

# Toronto embarks on its first-ever mass cat-trapping operation

## City aims to spay and neuter 400 cats

By Joshua Errett, [CBC News](#) Posted: Dec 12, 2014 11:13 AM ET Last Updated: Dec 12, 2014 11:52 AM ET



Free-roaming cats contribute to the overpopulation of homeless cats in Toronto - currently estimated to be 100,000 or more cats. (The Associated Press)

There are some 100,000 stray and feral cats in Toronto, estimates the city's animal services.

Most of those cats are not spayed or neutered, and reproducing at a rapid rate. Animal shelters are consistently full, and unfixed cats can be aggressive toward other animals and destructive to property.

For the city, the question was not what to do — free-roaming cats must be spayed or neutered — but where to start.

"We needed to find an area to target," says Mary Lou Leiher, a project manager with Toronto Animal Services, "so we ran some statistics on number of cats brought into shelters by postal code."

The numbers showed three areas in the city swamped with cats, all in the west end, all adjacent to each other. The postal codes began with M6M, M6N and M6H — a space roughly between Weston and Scarlett Road, from St. Clair Avenue West up to Lawrence Avenue West.

So armed with data on three west end areas, the city is embarking on its first-ever targeted trap, spay/neuter and release project for cats, called Toronto West Cats Project.

The city says it expects to fix 400 free-roaming cats in the area.



An example of an 'ear-tipped' free-roaming cat. (Annex Cat Rescue)

## Community involvement

Cats are very efficient at reproducing, according to the Toronto Feral Cat Coalition, a group of cat rescue and trap-spay/neuter-release groups in the city. Cats can begin having litters at a young age, and continue through several birth cycles.

But the problem of cat overpopulation often starts with pet owners.

Free-roaming cats often appear hidden - a challenge for cat-trapping volunteers in the Toronto West Cat Project.

"We're targeting feral cats, but also cats that are owned or loosely owned — these are free-roaming cats. If those cats are intact, they are contributing to the problem," says Leiher. "So the first step in the process is community outreach."

Volunteers are going door-to-door, dropping off literature on the project and recruiting volunteers. The councillor for the area, Ward 17's Cesar Palacio, is also involved, holding community meetings at seniors centres and communicating with constituents.

"The message always to the public is if you have a cat, spay and neutering is so important," says Leiher. "It's crucial."

But as the city found out, many residents of the west end already know this.

"What we found right away is there were people already trying to lick this problem," says Leiher, explaining that volunteers are trapping cats and getting them spayed or neutered on their own.

The difference in this project is the city will provide free clinics to spay/neuter as many cats as possible — aiming for 25 felines a day.

The way to identify a cat that has been fixed already, says the city, is an "ear tip."

"The feral and free-roaming cats will have a small tip removed from the end of their left ear to identify them as neutered," says Toronto Animal Service's website.

In addition to being spayed or neutered, all cats will receive a vet exam, vaccines, deworming and ear treatment.

The feral cats and others that cannot be adopted are then returned to the area. Leiher says this alleviates the financial burden on shelters, eliminates most of the problem behaviours that unfixed cats exhibit and is a humane and cost-effective way to deal with the problem.

The project is funded almost entirely by a grant from PetSmart Charities, with city resources being used only to coordinate the efforts.

## **No cost to taxpayers**

The Toronto West Cats Project is the first of its kind for the city of Toronto.

But another volunteer-led project to spay and neuter free-roaming cats has already been completed in Regent Park. That 2012 project, also funded by PetSmart Charities, spayed and neutered 644 cats, similarly at no cost to taxpayers