



# Pouncing on Opportunity

Many practices are seeing the benefit of being cat friendly

by Maureen Blaney Flietner

**A**ware that cats are an underserved population, more veterinary practices are pouncing on the idea of becoming designated “cat-friendly.”

While some practices have made varied efforts on their own, the American Association of Feline Practitioners’ (AAFP) Cat-Friendly Practice (CFP) program, begun at the end of February 2012, provides an exact guide to becoming feline-friendly.

“The completely self-paced, online program is a step-by-step approach for changing the experience for cats and cat owners in a small-animal practice setting,” said Elizabeth J. Colleran, DVM, DABVP Feline, former president of the AAFP and owner of Chico Hospital for Cats in California. As of February 2013, 554 practices were in the process of becoming certified, and 294 had reached gold or silver levels.

The CFP covers 10 topic areas with multimedia presentations, supplemental educational resources, photos and a practice checklist. A practice may obtain Silver Standard status by meeting the essential criteria and can get the Gold Standard status by incorporating the optimum criteria.

## Perfect timing for Maine clinic

At Veazie Veterinary Clinic in Veazie, Maine, Michael McCaw, DVM, said, “The CFP arrived at an opportune time because we realized the veterinary community needed to do a better job catering to the



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—Michael McCaw, DVM

unique needs of cats. Like magic, the AAFP Cat-Friendly Program appeared.”

“We’ve always practiced good feline medicine,” continued McCaw, “and as a cat lover myself, I have always promoted the proper handling of cats with my colleagues and our technical staff.

“But before this program came out, I was having a hard time seeing the forest for the trees. The CFP guidelines give the practice a tangible way to set up, promote and run a tight ship on all things feline. Public education on the



importance of wellness care with an achievable means of making the veterinary visit a less stressful one are big parts of the process."

The clinic was certified in May 2012 and is just starting to market its new status. McCaw said the CFP confirmed many beliefs he held about less-stressful cat care and even taught him a few things.

"To have this information in print... it's like a cookbook for creating a cat-friendly practice. The CFP really encourages practices to treat cats as an individual species, rather than like small dogs. A lot of people in the veterinary community don't take the time to appreciate what the individual cat is trying to tell them."

The clinic is planning a major renovation to make it more cat-friendly. For now, its cat-friendly features include the following:

- An alcove revamped as a private cat-only reception area
- Extensive client education through videos, articles and links on its website
- A dedicated feline exam room
- A quiet, dimly lit feline ward
- Use of a synthetic feline pheromone that marks territory as safe, with diffusers in all cat areas
- Ongoing in-house education on proper handling of cats

"My hope is that veterinary practices will look at CFP as not just an opportunity to expand their business," said McCaw, "but as a means of expanding quality health care to a significantly underserved species. The CFP gives them a concrete way to do this with no downside."

### Improvements being seen

Whitesburg Animal Hospital in Huntsville, Ala., had been aware of studies about cat visits and had seen a decline in cat visits of its own. The staff even learned that some dog-owning clients had cats at home they were not bringing in for care.

The hospital had made several efforts to become more cat-friendly, but, with the availability of CFP, everyone wanted

to take it on, said Kristen Fling, LVT. Fling was asked to lead the process and became one of the designated cat advocates along with owner Mark Russell, DVM, and Staci Armstrong, DVM.

Because the clinic already adhered to AAHA standards, said Fling, going through the CFP program was familiar. Groups of staffers each took a section of the program to review and present.

"It took us about 3 months to complete the program," said Fling, who developed a notebook from the process to use to train new staff.

The only challenge, she said, was the CFP Gold requirement for full-mouth radiographs taken with every dental prophylaxis and treatment, which they preferred to offer as an option for clients. However, the clinic, now at the silver level, is discussing and considering incorporating the protocol.

Improvements are being seen, said Fling, including a slow rise in the number of cat visits. In addition, the practice has done the following:

- Found the use of pheromone diffusers and better handling techniques have improved the attitudes of cat patients
- Increased its use of educational handouts
- Provided risk -assessment information to make clients aware of health care needs
- Provided cat-only appointment times when canine clients will be scheduled only if it is an emergency
- Kept the waiting time in the cats-only reception area to less than 5 minutes
- Appreciated the CFP's Continuing Education requirement that forces it to find new learning opportunities

"People are pleased and responding well," said Fling. "It does make the staff happier. We see the patients and our clients happier, and that makes our job easier. It's not difficult to see why you should do it when you see the outcome."



“We’ve seen absolutely no downside. The program is better for the patients and good for the bottom line.”

—Christen Skaer, DVM

### Better for patients and the bottom line

Skaer Veterinary Clinic in Wichita, Kan., always worked to be cat-friendly, said Christen Skaer, DVM. But with the clinic officially being certified through the CFP since fall 2012, additional efforts have come into play. The practice has changed its cat-handling techniques and has become more conscious of “scruffing” cats.

