

Sunday Column – Unintended Consequences

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We often hear in the course of our work that there should be more laws telling people how to take care of their pets. Anti-tethering and spay/neuter laws seem like no-brainers. The problem is that unintended consequences are lurking in the enforcement behind some of these laws.

Take anti-tethering for instance. The dark side of what seems like a good law is when municipal government is forced to seize large numbers of (usually) large breed dogs, from citizens who can't afford to put up a fence or to take Fido to doggy day care while they're at work.

Most people love their pets and they mean well. Unfortunately, people can be poor problem solvers in a pinch. The City of Auburn knows this and they enforce their anti-tethering ordinance with a heart. They work with pet owners to help them comply. Those who are willing to make the effort to work with animal control will keep their pets.

Other cities pass anti-tethering ordinances and never bother to enforce them. Animal control officers (ACOs) may not be comfortable with human interaction which too often is what drew them to the job of riding around in a truck all day picking animals up off the street. If ACOs are not inclined to work with people, any enforcement would consist of bringing more animals into already over-crowded facilities.

Laws requiring people to spay or neuter their pets would backfire in a similar manner, especially in a state like Alabama with outdated laws barring access to free and low-cost services. The price of spay or neuter at a traditional veterinary clinic ranges from \$250-\$350. Any number of special circumstances bumps this price up considerably. Even middle class pet owners are hard pressed to work this into their monthly budgets.

The City of Columbus recently placed a revision to the pet registration ordinance into their council business agenda. This would have placed the enforcement burden onto veterinary clinics and nonprofit pet adoption agencies by requiring the issue of the registration tag with the rabies vaccine.

In an attempt to correct this they revised the ordinance yet again to allow customers to decline to register. In this event, the veterinarian or nonprofit agency would be required to report the customer to animal control who would then follow up directly with the pet owner. Imagine getting this knock on your door!

PAWS Humane provides free spay/neuter in underserved, high poverty neighborhoods. In one such neighborhood over 70% of the households make less than \$12,000/year. Included with each spay or neuter is a rabies vaccine which we believe is an important component to maintaining the overall public health.

This ordinance would have required that either PAWS Humane or the pet owner pay for the City pet registration or we would have to report the pet owner to animal control. Word spreads quickly in these communities and animal control would only have to knock on one door to bring this program to a crashing halt.

Lawmakers have a lot to think about in the course of carrying out their duties. They can't always be expected to anticipate how a law that seems to make sense can backfire. Lawmakers should not

hesitate to ask the experts in our field how a law could negatively impact the programs that have the potential to one day solve pet overpopulation.

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