

Legal Watch

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

Beth Kalet

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Licensing is "a vital tool for rabies control in rabies-epizootic areas," the HSUS says. A well-written cat-licensing ordinance will link licenses to rabies vaccinations, thereby giving backbone to a community's push for mandatory rabies vaccinations, says HSUS issues specialist Nancy Peterson. When the license requires a vaccine, the community can ensure its safety.

The New Jersey borough of Glen Rock, which was among Northeast communities experiencing a rabies spike several years ago, also supports this premise. "The impetus [for cat licensing] is rabies control," says Paula Fleming, who directs cat and dog licensing for the borough administrator's office. Glen Rock's ordinance permits a small fine to be levied against a cat owner who has not licensed his adult cats. Instances of fining owners occur rarely if ever, she says.

Despite opposition, many communities already require owners to license cats. Typically, registering a neutered cat costs up to \$10; a non-neutered cat costs more. Recently enacted legislation in Howard County, Md., for example, charges a \$24 license fee for an unsterilized cat or dog. To back up its policy, the county's animal control administrator, Brenda Purvis, said in announcing the policy, "Cat licensing raises the chances that neighbors and other citizens will take cats back to owners, rather than calling impoundment authorities."

While licensing violations usually call for fines, many communities do not enforce them. In Austin, Texas, cat licensing is mandatory, yet cats are not required to wear tags. "It really is in essence a pet tax," says Karen Medicus, executive director of the Humane Society SPCA of Austin and Travis County. "I think the philosophy from the government is that it's a kind of user's tax to fund the animal control department." And it's a busy department, running a no-kill re-homing center and an active feral cat colony program.

A large feral cat colony led the college-town of New Paltz, N.Y., to enact cat regulations. "It's a sad situation really," New Paltz Mayor Thomas Nyquist says. With a population of only 5,400, and one in six houses used for student housing during the school year, New Paltz has its share of lost and abandoned cats come mid-May, Nyquist says. But the problem had centered on the habits of one resident who had been caring for 20-40 feral cats in and around his home. Two other smaller colonies in the community raised the number of free-roaming cats to one of discomfort.