



## **Despite COVID-19 shutdowns, Cat Rescues Perform Life Saving Mission with Grant and Donor Backing**

The call for help was typical. A Nokomis, FL resident who loves animals had taken on far more than she could afford and was at wit's end. She had 9 nursing mother cats and over 35 tiny newborn kittens inside her trailer and on her property. Local cat rescues from Venice, North Port and Sarasota worked together to get all the mother cats spayed, and adopt out all the kittens.

It was a happy ending for animals and humans, as the kittens were very tame even though they had fleas and other parasites. Otherwise, they were in good shape, needing basic medical services costing \$100 or more each before babies could be adopted into a new indoor-only home.

For the Venice Cat Coalition and Feline Friends SWFL, two of the local non-profits involved, such requests come in every week. The two nonprofits announced this week that they had completed their 2020 "worse case cat" project during the last 10 months, saving more than 250 local cats and kittens. The project was supported by a \$6,000 Animal Welfare Grant awarded in April 2020 by the Helen C. Schwieder Fund of the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, and matched with more than \$20,000 additional money from general donors.

Although not part of the grant, Community Cats of Charlotte Co. and Animal Welfare League also played a role in helping with the surgery of the mother cats. Also helping were Lemon Bay Animal Hospital of Englewood, Animal Rescue Coalition, Palmer Ranch Animal Clinic, Bay Road Animal Hospital, and the Humane Society at Lakewood Ranch.

"The purpose of the grant was to save lives and to stop the breeding cycle of these cats. The extra funds helped us to increase the number of cats saved and bring them under the protective umbrella of our program, which decreases the load on county animal services and also reduces neighborhood nuisance

complaints about cats,” said Theresa Foley, executive director of the Venice Cat Coalition.

Caroline Resnick, a board member of Feline Friends, said, “We really appreciated the medicines and vet services paid for by this grant because the impact of the Corona Virus meant that feline spay-neuter services were closed for weeks on end and surgeries were harder to schedule. All our costs were up. In the meantime, the demand for help was sky high, as more cats gave birth and more residents called asking what could be done. Our volunteers worked daily through the year. We did not do any Corona virus shutdown, so the extra funding was truly a life-saver.”

In another rescue supported by the grant, a very weak, malnourished, five-week-old kitten weighing only seven ounces was trapped by Feline Friends. She was suffering from a severe upper respiratory infection and both her eyes were badly infected and crusted shut. She required extensive medical treatment and was nursed back to health by a dedicated foster who named her Marisol. Although her damaged eyes could not be saved, she grew into a happy, healthy, loving cat. She never had any problems navigating the world around her while pursuing a very active kitten-hood. At seven months old, she was placed for adoption and quickly found a wonderful new home.

A third dramatic rescue story, also supported with grant funds, involved two outdoor mother cats in a South Venice yard. Mother and daughter cats simultaneously gave birth to their litters for a combined 11 newborn kittens. Neither mother cat had ever had distemper vaccinations or other preventive vet care, and so six of the kittens were born with a neurological birth defect called cerebral hyperplasia. Six of the nine babies (two died in the yard) are “wobblers,” a term that describes a cat that cannot walk straight and trembles and falls down a lot at times resembling a drunken sailor. The reason is a virus that affected the babies in the womb of the mother, which would have prevented the damage if momma cat had received a distemper vaccination earlier. The brain defect cannot be cured, but six wobblers are leading somewhat normal lives, except for falling down a lot, and needing some extra care in learning things.

The mothers were both spayed and returned to the backyard.

“The Community Foundation and this fund really helped us reach out more for these cats. Dr. Gurland and his team at Lemon Bay helped us understand and manage the birth defects. We know these kittens would have been euthanized at many shelters but we had extra help in terms of money and great vets. We understand this was a new grant program and we were competing with the

largest shelters in the region for money to help provide this care. We felt very honored to be trusted to do our best for the animals,” said Foley.

The numbers of cats in Sarasota and surrounding counties needing surgery and medical care adds up to an estimated tens of thousands of cats, far more than the county or the big shelters can help. Small rescues like VCC, Feline Friends and Community Cats of Charlotte are essential to help cats at the lowest position in the chain.

Cathy Worster, President of Feline Friends, added, “We focus primarily on spay/neuter services through Trap-Neuter-Vaccinate-Return projects. Although we do help residents with small numbers of outdoor cats, many of our projects are of colonies where 25 or more cats are common. The funds from this grant were essential in covering the costs of spay/neuter surgeries as well as allowing us to provide emergency medical care for sick and injured cats. Unfortunately, there are very few non-profits set up to assist in the worst cases of cat neglect or abandonment, and by having sufficient funds, we are able to seek veterinary care and rehabilitate cats instead of being forced to having them humanely euthanized”

Worster said Feline Friends was able to bring more than 500 cats in for spay/neuter, with most of them going to the Animal Rescue Coalition clinic for surgery. Feline Friends and other rescues pay ARC about \$45/\$55 per cat for spay/neuter services. Without grant assistance, this leaves small rescues limited by their own much smaller budgets.

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