

Feline Good

Keeping shelter kitties happy and healthy doesn't have to be complicated—or costly

BY JIM BAKER

Given their nature, what do cats need to feel happy? They need to scratch. They need to stretch. They need the opportunity to hide, perch, and pounce. They need to feel safe. And they need to feel loved, not forgotten. That means time spent being petted, stroked, hugged, and soothingly talked to.

These are the basics of caring, responsible cat ownership. They're also the building blocks of any good cat enrichment program at an animal shelter.

There's a growing movement in shelters around the country to provide such advantages to their feline residents, putting kitties on par—for the first time, in many cases—with dogs and the quality of care and enrichment they've long been receiving.

Want to get in on the trend? It starts with shelter staff, volunteers, and potential pet adopters changing their mindset, their overall attitude toward cats.

"Shelters were originally built for dogs, and even today, if you go out into rural areas, towns will have what they call 'pounds,' and they won't even take in cats. So that's kind of where we are—it means it takes a little extra effort on our part to think about doing things for cats," says Donna Mlinek, feline programs manager at the Dumb Friends League in Denver.

Mlinek says she often hears from other shelter professionals that there are simply too many homeless cats in their facilities to even think about putting them on the same footing as dogs. That notion doesn't sit well with her. "Somebody has to break that cycle, and it's gonna be us if it's gonna be anybody," she says.

Last year, Mlinek and Sherri Leggett, shelter manager of the Cat Care Society in Lakewood, Colo., gave a workshop at The HSUS's Animal Care Expo in Orlando, Fla., called "Can We Do for Cats What We Do for Dogs?"

Increasingly, at shelters across the nation, directors and staff are answering, "Yes."

Executive director Barbara Carr and her staff at the SPCA Serving Erie County created “Chillin’ Village” as a cool-down space where incoming cats can take their time adjusting to the shelter environment. When staff members deem them ready, they move the cats into one of the facility’s colony rooms for longer-term housing.



It Takes a Village

Barbara Carr’s been sold on the virtues of cat enrichment for some time, whether it’s in the form of special programs or innovative housing. She’s seen it work, witnessed cats who were virtually unadoptable—due to fear, stress, and their accompanying behavior problems—bloom in the hands of caring staff and volunteers.

In 2002, Carr—executive director of the SPCA Serving Erie County in Tonawanda, N.Y.—suggested creating a room where incoming cats who were scared and anxious could spend some time adjusting to the shelter environment at their own pace.

“You know the freaked-out house cat that you can’t touch? I knew that if we could just calm that [type] of kitty down, he could be adopted. I suggested a cage-free space where the public couldn’t get in but the cats could see, hear, and smell the rest of the shelter—a place where they could go in and hide,” says Carr, who’s worked at the open-admission shelter for the past 15 years.

A room with a glass window—so shelter patrons could view the cats—was chosen for the purpose. Staff

outfitted the room with shelves and cubbyholes decorated like Victorian houses and a set of narrow stairs leading up to a catwalk, near the ceiling, that circled the space.

It was a breakthrough. By enacting Carr’s vision, the staff had inadvertently created the shelter’s first cage-free, colony-style housing for cats. But Carr’s co-workers remained skeptical, she says, referring jokingly to her project as “Crazy Barbara’s Cool-Down Cat Room.” (Real name: Chillin’ Village.)

“They said, ‘You’re going to put two nasty, freaked-out cats together? They’re gonna kill each other.’ The first day, there were only two black cats [to put into the room], and our staff was sure it was going to be awful. But when they came back in the next morning, the cats jumped down from a shelf and ran to them. They were purring, and they let the staff handle them,” Carr says.

Within 12 hours of intake, both stressed, frightened cats—who Carr says probably wouldn’t have been adoptable previously—were ready for placement in one of the shelter’s regular cat kennels. That early success got Carr thinking. “The first thing that happened was

that we said, ‘What else can we do, based on the lessons we’ve learned from Chillin’ Village?’” she says.

