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MEMORANDUM

TO: Local Boards of Health

FROM: Catherine Brown, DVM, MSc, MPH
State Public Health Veterinarian
Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH)

DATE: August 5, 2014

SUBJECT: Bats and Rabies

As you may already be aware, calls to public health agencies regarding bats and potential exposures to bats, are on the rise at this time of year. This is because attics are the place in a house where bats usually choose to roost and raise their young. During the summer days, an attic can become too warm for the bats, forcing them into people's living quarters as they search for cooler places to roost. In addition, baby bats born earlier in the summer are getting old enough to start exploring on their own. Inexperienced young bats may fly down a chimney, through an open window, or down attic stairs. This may place them in proximity to, or even in direct contact with, people.

Below are several important points to keep in mind when handling calls regarding bats.

- If a bat is found inside a house, **do not release the bat outdoors until you can safely rule out that an exposure, as described below, occurred.**
- If an exposure to a person or a domestic animal has occurred, it is critical that the animal be safely captured, euthanized and submitted immediately for testing to the Hinton State Laboratory Institute. Information on how to submit an animal is available at www.mass.gov/dph/rabies. Improper handling and/or delays in specimen submission can result in a decomposed animal that cannot be tested. Unsatisfactory specimens have to be treated as if they are positive since rabies cannot be ruled out.

- An exposure is defined as: a person has had direct contact with a live animal and cannot rule out that a bite or scratch may have occurred; a sleeping person waking to find a bat in the room; or, an adult witnesses a bat in the room with a previously unattended child, mentally disabled person, intoxicated person or domestic pet. Simply finding a bat inside a home does not, in itself, indicate that a potential exposure has occurred.
- If a bat is involved in an exposure situation AND is available for testing, decisions about post exposure prophylaxis can wait until test results are available. Fewer than 5% of bats tested in Massachusetts are found to be rabid.
- If the bat is found to be rabid, or the bat is unavailable for testing, post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) is recommended if an exposure (as defined above) has occurred.
- Decisions about exposures and the need for PEP should be made in consultation with a healthcare provider and/or public health. Encourage your Animal Inspectors and Animal Control Officers to refer questions about exposure to appropriate resources. The MDPH has developed a two-sided business card for ACOs to hand out directing people to the right place. These cards can be order free of charge at <http://massclearinghouse.ehs.state.ma.us/RAB/RB4001.html>.
- Owners are legally required to keep their pet dogs and cats up-to-date on their rabies vaccinations. Currently vaccinated dogs and cats exposed to bats that are unavailable for testing, may need to receive a booster shot and/or be quarantined. Unvaccinated animals exposed to bats unavailable for testing pose a significant risk to other animals and people and may need to be quarantined for a prolonged period or occasionally even euthanized, at the owner's expense. Questions about domestic animals exposed to bats should be directed to the Department of Agricultural Resources, Division of Animal Health at 617-626-1786.
- When necessary, bats should be safely captured using the following technique and while wearing thick leather gloves. Wait until the bat lands, cover the bat with a coffee can (or similar container), and slide cardboard under the container to trap the bat inside. Avoid doing anything that might crush the bat's skull and make it unsuitable for testing. **Never handle a bat with bare hands.** Information on capturing a bat is available at <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dph/cdc/rabies/bat-capturing.pdf>.

If you have questions about potential rabies exposures or how to submit a bat to MDPH for rabies testing, please call the MDPH, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800. For additional information on rabies, you may also visit the website at www.mass.gov/dph/rabies.