

## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: Friday, April 3, 2026.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. Contact [Gage Harter](#) with any questions.

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Loudoun County  
Program Title: Tag, You're Home!  
Program Category: Communications and Community Outreach

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Monica Spells  
Title: Deputy County Administrator  
Signature: Monica N. Spells

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Date: 2026.03.25 20:38:06 -04'00'



# TAG! YOU'RE HOME!

2026 VACo Award Submission

## LOUDOUN COUNTY ANIMAL SERVICES

Loudoun County, Virginia



LOUDOUN  
COUNTY  
VIRGINIA

Animal Services

# Executive Summary

“Tag! You’re Home!” is a program designed by Loudoun County Animal Services to humanely minimize unnecessary intakes of free-roaming cats at the animal shelter. Cats enrolled in the collaring program specifically have been able to be kept out of the shelter at a rate of over 80%, reducing the unnecessary burden on the shelter of housing healthy cared-for cats, while offering supportive, accessible services to engage constituents who want to help cats in need.

**In 2023, LCAS was able to reunite 38% of stray cats at the shelter with their owners, compared to the nationwide average of 3%.**

Municipal agencies rarely have proactive efforts to reunite lost cats with owners, which means that cats who enter animal shelters in the United States are only reclaimed in 3% of cases. Sadly, at this time, more than 3 million cats enter shelters annually, with only 47% of them leaving the shelter alive. In addition to overcrowding, high-volume intake of free-roaming cats typically contributes to the prevalence of contagious disease, which can be difficult and costly to stay ahead of.



“Tag! You’re Home!” offers standardized communication to empower residents to be a part of the solution for outdoor cats. In addition to posters, yard signs and social media, an innovative collaring program helps reunite cats with their families. Cats in the program are scanned for a chip, have a found report generated in the LCAS system, cross-checked against lost pet reports and have LCAS provided flyers and posters distributed in the community. Cats are placed back in their found location with the “Tag! You’re Home!” collar which is engraved with an LCAS mobile number. If after five days no one has claimed ownership, the cat is assumed to be truly lost and can be brought to the shelter for intake.

**In Loudoun County, cats who are collared and returned to their communities are reunited with their families, adopted by their finders, or successfully free roaming 81% of the time.**

# The Problem

In the United States, the most common models for stray (“free roaming”) cat intake at municipal animal shelters fall into one of three categories: (1) do not accept stray cats at all, (2) accept only stray cats who are sick, injured or abandoned, or (3) accept all stray cats. Municipal agencies rarely have proactive efforts to reunite lost cats with pet owners, which means that cats who enter animal shelters in the United States are only reclaimed by their owners in 3% of cases. The low return-to-owner rate is largely due to cat owner perceptions that “the cat will come home on his own,” or the phenomenon of grief avoidance, in which owners of lost pets do not look for their missing animals for fear of finding out that they are deceased. In reality, the animal may have been picked up and brought to a nearby shelter, awaiting reclaim before being adopted or euthanized just a few days later. Sadly, at this time, more than 3 million cats enter shelters annually, with only 47% of them leaving the shelter alive. In addition to overcrowding, high-volume intake of free-roaming cats typically contributes to higher euthanasia (referred to as a lower “live release rate”) due to the prevalence of contagious disease in the stressful environment of the animal shelter, which can be difficult and costly to stay ahead of, particularly during warmer months when kittens are more likely to need sheltering services.



