April 27, 2017

To: Mayor Brian Treece
Members of the City Council

From: Michael Szewczyk, MD
Chair, Board of Health

Re: Impoundment and Licensing of Dogs and Cats

At the request of Council, the Board of Health has reviewed the City's Animal Control Ordinance as it relates to licensing and the impoundment of a cat or dog after it bites a person.

Summary of Board of Health Recommendations:

1) A city license should not be a requirement for at-home impoundment of a dog or a cat that has bitten a person.
2) All other requirements for at-home impoundment should remain.
3) The animal control ordinance should be updated to make it clear that the owner pays for the veterinarian visit at the end of the 10 day observation period and that an up-to-date rabies vaccination is a requirement for at-home impoundment.
4) Cat licensing should be discontinued.
5) Dog licensing should continue, with a concerted effort to increase program compliance.

Discussion

The current City of Columbia ordinance requires that a cat or dog be impounded and observed by a veterinarian for 10 days after it bites a person. This is done regardless of whether or not the animal has been vaccinated for rabies because we know the vaccine is not 100% effective. This language is typical of animal control ordinances. Some cities, like Lawrence, Kansas, mandate that this impoundment be done at veterinarian's office. Columbia, like Springfield, St. Joseph and St. Louis County, also allows for a dog or cat to be impounded by the owner, at home. Most often, the decision to allow home impoundment is at the discretion of the director of the health department. Columbia takes a different approach by listing the actual requirements that have to be met in order for home impoundment. This is a more defined and transparent approach which removes any concern that the director may be playing favorites.

Columbia's current ordinance allows for home impoundment if all of the following requirements are met:

(1) The animal has been vaccinated against rabies;

(2) The animal was properly licensed by the city at the time of the incident;

(3) Neither the animal nor any other animal kept at the owner's residence has a history of running at large;

(4) The animal does not have a history of causing injury to any person or animal;

(5) The animal's owner authorizes animal control officers to monitor the animal's condition for ten (10) days;

(6) The animal's owner agrees to have the animal examined by a veterinarian on the tenth day of impoundment;

(7) No one is being charged with a violation of Section 5-57 involving the animal to be impounded (dangerous animal).

A city license should not be a requirement for at-home impoundment of a dog or a cat that has bitten a person.

While most of the seven requirements make sense, there is no health or safety related issue prompting the requirement that the dog or cat be licensed. Animal Control noted that this was originally included to provide a perk to those who obtain a city license, but as we know, most owners don't bother to license their dog or cat. Board members all agreed that this requirement should be removed.

All other requirements for at-home impoundment should remain.

From the Council, there was a question regarding the necessity of the requirement that, for in-home impoundment, the dog or cat does not have "a history of running at large". The Board felt that there were good reasons why this is included. First, a dog or cat that is allowed out to roam is more likely to come in contact with a wild animal infected with rabies and is, therefore, at higher risk of being infected. As noted, the rabies vaccine is not 100% effective, but an infection with rabies is 100% fatal. At the end of the observation period, it is essential that it be confirmed that the dog or cat is healthy. If an animal has a history of running at large and is "accidentally" let out during the observation period and disappears, the person who was bitten will have to undergo prophylactic rabies vaccination. Not all owners are good about keeping their cat or dog at home and Animal Control has a good understanding of which animals have "a history of running at large".

The animal control ordinance should be updated to make it clear that the owner pays for the veterinarian visit at the end of the 10 day observation period and that an up-to-date rabies vaccination is a requirement for at-home impoundment.

During the review of the seven requirements, the Board noted that the first requirement should be modified to make it clear that an up-to-date vaccination is required for home impoundment. In addition, the Board agreed that the sixth requirement should be modified to include "at the owner's expense" to make it clear who covers the cost of the animal being cleared by the veterinarian. In the past, this has been an item of contention.

Cat licensing should be discontinued. Dog licensing should be continued.

The Board also reviewed cat and dog licensing data and discussed the purpose of having a license. As originally intended, an animal needed to receive its one or three year rabies vaccination in order to receive a license. It was felt this requirement would push the owner to

have their pet vaccinated, much like the requirement to have car insurance in order to renew your license plates. In addition, it was felt that a licensed dog or cat, with a collar and a license tag, could be more easily returned to its owner.

Data reveals that vaccinated or not, owners just don't license cats or dogs. Over the last seven years, it is estimated that only 2% of the cats and 11% of the dogs in Columbia were licensed. This data is an extrapolation based on the number of households in Columbia, the average number of dogs or cats per household and the actual number of licenses sold. The health department has no information on what percentage of dogs and cats are vaccinated. This information is not released by veterinarians and an uncertain number of animals are not routinely cared for by a veterinarian.

Board members noted that cats are most frequently a stay at home pet. Surveys indicate that around 74% of cat owners do not let their cats roam. As a pet, this is similar to ferrets, rabbits and guinea pigs which are not licensed. Dogs, on the other hand, are walked and frequently interact with other dogs and humans outside the home. Lost or roaming dogs are much more likely to interact with, and bite, other animals and humans. Animal Control spends considerably more time dealing with dogs and the City expends funds on park areas specifically designated for dogs. Given these considerations, the Board felt that dogs should continue to be licensed and cat licensing discontinued.

The Board discussed some of the causes of poor compliance with dog licensing. Many dog owners are not aware of the requirement and not all veterinarians promote or sell licenses. While the public can purchase a license directly from the City, very few are aware of this option.

Currently dog owners are able to purchase a one-year or a three-year license. This time frame was chosen to be consistent with a one-year or three-year rabies vaccination. For some, licensing becomes an annual nuisance, without the likelihood of any repercussions for non-compliance. Clearly linking rabies vaccinations with licensing has not led to robust numbers of licensed dogs. Board members felt that the requirement to vaccinate against rabies and the ability to license your dog should be unlinked. This would allow an owner to purchase a lifetime license for a onetime fee, perhaps for $50 or $75, which might increase compliance. A discount could be provided if the animal is given an identification chip. Better education regarding the licensing requirement and the availability to purchase it directly from the City would improve compliance. Consideration could also be given to provide an annual licensing notice in utility newsletters and the ability to pay for the license with the utility bill.

Should the City Council choose to implement these changes, the Board of Health would be happy to work with the City Attorney to amend the current ordinance.