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Health officials encourage pet vaccinations on World Rabies Day

SARASOTA COUNTY — In recognition of World Rabies Day on Sept. 28, Sarasota County is emphasizing the importance of pet vaccinations to prevent rabies transmission. Rabies prevention can be achieved through ensuring adequate vaccination of pets and farm animals, avoiding contact with wild animals and educating individuals at risk.

The animal species carrying rabies most frequently in Florida are raccoons, bats, foxes and unvaccinated outside cats. “Vaccination is the most crucial tool in fighting the spread of rabies among our animal population,” said Tom Higginbotham, environmental administrator for the Florida Department of Health in Sarasota County (DOH-Sarasota). “Because rabies can be prevented but not cured, being proactive in getting pets vaccinated is the key to safeguarding our community from this deadly disease.”

According to Sarasota County Animal Services, there were 532 bites from dogs and 175 cat bites reported during the last 12 months compared to 561 dog bites and 170 cat bites in Sarasota County a year prior. However, health officials caution that the actual number may be quite a bit higher since not everyone who is bitten reports the bite to Sarasota County Animal Services. Bites commonly occur when people feed or adopt raccoons as pets or handle bats, stray dogs and feral cats, attempt to break up fights between pets and other animals, rescue and assist injured animals and walk pets late at night.

During the past 12 months, 56 people were potentially exposed to rabies and received rabies post-exposure prophylaxis through DOH-Sarasota. According to local health officials, this is up slightly from August 2011-August 2012 when 54 people were potentially exposed to rabies and received rabies post-exposure prophylaxis at DOH-Sarasota.

Rabies is caused by a virus that humans and other mammals can contract through exposure to the saliva or nervous tissue from a rabid animal, and is nearly always fatal without proper post-exposure treatment. When an animal is infected with rabies, the virus is shed in the saliva and can be passed to another animal or a person, usually through a bite. Transmission may also occur if this saliva or the animal’s nervous tissue enters open wounds, the mouth, nose or eyes of another animal or person.

The following are steps you can take to protect yourself and your loved ones against rabies:

- Keep rabies vaccinations up to date for all pets.
- Keep your pets under direct supervision so they do not come in contact with wild animals. If your pet is bitten by a wild animal, seek veterinary assistance for the pet immediately and contact Sarasota County Animal Services at 941-861-9500.
- Call Animal Services to remove any stray animals from your neighborhood.
- Spay or neuter your pets to help reduce the number of unwanted pets that may not be properly cared for or regularly vaccinated.

- **Do not** handle, feed or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans **or** litter.
- **Never** adopt wild animals or bring them into your home.
- Teach children **never** to handle unfamiliar animals, wild or domestic, even if they appear friendly.
- Prevent bats from entering living quarters or occupied spaces in homes, churches, schools, and other similar areas, where they might come in contact with people and pets.

Unusual acting animals should be reported to Sarasota County Animal Services at 941-861-9500 for handling. If a domestic or wild animal bites or scratches you, seek care promptly. Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and running water for five to 10 minutes. Immediately visit your primary doctor, hospital or county health department for medical attention. The contact number at the DOH-Sarasota to report an animal bite that occurred in Sarasota County is 941-861-6133.

Additional information is available online:

www.sarasotahealth.org

www.cdc.gov/rabies

www.worldrabiesday.org

Sarasota County, located in southwest Florida, incorporated in 1921 and adopted a Home Rule Charter in 1971. The charter establishes a commission form of government with elected county commissioners as the county's governing body. An appointed county administrator acts as chief administrative officer and is responsible for operations and administration. Approximately 386,000 residents live within the county's unincorporated area and four municipalities, the cities of Sarasota, North Port and Venice, and the town of Longboat Key. Sarasota County is an All America County (2008), and its landmark Siesta Key Beach was named the No. 1 beach in America in 2011. The county's budget has received the Distinguished Budget Presentation Award for 23 consecutive years. In 2013, the county's website, www.scgov.net, was named by the editors of "Sunshine Review" as one of the most transparent government websites in the United States.

