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## Community Cat program shows 100 percent success in first month in Levy County



**Needles the community cat stands proud and healthy with his left ear tip snipped. He became the first cat in the program, just before it actually started, because that is the hand he was dealt.**

### Story and Photos

**By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 30, 2018 at 4:17 p.m.**

**LEVY COUNTY** -- The Levy County Community Cat Program started with a 100 percent success rate in its first month, Levy County Veterinarian D. Esler said on Monday (Jan. 29).

Twelve cats -- three males and nine females -- were neutered and spayed, she said.

The program officially started Thursday (Jan. 25). There are 15 cats scheduled for the monthly program in February and the March event is almost completely booked already, she said.

People may drop out, however; and so for the person who is willing to accept the responsibility of participating in the program, they may want to start communicating with Levy County Animal Services.

The “poster cat” for the Levy County program is named “Needles.” This community cat roams the unrecorded subdivision known as Jemlands. He is named Needles because he blends in with the pine needles.

Needles was a very feral male cat who wandered across The Ink Pad property and sojourned through the unrecorded subdivision of Jemlands in the unincorporated portion of Levy County. Jemlands, which is off of Levy County Road 347 between Carter's Crossroads and Fowler's Bluff. Needles was first noticed starting in October, or perhaps September.

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**Needles the community cat stands on a wooden porch in the Jemalnds area as he awaits a meal. The tip of his left ear is visibly missing. There is a cat that looks similar to Needles in the same area of the county, however that cat is a full-fledged feral and is not marked with a snipped tip of an ear.**

Jeff M. Hardison is one of the people who gives him food and water.

The cat was involved in a catfight and he suffered injuries to his right front paw and on the right side of his neck as another cat bit him.

Dr. Esler allowed Needles to jump the line a little bit as she accepted him as a community cat in need of neutering. He has completely healed from his catfight wounds.

Dr. Esler and Associate Director of Gainesville Pet Rescue Chelsea Bower told the Levy County Commission in November that a grant is anticipated to fund the six-month trial of a “community cat” spay and neuter program once a month. Since then, the grant funds have appeared.

A community cat is a feral cat that is fed in a neighborhood, but he or she has not been adopted to the point of living indoors. Feral cats that have no caretakers are not going to be eligible for this program, because it requires a person to capture the cat, take it to the animal services location near the waste transfer site between Bronson and Williston, and then return to pick up the “fixed” cat to return him or her to his or her “normal” neighborhood.

Dr. Esler and others believe the program can have an impact to help reduce the need to euthanize stray cats in Levy County.

As it stands in 2017, only 6 percent of the dogs that reach Levy County Animal Services must be euthanized, Dr. Esler said. As for cats, they have a 50-50 chance of either being “put to sleep” or adopted.

Dr. Esler said that with the help of five vet technicians from Gainesville Pet Rescue, she can spay or neuter as many as 30 cats in an eight-hour day. The cost for the techs is about \$500 for that period, and as of Tuesday Esler and Bower believe this project is completely funded with no need for taxpayers’ to be burdened.

After the cats are spayed or neutered, the cats will lose the tip of one ear, as they will be marked to show they have been made ineffective for breeding.

Dr. Esler has said that one female cat can produce four litters a year and that can translate into 60 kittens a year. Those kittens, in turn, can create more kittens and hence the population of kittens and cats can become colonies of feral cats.

She said people feeding community cats and not getting them spayed or neutered exacerbates the problem.

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The spay and neuter project for community cats in Levy County is currently anticipated to run from January through June to start. Dr. Esler said the success of the project depends on people's participation by trapping cats and bringing them in and then returning them to their points of origin before being trapped.

The traps will be provided by Levy County Animal Services. Cat carriers are not going to be accepted, because as Bower said, a community cat may allow a person to pick it up because that person feeds the cat, when it comes to handling them before they are prepared for surgery, there are claws and fangs to be considered for the vet techs' safety -- and therefore, traps are the single method for drop off and pickup of community cats participating in this program.

So far, the program seeing perfect success.

Dr. Esler is glad to start reducing the population of feral cats in Levy County, because this should help lower the number of cats that must be euthanized.