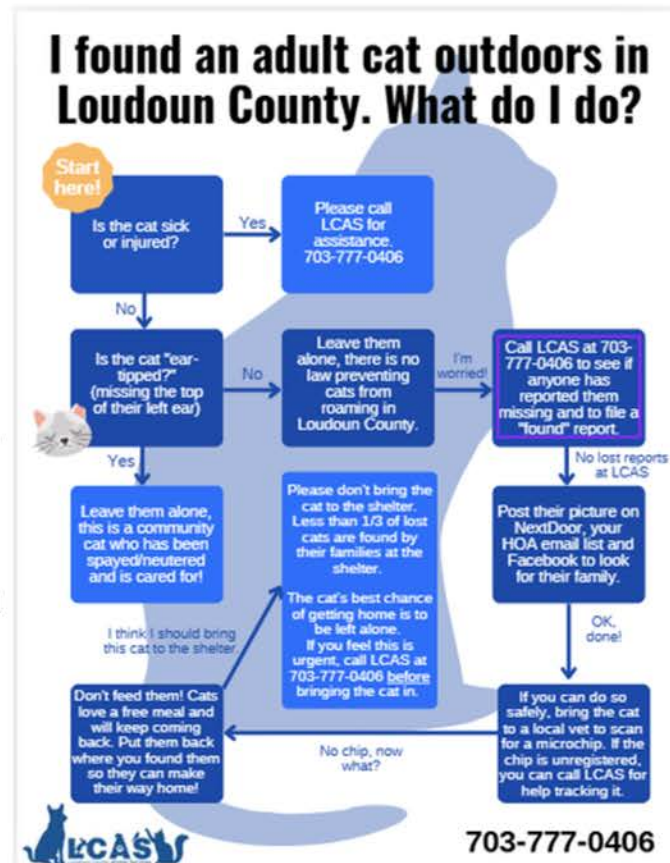
Many jurisdictions have instead elected to step away from accepting free-roaming cats at their shelters unless sick or injured (or in some cases, not accepting these cats at all), however, this is often a policy that is not well understood or appreciated by community members, as the perception is that taxpayer-funded animal shelters should be accepting cats who appear to be homeless. Further complicating the issue, cats who are free-roaming, intact (not spayed or neutered) and unvaccinated will routinely create resident discontent and neighborhood issues with fighting, spread of disease, rabies concerns and fast-growing overpopulation.

# Innovation, Collaboration and Modeling

Loudoun County's Department of Animal Services (LCAS) is a public animal services agency in northern Virginia, providing animal sheltering, humane law enforcement and humane education programming. LCAS has historically followed industry best practices, which include the recommendation to minimize intake of healthy free-roaming cats, due to the cost/benefit of providing services for these animals who are successful in their existing environments, and in many cases, have a home base which provides them with necessary resources. However, when members of the community would bring these cats to the shelter with good intentions, believing they were lost, they would become frustrated and upset when shelter staff advised that the cats were more likely to be reunited with their families if left in place. Routinely, these residents would be insistent that the cat had never been seen in the neighborhood before, that the cat was hungry/malnourished, and that if someone had lost the cat, that they would surely come to the shelter to try and find them, despite research offered that proved otherwise. Customer feedback on this practice became increasingly poor when LCAS opened a new, larger facility in 2021, and residents struggled to understand staff messaging and data provided as evidence for why cats would be most successful outside of the shelter environment.

Staff recognized that this was an area for improvement in shelter intake and public communication procedures and developed a plan, launched in mid 2022 to engage finders of cats. The goal was to maintain LCAS' historically high return-to-owner rates for lost pets, and minimize cats coming to the shelter unnecessarily while developing resident confidence in LCAS' policies.

As a result, "Tag! You're Home!" was created. "Tag! You're Home!" started by implementing standardized messaging from staff through graphics to improve the public's understanding of Animal Services' mission, capabilities and limitations, and empower residents to be part of the solution for outdoor cats. LCAS' flowcharts for those who find adult cats and kittens are available in English and Spanish, and provide a clear visual guide for customers on the next steps to take when finding a free-roaming cat while simultaneously giving all staff the same language to ensure consistent messaging over the phone, in person and on the website. With the flowcharts stored on the intranet for easy access, and hung up in dispatch, where calls first land, the staff are able to ensure a consistent outward message by walking callers through each step when they have found a cat outdoors.