Thinking Inside the Box

For their next cat enrichment project, Carr and her staff spent about six months doing research and development. Working with a local box company, they developed a cardboard box that would give caged cats a place to hide and perch, hard-wired feline behaviors that are often frustrated in typical shelter housing. The box would also serve as a cat carrier when newly adopted cats were ready to leave the shelter.

“We went back and forth [with the box company] until we had exactly what we wanted,” says Carr. “Then we found a sponsor to put their name on it—the boxes only cost about \$1.25 each—and it stays with the cat throughout their time with us. So their scent goes right with them into their new home.”

The shelter started using the boxes about three and a half years ago. That project led to a wider discussion of ways to make shelter cats more comfortable during their stay, which in turn led to a more ambitious undertaking: a cat enrichment team, dubbed the SPCA AdvoCATS.

Krissi Miranda, the shelter’s off-site adoption coordinator, inspired the project. “I was frustrated with the fact that cats always take a second seat to dogs generally. And that cats don’t deal with the shelter environment as well as dogs do—they come in here and they get sick,” says Miranda. “Then the only time people come near them is to medicate them or clean their cages; nobody had time to sit there with them. And after a while of not having regular human contact, they become untrusting—that’s what was happening.”

This was true not only for sick cats who were being treated, but also for cats who lived at the shelter longer than a week. They would become depressed, anxious, withdrawn.

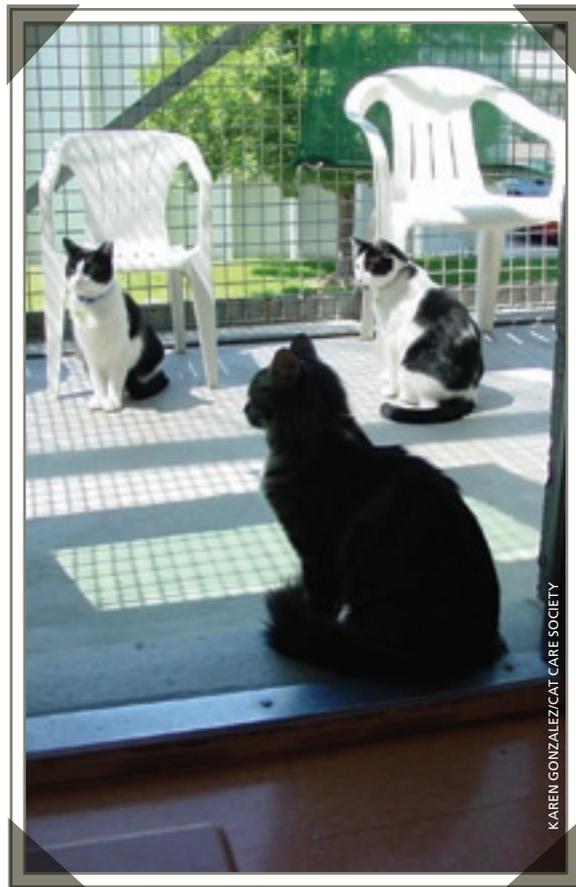
Miranda took her concerns to Debby Williams, the shelter’s veterinary department manager, who in turn shared them with Carr. The solution they came up with was the AdvoCATS. With Carr’s blessing, the pair put out a message to the shelter’s cat room volunteers, and ended up with 12 people at their first meeting in June 2007.

Williams and Miranda lead orientations for small groups of new AdvoCATS volunteers, teaching them how to interpret feline body language in order to understand what a cat wants. Volunteers are paired up with mentors and assigned to different rooms in the shelter, where they check a big notebook that contains progress sheets on each cat in the program. The sheets, filled out by AdvoCATS members, detail how volunteers are working with each cat, how the cat’s respond-



LAURA GRAHAM/SPCA SERVING ERIE COUNTY

Enriched environments, featuring multiple levels and perches, can stimulate shelter cats by giving them an interesting space to explore. Here, a resident at the SPCA Serving Erie County, N.Y., pokes his head out a “door” in one of the shelter’s feline playgrounds.



KAREN GONZALEZ/CAT CARE SOCIETY

Resident felines at the Cat Care Society catch some rays in one of the shelter’s “habicats”—outdoor enclosures where the cats can enjoy fresh air and sunshine in a safe, fenced space.

