All Together Now

Done properly, group housing can produce happier cats, delighted visitors—and more adoptions

BY JIM BAKER

Nancy Peterson met the love of her life when their eyes locked across a room full of scratching posts and climbing trees.

While visiting the Humane Society of Pinellas in Clearwater, Fla., in January 2006 for her job as cat programs manager for The HSUS, she decided to check out one of the cat colony rooms. And that’s when lightning struck.

“I mean the minute I sat down, he was going to come toward me,” she recalls. “[He] jumped in my lap. He started kissing me, and purring, and I thought, ‘Wow, what a friendly cat.’”

Peterson couldn’t get him out of her mind. “And the next morning, I woke up, and I said to my friend, ‘I’ve gotta have that cat. Call the shelter.’”

The cat—now named Toby—made the trip home to Maryland with Peterson, where he now lives happily with her three other kitties.

But Peterson’s memorable first encounter with Toby might never have happened if he’d been just one of dozens of cats housed in row after row of individual stainless-steel cages, just one more plaintive face.

The key was that first meeting; the colony-style housing allowed Toby to express his personality. He chose to approach Peterson on his own terms, offering her a glimpse of exactly the kind of affectionate companion she was seeking.

Not only did the colony room give Toby some control over his environment—reducing a major source of stress for shelter cats—it likely put him in a relaxed mood that enabled his loving nature to shine through.

It’s a textbook example of how colony housing can enhance cats’ welfare and their appeal to adopters. But creating and managing a cat colony room has to be done carefully. You can’t just place any old assortment of kitties within four walls, and expect to let the good times roll.

There’s a lot to consider before you ever put your first cat into the colony. What physical features should the room offer? How many cats should live there? Do you
need to write new SOPs to cover the cleaning and feeding schedule? Who should go into communal housing—and, just as importantly, who shouldn’t?

Shelters around the country have discovered the joys of colony housing. Older shelters are retrofitting to accommodate colony rooms, and many new shelters have them as standard features—or as showcases designed to wow potential adopters. Colony housing can reduce stress on cats, helping them to be healthier, which spurs adoptions—and makes room for more cats to move through the shelter. Here’s how to make sure cats who are living social stay healthy and happy.

**Principles for Feline Design**

Individual cages have their place. Durable and easy to disinfect, they provide suitable short-term housing for intake areas or isolation wards. But most kitties won’t be very happy living in a cage for long—they simply don’t offer the enriched environment that serves a feline’s health and social needs. In time, even the most resilient cat will likely go a little nuts from boredom, or get stressed out from the noise and activity of shelter life. You can wind up with cats who either cower at the back of their cages, or spend their time sitting in their litter boxes—neither of which particularly appeal to adopters.

Then there’s colony housing—ideally, a bright, colorful space festooned with a jungle gym or cat trees where residents can climb and perch; cubbies or other places where they can hide when they need “alone” time; soft bedding for cozy naps; and surfaces for that most natural of cat behaviors—scratching. If there’s natural light, windows to the outside, a plethora of toys, and comfy places for visiting humans to sit, well, you’ve got yourself a groovy colony room.

Some shelters go all out with towering, built-in trees made of metal or sections of real trees, elevated walkways that encircle the room, and other creative structures that create the vertical space that cats love. “Just think of the cats at your house,” says Heather Bialy, director of Shelter Services at The HSUS. “They want to jump up on your countertops, or jump on your curio cabinet. They love to get up there and explore, and kind of watch what’s going on around them.”

Some colony rooms have windows to the outside world, so that cats can observe people (and better yet, wildlife) coming and going. Some shelters hang bird feeders within view, giving cats plenty to “chatter” about. Windows and skylights not only give cats a room with a view, they also let in natural light—another boon to well-being. Allowing people to see into the colony room—and residents to observe them—is also a great idea.

**Keep it Clean, People**

Now, the catch here—and it’s an important one—is that you should be able to disinfect everything in a colony room. Hard surfaces...
have to be impervious to moisture, so that staff can wipe them down; bedding and fabric should be washable. Some shelters, Peterson says, use plastic outdoor furniture. It can be cleaned and disinfected if it gets soiled, and thrown away and replaced if the surface gets scratched. Another handy room feature is a drain, which allows staff to hose down the entire space.

Alachua County Humane Society in Gainesville, Fla., has carpeted scratching posts and cat towers in multiple colonies, and shelter management says they’ve never created issues with disease. The shelter has donated posts and trees on hand, so if a cat breaks with URI, staff can simply replace any carpeted furniture in the room. Of course, it helps that the shelter has a rigorous daily schedule of cleaning and disinfecting each room—sweeping, mopping, spot-cleaning, and litter-box scooping. And each colony room is separately vented to the outside, so air isn’t circulated from room to room.

“I didn’t see one sick cat. The place was immaculate,” says Bialy, who visited the facility in October.

Carpeted scratching posts and cat trees aren’t technically disinfectable; carpet cleaner, for instance, won’t kill unenveloped viruses. But the enrichment benefits can be worth the risk, says Inga Fricke, director of Sheltering and Pet Care Issues for The HSUS. Shelters just need to be prepared to discard furnishings in the event of disease.

