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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 8, 2008

STAY AWAY FROM STRAYS AND WILD ANIMALS

If your child finds an injured bat lying on the sidewalk or a baby groundhog that appears abandoned, would he or she pick up the animal and bring it home to nurse it? The answer should be an emphatic NO.

Rabies is a real threat in every Westchester neighborhood and the risk of contact with wild or stray animals is greater in the summer months.

Although the number of animals submitted to the Health Department for testing was down this year, compared with the same period last year, more of these animals have tested positive for rabies. From January through June 2007, the Health Department received 244 animals for testing, and 10 tested positive for rabies. In the first six months of this year, the Health Department tested 201 animals and found 13 of them had rabies.

The number of raccoons found positive for rabies increased from four in the first half of 2007 to seven in the first half of 2008. In the past 12 months, from July 1, 2007 to June 30, 2008, 18 raccoons tested positive for rabies, according to the Westchester County Health Department.

“Rabies is a fatal disease that is spread through the saliva of infected animals,” said Dr. Joshua Lipsman, Commissioner of Health for Westchester County. “For treatment to be effective it must begin before the onset of symptoms. Contact with wild or stray animals must be avoided and, if contact does occur, it must be reported to the Health Department to determine whether treatment is needed.”

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Children on summer recess often spend more time outdoors. There may also be many young animals leaving their nests at this time whose inexperience can lead to injuries or more frequent encounters with humans. Children need to clearly understand that touching a wild or stray animal is a big no-no whatever the circumstances.

Parents and caregivers are strongly urged to teach children not to touch wild or stray animals no matter how cute and friendly they are. Animals with rabies often show no fear of humans and may seem tame. Children should also be taught to report any accidental contact that may occur to their parents or caregivers.

Westchester County law requires that all dogs and cats be vaccinated against rabies and that the vaccinations be kept up to date. Residents are advised to report stray animals to the local police department.

The Health Department offers the following advice to anyone who has had physical contact with a wild or stray animal:

- Immediately wash the area of contact thoroughly with soap and water then call your doctor or the Westchester County Health Department at (914) 813-5000.
- If possible, the animal should be caught and tested. If the animal can be tested, the need for rabies shots may be eliminated.
- If you are bitten by someone's pet, get the pet owner's name and address so the animal's vaccination records can be checked and report the bite to the Westchester County Health Department at (914) 813-5000.

For more information on rabies, call the Westchester County Health Department at (914) 813-5000, or visit our website at www.westchestergov.com/health.