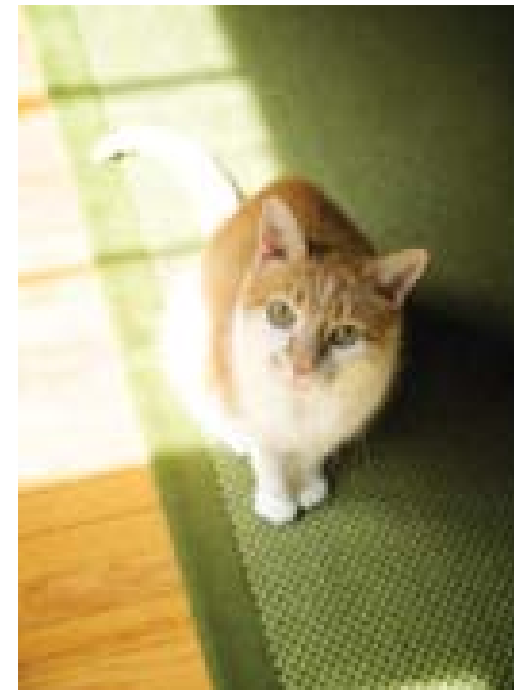
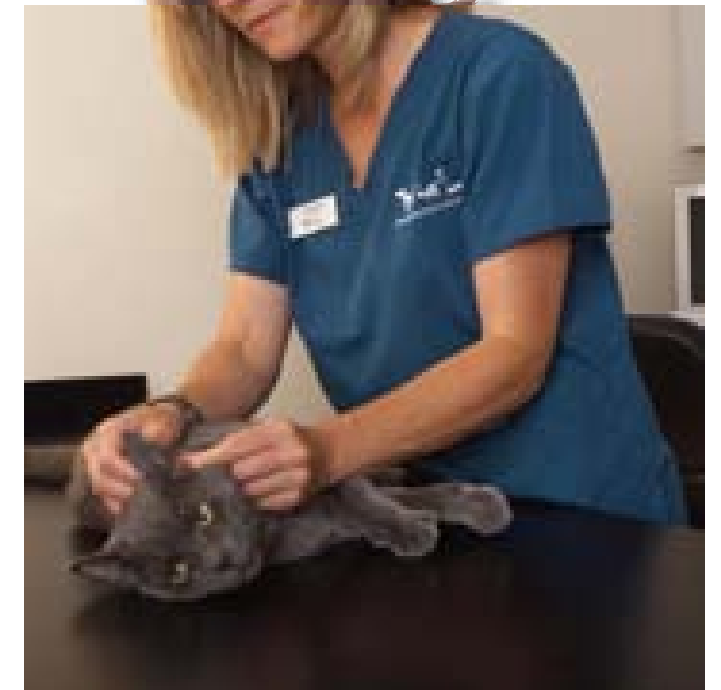


# Cats in Crisis

Why so many are homeless and how we can help them



Moose Photo by Sarah Beth Photography



AHS Veterinarian Dr. Melanie Sharpe

*By Tracie Jacobson*

*In the fall of 1998, a small orange and white kitten emerged from the woods lining the northern edge of an established Minnesota farm. Despite being so small he could fit into a coffee cup, he made his way into the barn and latched on to a mother cat as she nursed her recently born litter of kittens. He became just another one of her offspring.*

*Days later, a young college student arrived at the farm. She was interested in taking home one of the kittens mentioned in an ad the farm family had run in the local newspaper. As she was invited to meet the kittens, her eyes immediately went to the diminutive orange and white feline. His size was a stark contrast to that of the kittens who had already welcomed him into the fold. She picked up the petite and fragile kitten and knew he was the one.*

*Hours later and back at the apartment she shared with her best friend from high school, she considered what she would name the new family member. Days were spent and countless titles considered until her friend suggested giving the kitten a name to counter his small stature, something big. The tiny kitten who emerged from the woods seemingly out of nowhere was fondly named Moose.*

Most cats aren't given the opportunity to walk so effortlessly into good fortune. For years, cats like Moose have been coming out of the woodwork, roaming our communities and filling shelters across the country one after another. And although they're met at the shelter door with care and concern, these cats face two cumbersome hurdles—they are viewed with a limited perceived value in our communities and there are thousands upon thousands of felines competing for a limited number of homes.