**Pick and Choose**

Let’s say that you’ve finally got your colony room all set, ready to populate with kitties. Now other issues come into play, such as the makeup of your colony, the density of cats in the room, how many resources you’ll need, and where to place them.

One key measure to ensure that your colony residents stay healthy is to quarantine any cats before introducing them to the room—a practice that both Peterson and Bialy highly recommend. During quarantine, staff should monitor cats’ health to see if they break with any illness, which would make them ineligible for a colony room until they recover. The *Guidelines

### Design on a Dime

You don’t need a sparkling new facility to have a cat colony room your cats will like, and your staff will feel proud of. You can accomplish a lot even in an outdated building, or on a small budget.

The Tri-County Animal Shelter in Charles County, Md., is in a 48-year-old structure that was originally designed as a bomb shelter—not exactly flashy. So when supervisor Kim Stephens came up with the idea of creating a colony room, the staff made do with what they had. Workers from the Charles County building and trades department knocked out a wall to create a bigger space, installed skylights, and put in storefront glass, so that visitors can watch the cats. They can also go into the colony room, sit on benches, and play with the kittens.

The brightly painted room also features custom-made, floor-to-ceiling perches and a jungle gym—designed and built by shelter staff—made of PVC pipes and 36 squares of fabric, creating comfy resting spots. The colony room opened in January 2011. Total cost: $15,000—approved by the shelter’s advisory committee, which oversees the account that holds donations from the public.

The aspect of the room that most excites Stephens is a camera that lets people go online to watch the kittens remotely. The fuzzy reality show is a huge hit, drawing about 700 views per month. “We’ve had people that have watched it—the cat or the kitten—for days, and then they’ll finally come in and say, ‘I already know which one I want,’” she says. “If our ‘cat cam’ goes down, they call us, and let us know,” she says, laughing.

Stephens views the colony room as a success. The shelter still has lots of stray cats coming in, but the group housing definitely seems to showcase the residents; 75 percent of cats who get adopted from the shelter come from the colony. “And we have people that come in that just want to sit, and play with the cats,” she says.
for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, issued by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) in 2010, doesn’t specify a certain length of time for adequate quarantine, but says, “Unfamiliar animals should not be placed in group housing until sufficient time has been given to respond to core vaccines.”

Alachua County Humane Society has specific quarantine rooms, which have the standard, stainless-steel cages. “We make sure that [the cats] are completely healthy, at least the best that we can tell. We give them seven to 14 days in quarantine before they go into open colony rooms,” says Eric Van Ness, executive director.

Keeping fixed males and females together, and having cats of a range of ages (aside from the very young), doesn’t appear to pose any particular problems in colony settings.

But not every healthy cat is an appropriate candidate for colony life. Those who haven’t been vaccinated and aren’t yet spayed or neutered shouldn’t be grouped until those issues are addressed. Cats who are or extremely timid may find the group setting stressful, and cats who are aggressive to others may stress out the rest of the bunch. Some basic behavior assessments during the quarantine period will help you sort the bright-eyed Hello Kitties from the stressed-out soloists.

Kittens, due to their still-developing immune systems, would probably do best in their own appropriate group housing; many shelters find that the socialization benefits of placing single kittens together with a friend outweigh the potential health risks. Cats on special diets should be segregated to ensure they’re eating the right food. For those cats who aren’t good candidates for colony rooms, shelters should still have the option of enriched single housing.

I Need Some Space

Cats are highly territorial creatures, so you’ll need to think about how much space each cat needs to feel comfortable, as well as how many cats should live in a colony. The Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters recommends a group size of 10-12 cats, regardless of room size. The goal is to allow them to maintain adequate social distances, and to express a variety of natural behaviors.

Crowding too many cats into a colony—a common mistake—will lead to unhappy felines, make it difficult for staff to monitor the health and behavior of individuals, and possibly overwhelm potential adopters.

Then there’s the task of ensuring that each cat has what he or she needs to thrive. “Sufficient resources (e.g., food, water, bedding, litter boxes, toys) must be provided to prevent competition or resource guarding and ensure access by all animals,” according to the Guidelines. That means there should be plenty of feeding stations and rest and perch spots, and each cat should have his own litter box.

Food and water bowls should be separated from litter boxes, Peterson says, and
"You can’t just throw all these cats in a room, and say, ‘OK, that’s my cat enrichment.’ You’re just asking for problems,” she says. “It definitely takes work to have a good cat colony room, but the benefits are immeasurable, if you do it properly.”

It’s good to place one or two litter boxes apart or behind something, for those kitties who like privacy.

Bialy is a strong proponent of colony housing—as long as shelters commit themselves to the daily job of managing the colony.

“Resources
For a slideshow of the colony cats at the Tri-County Animal Shelter, visit animalsheltering.org/colony_cats.

To learn more about the Association of Shelter Veterinarians’ (ASV) Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, and to see how the standards address group housing, visit the link to the ASPCA’s Shelter Guidelines Webinars at aspcapro.org/webinar-series-guidelines-for-standards.php.

Animal Care Expo 2012 in Las Vegas will feature a cat track for the first time, as well as a track devoted to the ASV guidelines. Learn more at animalsheltering.org/expo.

Not All Kittens are Born Cuddly.
Feral kitten socialization information available at alleycat.org/Kittens.