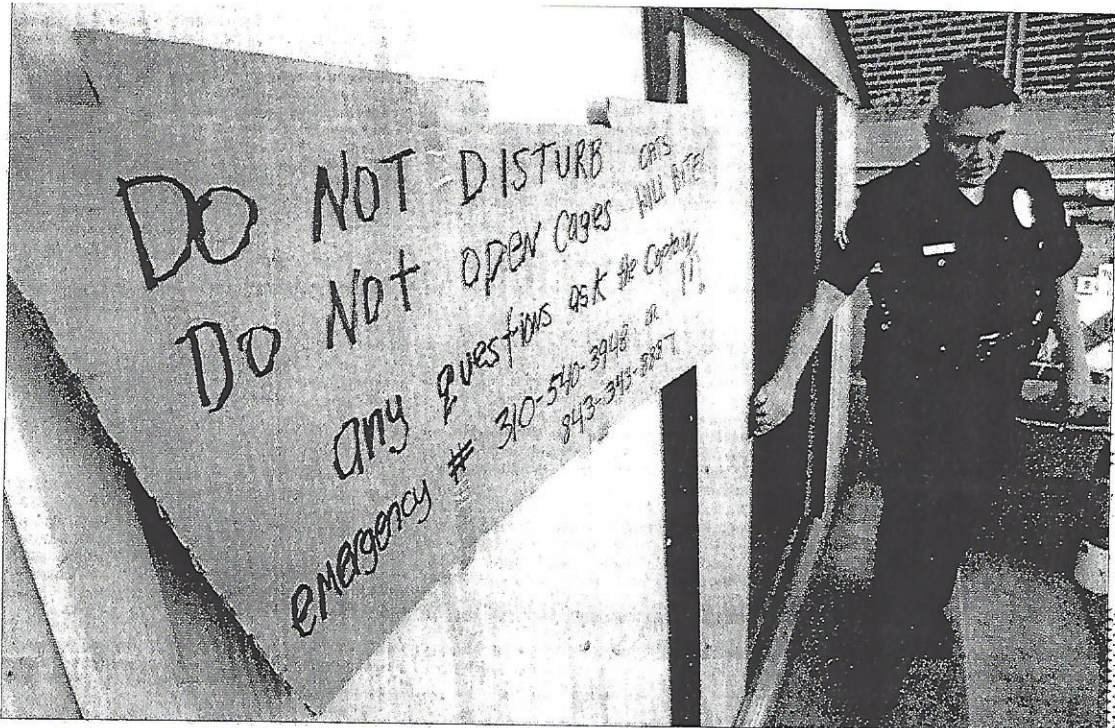


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CAPITOL & CALIFORNIA



Officer Sandra Magdaleno of the Los Angeles Police Department spends more than \$100 each month to feed feral cats at her Southeast Division station. Bob Chamberlin/Los Angeles Times

CLAW ENFORCEMENT

Feral cats keep rats, mice away at police stations, other L.A. locales

By Carla Hall
Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES - They are the homeless of the domestic animal world - colonies of feral cats that roam residential neighborhoods and lurk around office buildings and commercial garages, scavenging for food.

Unlike other strays that might rub up against a leg hoping for a crumb or a head rub, these felines are so unaccustomed to human contact that they dart away when people approach. Feral cats cannot be turned into house pets. When they end up in municipal shelters, they have little hope of coming out alive.

But one animal welfare group has figured out a way to save their lives and put them to work in Los Angeles. The Working Cats program of Voice for the Animals, a Los Angeles-based animal advocacy and rescue group, has placed feral cats in a handful of police stations with rodent problems, just as the group placed cats in the rat-plagued downtown flower district several years ago - to great effect.



One of six feral cats that patrol the LAPD's Southeast Division station roams intently around the parking lot earlier this month.

Six feral cats recently were installed as ratters in the parking lot of the Los Angeles Police Department's Southeast Division, and another group will be housed at the Central Division early this year.

Their reputation as furtive and successful exterminators grew after feral cats were introduced to the parking lot of the Wilshire Division nearly six years ago. Rats had been

burrowing into the equipment bags that bicycle officers stored in outside cages; inside the facility, mice sometimes were scurrying across people's desks.

"Once we got the cats, problem solved," said Cmdr. Kirk Albanese, a captain at the Wilshire station at the time. "I was almost an immediate believer."

After Albanese moved to the Foot-

hill Division in the northern San Fernando Valley, he introduced feral cats to the building's mice-infested basement in 2004.

"I think it's a very humane way to deal with a very stubborn problem," said Albanese, now assistant to the director in the office of operations at downtown's Parker Center, which has its own rat problem.

The cats generally don't solve the rodent problem by killing rats and mice - although the cats are game for doing so if they catch them. Rather, the cats simply leave their scent. Once rodents get a whiff of feline presence, like gangsters under a gang injunction, they move on.

"It's the smell of the cat and the cat urine," said animal rescuer Jane Garrison, a member of Voice for the Animals' board, who selected the half-dozen feral cats for the Southeast station.

Less grisly than glue traps - and usually more effective - the cats go about their "work" naturally: "They prowl, they eat, they sit in the sun," said Melya Kaplan, founder and di-

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(see over)

Cats: Initially, they mostly stay hidden

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rector of Voice for the Animals, who was responsible for putting cats in the flower markets.

When the cats are new to an area — as they are at Southeast — they spend much of their time hiding from view.

“They’ve got to play it safe and see if they’re OK,” said Southeast Officer Sandra Magdaleno, who feeds and cares for the cats.

Magdaleno, who has been rescuing animals for 25 years, can describe each of her elusive crew: two black cats, two gray-and-whites, a tabby and a huge gray bruiser who hissed at everyone during his days in the holding cages where the cats are confined while they acclimate. When his cage was opened, the bad boy timidly looked out.

“He jumped out of the cage

and looked around, then he heard a car and jumped back in,” Magdaleno said.

Garrison said the Working Cats program can be used anywhere.

At Southeast, the cats were released from their cages in late November. They hide in the station’s expansive parking lot, which is dotted with storage sheds, trees and bushes, not to mention dozens of cars under which to slink.

Magdaleno keeps the feeding station well-stocked with wet and dry food. Initially the cat installers brought provisions. Now it falls to the officer to buy food, which costs her more than \$100 a month.

“That is a glitch right now,” Kaplan said. “I’m working with the LAPD to put that in their budget.”