Any good enrichment program should offer cats the opportunity to satisfy the hard-wired desire to withdraw from the action and hide. This kitty at the Cat Care Society in Lakewood, Colo., feels secure in a fuzzy “hidey bed” for fearful or shy cats.



KAREN GONZALEZ/CAT CARE SOCIETY

ing, his mood that day, whether or not he’s eating, and what his favorite activities are.

“Volunteers have a set schedule that they adhere to,” says Williams. “They go to the book that we use, where every animal has its own profile sheet for cat enrichment. We’ve been able to develop profiles on these cats that we previously knew nothing about. It’s actually worked really well with adoptions—a cat might like a particular toy, it might like its ears scratched.”

A wide variety of the shelter’s cats are placed in the program: any who are being medically treated; any who have been at the shelter for more than a week; those who seem to be depressed or are not eating; and older cats. At any time, there might be 20-25 cats benefiting from the extra TLC.

“We’ve got cats who are here for two to three months; those are the ones that need the help. We’re here to help stimulate them mentally and physically, so that they fight off disease and stay adoptable,” Williams says. “We see cats who would be hiding [at the back of a cage] coming forward, rubbing on the bars, wanting to be petted, wanting attention.”

Cats at the shelter live in supervised colony rooms as well as cages, and volunteers work in both areas.

“We tell them, ‘It’s your program.’ We’re just here for organizing, scheduling, if there’s a problem or a medical issue with a cat,” Williams says.

Of course, volunteers have to follow the same strict guidelines for handling cats as staff members do, always minimizing the risk of spreading disease. “The protocol is for hand washing when they’re working with cats and changing gowns when they’re working with sick cats. If they’re working in the sick cat room, they can’t work with the general population,” Carr says. “In the long run, the programs we have for alleviating stress are so beneficial, they outweigh the potential for spreading disease. But we would caution everyone to use the best protocols possible.”

AdvoCATS is now up to 46 volunteers, including 11 of the original 12 members; old-timers mentor newcomers. The program’s budget is \$1,000 per year. Williams says that works out to about \$1 per cat who goes through the program.

Her advice to other shelters that want to launch something like this? “Be patient, do a lot of research and education, take it slow, and it will work. You need dedicated volunteers who are willing to devote themselves to this.”

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Can We Do For Cats What We Do for Dogs?

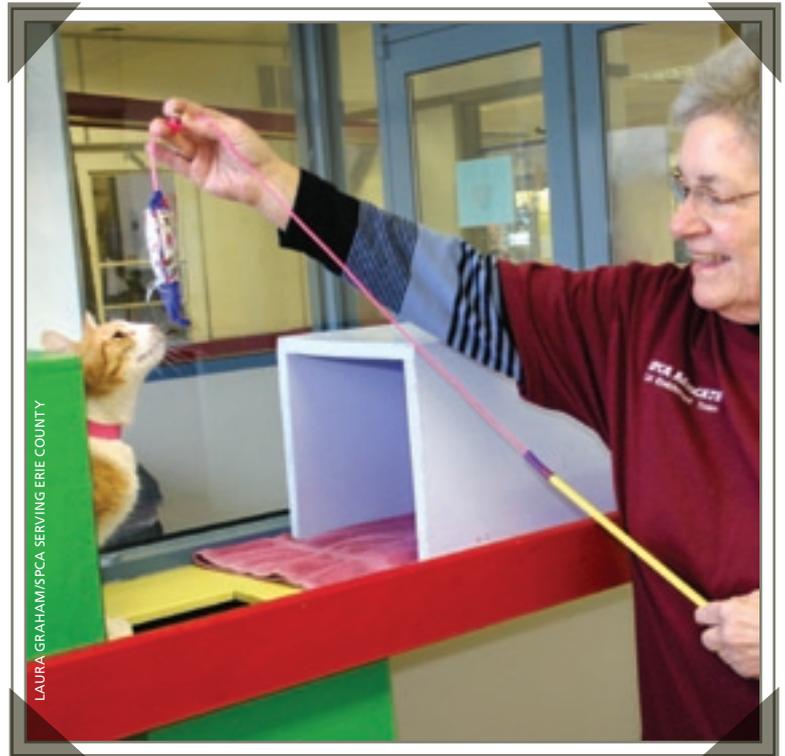
Last May, nearly 1,800 shelter- and animal-protection professionals attended The HSUS's Animal Care Expo 2008 in Orlando, Fla.

