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Cat Licensing: A License to Kill



Fatal Consequences for Cats

Passing a law mandating that all owners license their cats will increase the number of cats killed in animal pounds and shelters. The number one documented cause of death for all cats in the U.S. is being killed in animal pounds and shelters. Licensing funnels even more cats into a system which offers them little chance of survival.

Mandatory cat licensing ordinances are a license to kill. They operate on the principle that any unlicensed cat should be brought to a pound or shelter, where over 70% of all cats are killed.

A set of tags attached to a collar is usually the only feature which visually distinguishes a licensed cat from an unlicensed one or links a cat to her information in any way. Many cats do not tolerate collars, and those who wear them can easily lose them; nearly all cat collars today are designed to break away easily to prevent strangulation. Yet any cat not wearing a collar—owned or unowned, licensed or unlicensed, socialized or feral—is a visible target for animal control.

Even owned and licensed cats risk being killed if their owners do not find them quickly enough or aren't able to pay the sometimes hefty impoundment fees required to claim an animal from a pound or shelter. For feral cats who do not have "owners" to license them, mandatory cat licensing is a death sentence.

Debunking Licensing Myths

Even though mandatory licensing results in more cats killed, some supporters claim licensing is beneficial. Discover why those claims are myths.

Myth: Licensing reunites lost cats with their owners.

Truth: Animal facilities reunite only 2% of incoming cats with their owners.

Licensing tags are awkward and heavy, and poorly suited to a cat's small frame. If a cat doesn't wear a collar or her collar slips off or breaks away—as nearly all cat collars are designed to do, to prevent strangulation—there is no way to identify her and she will be treated as a stray. If a cat is lost outside of her own jurisdiction, the locally maintained license information will be useless in reuniting the animal with her owner.

In fact, across the country animal facilities reunite only 2% of incoming cats with their owners, according to the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy. Relatedly, in a recent study published in *The Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, owners report that the majority of lost cats who find their way

home do so on their own; only a small minority are recovered due to their owners calling or visiting an animal pound or shelter.

When cat licensing is introduced, cat recovery rates rarely increase, and in some cases decrease; this is most likely because more cats are brought into a system in which over 70% of them are killed, according to the most comprehensive research to date. In San Mateo County, California, enacting mandatory cat licensing increased recovery rates by only 1.5%. In a study of San Diego shelters, "the worst spike in euthanasia we found was L.A. County, where cats reclaimed fell 32 percent the year they instituted cat licensing."

Cat licensing depends on punitive measures and forced compliance and diverts valuable resources away from activities that actually ensure identification of animals, such as voluntary, subsidized microchipping.

Myth: Licensing generates revenue for animal control.

Truth: The costs of running licensing programs often exceed the revenue those programs generate.

Licensing programs are costly to run. Basic operational expenses include staff salaries and benefits, office space and equipment, and database management. Compliance rates are notoriously low, and ensuring even minimal enforcement requires expensive advertising campaigns, door-to-door canvassing, issuing citations, collecting fines, and more.

By its nature, licensing increases the number of cats picked up by animal control and brought to shelters; as a result, it also increases the number of cats killed. All of this increases expenses. Jurisdictions must pay for feeding and boarding seized cats until owners pick them up or until the minimum holding period expires.

Jurisdictions must also pay for killing all animals not claimed or adopted, and for body removal and disposal. The intake of feral cats in most locations guarantees continual seizures and killing costs, as these animals have no "owners" to claim them and cannot adapt to life in a human home.

Meanwhile, the revenue generated by these programs is negligible. In many places, the revenue is placed in a general fund where it does not benefit animals. Even in jurisdictions that place the revenue into the animal control program, the program expenses often exceed the revenue taken in.

Myth: Licensing ensures animals are spayed/neutered and vaccinated against rabies.

Truth: Spay/neuter surgeries alone ensure spaying/neutering, and vaccines alone ensure vaccination—licensing only discourages these by adding licensing fees on top of veterinary costs.

Licensing does nothing to ensure cats are spayed/neutered or vaccinated. Directly spaying/neutering and vaccinating cats is the only way to ensure both. Licensing merely directs valuable resources away from actual spay/neuter surgeries and vaccinations. Communities who wish to ensure spay/neuter surgeries and vaccination should invest government funds in low-cost, high-volume clinics.

Studies show that the main reason people don't spay and neuter their pets is because of the cost of the procedure and lack of access to clinics. Adding licensing fees on top of veterinary costs is likely to discourage spaying and neutering rather than encourage it, and is another reason licensing compliance rates are so low.

Proponents of licensing sometimes spread fear by depicting rabies as a terrible threat to the community. Licensing fails to increase vaccinations for the same reason it fails to increase spaying and neutering: only

vaccines ensure vaccination against rabies, and licensing costs on top of vaccination costs merely discourage it.

It is important to note that cats pose virtually no rabies threat to humans. Rabies has been nearly eradicated from the dog and cat population in the U.S.; it has been a disease of wildlife since 1960. In 2006, only three human deaths were reported: two from bat bites, and one from a dog bite that occurred outside the United States. The last human rabies death caused by a cat bite was in 1975.

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