Defining Cruelty: Knowing When To Call the Police or When To Leave a Letter

When I conduct educational programs, we discuss what the acronym SPCA stands for: Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. We discuss the individual meanings of the words and then the implication of putting these words together. Participants easily define society, prevention, and, of course, animals; but the word cruelty often trips them up.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “cruel” as: “1-disposed to inflict pain or suffering; devoid of humane feelings 2-a: causing or conducive to injury, grief, or pain b: unrelied by leniency.”

Yet, people often do not assign the same value to the word “cruelty” when applying it to animals. Abuse and cruelty to animals is illegal in North Carolina. Abuse and cruelty also include neglect.

There is a range of conditions that constitute abuse and cruelty at the state, county, and city levels. The difference in how these cases are treated is determined by their appointment as misdemeanor or felony crimes. Wake County Animal Control Ordinance: The definition of abuse in Wake County includes, but is not limited to, failing to provide adequate food and water for more than 24 hours; failing to provide adequate shelter; beating and torturing animals (among other things) resulting in physical pain, suffering, or death; and “failing to provide adequate medical attention for any sick, diseased, or injured animal in order to prevent physical pain, suffering, or death to the animal.” This is only a sampling of the definition of “abuse” of animals in Wake County.

You can read the entire ordinance and the definition at www.wakegov.com/pets/safety/ordinance.htm.

In Section 2-3-5 Cruelty to Animals the ordinance states “The words ‘torture’ and ‘tortment’ shall be included to include every act, omission or neglect whereby unjustifiable physical pain, suffering or death is permitted.”


State law is closely mirrored by the county law but it elaborates on what qualifies as a misdemeanor or a felony. Cruelty to animals committed intentionally – an act committed knowingly and without justifiable excuse – is a Class I misdemeanor. Cruelty to animals committed maliciously – an act committed intentionally and with malice or bad motive – is guilty of a Class 1 felony.

Abuse, cruelty and neglect of animals is illegal in our state. It empowers us to take action when we understand how our government defines these words. If you see an animal being treated in a way that falls into these categories, call your local law enforcement immediately.

If you are concerned about an animal’s quality of life but the animal is not being neglected according to the law, we’ve provided a handy letter for you below.

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Dear Neighbor,

I am leaving you this letter because I am concerned about the welfare and quality of life of your pet. I wanted to give you some information that I hope will help you better understand a pet’s needs and those of your neighbors.

This letter is meant to make your life, your pet’s life, and your neighbors’ lives better.

IT CONCERNS ME TO SEE:

❑ Your cat or dog loose in the neighborhood.

A cat or dog loose in the neighborhood runs the risk of getting hurt or hurting others. A loose pet can be hit by a car, run away and get lost, get into fights or be attacked by other animals, be exposed to disease through contact with unvaccinated pets or wild animals, be harmed by people or harm people, be picked up by animal control officers, be stolen, get into pesticides, antifreeze or other things that could kill them.

❑ Your cat or dog left outside without proper food, water, or shelter.

A cat or dog left outside without proper food, water, or shelter can suffer from starvation, thirst, exposure and accidental death. A pet should be fed one to two times a day, always have access to fresh water, and be provided with a shelter of at least three sides, a roof and a floor. Ideally, your cat would be an indoor cat and your dog would live inside the home with the family. Cats and dogs have been raised to live with humans and they become lonely, depressed, and anxious if isolated outdoors.

❑ Your cat or dog outdoors without a collar and proper identification and rabies tags.

A cat or dog outdoors without a collar and proper identification and rabies tags can be picked up by animal control or get lost. Without a collar and proper ID tags, you increase the chances of never being reunited with your pet.

I also wanted to make you aware of just a few of the laws that protect your pets and help the community. These are excerpted or summarized from the NC General Statutes as well as the Wake County Animal Control Ordinance and the municipal codes of Raleigh, Cary, and Garner. They directly relate to the concerns listed above.

❑ Section 2-3-7. Animals at Large (this applies to dogs AND cats)

“The Animal Control Section shall confiscate any animal found to be at large and impound it…” (“At Large: Any animal shall be deemed at large when it is off the real property of its owner and not under the restraint (such as a leash) of a competent person.”)

❑ Section 2-3-6. Adequate Feed, Water and Shelter

“All dogs and cats shall be given adequate food, adequate water and adequate shelter. Adequate shelter is an enclosure of at least three (3) sides, a roof and a floor. The enclosure shall be ventilated and must have sufficient room for the animal(s) to move about freely and to lie comfortably.”

❑ Section 2-3-23. Inoculation of Dogs, Cats and Other Pets

“It shall be unlawful for an owner to fail to provide current inoculation against rabies for any dog or cat four (4) months of age or older.”

Raleigh, Cary, and Garner require pets be licensed with the city and wear the license tag at all times.

I hope that you can accept this letter with an open heart and open mind. I’ve provided it with the best of intentions for the safety and welfare of your pet.

Sincerely,

Your Neighbor

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This letter was provided by the SPCA of Wake County. Please visit www.spcawake.org for more information or call 919-772-2326.