“It’s not so much of a problem for cats,” said Skaer, “but the owners hate it and we are making a concerted effort to be a good experience for the cat and its owner.”

Other changes include:

- No longer allowing dogs in the cat exam room
- Bringing cats and their owners directly into an exam room without having to wait in the reception area
- Offering the option of leaving a cat in the exam room until the owner has finished checking out
- Offering house calls (Although this service is for all species, said Skaer, “cats were in mind when we planned it. If cats are too afraid or anxious to bring to the clinic, we can provide them with the care they need at home.”)

Skaer, a self-described “huge cat fan,” said it was worth it to jump through the hoops to get designated. “Cat owners like

it, and it lets consumers know that cats-only practices do not have a corner on the market.”

“We’ve seen absolutely no downside,” she said. “The program is better for the patients and good for the bottom line. It’s certainly something I want for my business—to be healthy and viable while providing excellent veterinary care to animals that have been underserved.”

### It’s an ongoing process

At VCA Monte Vista Animal Hospital in Concord, Calif., the biggest challenge to meet the CFP standards was the reception area, said Marybeth Rymer, DVM, medical director.

“We were unable to separate the reception into cat and dog waiting areas. But, by being creative, we found a way to meet the standards.” Now, upon arrival, owner and cat may be escorted directly into a cat exam room, brought to a converted bathing room to wait or to be examined, or be asked to sit away from the dogs with the cat carrier on the bench covered with a towel.

For fractious felines, appointments are made when the master cat handlers are available and the cat exam room can be reserved, where the pheromone diffuser is turned on and towels pre-sprayed with pheromones are available to cover the carrier as well as to handle the cat.

She said that the owners have been educated to buy a carrier with a removable top so the cat may be examined in the bottom. The hospital also features a Cattitude program, which offers a bag of goodies such as AAAP’s booklet on how to get a cat to the veterinarian.

Because the hospital is already accredited by AAHA, it took only a few months to review the CFP standards, present information and education at staff meetings, and fill out the online application, said Rymer. It achieved CFP status in August 2012.

“Be creative, discuss cat-friendly practices at your staff meetings and have those who are comfortable with cats be your feline handlers,” said Rymer. “Being

cat-friendly is also an ongoing process; we all need to keep reminding each other not to rush our treatments and stay in the cat 'Zen moment.'"

### Visits and revenues increase

Frontier Veterinary Hospital, PC, of Hillsboro, Ore., has seen many positives since it began instituting cat-friendly practices on its own in 2009 that culminated with CFP certification in 2012.

One upshot has been the increase in its feline business, said Sara Fleissner, practice development director.

"The percentage of our total business that is feline did increase from 28% in 2010 to 32% in 2012, but the increase in revenue during that time was 22% while visits were up 20%. It means that we had 736 more feline visits in the first 9 months of 2012 compared to the same period in 2010."

"By creating a sort of 'cat practice within a practice,' we have both filled a need for cat owners and created opportunities for our practice," said Fleissner. The steadily increasing number of active cat patients and cat visits is "impressive, especially considering the economic environment of the last few years."

The staff's improved handling practices, level of care and confidence have produced a pleasant side effect: increased interaction among the Patient Care team and clients, which created more opportunities for education and bonding. In addition, she said, the Client Care team doesn't "mind bragging to the clients about our CFP status and the things we have done to improve their cat's experience at Frontier."

Fleissner highlighted some points:

- While they implemented AAFP Handling Guidelines before applying for the CFP program, other practices may need encouragement to implement them. "Educating both technicians and customer service personnel to identify cat body language and altering the approach to fearful or aggressive cats takes some finesse and time to retrain routines."

- Practicing the use of towels for restraint on their own cats helped the technicians feel comfortable and confident with this type of holding. "A very small investment in non-traditional tools—nice thick towels, bath mats for use on exam tables, and toys to use for distraction in the exam room—more than paid for itself."
- Providing a cat-only exam room—something Frontier already had in place—is worth doing. Client response has been "overwhelming," she said.
- Instead of a broad rollout, Frontier started out case-by-case to address issues as they arose. For example, it had to develop a customer service policy and communication techniques for visibly uncomfortable or squeamish clients as well as those who attempt to handle their cats while treatments are performed.

One challenge: veterinary professionals who do not enjoy treating cats.

"In my experience, this is primarily due to fear or a lack of training. Fortunately, these are both things that proper coaching can improve if managers and team leaders take the time to implement a thoughtful and staff-empowering approach," said Fleissner.

The biggest potential obstacle: getting your staff on board with the CFP program. "It is essential to have your entire staff and doctor team 'buy in,' though creating 'buy in' for any new initiative is a significant challenge for many veterinary managers," said Fleissner.

"At the practice level, projects like the CFP and AAHA accreditation processes, when properly and thoughtfully implemented by management, really do help bring your team together. Everyone working toward a common goal that benefits both our patients and our business is truly a win-win!" ■

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