

# RTF: It's for the Birds...

# No, Really

Outdoor Cat Population Management – Rose Hegerle, CVT



# Introduction

- Rose Hegerle, Director of Veterinary Services at Tri-County Humane Society
- About Tri-County Humane Society:
  - Founded in 1974
  - 5,264 animals received in 2023
  - 2023 placement rate 94%
  - ~30 staff members
  - 16,627 volunteer hours 2023
  - 3,204 surgeries in 2023



# Outdoor Cat Management Strategies

- From a shelter perspective
- Not one right way to help
  - Some options better than others
- Available resources
- Data-driven practices that align with ethical standards
- Consideration of community values
- How does outdoor cat management practices fit in with other programming?

# Complexity of Outdoor Cats

Feral ~ Tomcat ~ Kittens

Stray ~ Kittens ~ Birds

Lost ~ Found ~ Alley Cat

Unowned ~ Pest ~ Feral

Community Cat ~ Pregnant

# For today's purposes:

- Community cat
  - Unowned
  - Lack socialization to humans
  - Age past socialization period
  - Accustomed to outdoor life
  - Generally healthy
  - Best option generally TNR/RTF

# COMMUNITY CAT

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Outdoor Cat, Stray Cat, Alley Cat, Feral Cat, Street Cat, Barn Cat, and Tomcat.

Outdoor community cats and pet cats are the same species—***Felis catus***—the domestic cat.

Studies show outdoor cats are as **healthy** as pet cats and can have the same life span.

**"Feral"** describes behavior—feral cats are wary of people and live on their own outdoors.



An **ear tip** is the universal symbol to identify a neutered and vaccinated cat. The top  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch of the cat's left ear is removed during surgery.

Community cats are **not adoptable** because they are not socialized to humans.

**More than 40%** of Americans have cared for an outdoor cat.

Cats live **everywhere**.



Cats have lived outdoors alongside humans since **before the pyramids**.

Outdoor cats live in family groups called **colonies**.



Cats are **bonded** to their environments and colonies.

**More than 70%** of all cats who go to a shelter are killed there.

For community cats, that rises to **virtually 100%**.

**Removing community cats doesn't work.**

Catching and killing is ineffective, outdated, and cruel.



Trap-Neuter-Return (**TNR**) is the only humane, effective approach to care for community cats. Cats are **spayed or neutered, vaccinated, and eartipped** and then returned to their outdoor home.

# I found a cat...

- Is the cat friendly?
- Does the cat appear sick and/or injured? Severity?
- How long has the cat been around the area?
  - A day
  - A week
  - A year



# I found a friendly cat...

- If healthy, make every attempt to find an owner
- Cats are 10-50 times more likely to make their way back home if left in the same area they were found (2)
- If no owners are found after several attempts, proceed with stray hold and adoption pathway
- If sick or injured, contact local shelter, rescue, or veterinarian for care (while still looking for an owner)



## I found an unsocial community cat...

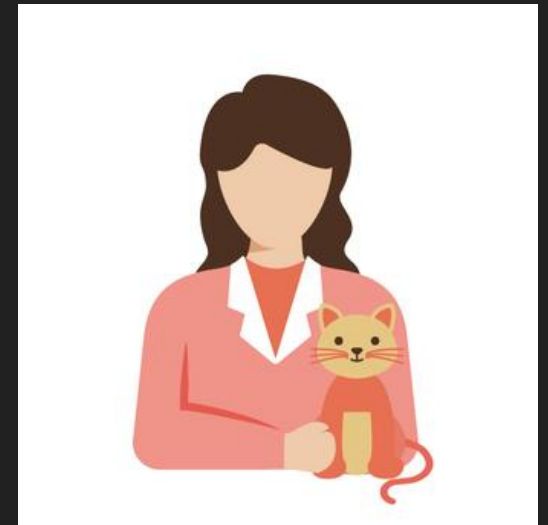
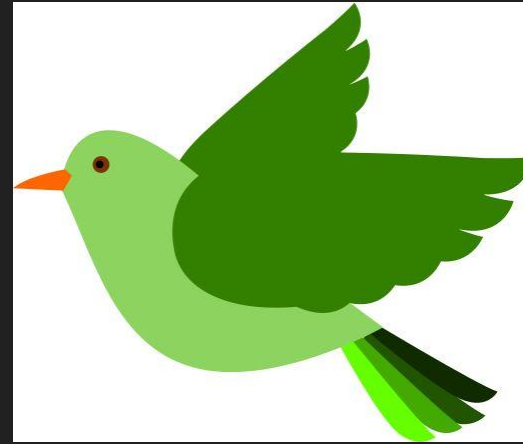
- How long has it been around?
- Significantly injured or ill?
- Healthy and robust?
- Pregnant?
- Consider options before taking action





