

Fresh Start: Thinking Outside the Litter Box

Dr. Graham Brayshaw, DVM, Director of Veterinary Medicine

Lauren Fries, BA, BSc, Shelter Behavior Services Supervisor



Agenda

- What is Fresh Start?
- Medical reasons for inappropriate litter box usage
- Behavioral reasons for inappropriate litter box usage
- How to help reset a cat in the home environment
- Animal Humane Society's Fresh Start program
- What does the data tell us?
- Takeaways + Questions



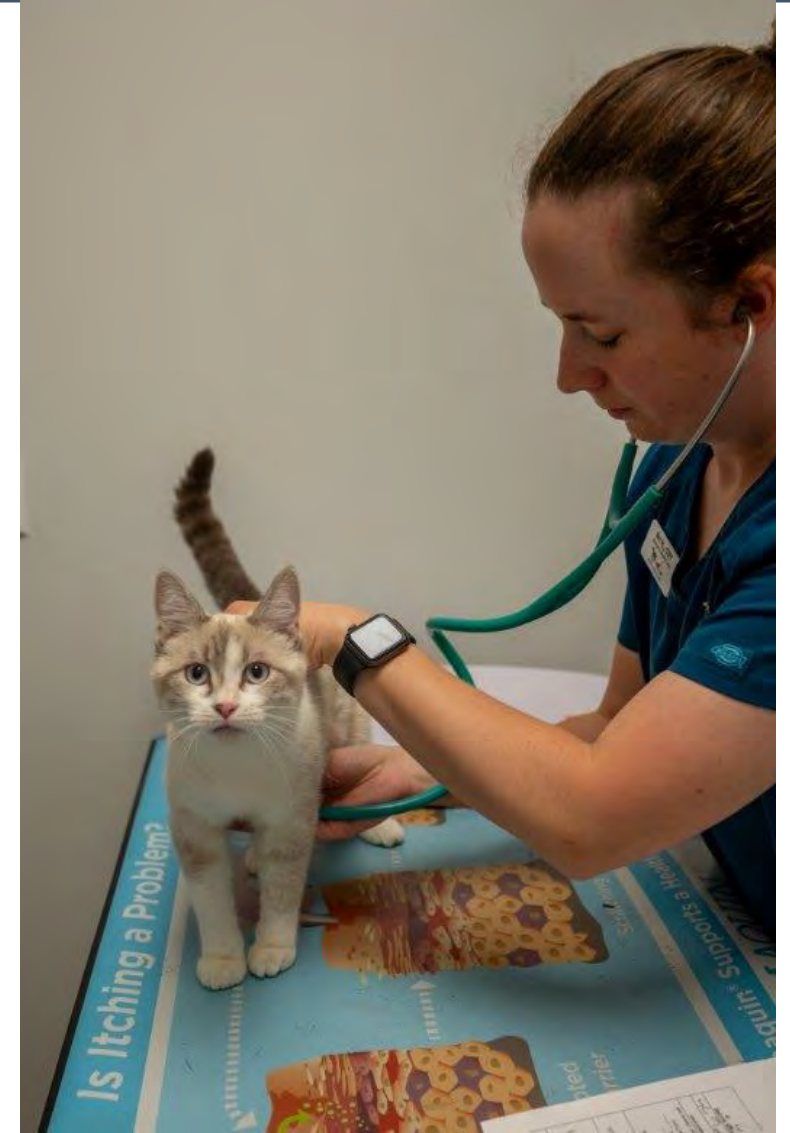
What is Fresh Start?



- AHS' program for cats surrendered with a history of inappropriate elimination
- The intersection of medical and behavioral issues
- Start with medical
 - Why? Run definitive test
 - Best behavioral practice to rule out medical needs before addressing behavior

Working it up by breaking it down

- Medical vs Behavioral
 - Can be inter-related
- Urine vs Feces
 - Today focuses on inappropriate urination
 - Very different causes if medical
 - Similar causes if behavioral



Signalment tells you a LOT



- Age
- Species
- Sterilization status

History is crucial

- How did the problem start?
- How did it progress?
- Where are we at now?
- What have you tried?



Initial Evaluation



- Physical exam
- Urine screening
- Observation in shelter

Advanced Diagnostics

- Blood work
- X-ray
- Ultrasound
- Culture?
- Therapeutic trial



Treatment is based on diagnosis



- FIC, FUS, FLUTD, Pandora Syndrome
- Infection
- Uroliths
- Neoplasia
- Idiopathic Renal Hematuria

Behavioral

Why do cats eliminate outside the litterbox without an underlying medical cause?

