

Legal Watch

Does cat licensing work? Experts from both sides of the issue weigh in.

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Licensing typically requires owners to register their cats. They pay a fee to the local government based on whether the cat is spayed or neutered. Some communities give discounts for multi-cat households; some give senior citizen discounts. They may issue a paper license and metal tag, asking pet owners to put the tags on their cats. The truth is that few communities do anything to enforce tag-wearing. As a rule towns do not patrol for unlicensed cats, but when animal control officers do pick up a cat, a fine will likely be levied if an owner is found. Costs can run in the neighborhood of \$20.

The Humane Society of the United States, based in Washington, D.C., along with a half dozen other respected organizations, supports licensing. Licensing promotes spaying and neutering, protects against rabies, helps return lost cats to their owners and protects cats found outside from disease, HSUS says.

Concerns about sterilization and rabies inoculations often lead communities to develop cat licensing laws. In the city of Columbia, Mo., licensing has been required for at least 15 years, says animal control officer Jean Easley.

"It started out just to make sure people were getting rabies shots for their cats. It's just a separate tag they purchase from their veterinarian when they get their shots. It's renewable at that time," she says. And that's where the regulation stays. "We have no law against cats running loose. We don't pick them up."

As a means of assuring regular veterinary care, Columbia's policy is in keeping with the spirit of HSUS policy and is generally considered reasonable. It is also difficult to argue against identification for all pets as a valuable safeguard. CFA supports voluntary identification, Eigenhauser says. The North Shore Animal League in Port Washington, N.Y., believes all animals should be licensed for identification purposes, says spokeswoman Marilyn DiToro. She doesn't believe cat licensing laws, though, have proved enforceable.

In Seattle, Wash., cat licensing has been required more than a dozen years. Fees generate \$250,000-\$300,000 yearly, providing 12-15 percent of his \$2 million budget, says Don Jordan, Seattle's manager of animal control. "The most important issue obviously is identifying cats," Jordan says. He cites a sobering fact: Of the 6,000 animals coming into his shelter yearly, they return only about 1,500 to their owners.