For Immediate Release

Rabid cat attacks two Suncrest residents; rabies vaccine distributed Friday

MORGANTOWN, WV (Sept. 5, 2019) — A cat that later tested positive for rabies attacked two Suncrest neighbors last week in separate incidents, but the situation has been complicated by an area cat colony that interacted with the rabid cat.

Both residents of Legion Street, the neighbors are undergoing post-exposure rabies prophylaxis treatment.

In the meantime, the cat interacted with a cat colony in the Legion Street area. State law requires that these cats be collected. If there is documented proof that a cat has had a rabies vaccine, there would be the option to re-vaccinate the cat for rabies and confined and observed for 45 days.

If there is no documented proof the cat has been vaccinated for rabies, it can be quarantined in a double cage with no human or animal contact for six months if someone is willing to pay for that, to make sure it is rabies-free. Otherwise, it would be euthanized.

“Rabies is spread through saliva,” said Dr. Lee B. Smith, Monongalia County Health Department executive director and county health officer. “So if the cats are eating out of the same bowl and drinking out of the same water trough, not to mention cat fighting, the chance of rabies being spread in this colony is really high.”

Any residents of the Legion Street area who have dogs or cats that have been allowed to roam around should keep an eye on their animals and not let them outside unattended for 45 days. All cats, dogs and ferrets should be up to date on rabies vaccines, as per West Virginia state law. “It is not a suggestion,” Dr. Smith said. “It’s the law.”

Another precaution that residents should take is to not leave pet food outside.
“It does attract strays and raccoons, and we know we have a rabies issue,” Dr. Smith said.

Coincidentally, MCHD Environmental Health sanitarians will be going out into Morgantown on Friday to distribute Oral Rabies Vaccine (ORV) baits. Monongalia County Health Department spent $1,566 to buy 1,080 ORV baits for the drop, said Jon Welch, program manager of MCHD Environmental Health.

There have been 14 report incidents of raccoons that have tested positive for rabies in Monongalia County in 2019. Five of those raccoons had encounters with family dogs. Those dogs had to be re-vaccinated for rabies and observed for 45 days. If their human family members were exposed or potentially exposed to the dog’s blood or saliva, they need to undergo post-exposure rabies prophylaxis.

MCHD Environmental Health was alerted to the situation with the cat late last Friday afternoon after receiving a call about the cat’s second victim, who saw the cat in the bushes. Unprovoked, the cat aggressively scratched the person on the arm, said MCHD registered sanitarian Joe Lawson.

The cat was killed with a pellet gun by a family member and brought to MCHD. It was also learned that the cat also had bitten a neighbor. The cat was sent to the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources Office of Laboratory Services. This week, MCHD learned that the cat tested positive for rabies.

Rabies is a viral disease found in mammals that attacks the nervous system, ultimately causing disease in the brain and death, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov). The closer to the head a person is attacked, the faster rabies can develop.

Someone who has an encounter with a strange and potentially rabid animal should wash out the wound with soap and water and seek treatment at an emergency department if post-exposure rabies prophylaxis might be required.

“If you go to your physician or a doc-in-the-box, they’re not going to have rabies vaccine,” Dr. Smith said. “We don’t routinely stock rabies vaccine unless we have ordered it for a patient who needs it if they are traveling to a place with rabies, if we are updating local veterinarian staff, or for some other reason.”

Only emergency departments, in the case of Morgantown, Ruby Memorial Hospital and Mon Health Medical Center, would have rabies immunoglobulin and rabies vaccine on hand, Dr. Smith noted.
Under West Virginia law, all animal bites are to be reported. MCHD Environmental Health works to control rabies and other vector-borne diseases. MCHD also works to educate the community on the presence of rabies, the need to avoid wildlife and to take common-sense precautions with pets.

Skunks, foxes and bats, along with raccoons, are common rabies carriers in West Virginia.

The hand-baiting that will be done Friday by MCHD Environmental Health will include areas around Green Bag Road, Richwood Avenue, parts of Westover and Star City and the rail-trail downtown. The United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA APHIS) just completed a drop of 49,000 ORV baits in less sparsely populated areas of Monongalia County after MCHD officials asked the agency to move the west-moving zone east again because of the high incidence of reported rabies.

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