- Stress → changes in cat's environment
- Individual preferences
- Cleanliness
- Number of litter boxes per cat and location



How to help reset in home



- First, trip to vet
- Try different litters and types
- Add and rearrange litter boxes
- Deep clean
- Pheromones
- Adding enrichment and vertical space
- Continue talking to your vet about other medications

Fresh Start - Eligibility



- Already sterilized
- No underlying medical cause for inappropriate urination
- Only happened in one home
- Using the litter box appropriately in shelter

Fresh Start – How AHS does it

1. Veterinarians will run diagnostics and interpret results.
2. If not medical issues, Shelter Behavior Services will look at cat's home history and determine:
 - Is there a clear trigger for the litter box issues?
 - Is that trigger avoidable or unavoidable in a new home?
 - How do we set the cat up for success as a Fresh Start in their new home?
 - Write ups
 - Restrictions



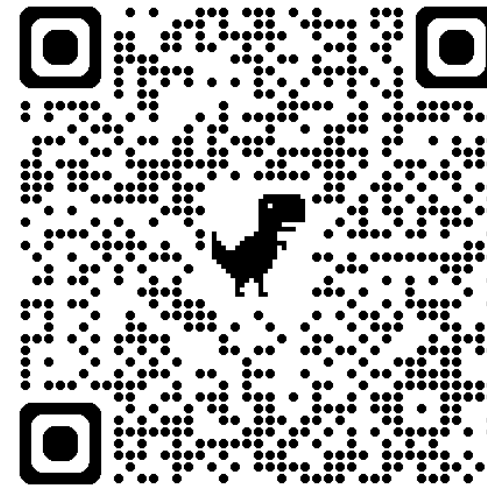
**For adopters: Litter Box
Survival Guide**



Litter Box Survival Guide

- Talking Points for adopters
 - Common tips for keeping litter boxes clean and accessible
 - Other shelters that have placed house-soiling cats (such as Denver Dumb Friends League) report a 90% success rate. Few cats continued the behavior once in a new home environment.
 - AHS veterinary staff has ruled out medical causes, such as urinary tract infection.
 - We have been doing this program for multiple years and have seen no greater likelihood for this cat to eliminate outside the box than any other cat in our adoption center.

