

The Pros and Cons of Shelter Vaccines

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
August 2015

Take a number and wait, but you'll save money



y terrier-mix Queenie was due for her rabies shot and tag on June 2.

Earlier this spring I'd received a blue renewal notice postcard from Miami-Dade Animal Services: "Your pet's rabies vaccination and/or your dog's Miami-Dade County license will expire soon." It went on to warn: "Rabies is a **fatal disease** that is contagious to both pets and humans."

Failure to renew could result in a \$65 to \$165 fine for each violation. They don't pull punches when it comes to vaccines and tags.

Driving 30 minutes to Medley is no fun with a dog when your car's A/C is down, but as June 2 loomed, I decided to get it over with a few days early.

Why bother with Miami-Dade Animal Services (MDAS)? Warm fuzzy feelings for the place are rare while "kill shelter" status hangs over them. Two years ago Queenie was sprung from the facility in the nick of time by a rescue group that regularly checks euthanasia lists there and saves the most adoptable ones.

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So why not go instead to a nearby vet for shots? Because MDAS vaccines are the cheapest in town.

How cheap? They offer a dog vaccine package of rabies, DHPP, and bordetella for a mere \$35; the price is \$25 for low-income owners and \$20 cat vaccines rabies and FRCP. No vet exam, no diagnostic tests, just basic shots.

Compare those with prices along Biscayne Corridor, where dog vaccines range from \$103 to \$170. These include mandatory examination fees of around \$50 and often fecal/heartworm checks. While exams and tests are beneficial, budget-minded people with dogs on monthly heartworm prevention can save at MDAS.

Upon arriving at MDAS, though, that local vet office started looking better and better. I made the mistake of going on a Saturday. After a bumper-to-bumper crawl into the parking lot, there were no empty spots. Cars were parked willy-nilly on medians and in no-parking zones, even double parked. I circled and circled until I held my breath and squeezed in somewhere.

Queenie had to hit the grass for bladder relief but decided she'd have none of it, as she dodged land mines in front of the building. Once inside, our trek was forgotten with a blast of cool air; MDAS excels at ample waiting-room air-conditioning.

Several feet from the entrance were two "take-a-number" dispensers. Keeping things orderly, those in line for rabies shots and tags were directed to take white-numbered tickets; yellow-numbered tickets were for those waiting to adopt. Mine was No. 91 and the electronic sign behind the clerks' desk said they were currently serving No. 64. Hopes for a quick visit were gone.

Packed on Saturday, MDAS buzzed with families, extended families, and their pets. An estimated 60 people and 25 animals were in the waiting area, not counting the flow of volunteers, shelter staff, rescue groups, and shelter visitors. There wasn't enough space to accommodate the crowds, or enough common sense to go around. Some people cradled dogs or cats in their arms, or had youngsters carelessly handling leashes. Retractable leads added to the tension. A cat got loose in the parking lot, and I expected a dog bite to go down. Toddlers ambled around strange dogs, and people walked by with palms turned out, touching each dog

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as they passed.

Numbers were called out in English and Spanish, and five computers were set up with clerks to enter information, process payments, and print out receipts; owing to high turnout, it became a two-hour wait just to handle paperwork.

Good news for me: since I came in before the shot due date, they rewarded me with a three-year rabies vaccine for the price of a one-year. From there we were directed to a narrow and dimly lit hallway to wait again, this time for the actual administration of vaccines. After 15 minutes, we were let inside a tiny room where Queenie finally received shots from the sole vet for dozens and dozens of animals.

MDAS deserves credit for trying to keep craziness at a minimum with the take-a-number system, bilingual directions, and several processing stations. They're also keeping floors clean and providing paper towels, poop bags, and trash bins.

On-leash/in-carrier rules should be regularly announced and enforced. On the day I visited, a volunteer eventually stepped up and handed out slip leads to those in need, but volunteers ought to stand by doors and brief visitors coming in. Family size should be limited to two. Mom, Dad, kids, grandparents, cousins -- it all adds up to too many bodies in one room.

Animal Services didn't lose points for well-worn décor; we weren't there for ambiance. Yet every year I swear, "Never again!" It makes for a long day, but the low-priced vaccines are worth the wait. Just don't go on the weekend.

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