

Spirit cats how to

This is what's worked (and what hasn't) for us. If you find something that works better - we'd love to hear about it! We're always looking for ways to improve!

You know it's working if...

- your Spirit cats are getting adopted quickly (within a month)
 - you aren't having many 10 day rabies quarantines
- cats are staying healthy while with you, and not losing much weight
- your aren't accumulating more Spirit Cats than you can care for well
 - your follow up shows they are doing well in their new homes
 - and that your adopters are satisfied.

Change might be needed if...

- Your Spirit Cats are regularly lingering more than a month before getting adopted
 - Your cats are getting returned after adoption
- Your cats are getting sick, or not maintaining weight in your care
 - Your cats are going on 10 day rabies quarantines often
 - Your number of Spirit cats in care keeps growing
- Your follow up shows they are not doing well in their new homes
 - Your follow up shows your adopters are not happy
- You aren't providing basic requirements, such as weighing all of them once a week (minimum - we do twice a week)

Must do:

Choose your cats carefully. This program is for cats who are scared, terrified in the shelter/care, and keep to themselves. It's not for offensively aggressive cats who run after and hurt people, for feral cats, or for cats who've never had a relationship with a person.

Categories of cats in order of success;

- Category 1 - best candidates: Cats who were normal in a home but can't deal with change/being sheltered
- Category 2, next best candidates: Cats who were one person cats or good with family, but hid from everyone else in previous home
- Category 3, third best candidates; Cats with unknown history who present with Spirit behaviors in shelter/care
 - Use extreme caution/these aren't likely to be successful; Cats who have lived in homes, but never had acted like a pet with anyone in the home. These are very unlikely to ever act like a pet with a future adopter, and very challenging to keep going in shelter. Normal

socialization efforts probably won't help these cats – very different than the first two categories who can feel happier when you work with them in shelter/care.

- Outdoor feral cats. We do not place these as house pets through our Spirit program.

Concentrate on low stress housing and care.

It's the most critical part of this program. These cats are super stressed, which causes all kinds of behavioral and medical problems.

- The better the housing you can offer, the more cats will be successful. Cage free housing in a quiet area, with lots of hiding options and ability to gain height, is best. Foster care can work great; staff offices work great. Few of these cats will succeed in cage housing.

- Low stress handling is needed at all times, including when moving them or weighing them.

- Get them into this housing at intake, or ASAP for cats with normal profile who can't adjust to sheltering/change. DO NOT cage them until you're "sure they are eating". They usually won't, in cages.

- We colony house nearly all Spirits, and have never had a cat fight. These are cats that just hide.

Weighing them regularly is how you will figure out which cats aren't making it.

- These cats are so stressed that some of them would literally rather die than continue as they are. They just will not eat. This is kept to a minimum with proper housing and low stress handling, but it may still occur. If you do not weigh them regularly, cats may starve to death in your care.

- Track their weights in writing, and have established protocols for when medical intervention is required. Our weight tracking sheets also have places to note what they like to eat, how they like to play, what's worked with them, etc.

- Weighing must also be low stress or you'll be setting the cats back. Two options that have worked for us:

- o For where there isn't much change in the room; weigh the carrier they hide in with the blankets in it. Write the weight on the carrier itself. When it's weighing time, shut the door, weigh the whole thing with the cat, and subtract the known weight of carrier and bedding.
- o When you can't rely on the bedding in the carriers being the same over time; shut the door and weigh the cat in the carrier she's in. Then butt the carrier up to another one which is set up for her, with delicious treats inside and fully covered. When she moves to the new carrier, weigh the one she was in and subtract the weight of carrier and bedding.
- o If you just go in and towel/grab the cats to weigh them, you are adding stress and increasing chances cat will not succeed. Take your time and slow down. It's a great program for volunteers to do.

- You need a plan for how you will address cats who do not eat enough to maintain weight. In our program, about 20% of cats require medical intervention, such as appetite stimulants, in addition to behavioral intervention in order to succeed.

Feed them whatever they want to eat. Try a wide variety of options. Put the food where the cat is (right in her carrier) if needed.

Interactions with the public must be limited and supervised. A lot of visitors stresses out the cats, and if people reach in where the cats are hiding and try to touch them, they're going to get scratched or bitten.

If at all possible, have all of the many hiding spaces she has access to, be carriers. It's much easier to move a Spirit if she's already in a carrier and you just shut the door – whether it's to weigh her, to send her home with an adopter, etc. It's very difficult – and stressful to the cat – to pull her out from a cat tower, under a bed, etc.

If they aren't moving into homes, evaluate:

- Do you need to change your marketing? See examples from presentation.
- Are you choosing the right cats for the program?
- Are the staff interacting with potential adopters presenting the cats in the right way? Or talking potential adopters out of them?

SEE SEPARATE HANDOUTS including instructions for volunteer weighing program, for fosters/adopters, and signage for housing rooms on the New England Fed website. You have our permission to modify and use anything we've posted!

BONUS LEVELS FOR SPIRIT CATS:

Enrichment programs to help them come around while in care and reduce stress.

- See separate handout for our Feline Weight Watchers volunteer program (note that program serves all cats/kittens, not just spirits)
- Clicker training works for spirit cats if you can find a food reward they like.
- Programs such as Jackson Galaxy Cats Positive
- Hang out in their space acting like a normal person, singing, reading out loud, have meetings – things where you are not staring at them and “working” with them. They know. Having people around who aren’t “after them” can help some cats.
- Note that these kinds of programs have success mostly for cats who have had a pet relationship with people in the past.

Experiment –

- Try adding a normal behaving cat to your Spirit housing room, can work as a “helper cat”.
- If your adoption space is closely monitored and relatively quiet/not busy, adding one Spirit to a regular cage free room can work as well (visitors should not attempt to touch the Spirit).
- Try different marketing to see what works!

Tips for getting started: Set yourself and your new program up for success.

-Start with cats who will be easiest to place. Once successful with those, then consider trying some harder ones. Easiest cats are:

- ones who were pretty normal in a home, but totally different in care
- under 5 years of age
- pretty
- healthy
- without any other behavioral problems

- Start when you have time/space. Winter's good. Middle of the summer is going to be much harder to get any new program going.
- Be willing to give it a try, adjust and make changes as you go.
- Start small and build on your success
- Learn which cats your program can serve – you can't save every cat with any one program. If a cat isn't succeeding, do you have other options for her? If your new program is not succeeding, are you putting the wrong cats in it?

Need help? Contact us!

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