind purposefully
 - ii. Cat's community feeder(s) have left the area and the cat was inadvertently left behind
 - iii. Cat was accidentally relocated while hiding in the undercarriage of a car
 - iv. Cat may have a caring owner but also a disease process that makes them have poor musculing despite having plenty to eat
 - b. Consider placing the cat on a stray hold and asking the presenter to knock on doors in the neighborhood where the cat was found. Ask the presenter to add the cat to a neighborhood list-serve like Nextdoor or Facebook. Often, neighbors will recognize the cat and can identify ownership or a known community cat.
 - i. A referral to another staff member/volunteer who works with community cats can help to identify if this cat is a known community cat (but has not been ear-tipped). Shelter staff may also have access to post Lost/Found animals to neighborhood list-serves, Facebook groups, etc.
 - c. If you place the cat on stray hold, allow the cat to free feed and monitor for appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, and weight gain.

- i. If the cat gains weight while on stray hold, then it is likely that they are skinny because they haven't had enough to eat lately, and may indicate they do not have an owner near where they were found.
- ii. If the cat has a good appetite on stray hold but doesn't gain weight, or has vomiting or diarrhea, they may have an illness or disease process.
 - 1. Consideration: There may be an owner out there who has been treating the cat. Re-engage posts made to the lost and found groups, and try knocking on doors one more time.
 - 2. If an owner or caregiver is not found, consider whether to return-to-home or place the cat up for adoption.
- d. The cat has been staying at the finder's residence and hasn't left.
 - i. This may indicate that the cat has lost access to a food source and is looking for another. It's possible they were abandoned intentionally or unintentionally, or purposefully/accidentally displaced. Perhaps the cat prefers the food being offered at the finder's home better than her original home. This cat may be in need of assistance and should be investigated further.
 - ii. Put the cat on a stray hold and post to lost and found pages. Enlist volunteers to put up posters, utilize social media, and follow reunification attempt protocols. At the end of the stray hold, make available for adoption but allow reclaim if the owner comes forward.
 - iii. Consideration: Cats may move along on their own if a different caretaker is providing more desirable food and resources, and the cat may not need assistance. Your conversation with the presenter will help you distinguish why this cat has arrived in the neighborhood and determine if this cat requires assistance.
- 5. There is a credible risk of harm or malicious intent at the home location.
 - a. If there is malicious harm to cats happening, this should be brought to the attention of management for possible animal cruelty or illegal activities and handled by the appropriate department in your community.
 - b. These cats may need admission or relocation through a Working Cat Program if unsuited for traditional adoption and it is determined that they cannot be returned.
- 6. There are exigent risks, such as demolished or soon to be demolished sites at the location of origin or environmental conditions (e.g. protected natural areas, serious nuisance that is unable to be mitigated, high rate of disease).
 - a. These cats may need relocation through a Working Cat Program if unsuited for traditional adoption and it is determined that they cannot be returned.

An important note about owner-surrendered cats

Organizations and communities may have various laws and interpretations of laws in defining an "owned" animal (harboring, feeding, and/or maintaining an animal for a minimum number of days, etc).

- In order to ensure that an outdoor cat has a chance to go home when a cat is being admitted to the shelter as an owner surrenders, admissions staff should ask questions about the length of ownership, how the cat was obtained by the owner, and if the cat had lived exclusively outdoors prior to ownership.

- The answers to these questions will help admitting staff determine whether a stray cat intake template should also be completed for the cat.
- Obtaining this additional information may result in the cat being eligible for fast track return-to-home or allow for easier review of the cat's status and eligibility for return-to-home by other staff after time of intake.

