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Kitty, Kitty, Kitty … :What to Do with 90,000 Wild Cats? Pro Bono Project Seeks an Answer

UB Law Forum
Kitty, kitty, kitty …

**What to do with 90,000 wild cats?**

*Pro bono project seeks an answer*

They’re called feral cats – entirely undomesticated – or “community cats,” friendly felines that troll the neighborhood for food and don’t live with a family in a home. To some, they’re a nuisance; to others, they’re a vital part of the urban ecosystem. And there are a lot of them: By some estimates, 40,000 to 90,000 unowned cats roam the streets of Buffalo.

The problem is, the city has no well-thought-out plan for dealing with these cats. Citizen complaints led the city’s Common Council to order a task force to address the issue. One member of that task force, Peter A. Reese ’73, approached the Law School seeking legal help for the project.

The result was the development of the SUNY Buffalo Animal Law Pro Bono Project, with students working over the summer and continuing this fall researching the issue and putting together a draft ordinance for lawmakers to consider.

"The students looked at what science shows us happens in communities with free-roaming cats, the experience that other localities and national experts have had with ordinances, and how Buffalo works," says Professor Kim Diana Connolly, vice dean for legal skills and director of clinical legal education, who oversees the project. "They found that no uniform standard exists for laws in this area, and, Connolly says, they hope to submit the draft ordinance to a national database to be shared widely.

Reese, a longtime advocate for animal welfare, says there are three possible avenues for dealing with unowned cats. The first is to try to catch and euthanize them. But, he says, "we’ve been trying that approach for at least 150 years, and it just doesn’t work.” Cats, he points out, are prolific breeders. The middle ground is to do nothing, and he says some studies have shown it’s the best course, recognizing that if all the wild cats were to disappear from a city, rats and other vermin would proliferate.

What Reese calls the most progressive approach is labeled TNVR – trap, neuter, vaccinate and release. "It requires some resources," he says, "but we would like the Common Council to at least recognize the concept of TNVR. If they’re willing to support it, that’s good. We hope to shed some light on this and give the Common Council some options." He says the task force will reach consensus on a recommendation and present it to the Council; public hearings would follow.

Of the law students’ involvement, he says, "I think it’s a fantastic opportunity for the students to do pro bono work and for the community to utilize their resources, to come up with solutions for problems like this.”

Student Ian Laing is writing the draft ordinance for the city task force. "Through this project, I have been able to read and analyze ordinances that have been passed in other jurisdictions," he says. "Being able to read and decipher what some of the other ordinances mean and say is a major benefit.”

Connolly says, "It is a win-win when students can get experience while delivering a project that is needed in real-time for an actual project.”

The rising second- and third-year students did the work to help satisfy New York State’s new 50-hour pro bono requirement for Bar admission. The Law School wants to offer other such service experiences in many subject areas, in which professors or alumni "can get a group of students who can do meaningful work that will support necessary change in a limited time.” Interested parties can reach her at (716) 645-2092 or at kimconn@buffalo.edu.