# Who cares?

- Citizens
- Municipalities
- Public health officials
- Animal shelters & rescues
- Animal control agencies
- Cat advocates
- Neighbors
- Wildlife advocates



# Common goal – LESS OUTDOOR CATS

From this



To this



# What to do with them all?

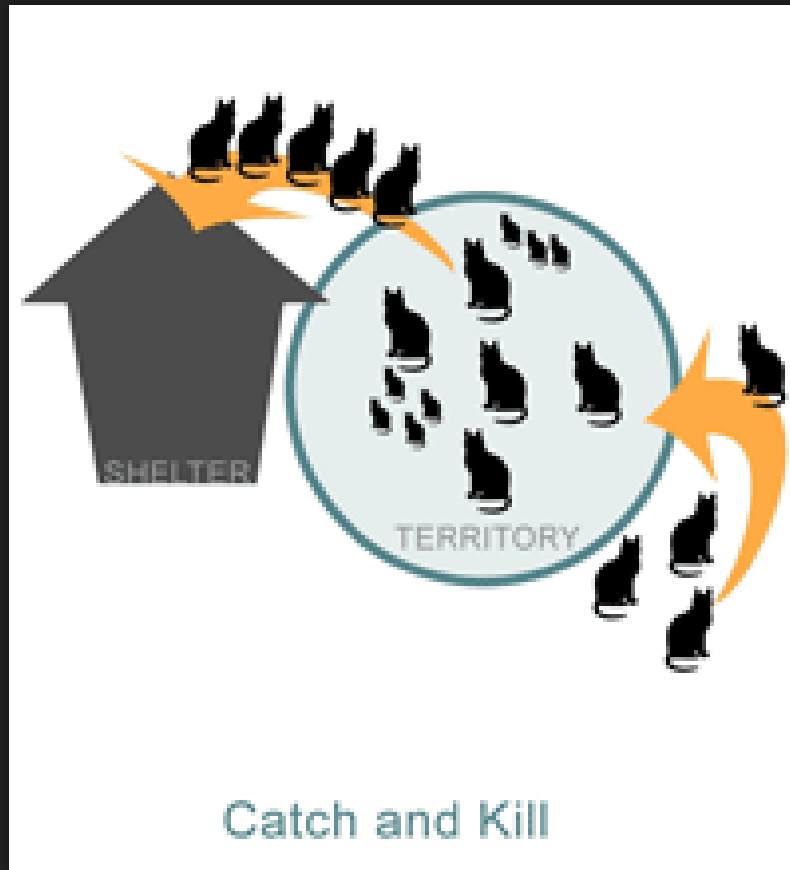
- Removal
  - Euthanize or cull
  - Relocation
  - Attempt to socialize
- Leave in their outdoor home
  - Do nothing
  - Provide basic care
  - Sterilize, vaccinate, etc.
    - Humane, effective



# Why not just remove them?

- Trapping and removal does not affect population size
  - One example: 44% of cats removed from semi-isolated peninsula, population rebounded to same starting size in 3 months (1)
- The reason a cat lives in that outdoor area remains
  - Human-created environment
- Remove a cat and resources open up for a new cat
- Remaining cats continue to reproduce & population rebounds
- Vacuum effect

# Vacuum Effect – Alley Cat Allies Images



# Community Cat Sterilization

- TNR
  - Trap, Neuter, Return
- TNVR
  - Trap, Neuter, Vaccinate, Return
- TNRM
  - Trap, Neuter, Return, Monitor
- RTF/RTH
  - Return to Field/Home
- SNR
  - Spay, Neuter, Return



# Targeted, Intense Approach

- Focus on each colony with purpose
- Aim for 75% or higher (4)
- Sporadic TNR less effective for overall population decline
  - Still beneficial

