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## PUBLIC SAFETY POINT – THE IMPORTANCE OF VACCINATING PETS

Recently, Norfolk Police received information that there has been a confirmed case of rabies in a feral cat, found in southeast Norfolk. This makes the third confirmed case of rabies in Nebraska in 2018.

### **What is Rabies?**

According to the CDC, rabies is a viral disease of mammals and is most often transmitted through the bite of a rabid animal. The most common way to contract the disease is through the saliva of an infected animal. Though the disease is most often found in wildlife such as raccoons, skunks, foxes, and bats, dogs and cats may also contract rabies if they are not vaccinated against it.

### **How can you tell if an animal is rabid?**

Even though movies portray a rabid animal as one foaming at the mouth, it is actually difficult to tell if an animal has rabies just by looking at it. Instead, a common clue is abnormal behavior of the animal.

Most rabid animals show signs of central nervous system disturbance. The most reliable indicators are sudden and severe behavioral changes and unexplained paralysis that worsens over time. Behavioral changes can include sudden loss of appetite, signs of apprehension or nervousness, irritability, and hyper excitability. The animal may seek solitude, or an otherwise unfriendly animal may become friendly. Uncharacteristic aggressiveness can develop, and wild animals may lose their fear of people. Animals that are normally nocturnal may be seen wandering around during the daytime.

The furious form of rabies is the classic “mad-dog” syndrome, although it is seen in all species. The animal becomes irritable, may bite or snap at imaginary and real objects, and may viciously and aggressively use its teeth and claws with the slightest provocation. The posture is alert and anxious, with pupils dilated. Noise can invite attack. Such animals lose fear and caution of other animals. As the disease progresses, seizures and lack of muscle coordination are common.

The paralytic form of rabies usually involves paralysis of the throat and jaw muscles, often with excess salivation and inability to swallow. Drooping of the lower jaw is common. These animals may not be vicious and rarely attempt to bite. People can be infected by this form when examining the animal’s mouth or giving it medication with bare hands.

**Why are pet vaccinations important?**

Vaccination of pets is the most sensible measure to reduce human exposure to rabies. Rabies vaccinations for pets is even required by law. In Norfolk, dogs or cats should be vaccinated within 30 days of turning three months old, and should be revaccinated within one year of the first vaccination. After the second vaccination, pets should be revaccinated every two years. An updated rabies tag should be attached to the collar or harness of your pet.

**What should you do if you are bitten by a wild or stray animal?**

If you are bitten by a stray or wild animal, immediately wash the wounds thoroughly by cleaning and flushing with plenty of soap and water for several minutes. If possible, obtain the owner's address and telephone number. Immediately report all animal bites to an animal control agency, police department, or the health department for follow-up. Continue to observe the animal to aid the capture, but do not risk exposure again. Finally, call your family doctor or go to the nearest emergency room for preventative or safety measures.

**What are the symptoms of rabies in humans?**

Rabies is a medical urgency, but not an emergency (according to the CDC). Nonetheless, decisions for treatment should not be delayed. Some symptoms of rabies may be similar to that of other illnesses and include fever, headache, and general weakness or discomfort after being bit. As the disease progresses, more specific symptoms may include insomnia, anxiety, confusion, slight or partial paralysis, excitation, hallucinations, agitation, an increase in saliva, difficulty swallowing, or the fear of water.

**What do you do if you have a bat in your house?**

If you have the unwanted bat taunting you in your home you should contact animal control for assistance, close windows and closet doors, turn on all the lights if the room is dark, leave the room closing the door behind you, and make sure not to release the bat.

**How can you help prevent the spread of rabies?**

Though it may be difficult to hold back from approaching a pet to make sure it is safe, all stray dogs and cats should be left alone. That includes resisting the urge to feed them. Report any sick, stray, or abnormally behaving animal to the local animal control. Finally, educate children about interacting with stray animals.

While rabies is a serious condition, an infected animal can only transmit the virus after the onset of clinical signs. The most effective way to avoid the disease in your fur-baby is to vaccinate them. Reach out to your local veterinarian, or find one if you do not yet have one, and make sure that your pet is up-to-date on their vaccinations.

Finally, if you have any concerns with animals in the community you can contact Norfolk Community Service Officer, Doug Zach, at 402-844-1188.