

KITTENS

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kennel supervisor Andrea Jones-Rothwell. A rough economy is hurting homeless cats' chances for a place to live and ultimately their survival.

"Adoptions are down 40 percent," said Donna Ward, director of Lee County Animal Domestic Services. "Even though we have less animals, it is still hurting us. We feel overwhelmed because we are not getting them adopted."

With so many residents out of work, leaving the area or moving to places that don't accept pets, the number of potential adopters has dropped. But the kitty count is going up. Unaltered cats keep producing litter after litter. According to the Humane Society, a fertile cat can average three litters a year. The average number of kittens in a litter is between four and six. There are almost 100,000 feral or community cats living in Lee County alone.

Spring means kitten season

Each day the personable and adoptable preen, primp and rub up against their cages seeking potential new owners at Lee County Animal Domestic Services. With what looks of hope and anticipation, they watch each potential new pet parent walk by, and in many cases, keep on walking.

"It's sad," Ms. Jones-Rothwell said as she cuddled a playful kitty. The perky caretaker pointed to some of her furry menagerie. Mufasa is a healthy, young tiger cat that thinks he's a dog. "I am sure if he could get out of his cage he would play fetch," she said. Mufasa can be spotted toting his toy mouse around his cage waiting for someone to pet him. Mean-



Maddie and Max

COURTESY PHOTO



Trixie

COURTESY PHOTO

while his neighbor Georgia, a few cages down, is a calico who is just looking for a lap to warm. She recently had kittens and misses having someone to dote on. Ms. Jones-Rothwell said Georgia is mellow and sweet. Doug is a young high-energy cat. Doug is that guy who is first to come to the party and the last to leave. "He will play with anybody," Ms. Jones-Rothwell said. "He's so hilarious. But everybody keeps walking by."

The hardest part of the kennel supervisor's job is seeing her fuzzy wards grow, develop and have no one to call them their own. "It's hard to see people walk past," Ms. Jones-Rothwell said. "It's hard to wait day after day for their forever home to come to them. Some get depressed from waiting."

Where the homeless felines go

Cats without homes often die of disease and starvation. Those who are brought to the shelter often face slim chances of finding a home. Ms. Ward said she and the

shelter staff work hard to help the more than 10,000 cats that make it to their door annually. More than 1,700 feral cats are brought to the shelter annually. These are undomesticated felines and none make it out of the shelter. And for the rest of the stray cats, finding suitable homes is not easy. The rest are euthanized.

"There are just not enough homes for all of these cats and kittens," she said. We can do better than that as a community," Ms. Ward said. She sighed as she rattled off the number of cats brought in on a daily basis. "It's frustrating to see another resident walk in with a laundry basket of kittens."

Finding a solution

Ms. Ward listed a number of programs that are in place to stave off the growing number of homeless felines, including, the pet food pantry for the needy, free or reduced medical care for sick or injured animals and a newly installed program for decreasing the number of feral cat

colonies. The Trap, Neuter and Return program helps reduce the number of feral cats in colonies. Volunteers and residents trap fertile cats. They are brought to Lee Animal Services where they are spayed and then they are returned. The program was approved in March.

Two volunteers, B.J. Gerald and Nancy Taylor, keep the program working. Aside from trapping the cats, and returning them once they're neutered, the pair work to educate the community.

Cape Coral and Lehigh Acres — two areas with deep pockets of feral and stray cats — often get visits from Ms. Taylor and Ms. Gerald. The two explain to people about the importance of spaying and neutering as well as help people trap cats. They tell people that they are the solution, not the shelters that do not have the space and money to keep so many cats.

"We talk to them," Ms. Gerald said. "We try to educate the public." Ms. Gerald said that this direct approach will ultimately help cats stay healthier, happier and live longer. If they are neutered, they will also not become loud nuisances at night, fighting with other suitors for female cats. And cats are not trapped to kill. As long as there is a willing caretaker to look after the cat once altered, it is returned.

"Someone must sign to be responsible to feed them," Ms. Gerald said. Anyone with a stray or feral cat issue can contact Ms. Gerald or Ms. Taylor at feralt-nrhelp@live.com. This, along with the Barn Buddy program — a program that allows people living in the country to adopt outside cats, is poised to decrease the numbers of feral and stray cats being brought to the shelter.

"My goal is by 2012 to reduce the stray cat population by 50 percent," Ms. Ward said. "Ultimately, the goal is to reduce the numbers of cats dying in shelters." ■

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