Some people may question if cats are truly seen with lesser value after experiences they have with those who hold cats in a higher regard. Not unlike dog lovers, if you talk to any cat lover you'll be provided with a front row seat to tales of intelligence, kindness and even hilarity about their feline. Tales providing evidence that a cat makes a good pet.

Considering the results of a survey of pet owners conducted by the Humane Society of the United States from 2007 to 2008 may also leave one to question if cats face those hurdles. The survey shows that although more households have dogs, there are more cats in homes across the country—88 million compared to 75 million dogs. But the reality is there are still millions of other cats in need of homes.

"We are experiencing a crisis in the United States that very few people outside of animal welfare are aware of," says Janelle Dixon, president and CEO of Animal Humane Society. "Cats are being born at such an incredible rate each year that all five of our facilities struggle to keep up—and we're just one organization of thousands in this country overwhelmed by the cat overpopulation crisis."

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# Cats in Crisis

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**When considering that 88 million cats already have homes and millions more are waiting for one, we, as a community, need to ask ourselves: Why are there so many cats without a home and why aren't we doing more to help them?**



Barbara Carr, executive director of the Erie County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ECSPCA) in New York and a 25-year veteran in animal welfare, agrees. "We have to come out of the closet about cats... and get people talking nationally about them. There is a mass problem and we have to create a solution and follow it."

An alarming statistic provided by Spay USA gives a better understanding of what cats in this country are facing: Each day 10,000 children and 42,000 kittens are born in the U.S. When we consider that 88 million cats already have homes and millions more are waiting for one, we, as a community, need to ask ourselves: Why are there so many cats without a home and why aren't we doing more to help them?

A common consensus is that we've been conditioned to value cats less. "Growing up, the culture was different," says Kathie Johnson, director of veterinary services at Animal Humane Society. "A lot of people saw cats as disposable. They were unsterilized and allowed to run around outdoors. There was an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach to having them. For many people, that hasn't changed."

This view has led to family cats disappearing, being injured and often-times losing their lives due to severe weather, wildlife attacks or being hit by a car. It also leads to millions of cats and unwanted litters of kittens being cared for in shelters.

Animal welfare organizations in both rural and urban Minnesota are replete with cats and kittens, almost throughout the entire year. However, there is one time of year, known as "kitten season," where an average of

70 cats per day arrive at Animal Humane Society's doors—and that is just one animal welfare organization of hundreds in the state.

Kitten season has historically resulted in a surge of cats and kittens beginning in May and continuing to October, but that period is lengthening year after year. Laura Johnson, the founder of the Stray Cat Rescue Association of Minnesota, says they were still taking in litters of kittens at Thanksgiving last year, something of a rarity in years past. She believes the reason for the extended season goes back to people letting their cats outside—cats that haven't been spayed or neutered.

"It's shocking the number of house cats abandoned outside," she says. "There are just so many, which contributes to them being undervalued."

The flood of cats arriving at shelters takes a toll on the cats and the people caring for them. The stress of being housed with hundreds of other animals can wear down any healthy animal, especially during kitten season. Add to that the extended period of time cats spend in shelters—again caused by the number of homeless cats far exceeding adoptions—and they become susceptible to illness such as upper respiratory infections and even depression.

If you walk into any examination room at Animal Humane Society's five facilities in the summer months, you'll gain a visual understanding of the crisis our communities face. Shelves lining the walls of the room are filled with cats and kittens in receiving kennels—an older male cat recently brought in from the summer heat, a mother cat already in labor and another who just gave birth to a litter of eight; some are strays, many



are brought in by owners because a lifestyle change no longer accommodates a feline.

"Kitten season is overwhelming, crowded and very hectic. I can be examining one cat and there will be 10 or more waiting for me with more coming in one after the other on the other side of the exam room door," explains Christa Raymond, a lead veterinary technician Animal Humane Society's Coon Rapids facility. "It's never-ending and it affects the cats. They pick up on the stress we feel."

Another person on the front lines of the issue is Kit Belcher, executive director of Beltrami Humane Society in Bemidji, Minn. "We are always telling people about spay/neuter. The responsibility starts the day the animal is born, but many don't accept the responsibility. When they decide they don't want the pet anymore, they take it for a ride and leave it out in the country, only contributing to pet overpopulation."