# Empirical evidence of results (3)

- Chicago: 54-82% reduction in colony populations
- Newburyport, Massachusetts: 100% reduction in 17 years
- Australia: 31% reduction (small colony size)
- University of Central Florida: 85% reduction over 11 year period
- Texas A & M University: 35% reduction of cats



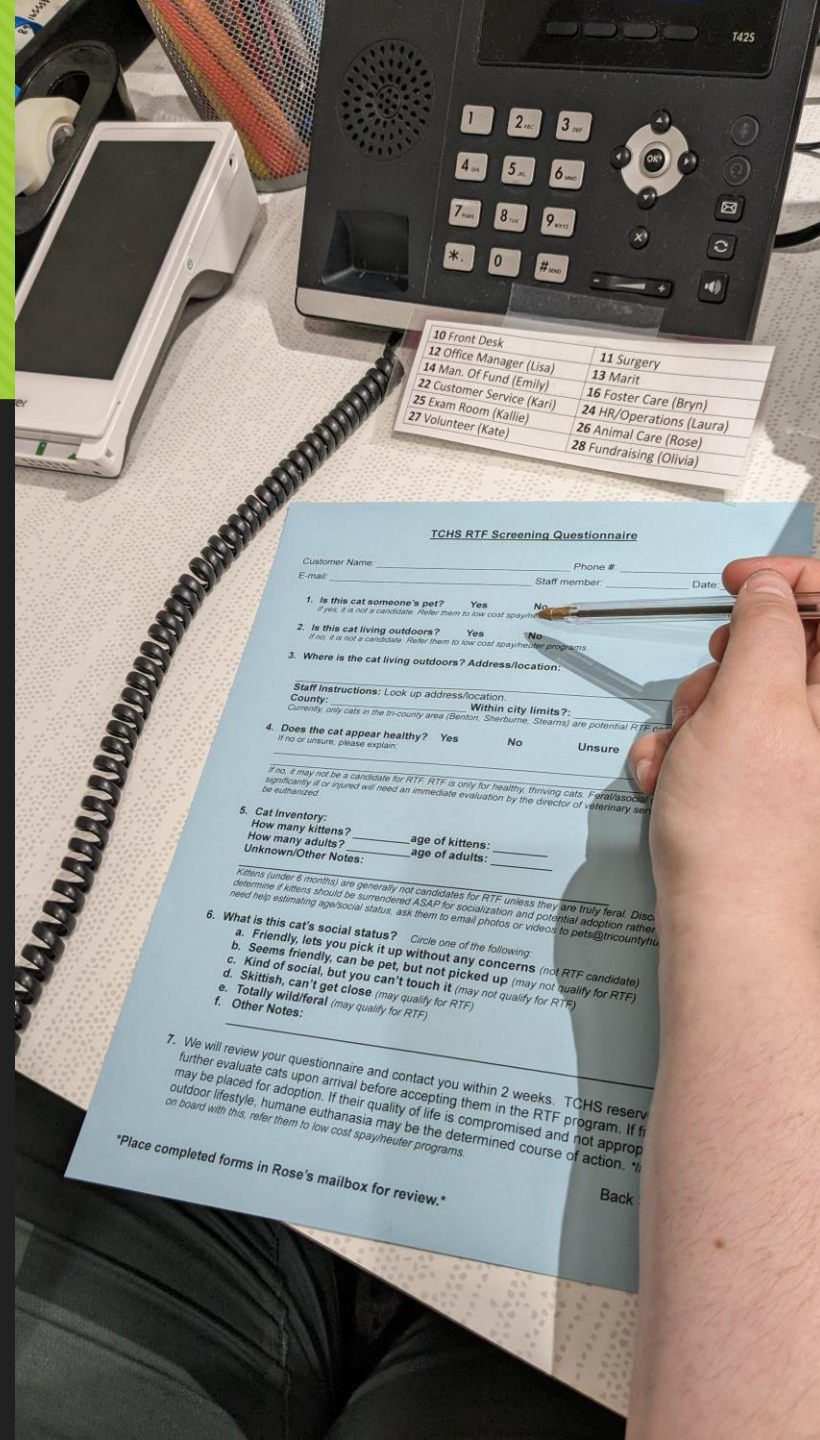
# Not one right way - Core

- Trap
- Spay/Neuter
- Rabies vaccine
- Recovery period
- Return



# TCHS RTF Program

- Individuals identify community cats
- Inform about RTF program
- Collect cat inventory
- Determine best route for cat(s)
- Triage-approach
- Schedule surrenders for adoptable cats or surgeries for unsocial community cats



# What about the kittens?! (At TCHS)



- All kittens under 5-6 weeks old should remain with nursing mother if stable
- When possible, work on socialization during that time
- Once on the cusp of weaning, (5-6 weeks old), intake kittens for adoption pathway
- Keep more cats from growing up to be community cats
- Don't forget about mom!