Among the many presenters were Donna Mlinek, feline projects manager of the Dumb Friends League in Denver, and Sherri Leggett, shelter manager of the Cat Care Society in Lakewood, Colo. Their workshop offered innovative ideas for cat enrichment programs and housing that participants could share with their colleagues back home.

Here are some highlights and take-away ideas.

Provide "security blankets" for cats

- **Hiding spots**—Give cats a place to hide from the moment they enter the shelter. Put a shoe box or office-supply box in their kennels. Create "kitty bunkers" from rolled-up towels.
- **Scent**—Having their own scent around is important to cats. Keep something in their cages that smells like them, such as a towel or box.
- **High places**—Having the drop on everyone makes cats feel more secure. In intake areas, put cat carriers high on a shelf while owners do paperwork.
- **Pheromones**—Air-exchange systems at some shelters might render plug-in versions of Feliway ineffectual, so you may need to use the spray version of this synthetic product. (But never spray it directly on a cat!)
- **Scratching posts**—Scratching is a physiological need for cats; provide scratching opportunities in every cage and colony room. Branches, logs, or sisal-wrapped PVC pipes are all good options. Or create acrylic frames that you can attach to cage walls and slide a carpet sample/swatch into. (Carpet stores will often provide these floor mat-sized samples at little or no cost.)
- **A clean, accessible litter box**—Boxes should be cleaned frequently and of the appropriate size for cats/kittens. Placement in colony rooms should allow all cats free use of the box.
- **Human companionship**—Use shelter patrons to interact with cats, and provide toys. Use staff to interact with cats by having each of them "sponsor" a cat, spending five to 10 minutes with the kitty two to three times per week.
- **Routine**—Predictability gives cats a sense of control; strive for consistency in caretakers, as well as cleaning and feeding protocols.



Claire Johnson, a member of the AdvocatS enrichment team at the SPCA Serving Erie County, N.Y., plays with a resident of the Condo Village Room. Volunteers like Johnson use a notebook to keep track of their interactions with each kitty, recording the cat's mood, response to different activities, and other habits.

- **Natural sleep cycles**—Monitor levels of noise and light. Come back after hours to see what noises and sounds are present.
- **Exercise**—Caged cats need exercise. Create an area for exercise that's visible to the public, so that patrons can see staff interacting with cats just as they do with dogs.

Provide mental stimulation and interesting visuals

- Hang up prisms that can catch light; cats like to watch movement.
- Place fish tanks or bird feeders where cats can see them.

One way to enrich a shelter cat's environment is to provide a soothing or interesting soundtrack, such as classical music, soft rock, or a CD of birdsong. These kitties at the Cat Care Society are the very picture of enrichment, enjoying mellow sounds and cool toys.



KAREN GONZALEZ/CAT CARE SOCIETY

Resources

Read more about cat enrichment in the online resource library at animalsheltering.org, as well as elsewhere on the Web:

- Animal Care Expo workshop, "Can We Do for Cats What We Do for Dogs?" video webcast, \$20. Visit Expo On-Demand (animalsheltering.org/expo/video_expo_2008.html).
- "The State of the Cat," *Animal Sheltering*, May-June 2008
- "The URI Challenge: Keeping shelter cats healthy through stress reduction," *Animal Sheltering*, Jan-Feb 2007
- "Kitty Comforts," *Animal Sheltering*, Jan-Feb 2005
- "Seeing the World Through Cat Eyes," *Animal Sheltering*, May-June 2004
- *Cat Sense: The Emotional Life of Cats* (video and manual available from the British Columbia SPCA at spca.bc.ca)
- The ASPCA's Meet Your Match Feline-ality Guide and "Mission Possible—Comfy Cats: Feline Shelter Enrichment Program," available at aspca.org
- Presentation by veterinarian and cat enrichment expert Kate Hurley (sheltermedicine.com), can be viewed free on the Web (breeze.ucdavis.edu/p48567391)

Learning by Os-meow-sis

For Leggett, Mlinek's Expo co-presenter, shelters can best enrich the lives of resident cats by providing for their individual needs.

