

Get the Facts About Cat Law

CATS INDOORS

Laws requiring the licensing, restraint, and control of dangerous dogs have existed for many years on both local and state levels. However, cats have often been ignored in animal care and control legislation and have little or no protection legally. Given the popularity of cats throughout the United States and the steady increase of cats entering shelters, it is imperative that communities enact legislation that will protect both the animals and people. Carefully drafted legislation can help ensure that cats are recognized by law as domestic animals that are owned as pets, thereby making cat owners legally responsible for their pets' behavior and well-being.

This fact sheet provides guidelines for anyone considering proposing cat legislation. You should work with those agencies involved in animal welfare early in the process. They will be able to provide support and information essential to the success of the legislation. The passage of laws regarding cats requires a great deal of public education.

Before you begin, ascertain what laws already exist within your community and your state. Local ordinances for over 1,100 cities and counties can be found at www.municode.com. Next, decide what you want your legislation to accomplish, and whether you should work for its passage at the city, county, or state level.



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Cats In Your Community: Before presenting a case for legislation, it is helpful to document the "cat facts" in your area.

1. Compile the following statistics for your community shelter:

- ✓ The number of cats entering the shelter each year
- ✓ How many of those cats were stray and how many were surrendered
- ✓ How many stray cats are reclaimed by their owners
- ✓ How many cats are adopted
- ✓ How many are euthanized

This information can support your case for the necessity of legislation.

2. Track the number and kinds of complaints that animal care and control agencies receive regarding cats, including general nuisance calls, reports of attacks on other animals, destruction of property, and cats roaming "at large". Licensing laws will make it possible to hold cat owners accountable for problems caused by their cats.

3. Document any public health problems that relate to cats. Consult *The Great Outdoors Is No Place for Cats*, at www.abcbirds.org/cats for more information.



Jennifer Barnard, Wikimedia Commons

LEGISLATION

Cat Licensing: Cat licensing is a cat registration and identification system administered by local authorities to protect both cats and people. When cat owners register their pets and pay the associated small fee, they are purchasing an “insurance policy” that helps ensure the safe return of pets that stray from home. Cat licensing provides local officials with a useful tool to enforce laws protecting cats and communities, as well as funds to help offset the costs of animal protection and control.

Cat licensing is also a vital tool for rabies control. A well-written cat licensing ordinance links licenses with rabies vaccinations, providing a needed enforcement tool in states and localities where rabies vaccinations are mandatory. Since cats sometimes slip out of their collars, increasing numbers of communities are promoting microchips as a fail-safe method of animal identification. Differential licensing, whereby license fees are set higher for unsterilized animals than for sterilized animals, promotes spaying and neutering. It places the burden of higher fees on pet owners most likely to contribute to the surplus of cats and dogs and the many animal control problems related to that surplus.

Cat Control and Restraint: Laws requiring that cats be confined to their owner’s property or physically restrained when off-premises are the most effective way for communities to ensure that cats receive the protection and care they deserve. The City of Aurora, Colorado passed a comprehensive ordinance that requires cat licensing and rabies vaccination, control and restraint, mandatory spay/



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neuter of all cats over six months of age, and limits the number of cats an individual can own (visit www.abcbirds.org/cats to view the ordinance).

In 1999, Montgomery County, Maryland passed a cat nuisance law, whereby a cat owner who allows their cat to roam on another person’s property without that person’s permission may be fined \$100 for the first offense and up to \$500 for subsequent offenses. In addition, an unaltered cat may not roam at large.

Cat restraint and control can be a controversial issue. Some people may argue that it isn’t “natural” to keep a cat indoors. The information you have gathered from animal shelters and agencies will help you to point out that cats should not have to risk their security, health, and lives in order to satisfy their owner’s idea of a “natural” life.

Sterilization of Outdoor Cats: Many communities are looking at ways to address the problems caused by cats that spend most or all of their time outdoors. Santa Rosa, California has enacted legislation requiring that free-roaming and outdoor cats be sterilized by their owners, although cat control and restraint is not required. Licensing should be a prerequisite for this provision, so that animals and their owners may be identified and the legislation enforced.



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LEGISLATIVE TIPS:

- ✓ Before you begin to work on a bill (the draft of a law presented to the legislature to be voted on), discuss your effort with those people most involved. If animal control officers will be expected to enforce your law, meet with them early in the effort and consider their concerns and suggestions.
- ✓ If the bill may have a negative impact on a specific group, try to work with them early in the process. The more opposition you can negotiate, the better the chances that your bill will advance.
- ✓ Whenever a bill affects animals, legislators will solicit expert veterinary opinion. Try to get veterinarians or the state veterinary medical association to support your proposals.
- ✓ Find a good sponsor for your bill. Approach those who have sponsored animal welfare laws in the past. If the bill must be heard (considered or examined) by a committee, try to get the chairperson or someone on that committee to sponsor your bill. If one party dominates the legislative body, it is best to get a sponsor from that party.
- ✓ Get help in drafting your bill. Your objectives and the structure your program will take should be clear. You may be able to enlist the expertise of the sponsor's staff, or the counsel who works for the legislative body.
- ✓ Draft your bill with costs in mind. Try to create a program that generates sufficient funding to cover its expenses. It is best if only cat owners are forced to pay; funding generated this way is referred to as a "user's fee."
- ✓ As you lobby for your bill, be sure to develop good relationships with its sponsor's staff. They can control what happens, and they can provide you with important information and insight.
- ✓ Form a coalition of backers for your bill. In addition to the humane community and veterinarians, seek endorsement from groups such as cat breeders, law enforcement and public health officials, civic associations, student groups, and conservation organizations. Include anyone who will be better off if your bill passes for reasons such as safety, taxpayer savings, fewer neighborhood problems, and wildlife protection.
- ✓ Contact the local newspapers and other members of the media early in the process to explain your issue and why your proposed legislation is important.
- ✓ If hearings are held, carefully choose who will testify for your bill. It should be someone who is comfortable with public speaking and who can adequately handle any questions that come up. Try to pack the room with your supporters. They can wear badges or carry signs of support.
- ✓ When lobbying legislators or city council members to support your bill, always be polite. Even if they don't support you on this bill, they may work with you in the future on another issue.



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