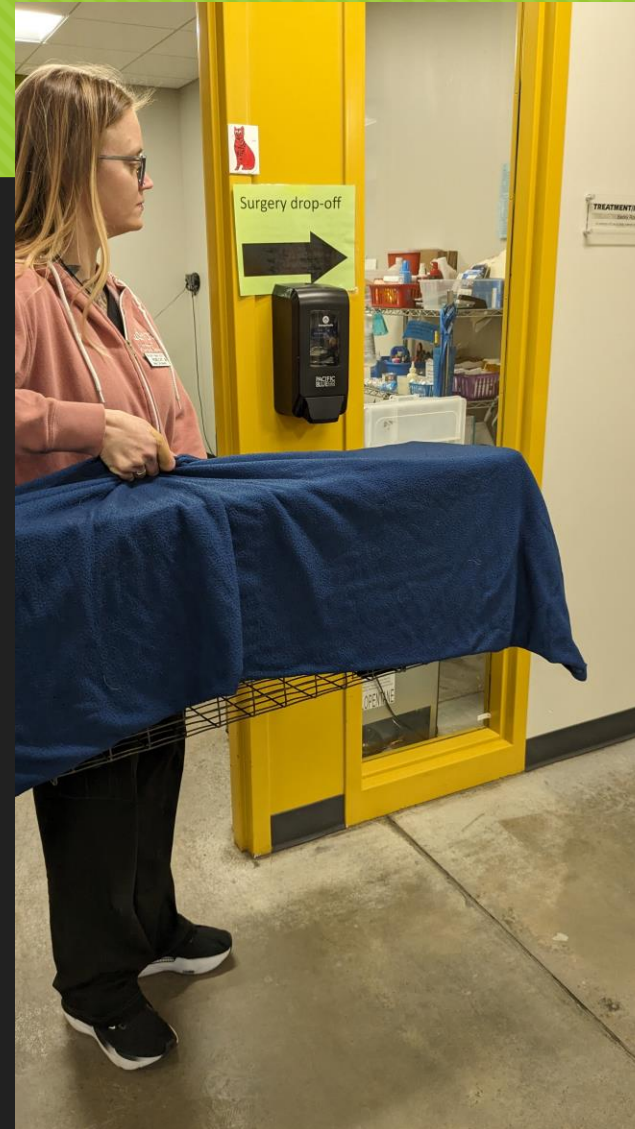
# Trap

- Large humane live traps made for cats
- No feeding the cats for at least 24 hours
- Set around dusk or at typical feeding time
- Monitor closely for success
- Secure cats



# Surgery Day

- Morning check in
  - Explain the veterinary care to client
  - Ear-tip
  - Post-op restriction
  - Release



# Procedures



- Spay/neuter & tattoo
- Rabies
- Distemper combo
- Left ear tip & tattoo
- +/- other treatments as needed



# What about Feline Leukemia or FIV?!

- Not testing RTF cats
- 2020 American Association for Feline Practitioners retrovirus management guidelines
- Spay/neuter is contingent on an outwardly healthy appearance
- If they happened to be positive, the virus is already present in the colony
- Retroviruses are less likely to spread after cats are spayed and neutered

# Recovery

- Confinement overnight at minimum in a secure location
- Trap with newspaper or pad
- Medium lined plastic crate
- Wet food
- +/- small litter box
- Visual assessment prior to release
- Release at optimal time





# When Return is not an Option

- Working Cat Adoption Program
  - Acclimation period
  - Can be a struggle to find homes
- Lengthy confinement of feral or asocial cats is not always humane
- Health of cat



