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(11/03/06)

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Humane Society of Berks County Tells Pet Owners: “If You Surrender Your Pet, Be Prepared to Pay Money or Time”

The Humane Society of Berks County, Berks County’s leader in animal welfare, announced today that it will be telling those surrendering their pets that they should expect to pay for the service in either money or time. Starting Saturday, November 4, anyone wishing to surrender a pet will be charged \$25 per animal or \$50 for two or more animals. In the event that the owner cannot afford the fee, the owner will be given the option of providing **three hours** of community service. “With the number of resources and options available to pet owners through our agency, behaviorists, and veterinarians, there are fewer and fewer reasons to abandon a pet at a shelter,” said Humane Society executive director, Karel I. Minor. “We don’t want to be in the position of actually facilitating the abandonment of pets and our charitable donors shouldn’t be asked to shoulder the expense- the pet’s owner should.”

The new rule would apply only to owned pets and may be waived in cases in which the owner truly has no option but to surrender their pet and cannot afford the fee. The Humane Society of Berks County received 3,630 owner surrendered pets in 2005. Minor estimates that at least 1/3 of owners left no donation to offset the expense of caring for those pets. With the direct costs for providing services to just one animal at nearly \$100, these costs add up to nearly \$100,000 a year for the 1/3 of animals surrendered without a donation. “We are and will remain an open door shelter and we accept any domestic animal, any time,” said Minor. “However, the expense of caring for these animals is great and that money shouldn’t have to be diverted from other animals just because some of these incoming pets have thoughtless or deadbeat owners.”

Owners surrendering pets will be given a choice of paying \$25 per animal immediately or providing 3 hours of community service or full payment within 30 days. Failure to do so

will result in the debt being given to a collection agency and reported to credit bureaus. Community service may be performed at the Society's 11th Street shelter or elsewhere. "Pet overpopulation is a community problem," said Minor. "By giving up a pet, owners not only put their pet's life at risk, they place a burden on shelter services and the community. We think they should pay the community back for that burden, whether through monetary payment or through work equity." Owner's choosing to perform community service may do so at the HSBC or through any organized public, private, or religious community service program. Those surrendering litters of animals will be given the option to apply their surrender fee to a low cost sterilization of their pet in order to break the overpopulation cycle.

Animal shelters have long struggled with whether to require payment because of the fear that fees would unfairly impact the poor or that owners will abandon pets rather than pay. Society officials felt that the service option addresses the income issue by giving low income owners a non-cash option to repay their debt to the shelter. When asked if charging will result in animals being abandoned elsewhere because owners simply don't want to pay, Minor is not entirely sure of the answer. "We have people who abandon pets now and we don't charge," he said. "But right now we're diverting funds from medical and emergency services to pay for pets dumped at the shelter without the owner taking any financial responsibility- animals are suffering because of that right here and right now."

Nationwide, shelters are increasingly charging intake fees ranging from a few to hundreds of dollars. The **"Pay or Work" Program** is believed to be unique and Humane Society officials are not aware of any shelters offering a similar community service option. The Humane Society will evaluate the program as it goes forward to determine its effectiveness. The Society will also continue to counsel pet owners on the ways to keep their pet at home, where it belongs. "We have so many programs, services and options available to help pet owners who truly want to keep their pet. We also take in pets from owners who truly can't keep their pet and do everything possible not to give them up," said Minor. "We shouldn't make it easy for the minority of careless owners to simply dump their pets without taking any personal or financial responsibility for the decision. They chose to be responsible for the animal- they should take the decision to give up on that responsibility seriously."

The “Pay or Work” program is the first part of the HSBC’s new **Pet Owner’s Personal Responsibility Program**. Over the next year, this program will undertake a community awareness campaign to remind pet owners of their own personal responsibility to their pet, both under the law and ethically. Rabies and licensing requirements, proper veterinary care and nutrition, behavioral training options, and the reality of the life-long commitment owed to a pet will all be focuses under the new program. “Yes, shelters are here to be a safety net for pets and their people. But that safety net doesn’t absolve pet owners of their responsibility to the companion animals they *chose* to care for,” said Minor. “As this program reminds pet owners: **It’s *your* pet. It’s *your* responsibility.**”

The Humane Society of Berks County is a nationally recognized animal welfare agency serving all of Berks County and surrounding communities, sheltering nearly 7,000 animals each year. It is a private, non-profit organization funded through donations and service fees. In addition to enforcing Pennsylvania’s animal cruelty laws, the Humane Society offers award-winning adoption services, spay and neuter services, humane education, pet behavioral counseling, and helps stray, injured and mistreated animals. The Humane Society of Berks County is located at 1801 N. 11th Street, Reading. More information is available at www.berkshumane.org.

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