

Rethinking The FIV Stigma

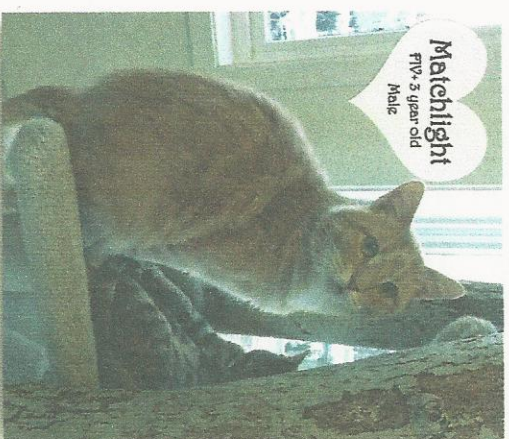
As construction began in early 2012 on our Paulina location and we were forced to temporarily move into a one-room makeshift shelter on Peterson Avenue, we were faced with two options: 1. Euthanize all of our segregated, FIV+ cats, or 2. Take a leap of faith and incorporate our FIV+ cats into

the general population. Option one never felt like the right route to take, so option two it was. For over a year, our FIV+ and FIV- cats lived very happily together as one. As a result of the incorporation, we saw every single one of our friendly, social FIV+ cats get adopted by awesome, open-minded families. As the year went on, we felt inspired to scratch the FIV+ room off of our blueprints and opt for one large, free-roaming cat floor. We braced ourselves for tremendous kickback from both our supporters and other shelters in the Chicagoland area, but surprisingly, our supporters responded with a collective "way to go!" After moving back into the Paulina location in December 2012, we saw our FIV+ population continuing to thrive and find adoptive families faster than we ever could have dreamed. With all of the excitement and joy associated with this seemingly positive change, there was still one nagging question left to be answered: Had any FIV- cats contracted the virus as a result of the intermingling? There was only one very labor intensive and time-consuming way to find out: draw the blood of and snap test every single free-roaming cat in the shelter (feral cats included, which is a feat all of it's own!) for the Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV). For one entire day in January 2014, we closed down the cat floor and tested over 100 cats for FeLV/FIV. The results were truly astounding: after nearly two years of having our FIV+



and FIV- cats living together in a communal environment, *not one cat tested positive for FIV who didn't come in to the shelter that way!* As one of only a small

handful of shelters that champion for the FIV+ cats and, more importantly, the integration into general population, these results were monumental. We have spent years combating the stigma that FIV is easily spread from cat-to-cat, therefore FIV+ cats must be isolated and treated as lepers. The stigma has made many adopters fearful of adopting an FIV+ cat; therefore many facilities will either euthanize or leave them to sit in an isolated room for months or years at a time. Because FIV is primarily spread deep bite wound, our mindset has been if you are housing friendly, well-socialized cats who are not prone to viciously fighting with others, you can safely intermingle positive and negative cats. We are diligent about thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting the shelter every single day, keeping our animals on a high-quality diet enriched with L-Lysine (an over-



the-counter immune-system booster), regular medical exams/care, and creating a low-stress environment; all of which contribute to a healthy, happy animal. We hope that our experiences and discoveries will encourage more shelters to open their minds and expand their policies on the treatment and incorporation of FIV+ cats. After all, if we as shelters can't work together to combat this stigma, how will the outcome ever change for these amazingly lovable cats?