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RABIES AWARENESS

June is Rabies Awareness Month in Niagara County. The Niagara County Department of Health is encouraging the public to learn more about rabies and how to protect themselves, their pets and their livestock from becoming infected.

Rabies affects the central nervous system causing paralysis and ultimately death in infected animals. Signs of rabies virus infection in animals include changes in behavior such as aggression, agitation and excessive salivation.

Rabies has been present in New York for more than 25 years. Fabian Rosati, Associate Supervising Public Health Sanitarian of the Niagara County Department of Health, said, "The rabies virus can infect any mammal including dogs, cats, livestock, wildlife and humans." According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the vast majority of rabies cases reported each year occur in wild animals such as raccoons, skunks, bats and foxes. In 2007 rabies-infected animals throughout Niagara County included 5 raccoons and 1 bat. To date there have been 4 cases of rabies in Niagara County, all of which were raccoons. Two of these cases were documented in the past two weeks.

While the majority of rabies cases involve wild animals, Fabian Rosati emphasized that keeping vaccinations current for dogs and cats, including indoor cats, is crucial to prevention. A pet can act as a link between a rabid wild animal and a person. An unvaccinated animal can acquire the virus through a bite and then bring the virus into the household. "Determining an animal's rabies status is essential when there is contact between a potentially-rabid animal and a person or pet," Fabian Rosati stressed.

"Prevention and avoidance are key when dealing with wildlife," stressed Jack Landrigan, Supervising Public Health Sanitarian. "Raccoons and skunks are attracted to developed areas and capitalize on artificial food sources such as garbage, compost, gardens, bird feed and pet food. Skunks are particularly fond of white lawn grubs and the larvae of Japanese beetles. Many animals also take advantage of man-made shelters such as crawl spaces under garden sheds or decks. Opportunistic raccoons frequently den in chimneys that are not capped, and bats will infiltrate and reproduce in attics that are not sealed. By eliminating both artificial food sources and shelter, the chances of encountering bats, raccoons and skunks around your home and yard will be greatly reduced."

Additional tips for preventing rabies include:

- Vaccinate dogs, cats, ferrets and selected livestock for rabies and keep vaccinations up-to-date. Contact your veterinarian today for details. You can also contact the Niagara County Department of Health for their free rabies clinic schedule, or go online at www.niagaracounty.com/health.
- Keep pets under direct supervision in a yard or on a leash to minimize contact with wild animals.

- Enjoy wildlife such as skunks, bats, raccoons and foxes from a safe distance.
- Do not handle, feed or unintentionally attract wild animals with open garbage cans or pet food.
- Never adopt wild animals or bring them into your home. Do not try to nurse sick or injured animals – call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator, nuisance wildlife control officer, or animal control officer if available in your area for assistance.
- Teach children to never approach unfamiliar dogs, cats or wildlife even if they appear friendly.
- Report animals acting strangely to your local dog or animal control officer.
- If an animal inflicts a bite or scratch, wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water for 15 minutes then call your health care provider and your local health department.
- Use caution with a pet you suspect may have been in a fight with a wild animal. Handle with gloves and contact a veterinarian.
- Contact your local health department immediately if a bat is found near a sleeping person, young child, or anyone with mental incapacitation. Bats have such small teeth that bites are not always detectable. Even unknown or minor contact with bats has led to rabies infection.
- Bat proof your home by repairing screens, vents and other areas where bats may gain access.

Bat rabies viruses have accounted for 37 of the 40 human deaths from rabies in the U.S. since 1990. This is one of the main reasons why bat rabies education is being emphasized in 2008.

The frequency of bat encounters increases in warm weather because:

- Bats that have migrated south for the winter return.
- Bats that have overwintered in caves become more active.
- Female bats establish maternal roosts in accommodating places such as home attics.
- People are outside at dusk when bats emerge from day roosts to feed on insects, and
- Children at camps in rural areas may sleep in rustic buildings that may not be bat-proofed.

For more information on rabies, contact the Niagara County Department of Health at 439-7444 or visit NYSDOH on-line at: www.health.state.ny.us/