# Cat Welfare Concerns

- “Outdoor living is rough”
  - Without denying some hardships, not evidence that outdoor cats are significantly less healthy than indoor counterparts - <1% of cats admitted to TNR clinics requiring euthanasia due to health (1)
- “Can’t survive the winter”
  - Then why are there so many?
- “Risk for suffering”
  - All cats have risks, indoor or outdoor
- “Every cat deserves an indoor home”
  - Every cat deserves a good life



# Human Benefits

- Smells like tomcat
- Noise from cat fights and mating
- Public health
  - Waste in yard or garden – parasites, unsanitary conditions
  - Rabies concern
- Trauma from witnessing hunting or remains
- Stresses out owned cats

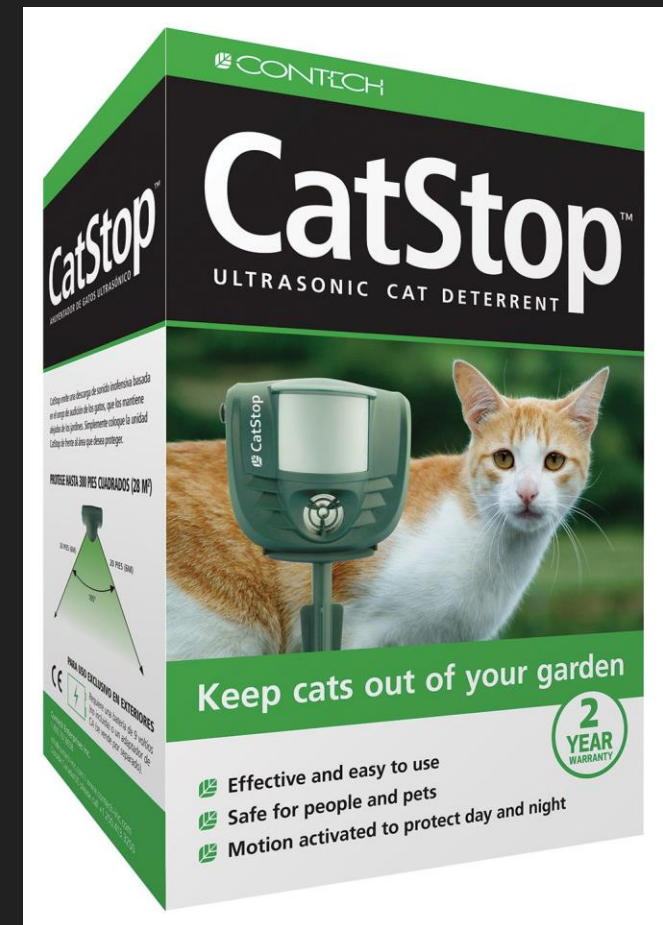
ALL DRASTICALLY REDUCED WHEN CATS HAVE BEEN STERILIZED AND THE POPULATION DECREASES!

# Wildlife & Birds

- Fewer cats = fewer hunters
- Once altered, less roaming
- If there is a reliable source of shelter and food for the cat (care takers in the area), there may less need to hunt
- Not “either or”
- Human activity

