

Is There Any Hope for Cats Rescued From Hoarders?

Shelters are traumatic enough for cats, but especially so for very fearful or under-socialized cats rescued from hoarding situations. At significant risk for poor outcomes in shelters, cats from hoarding environments are often euthanized. This new program may be able to change that.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Shelter environments are very difficult for cats, and especially kitties who are fearful or under socialized, such as those taken from hoarding situations
- A graduate student at the University of British Columbia developed a program to help rehabilitate cats rescued from hoarders that involves the temporary use of anti-anxiety medication coupled with behavior modification
- Of the 34 cats in the program, 32 were successfully rehabbed and found new homes; the remaining two cats were deemed still too fearful of people after medication and behavior modification, and sadly, were euthanized
- It's possible the lives of those two cats, along with many other kitties determined to be unadoptable, could be spared through working cat programs like the one run by the Arizona Humane Society

Cats living in shelters deal with unmitigated fear, anxiety, and stress that must be minimized to preserve their health and welfare. This is especially important for very fearful and/or under socialized cats such as those from hoarding environments, most of whom are at significant risk for poor outcomes in shelters.

For example, cats rescued from hoarding environments are often afraid of humans, which can negatively impact their adoptability. According to the SPCA in British Columbia, hundreds of cats are rescued each year from hoarders, sometimes in groups as large as 80.

The good news is that Bailey Eagan, a PhD student at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver's Animal Welfare Program is helping to rehabilitate cats rescued from hoarding situations to save them from euthanasia.

Cats Receive an Anti-Anxiety Drug Plus Behavior Modification

Eagan and colleagues recently published a study in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA) that evaluated the use of a combination of anti-anxiety medication and behavior modification to help cats from hoarding backgrounds be less fearful of humans, improving their odds of adoption.¹

There were 34 cats in the study, some of which were given the anti-anxiety drug gabapentin. With the drug onboard, volunteers began interacting with the kitties for a few minutes each day, gradually getting closer and closer to them.

A second group of the 34, the control group, took part in the behavior modification program the researchers developed, but didn't receive gabapentin. The study results showed that the cats given the drug were more quickly rehabilitated than the kitties who received behavior modification alone. The median time to "graduate" from the behavior modification program was 11 days, with a range of 4 to 51 days.

"The sooner we can have a cat that's comfortable being around people and available for adoption, that's the best-case scenario," Eagan told CBC News.²

Of the 34 cats in the study, all but two found new homes. The two remaining kitties continued to display severe fear of people, even with additional medication and foster homes. Sadly, the decision was made to euthanize them.

Eagan's Research a 'Game Changer' for the Shelter

Cats removed from hoarding situations often have a variety of medical and behavioral problems that are difficult for shelters to treat, and that make the kitties less likely to find forever homes.

Kim Monteith, manager of animal behavior and welfare at the British Columbia SPCA, explains that while some of these cats seem fine with shelter life, others are so stressed they don't eat, pee, or poop. Many are in poor health and aren't used to interacting with people because they received little to no attention from their prior owners.

"We would bring them in, and they wouldn't have good outcomes," said Monteith. "We didn't know how to help them."³

Monteith believes Eagan's research has been a game changer for the shelter. Whereas not long ago, only about three-quarters of cats rescued from hoarders could be adopted, now most of them find new homes.

"Bailey's research has already changed everything. We are able to help more cats," she said.

Another Alternative for Unadoptable Cats

I can't help but wonder if the two cats in the above study who were euthanized might have been spared through one of the many working cat programs that have sprung up across the U.S., such as the one run by the Arizona Humane Society. From the website:

"Rodents Running Rampant?"

"Our cats can help! The Arizona Humane Society's Working Cats Program offers an environmentally-safe alternative to poisonous pest controls.

"Our working cats, who aren't suited for indoor living, would love to spend their lives helping to control your warehouse, ranch, mill or barn's rodent and pest population. All they ask for in return is shelter, food, water and care. Best of all, when you give our cats a job, you're saving the lives of homeless pets who otherwise would not have been suitable for adoption.

"Our Working Cats Program is an outlet for hard-to-place cats already in our shelter who meet specific criteria. We are unable to accept cats from the public to be placed directly into the Working Cats program."⁴

The cats in this program are spayed or neutered, vaccinated, ear tipped and microchipped. They're adopted out in pairs, at a minimum, for a nominal fee of \$25 per cat. The humane society loans new adopters "acclimation crates" and supplies that must be returned within three months.

Working Cat Guardian Responsibilities

New owners are advised to keep new cats in the large wire dog crates for the first four weeks of their new life. The crates should be placed in a location (e.g., a garage, workshop, warehouse, shed, tack room, greenhouse, barn, etc.) that is safe from the elements and predators. This will help the cats acclimate to their surroundings and recognize them as "home." After four weeks, the cats are allowed to leave the crate and explore a larger, secured shelter to help them more fully bond to their new home.

Owners are responsible for providing fresh food and water and performing daily litterbox duty. It's recommended that the cats be offered a high value treat at the same time each day to help them get accustomed to their new caregiver and give them something they look forward to long after they've left their crate.

Once the cats are acclimated, they can be released to explore their new surroundings on their own, while the owner continues to provide daily food, water, access to shelter, litterbox maintenance if necessary, and medical care as required.

If you're interested in adopting a working cat for your business or residence, contact your local humane society and ask whether such cats are available. In addition to welcoming a valuable new "employee," you'll also likely gain a wonderful new friend!

Source and References

¹ [Eagan, B.H. et al. Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, May 5, 2023](#)

^{2,3} [CBC News, May 21, 2023](#)

⁴ [Arizona Humane Society Working Cats Program](#)