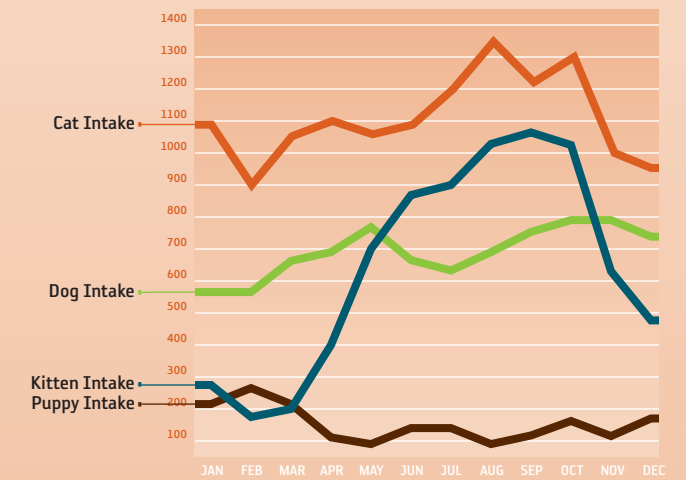
We as a community need to change old habits. The way people acquire cats—often "free to a good home"—and the fact that an incredible number of cats are available contributes to this "disposable" mentality.

When it comes to dogs, we are diligent and purposeful in the animal we select. We research different types of breeds and plan for when the animal will be in our home. With cats it is different. There is very little planning or intent. Carr of the ECSPCA found in a survey that 67% of cat owners never planned to get the cat they have today.

"If you want to make an analogy, you can compare the way we bring dogs into our homes to the way we purchase a new television," explains Dixon

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# animal intake at AHS in 2009



## A look at cats by the numbers at Animal Humane Society in 2009

- 33,625** Companion animals cared for in 2009
- 20,873** Cats cared for at its five facilities, or 62% of all companion animals
- 8,626** AHS felines that received spay/neuter surgery at AHS
- 1,689** Felines spayed/neutered for AHS animal welfare partners
- 10,413** Felines (5,863 adult cats and 4,550 kittens) arrived at AHS doors during kitten season between May 1 and September 30, 2009
- 70 per day** Cats arriving at Animal Humane Society during kitten season



# Cats in Crisis

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at Animal Humane Society. “We research and select the model that best fits our desires, but cats are different. Cats are the DVD we pick up on the way out the door with little forethought or consideration.”

Looking at how we regard dogs today in Minneapolis-St. Paul, it's surprising that we once had an overpopulation issue with dogs. Now we spay and neuter dogs to make them better household pets, but more intentionally we do it to prevent that first mistake litter. We have managed the population of dogs so well that with leash and licensing laws, ample opportunities for dog training, and a long list of dog parks, there are now far fewer dogs surrendered to shelters or turned loose to fend for themselves. As a result, Animal Humane Society is able to help other communities still facing dog overpopulation. Dogs from other Minnesota communities and from shelters as far away as Oklahoma are being transported to AHS to find homes.

We can get to the same place for cats. “We need to encourage our cities to require and enforce cat ordinances and everyone in the community needs to provide an ID tag and collar for their cats or have them microchipped,” explains Kathie Johnson. “We also need to encourage everyone we know to have their cats sterilized, but most importantly, we need to be able to provide affordable spay/neuter services to people in our state.”

The success of the ECSPCA of New York is proof that providing affordable spay/neuter services to the public works. Over the last 13 years the organization has made a concerted effort to tame the cat overpopulation crisis in their area, in one of the poorest economic areas in the country. They concentrated their efforts on sterilizing each animal adopted from their facilities and providing subsidized spay/neuter to their community. “We looked at fixing overpopulation as finding the solution to a math problem,” says Carr. “We determined how many spay/neuter surgeries we had to do to get to zero population growth. It took some time but it has now been 19 months since we had to euthanize a healthy cat.”

According to *Companion Animal Demographics and Sterilization Status* a study printed in “Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interac-

## ***There is a disparity between the number of cats being brought to Animal Humane Society and the number of adopters taking cats home.***

tions of People & Animals,” nearly 70% of unwanted cat litters are born to a mother cat who ultimately gets sterilized—evidence that if more cats are sterilized before they're able to reproduce our communities would see a dramatic reduction of felines living as strays and in shelter facilities.

