



Photos by CHARLES CORTES/Reporter

Better lives for cats

Sally Halela (left) and her fellow South County Cats volunteers try to improve the lot of felines living on the fringes, like the kitten she's holding. It was found at an automotive wrecking yard in Black Diamond while its mother was being spayed, one of the services of the Maple Valley and Covington-based organization. The group also transports feral cats in carriers (above) to farms where the animals can live in barns and provide rodent control. For the story, see page 4.

They're felines' best friends

South County Cats' goal is to make world a better place for the four-legged

The Reporter

There are cat lovers, and then there's South County Cats.

The spay/neuter assistance group, based in Maple Valley and Covington, wants to make local communities more cat-friendly for the animals and their owners. The mission includes:

- Making feline birth control available to cat owners who can't afford it.
- Trapping feral (wild) cats and relocating them for their own safety, including putting them to work in rodent control.
- Fostering semi-socialized cats to make them more adoptable.

It's rewarding work – especially the spay/neuter program, which is "our main focus," said Sally Halela, president of South County Cats.

The organization is a strong advocate of spaying or neutering as the solution to decreasing the euthanasia rate of cats deposited in animal shelters. Information on assistance with the cost of the surgeries is available at southcountycats@comcast.net.

In addition to the spay/neuter efforts, South County Cats places cats with farms, for instance. "Barn installations," such as the one Halela assisted this week with a mother cat and four kittens



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For her work with South County Cats, cages and carriers for cats are standard equipment at the Maple Valley home of Sally Halela.

in Sammamish, give the cats a stable environment and help farmers keep rodents at bay. The cats are deterrents for rats that are attracted by the feed stored in barns for livestock, Halela noted.

South County Cats members half-jokingly call the program cat "employment" in mouse and rat prevention.

As a non-profit, all-volunteer organization, South County Cats depends on donations to keep its services afloat. Cash contributions are tax-deductible. Donations of towels, cat food, cat litter, and old cell phones or ink cartridges (for recycling) are also welcome.

This month, the group received a grant from the Wash-

ington Association of Animal Care and Control. Halela explained that the funding is "for spay/neuter only. While our target audience is low-income and disabled, we will provide assistance to anyone who needs it."

She noted that "we support cats that fall outside of the work that shelters do." To that end, Barb Horton, a Covington resident and one of South County Cats' original members, has forged partnerships with King County's

shelters and the Humane Society to rescue "unadoptable" cats. The latter are feral or have unsociable temperaments.

Horton and Halela use their homes as temporary staging places for cats that fit into the South County Cats programs.

While the cats the group handles are fostered at private homes, it doesn't have a shelter. So it doesn't accept stray or owner-surrendered cats. For that, the group advises contacting the Seattle-King County Humane Society at (425) 641-0080.

Cristy Ellingson, who lives in Maple Valley, got involved with South County Cats after hearing about its search for volunteers. She said she likes "the way the group goes about getting cats spayed or neutered and returned to their homes, or finding barn homes for them."

Ellingson added that the group "can always use help in trying to make people aware of our existence, what we do and to recruit more volunteers."

Among other tasks, volunteers can drive cats to and from a spay/neuter clinic near Northgate, clean cages and carriers, and foster cats and kittens.

For anyone who wants to support the group monetarily, donations can be mailed to South County Cats, 26828 Maple Valley-Black Diamond Road SE., no. 160, Maple Valley, WA 98038.