



Being a Community Cat Advocate – Conflicts with Neighbors

As the colony caregiver, you become the cats' public relations firm. Being open about caregiving can protect the cats. One way to maintain good relations is to establish and maintain a friendly dialogue with residents living in the cats' neighborhood and readily address all neighbor concerns.

While most people support the concept of humanely caring for feral cats, conflict can sometimes arise. One of the best ways to prevent conflict is to ensure that the cats are spayed or neutered and feeding areas are clean and inconspicuous. Following are the most common reasons people complain about feral cats, and ideas for addressing their concerns.

- **Wild animals.** Feed cats during the day and pick up any leftover food once the cats have eaten.
- **Too many Kittens.** Spaying and neutering the cats in the colony will prevent more kittens from being born. In some cases, feral kittens can be socialized and adopted if captured at a young enough age.
- **Cats using yard as a litterbox.** Caregivers can place covered, sand-filled litter boxes in their yards, and/or offer to periodically clean the neighbor's yard.
- **Spraying, fighting, howling.** Neutering quickly reduces or eliminates these behaviors. Regular and sufficient feeding will also prevent fighting.

Establish a friendly, ongoing discussion and know your facts.

Explain to residents living in the cats' neighborhood what Trap-Neuter-Return and colony care entails—explain that the cats are cared for and pose no health risk. You may find that other neighbors are feeding the cats as well and you can combine your efforts and set up a schedule. It may be a good idea to deliver copies of ***Deterring Cats from Your Yard*** to each of your neighbors with your contact information written on the back. This way neighbors know you are being proactive and understand their concerns.

Listen closely and ask questions.

A person might start out by saying the cats are "bothering" them, but further discussion may reveal that cat droppings in her flower garden are the specific problem. As the caregiver, providing a litterbox, and being responsible for cleaning it regularly can quell this issue quickly. In another case, a neighbor demanded—without explanation—that a caregiver stop feeding cats in the neighborhood. After asking several questions, she discovered the neighbor was upset because he didn't like cat footprints on his new car. To keep the peace, the caregiver bought her neighbor a car cover and he never complained again.

Your neighbors' concerns may seem reasonable, they may not, but it is important to listen respectfully and be constructive. By asking questions and offering solutions, it becomes possible to focus on the person's specific concerns rather than their generalized objections to feral cats.

Sit down and talk.

Calmly share your concerns with the goal of amicably resolving the problem. It can be a good idea to prepare a small packet of written materials in support of caring for feral cats. If relations are seriously strained, community mediation services may be beneficial.

Offer concrete solutions.

Once you have determined what the person's specific complaints are, you can address them. Give them the SFSPCA flyer on deterring cats from a yard, and explain what a cat fence is and how it works. If you haven't had the cats neutered yet, do so, and let your neighbor know how much it will improve the cats' behavior while gradually decreasing the size of the colony. Offer to keep litter boxes in your backyard for cats to use, or put a cat fence around your yard. Don't be afraid to brainstorm.

Explain the value of Trap, Neuter, Return (TNR) programs.

TNR is the most humane and effective way to control feral and free roaming cat populations and minimize the most common concerns people raise the cats. Be sure to explain the ramifications of trapping the cats and taking them to an animal shelter: most will be euthanized since feral cats are not candidates for adoption. In addition, more cats—probably unneutered—will move back into the area starting the cycle all over again.

Remain calm and constructive in all of your dealings.

Present information and interact with others in a reasonable, professional manner. You will give neighbors confidence that you know what you are doing and care about their interests. Should you get to the point where you feel you can no longer control your temper, put the brakes on the discussion and ask someone else—perhaps a fellow caregiver or neighbor—to help mediate.

When dealing with a neighbor that has concerns about the cats, determine the specific problem and do your best to resolve it. Address individual complaints by listening patiently and asking questions that uncover the specific problem. Problems that may seem on the surface to be about feral cats may instead be about you or a neighbor's cat. Instead of arguing or pointing the blame elsewhere, do your best to find a solution to any problems that arise. In most cases, the problems are very easily resolved, when dealt with quickly and in a calm and helpful manner.

There are steps you can take preemptively that may help avoid potential concerns altogether.

Trap-Neuter-Return. Neighbors are often bothered by behaviors associated with breeding, such as roaming, fighting, yowling, spraying, and the birth of litters of kittens. Your Trap-Neuter-Return program will virtually eliminate these behaviors.

Clean feeding areas and follow feeding protocols: Keep the cats' feeding stations or areas clean and trash free. Building attractive, but inconspicuous shelters and feeding stations can help maintain cleanliness. Do not put out more food than the cats will finish in one meal. Remove what they do not eat after 30 minutes and clean up the area. Never leave food out overnight as this can attract unwanted wildlife.

Keep the location of feeding stations and shelters discreet. Cats can be discouraged from climbing on cars or other private property by gradually moving their shelters and feeding stations away from these areas. The cats will follow the food and shelter.

Provide litter box areas. To keep cats from using neighborhood gardens as litter boxes, build one or more litter boxes or place sand or peat moss in strategic areas for the cats to use as litter (do not use conventional litter, as it will be ruined by weather). Be sure that the litter area is in a quiet, sheltered space. Scoop regularly to alleviate odors and keep flies away. Be prepared to scoop more often in hot weather.

Use humane deterrents to keep cats away from places they are not wanted. There are many safe, low-tech methods to discourage feral cats from hanging out where they are not wanted, like neighbors' gardens, yards, porches, or vehicles. Always offer to provide and apply these methods for neighbors at your own expense. Consider pooling resources with other caregivers, if possible, to cover the cost of such items.

Maintain colony records. Though you should take every step to prevent neighbors from calling animal control, you should always be prepared for the possibility. This is why you should always maintain current, accurate health records, including vaccination data and photographs, for all of the cats in your colony.

Protect yourself and the cats. Draw up an agreement with the neighbor who has concerns describing them and what it is you plan to do to address them. Make a note of who is responsible for the costs and the deadline for every action. Each party should receive a copy of the agreement. You should each sign the document to indicate that everyone agrees to the proposed solution. Then each party should sign the agreement again upon completion of the plan. This document will be written proof that you addressed your neighbor's concern and she/he agrees that the situation has been resolved.

***Call us with questions or for advice.
We're here for you, and for the cats of San Francisco.***