Animal Shelters Can Make Cats Sick - But Not For the Reason You Think

What’s it like for a cat to be in an animal shelter? Most people can only imagine how they’d feel if they had to eat, sleep, and spend 24 hours a day in an airplane bathroom to get an idea what many cats face in shelters every day. Conference attendees at Animal Care Expo in New Orleans, La., this week won’t have to imagine it. They can go see it.

Cats can get sick in animal shelters, but the cure probably isn't a vaccine or an antibiotic; it's better cat housing. That’s the message the Million Cat Challenge is driving home in an interactive cat housing exhibit at Animal Care Expo, the world’s largest animal shelter conference being held through April 18 at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans.

Launched in 2014, the Million Cat Challenge set out to save the lives of one million shelter cats in North America within five years. When the 1,075 participating shelters met and exceeded that goal a full year early, the Challenge then turned its attention to an initiative dubbed #allthecats, which seeks to provide the right outcome and care for every cat, every day, in every shelter.

Due to limited resources and a lack of awareness, many shelter cats are kept in inadequate housing. “Multiple studies have looked at the effect of poor housing on cats, and have linked it to a high incidence of stress-related illness, particularly upper respiratory infections (URI),” said Challenge co-founder Dr. Julie Levy, Fran Marino Endowed Professor of Shelter Medicine Education at the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine.

“Shelters frequently assume this condition is simply being spread from cat to cat like the flu, but what’s really happening is the cats are so stressed out they become ill. That in turn makes it harder for the cats to find an adoptive home, which extends their stay in the shelter and triggers a vicious cycle of stress and illness. It can even lead to euthanasia.”

There are many types of adequate feline housing, ranging from good to better to best. Levy and her Million Cat Challenge co-founder Dr. Kate Hurley, director of the UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program, wanted to use the platform at Expo to demonstrate what good housing can look like and educate attendees about the real consequences of bad housing.

“When people enter the exhibit, they’ll find themselves in the ‘Bad Cat Housing room,’ a human-scale immersive experience complete with sights, sounds, and smells,” said Hurley. “Having survived the bad, participants will emerge into life-size examples of good cat housing configurations for both individual and multiple cats. The whole experience adds up to ‘IKEA showroom meets cat sheltering.’”

The power of shelter housing improvements to save cats’ lives can’t be overstated. When Calgary Humane Society upgraded their cat housing by installing porthole-like passages
known as "portals" between two cat cages, thereby doubling the space for each cat and allowing them to sleep and eat in a separate space from the litter boxes, they saw an immediate benefit to cat health.

“Once the portals were done we were quite amazed at how quickly we saw improvement in the cats’ overall well-being. Stress-related illnesses such as URI dropped, the cats seemed livelier with less scratching and biting. We did not anticipate seeing such an improvement so quickly and we’re thrilled we had proceeded with the portals.”

Such improvements also help get more cats adopted. "Kitties who spent their days hiding in a litter box all of a sudden got to move into the penthouse suite," said Kathy Pitman-Feltham of Oshawa Animal Services. "It often allows cats to come out of their shell, and definitely increases their adoptability! It has also allowed for great conversations with the public around the importance of enrichment and proper housing. Our adopters come into the space and see happy and playful kitties."

This first-of-its-kind educational experience was made possible by the outstanding generosity of the animal welfare community. The exhibit was designed pro bono by Animal Arts Design and the housing was provided by the Mason Company, Shor-Line, TriStar Vet, Crijo, Kuranda, Snyder Manufacturing, Kitty Kasa, and Tomahawk Live Trap. The units will be donated to local animal shelters when the conference is over.

The space was donated by the Humane Society of the United States, the organization behind the annual conference. The exhibit was sponsored by Petco Foundation, which works with and supports thousands of local animal welfare groups across the country and helps find homes for more than 400,000 animals every year, and Vetoquinol, a family-owned, global leader in animal health since 1933. Additional sponsorship was provided by the Michigan Pet Fund, an education and advocacy organization working to improve lifesaving and care in Michigan animal shelters.

The Million Cat Challenge is a joint project of the Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Program at the University of Florida and UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program. It was made possible by the financial support of Maddie’s Fund, a national foundation established by Dave and Cheryl Duffield to revolutionize the status and well-being of companion animals.

High-resolution images are available in the Million Cat Challenge Newsroom. Contact Christie Keith at media@millioncatchallenge.org to arrange to interview Dr. Levy or Dr. Hurley or for additional information.