# Innovation, Collaboration and Modeling Cont.

In the event that a customer follows the flowchart of solutions and information all the way to the end and is still seeking placement for the cat, shelter intake of the cat is offered as an option, but preferably, staff will enroll them in the collaring program. The collaring program provides the cat with a collar that says “Am I your cat? If so please text or call...” and lists a mobile phone number owned by LCAS. The collaring program also has its own visual flowcharts to guide well-meaning cat finders through a process which consists of the following steps:

- Bring the cat to the shelter for a photo to be taken and a “found pet” record to be created.
- Staff will scan the cat for a microchip and compare his information with any lost reports on record.
- A collar will be placed on the cat and the finder will place the cat back where she/he was found and not offer food (which would discourage the cat from going home)
- Finder will hang posters and place signs in the neighborhood where the cat is (provided by LCAS)

In the event that the cat is still observed in the area after five days, and no one has called the phone number on the collar to claim ownership, the cat is assumed to be unowned or lost and can be brought to the shelter for intake.

In cases in which the cat’s finder wants to keep the cat or finds a new home for the cat after five days, they are offered free spay/neuter, microchipping and vaccinations. In cases in which the owner calls the number on the collar to claim ownership, they are also offered free spay/neuter, vaccinations and a microchip and the finder is called, thanked and notified that the cat does, in fact, have a nearby home. Overwhelmingly, participants in this process, both cat owners and finders, have had positive feedback about the experience and have expressed gratitude for the process in place. Over 80% of the cats enrolled in the collaring program have not needed intake at Loudoun County Animal Services.

In its first full year, the streamlined messaging and proactive efforts of “Tag! You’re Home!” led to a 17% drop in stray feline intakes and improved return to owner rates for adult cats from 29% in 2022 to 38% in 2023, an all time high for Loudoun County. (For reference, national averages of return to owner rates for cats is around 3%.) Loudoun County Animal Services has received substantial interest in the program from other animal sheltering agencies and is looking forward to continuing to engage the community in the life-saving animal welfare initiative of “Tag! You’re Home!”



# Costs and Staffing

The single largest expense of this program was the purchase of custom-printed collars for cats (approximately \$15 per cat) in the collaring portion of the program. Printing costs associated with posters and yard signs varied from \$3 to \$30 per cat, depending on the print quality and volume of printed material per cat.

Municipalities may choose to offer the same spay/neuter and vaccine packages to found cats, as they would for cats that they would intake at the shelter, which means that even with the (maximum \$45) additional expense of involvement in the program, the shelter is still saving any and all costs associated with intake, housing, and care of cats, which ranges by region, but can be anywhere from \$15 to \$80 per day. Keeping healthy free-roaming cats out of the shelter also reduces overcrowding, which reduces the incidence of contagious disease, which costs an average of between \$40 and \$200 per cat to treat. In most communities, mandated stray hold periods range from 3 to 10 days, indicating that, conservatively, this program saves \$75 per cat, but could save as much as \$955 per cat in communities where contagious diseases are treated in the shelter environment, but long mandated stray holds contribute to their prevalence. The program is staffed using existing LCAS staff at current staffing levels.



# Results

“Tag, You’re Home!” had the goal of reducing the number of free-roaming cats who were brought to the shelter unnecessarily, and through the shelter’s use of a combination of outreach efforts, and the engagement of well-meaning cat finders, the program has seen significant success. Nationwide, the average return to owner rate for lost cats brought to animal shelters averages 3 percent. In Loudoun County, cats who are collared and returned to their communities end up not needing intake at the animal shelter 81% of the time, and adult cats who do end up at the animal shelter are reunited with their owners in 38% of cases, both well exceeding national averages. The reduced number of cats unnecessarily in the shelter allows for a better quality of care for those truly in need, reduced euthanasia, and reduced incidence of contagious disease due to lower in-shelter populations.

This unique program and its successful metrics have now been presented to national organizations, such as Maddie’s Fund, Justice Clearinghouse and the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners and interest in the program continues to grow. The results of “Tag, You’re Home!” have also been substantiated and documented in the peer-reviewed Journal for Shelter Medicine and Community Animal Health, providing data to support the model’s success and duplicability.