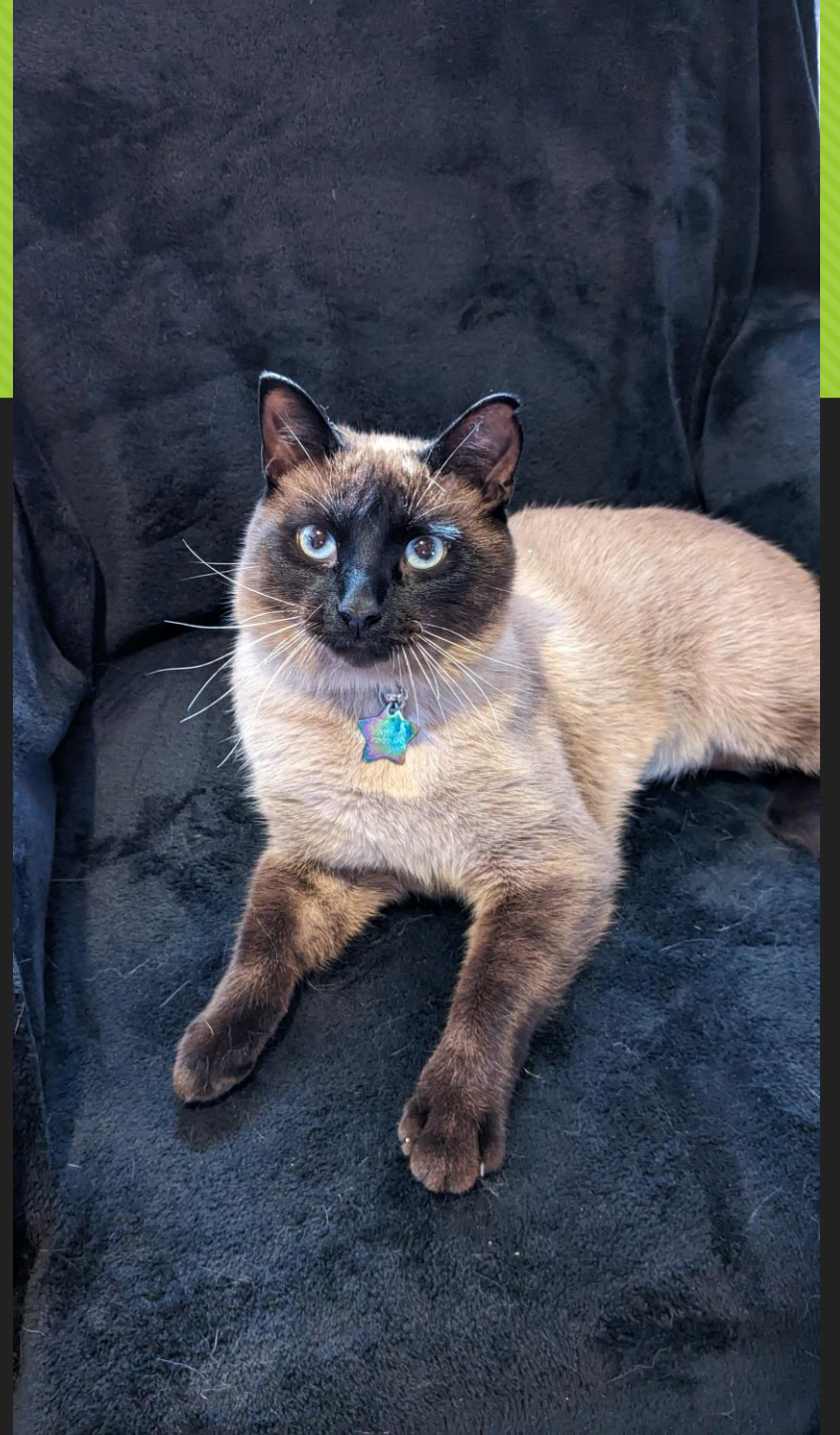
# Manage the environment to keep cats away!

- Ultrasonic deterrents
- Motion-activated sprinklers
- Repair/close gaps in decks, foundation, out buildings
- No access to trash or potential food sources
- Fencing
- Dog
- Garden stakes
- Chicken wire
- Guards for bird feeders, strategic placement



# Key Points of TCHS Program

- Remove friendly cats for adoption (when/where feasible)
- Remove kittens ASAP for adoption
- Focus on an entire colony
- Educate, collaborate
- Work within your resources
- One step at a time



# References & Recommended Reading

1. "Rethinking the Animal Shelter's Role in Free-Roaming Cat Management" Kate F. Hurley and Julie K. Levy. 2022
2. "Animal Control Intake of Free-Roaming Cats" National Animal Care & Control Association. 2021
3. "Managing Community Cats: A Guide for Municipal Leaders" The Humane Society of the United States. 2020
4. "A Long-Term Lens: Cumulative Impacts of Free-Roaming Cat Management Strategy and Intensity on Preventable Cat Mortalities" Boone et. Al. 2019
5. "Animal v. Animal: A False Choice" Wendy Anderson and Amy Vaniotis. American Bar Association Committee News. Spring 2008
6. "The Evolving Role of Triage and Appointment-Based Admission to Improve Service, Care, and Outcomes in Animal Shelters" Kate F. Hurley. 2022
7. "2020 AAFP Retrovirus Testing and Management Guidelines" Little et. al. 2020

# Recommended Resources for TNR/RTF

- Community Cats Podcast
- Alley Cat Allies
- ASPCA Pro



# Questions?



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