

That means her household contains 1,784 paws, 446 elegant and eloquent tails, 892 pointed but fuzzy ears and enough feline nonchalance to float an ark. The word is also out in Litchfield County's mouse community: Visiting 95 Belden Street can endanger your health.

But Ms. Toomey's estate is more than a catnip salesman's idea of nirvana. It is, in fact, an endowed retirement home — for cats. No kidding. More than half the cats come from owners who bequeathed funds to Ms. Toomey's home to underwrite their companion cat's care in perpetuity. (The other 200 are m-o-o-c-h-e-r-s, but we don't like to say that in front of them.)

The cat home, a nonprofit organization called Last Post, is north of this town on 35 acres of northwest Connecticut's prime rural real estate that humans like Mia Farrow, the actress, and Henry Kissinger, the expert, pay a fortune to use as a part-time getaway. The cats live in these wooded hills full time free. (So, who

Who's going to turn away a sodden soul who shows up with a feeble meow but no endowment?) Now, in a kind of feline socialism, endowment income and donations support both affluent cats and moochers.

There's Chester, who became the grumpiest resident as soon as he won the monthly Friendliest Cat Award; he gets an entire chair to himself whenever he wants. There's Brenda, with her little pixie face, and Moe, with the bent left ear. There's Poopsie, who's 22 and half blind, and Patches, who's used up seven of his lives, Sidney, who thinks he's a king, and Scooter, who talks to himself.

You walk into the home's day room (carefully maintained at 68 degrees) and the residents are everywhere, usually in the same social groupings on familiar perches at the same time every day, in various depths of snoozing. There's the morning TV group and the afternoon TV group. There are those who take the morning air out on the huge wooden deck and those who prefer the weaker afternoon sun. There are the young ones

who daily pick a catnip toy from the mini-mountain of toy mice and balls, and there are the older residents who watch such youthful tomfoolery with the jealous disdain of middle age.

Residents come and go through floor-level windows and have the run of five fenced acres of woods containing any adventure a cat could want, save, perhaps, songbirds.

Newcomers stay briefly in a special room where Michael Cohen, Judy Warner and the Last Post's five other staff members and numerous volunteers hug and help new residents shed the emotional baggage of being lost or ease the adjustment from family into institutional living. The other day Nike was hesitantly starting to step from his cage, three weeks after his

owner, Blanche Bond, died in Waynesville, Mo.

Cats over 14, who prefer a more sedate environment, inhabit the North Building, where the music and food are softer.

Speaking of which, every morning at 7:30 workers dole out 125 cans of five kinds of Friskies food. (We can report that Beef 'n Gravy easily beats Mixed Grill as the favorite.) An additional 20 pounds of dry food disappear during afternoon snacks. But you bet-te not cut in line. "There is a definite eating order," says Mr. Cohen, who loves cats despite his asthma. "The same ones eat in the same order at the same bowl every day."

At the other end of life's necessities, a local lumberyard donates a monthly truckload of sawdust. And Dr. David Sandefer over at the Sand Road Animal Hospital provides volume discount veterinary care. Visitors are welcome every day from 11 A.M. until 4 P.M. Many cats are available for adoption, with proper references.

Last Post is also home to 20 dogs, 2 rabbits and a sheep named Murdoch, who thinks he's a cat and likes to play soccer. But cats like Ethel, Samantha and Jersey City reign in Ms. Toomey's home, as 57 million felines do in other American households. A retired veteran newspaper reporter, Ms. Toomey sees these sincerely confident creatures arriving as the convenience pet of the 90's and the country's favorite animal companion. In fact, come Jan. 20, Millie Bush relinquishes her last post as the nation's First Pet to Socks Clinton.

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