Post Adoption Behavior Support

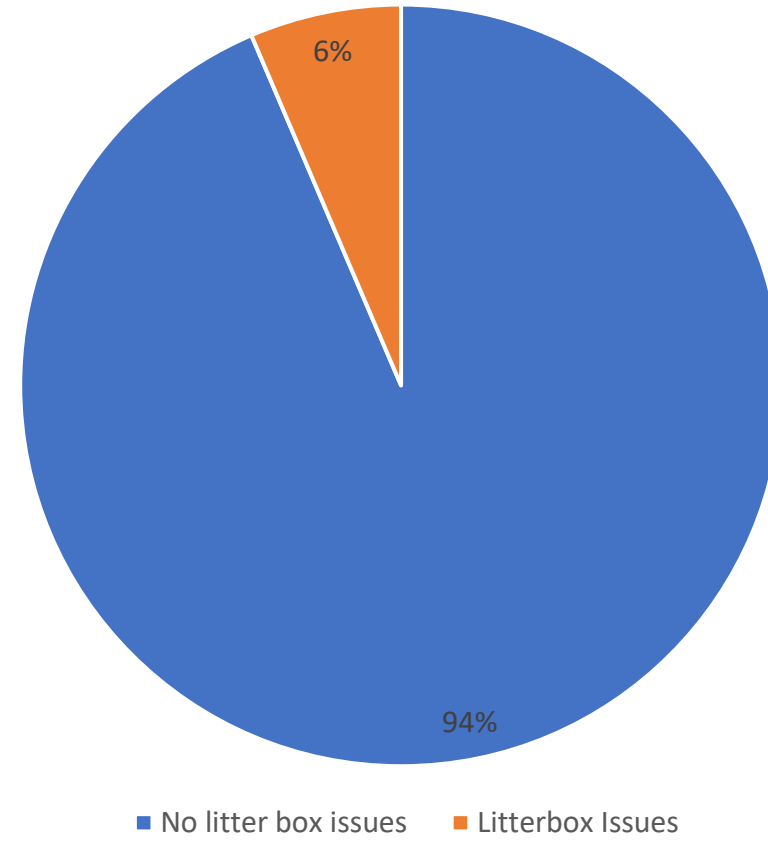




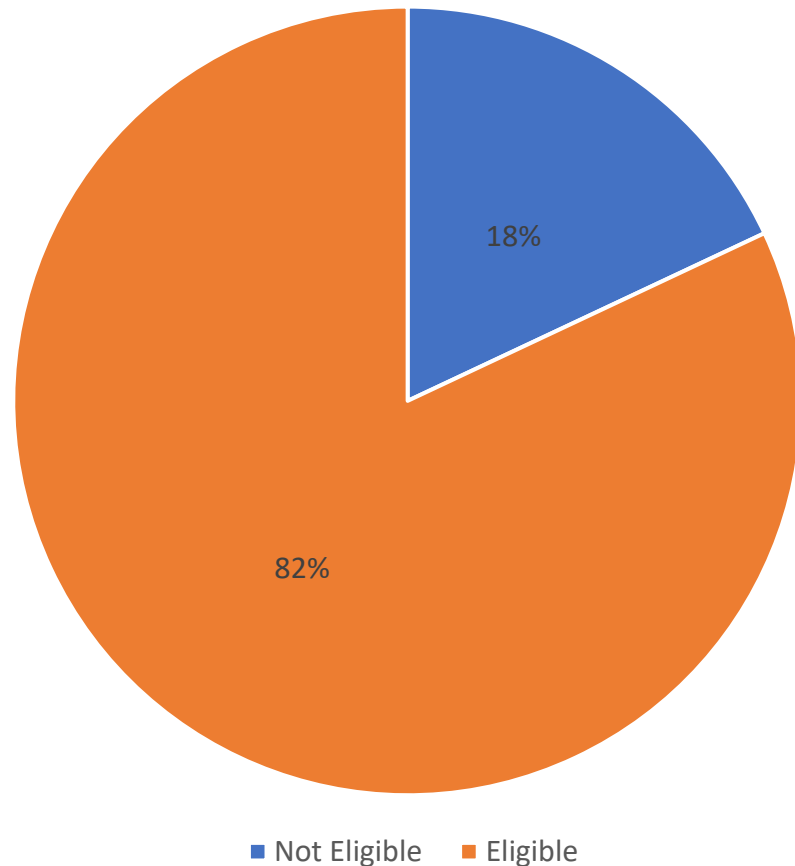
**What does the data
tell us?**

2022 Data

- **4062** cats that were owner surrenders
- With litter box issues: **260**



2022 Data

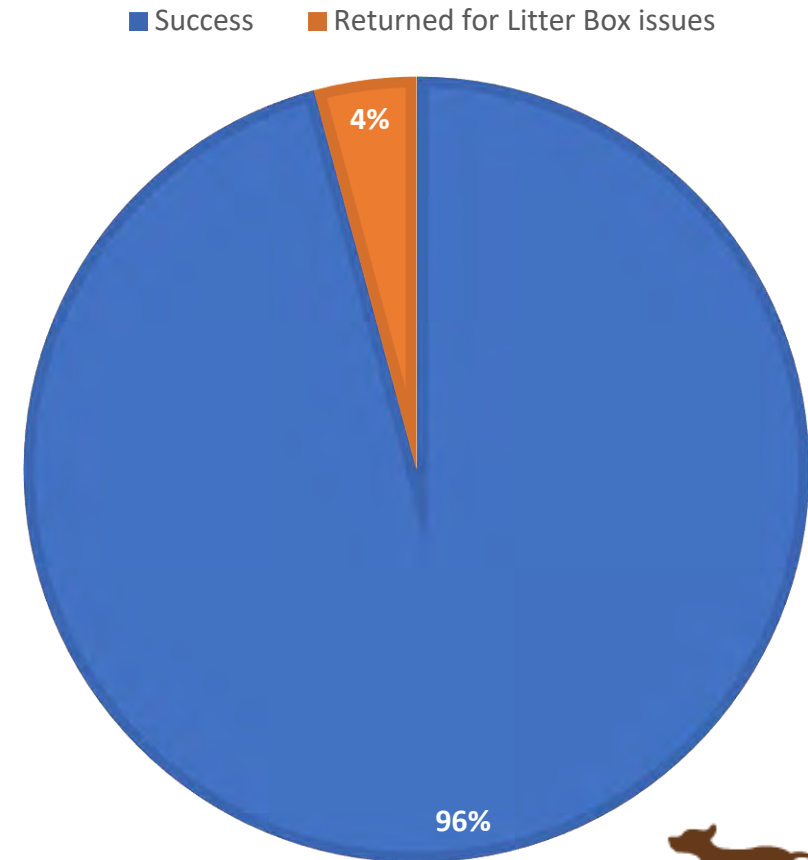


- Out of the **260** cats that had inappropriate elimination reported in their home, **213** were eligible for Fresh Start
- Those that were not had other underlying medical or behavioral concerns that made them not candidates

2022 Data

As of May 2024, only 8 out of the 213 Fresh Start cats were returned to AHS for inappropriate litter box usage

**Success rate:
96.25%**



Data

- What the data doesn't tell us
 - No correlation with sex, age, how long the litter box issues have been going on
 - Normal distribution of population of cats surrendered cats to shelter for age and sex for owner surrendered cats



Why do we think it works?



- Ruled out underlying medical causes
- Team of veterinary and behavioral experts
- Cats get a “reset” in a new home that they do not have established behavior in
- The stay in shelter in smaller housing units might restart proper litterbox usage
- Adopters are provided with a Litter Box Survival Guide to set up for success



Take Aways

Help educate cats owners on proper litter box guidelines before problems start

Rehoming a cat with litter box issues can be beneficial to the cat

Most shelters can implement similar programs

Questions?