Minnesota is one of only a few states that make it difficult for shelters to offer sterilization services to the communities they serve. “Until subsidized sterilization programs are developed for the public, our communities won't see a reduction of felines that are feral, living as strays or in shelter facilities,” explains Dixon. “In the meantime, Animal Humane Society has started development of a low-cost spay/neuter program for the public and we'll continue to sterilize every animal available for adoption.” In 2009, more than 8,600 felines underwent the procedure at AHS facilities and in mobile services units.

Despite its efforts and those of so many others, unwanted litters of kittens and stray cats continue to leave the local community in a perpetual cat crisis. Animal Humane Society recognizes that change doesn't happen overnight and is taking measures to ensure the health and happiness of every animal in its care.

In March 2009, AHS launched Bound for Home, a multi-year initiative designed to provide better care to animals in its facilities and to move animals more quickly through the shelter. The goal of the initiative is to ensure that all healthy and treatable animals that come through its doors are placed with caring families.

# how to help

## **We're in this together**

### ***How you can help reduce cat overpopulation***

It's going to take all of us working together to solve the cat overpopulation issue. You can help by doing any one of the following—and asking your friends and family to do the same!

**Adopt a cat**—Providing a home to a cat from AHS will help more than just that one cat. It also provides another homeless cat the opportunity to find a new home.

Cats love to have a playmate at home and **Double the Love** is a great opportunity to help a cat in need and bring home his best friend too.

When customers adopt one cat at the regular adoption fee, the fee for a second cat will be waived.

Millions of cats find themselves at animal shelters around the country each year; nearly 21,000 of those cats find themselves at AHS. **Double the Love** and help them find their way home.

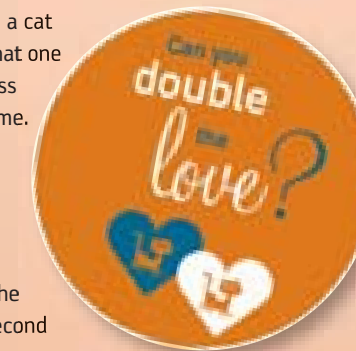
Adopting a cat helps all of the animals at AHS.

**Spay or neuter**—Spaying or neutering your cat is critical to reducing the number of cats and kittens flooding animal shelters and rescues throughout the state each year. According to Spay USA, one unspayed female, her unsterilized mate and all of their offspring can produce 11,801 kittens in just five years!

**Microchip and ID**—Many of the cats that make their way to shelters are strays. They don't make their way home again because they weren't identifiable. Increase your cat's chances of returning home by having him or her microchipped and identified with an ID tag and collar. AHS offers low-cost microchip clinics at each of its locations every month.

**Keep them safe indoors**—Despite popular belief, cats can be happy indoors. Keeping your cats inside removes them from the dangers of traffic, other animals and those who don't have their best interest at heart.

**Turn to AHS before you surrender your cat**—At AHS, we're here for all the stages of your cat's life. We offer a variety of services from our Behavior Helpline to therapy animal classes that can help you live a happier, healthier life with your cat. 🐾



“The approach involves moving beyond the status quo,” says Dixon. “We need to do things differently to provide enriched living environments for the animals and improve the way they move through the different areas of care at our facilities. Making these improvements will ensure high quality care and reduce the length of stay for animals in the shelter—ultimately reducing euthanasia.”

Animal Humane Society enlisted the help of nationally-renowned animal welfare and shelter medicine experts from the University of California—Davis to advise them and examine all of the ways in which they care for animals—from intake to animal housing to medical treatments and the different ways the animals' lives can be enriched in the shelter. Animal Humane Society board members, staff and volunteers are filled with hope for what these changes will mean for animals that come into their care in the future.

But that is just one piece of the puzzle toward helping these felines in crisis. “We need to work together,” explains Dixon. “It's not just an Animal Humane Society or rescue group problem. It's a community problem and it's going to take all of us to help them.” 🐾

*Tracie Jacobson is on the staff at the Animal Humane Society. She and her husband have two pets: a relaxed 11-year-old cat named Moose and Kate, a happy two-year-old boxer mix adopted from the Animal Humane Society.*

To learn more about Cat Overpopulation  
watch video online at  
[www.animalhumanesociety.org/ATSpring10](http://www.animalhumanesociety.org/ATSpring10).