That's what she and her co-workers strive for at the Cat Care Society in Lakewood, a private, limited-admission shelter that can house about 60 cats at a time. To ensure they understand each animal as an individual, they gather as much information about each cat as they can at intake, which also helps them make better adoption matches later.

Cats at the facility are housed in seven colony rooms, including a calm, quiet one set aside for those who are shy. "They seem to bond with each other. Since it's a nice, quiet room and all of them are in the same situation, they thrive. Within seven to 10 days, you're seeing the real personality of the cats," Leggett says. The colonies feature shelves for perching, a window to provide the cats a view and natural light and soft music playing. Four of the rooms have patios, called "habicats."

The shelter's spoiling of its kitties goes beyond the comfy digs, though. Leggett, a 15-year veteran at the society, believes in monitoring each cat for at least the animal's first two weeks at the shelter. Given proper training and support, the cleaning staff, veterinary technicians, and other shelter employees can all help with this. Both staff and volunteers at her shelter receive training for the safe handling of cats. Staff members also get instruction on medical issues (food types,

vomiting, urinary problems, diarrhea, upper respiratory infections, etc.), basic cat behavior, and safety in a shelter environment.

Society staffers learn about what behavior and appearance factors to notice. They learn to watch for where a cat spends time in a colony room: Is she up high, hiding, or curled up in a corner? They learn to gauge her responsiveness when people enter the room: Is she talkative, or quiet and withdrawn? And they learn to keep an eye on their residents' coat condition and grooming habits, since both under- and over-grooming can be signs of health or behavioral troubles.

The shelter's cleaning staff members serve as great monitors, because they're often the first ones to arrive at the shelter in the morning. It's quiet, and they can write up notes about the cats as they work on changing litter and cleaning the rooms, Leggett says. Adoption staff can spend time with individual cats, targeting those who need special care. And everyone can help by petting and interacting with shy, hiding cats, in order to get them used to being handled.

"Here at our shelter, it is all about cats. Every day the staff needs to go around and visit with them, they need to know them," Leggett says. "We feed the cats twice a day with canned food, so if a cat eats one day and doesn't the next, our staff notices. Is there vomit or diarrhea in the room? Are there cats fighting? Our staff is really well trained to watch for health and behavior issues."

Volunteers come in almost every day to groom and play with the cats or just spend some extra time with them. All that socialization helps create a homelike feeling for the shelter residents. The efforts of staff and volunteers have reduced the stress level among cats—as well as the incidence of upper respiratory infections, according to Leggett.

Providing enrichment programs and innovative housing for cats, Leggett says, requires educating people—both shelter professionals and the public. "Cats deserve as much of our attention as dogs do, and frankly, for years and years there have been all kinds of programs for dogs ... and it shouldn't be that difficult to develop enrichment programs for cats. It should be a priority."

But good role-modeling has to start in the shelters, she says. "We have to show people that we care just as much about the cats as they do, placing them up there with dogs, then have educational opportunities for everyone who comes through the shelter to show them that they're not disposable pets, they can't fend for themselves, that they need to be respected and cared for." **AS**



KAREN GONZALEZ/CAT CARE SOCIETY

Cats have both an emotional and physiological need to scratch. A well-anchored chunk of tree branch does quite nicely for this resident at the Cat Care Society.



LAURA GRAHAM/SPCA SERVING ERIE COUNTY

Gentle, loving contact with staff and volunteers can keep cats receiving medical treatment from only associating human touch with scary, uncomfortable procedures. Sue Paulson, a member of the AdvocATS enrichment team at the SPCA Serving Erie County, cuddles a cat in the shelter's isolation room.