

Statement on Mandatory Licensing of Dogs & Cats

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Proponents argue that dog and cat licensing will increase spay/neuter rates and reclamation of strays. In fact, a license is often called “a lost pet’s ticket home.” But licensing laws do not confer any special benefits to dogs and cats. When I was at the San Francisco SPCA, 64% of stray dogs were reclaimed and San Francisco was the safest community to be a homeless dog or cat, but only 4% of dogs were licensed and no cats were. (In fact, many non-U.S. countries have relatively high rates of owner reclaims without licensing mandates.) My experience was not an anomaly.

In the late 1990s, the Symposium on Overpopulation sponsored by the California Veterinary Medical Association in conjunction with the California Council of Companion Animal Advocates found that one of the disadvantages of licensing is that “it will discourage feral cat programs.” This result coincides with the 1993 report of the San Diego County Animal Control Advisory Committee Subcommittee on Cat Licensing which solicited input from 370 animal control/welfare agencies across the country on their experiences. Sixty-one responses were received, of which 41 had cat licensing programs. The Subcommittee found no evidence that licensing would increase claim rates, promote responsible pet ownership, or reduce death rates in shelters.

Moreover, licensing programs require animal control shelters tasked with enforcement to implement a variety of programs including developing and issuing licenses, keeping records, enforcement, and more. Where will this money come from? If you answered, “from licensing,” you’d be wrong. In fact, the 41 reporting agencies surveyed by the San Diego Subcommittee found that canvassing was required to get people to license, but doing so was not cost-effective: more money was spent getting people to license than was raised on licenses, without the attendant benefits of increased reclaim or save rates.

In addition, spay/neuter rates are driven by cost, not rates of licensing. Punishing people into spay/neuter is merely mandatory spay/neuter in disguise. Worse, it increases the number of animals abandoned, relinquished and killed, as has been shown in communities like Los Angeles which have mandated it (resulting in the first increase in impound and killing in a decade).

Regardless of promises of how it will be implemented in a given community, as other communities look to us to fashion their own policies, the results could be disastrous. In many communities which have implemented licensing laws, especially for cats, the number of animals killed increased, rather than decreased, with no appreciable benefit in terms of spay/neuter and reclaim rates. While some communities like San Mateo, California, Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and King County, Washington, have reported lifesaving results from licensing, the claims do not stand up to scrutiny.

At least two independent assessments of King County, Washington, reported high rates of neglect and killing and a simple recategorizing of animals as “unadoptable.” In other words, the rate of killing did not decline, but the number of animals they claimed were “unadoptable” simply increased. And not only did Ft. Wayne and San Mateo see initial increases in impoundment rates and killing, but neither is a No Kill

community and both are categorized by high rates of killing. We should reject, not emulate, the antiquated policies and procedures responsible for continued failure in those communities.

Nonetheless, proponents of licensing like to say that communities that are No Kill have dog licensing, like Tompkins County, NY. As a result, licensing is consistent with No Kill. But this argument is nonsensical. Licensing certainly did not cause No Kill. Moreover, the time and money spent on licensing compliance was wasted potential and wasted resources, which could have been used for truly lifesaving programs.

Punitive laws, like mandatory licensing, are part of the defunct Legislation, Education and Mandatory Sterilizing (L.E.S.) effort that pitted animal services against the community, criminalized pet ownership, and increased the power of the animal services bureaucracy, without the attendant benefits of increased lifesaving.

In 1995, the San Francisco SPCA wrote the definitive position paper against mandatory cat licensing when health department officials tried to mandate it in California by making the claim that it would increase the status of cats to that of dogs. Its words hold true today:

In our view this claim is on a par with the suggesting that licensing poor people or the homeless will help raise their "status." Of course, cat licensing proponents aren't making a comparison to people, but to dogs: if cats are licensed like dogs they will apparently enjoy the same "status" as dogs. Unfortunately, dog licensing didn't confer any beneficial "status" on canines: it was and is a tool for protecting livestock, enforcing rabies laws, and ridding the public streets of the perceived threat posed by unowned, free-roaming dogs. Indeed, since 1933 California dog licensing laws have explicitly authorized the impoundment of unlicensed dogs, and millions of dogs have been impounded and killed by animal control agencies throughout the state as a result of these mandatory licensing laws.

This is the precedent to which proponents of cat licensing appeal when they claim that licensing will raise the "status" of cats. We doubt, however, whether cats would choose such a status for themselves. They might well prefer to retain the unlicensed status they now share with humans. And the dogs may want to join them.

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