

**Region of Waterloo**

**Public Health and Paramedic Services**

**Health Protection and Healthy Environments**

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**To:** Community and Health Services Committee

**Meeting Date:** May 5, 2026

**Report Title:** 2025 Rabies Prevention and Control Program Update

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**1. Recommendation**

For information.

**2. Purpose / Issue:**

This report provides a program update for Regional Council, as the Board of Health, on Public Health's Rabies Prevention and Control Program.

**3. Strategic Plan:**

This report relates to the Equitable Services & Opportunities strategic priority of the 2023-2027 Strategic Plan. Public Health protects the public by mitigating risk of rabies transmission to humans through investigations, involving humans and animals, and promoting vaccination in pets.

**4. Report Highlights:**

As required by the Ministry of Health's Ontario Public Health Standards, the goal of Public Health's Rabies Program is to prevent the occurrence of rabies in humans. To achieve this, Public Health Inspectors investigate every animal to human incident of potential rabies exposure (i.e. bite or scratch breaking the skin) reported to Public Health. Public Health also promotes rabies vaccinations in pets and educates the public to prevent the transmission of rabies.

Highlights from the program's activities in 2025 include:

- The total number of rabies investigations has increased over the past several years, from 1209 in 2021 to 1642 in 2025 (Appendix A). 2025 had the most potential rabies exposures reported to Public Health, to date.
- Many rabies investigations have become more complex, particularly as the number of cases requiring rabies post-exposure prophylaxis has increased.

- Rabies post-exposure prophylaxis (rPEP) was issued to 291 people, representing approximately 18% of total investigations completed (Appendix A). This was the most rPEP dispensed over the years and is an increase from 229 in 2024.
- In 2024, the first human case of domestically acquired rabies was reported in Ontario (since 1967), leading to increased public awareness of rabies. This was likely a contributing factor to the increase in reported exposures and cases requiring rPEP in 2025.
- To mitigate the risk of rabies in the community, Public Health continues to promote the reporting of potential animal bites and scratches, conducts risk assessments and investigations for potential exposures, recommends post-exposure prophylaxis to humans when necessary, and promotes the vaccination of pets.

## 5. Background:

Rabies is a viral disease that can occur in animals and be transmitted to humans, usually through the bite or scratch from an infected animal. Once symptoms appear, rabies is almost always fatal to both humans and animals. The rabies virus is concentrated in the saliva of infected animals and spreads when the saliva enters a cut or wound of another animal or human through broken skin as a result of a bite or scratch. The virus can also be passed through contact with mucous membranes such as the eyes or mouth. According to the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), the most common animals reported to have rabies in Ontario are raccoons, bats, skunks, and foxes.

Human rabies cases are rare. The first human case of domestically acquired rabies in Ontario since 1967 occurred in 2024, due to an exposure to a rabid bat. Education and awareness of rabies has increased because of this positive case. Since 1924, there have been 28 Canadians (nine Ontarians) who have died of rabies. There continues to be no domestic animal or human rabies cases originating from Waterloo Region.

### Animal Exposure Investigations

Rabies investigations are increasing and becoming more complex. This could be due to more exposure to unknown animals/animals where confinement is not possible including during travel and an increased awareness around the human positive case in 2024.

Public Health Inspectors provide timely responses to requests related to reports of animal exposures. Public Health initiates an investigation within 24 hours for every potential human exposure to the rabies virus, which is reported to Public Health, as mandated by the Ontario Public Health Standards. Reports of potential rabies exposure can come from physicians, hospitals, veterinarians, police officers, or from a member of the public who has been bitten or scratched by an animal.

The number of animal exposures reported to Public Health has increased over the past several years. In 2025, Public Health conducted 1642 investigations of reported animal exposures; this is an increase of 433 investigations since 2021.

In 2025, the majority of exposure incidents involved domestic dog (53%) or cat (25%) bites or scratches which broke human skin. This is consistent with previous years. Other cases involved contact with wildlife such as bats, raccoons, rodents, and livestock, such as cattle and horses.

In most cases where a person may have been exposed to a domestic animal that could transmit rabies, Public Health Inspectors arrange for the domestic animal involved, such as a dog or cat, to be confined and observed for 10 days. If the animal had transmitted the rabies virus at the time of the bite or scratch, it would develop symptoms within 10 days, indicating the need for human post-exposure prophylaxis for the person involved. If the animal remains alive and well after the 10-day period, this means that the animal did not have rabies, and the person who was exposed would not need to receive post-exposure prophylaxis.

In some situations, the animal involved cannot be found, i.e. a stray or wild animal, and the animal cannot be held for observation or tested, to rule out the presence of the rabies virus. In this scenario, a risk assessment may identify that an exposed individual requires post-exposure prophylaxis to prevent rabies. Public Health inspectors work with the person exposed and their health care provider to arrange for rPEP administration and to ensure prompt delivery of rPEP to the administering office. Public Health has experienced an increase in more complex rabies exposure investigations since 2021.

If an unvaccinated pet is found during an investigation, Public Health Inspectors will work with the pet owner to discuss the importance and legal requirement of pet vaccination. By the end of the investigation, most pet owners vaccinate their pets.

### **Rabies in Waterloo Region**

Public Health actively monitors the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) surveillance reports to stay informed about animal rabies activity locally, in surrounding areas and provincially. The MNR manages wildlife rabies by working to control and eliminate rabies in Ontario with provincial, federal and municipal partners. One of the programs they lead is the vaccine-baiting program which helps to increase immunity to the rabies virus in the wildlife population. The baiting program encompasses urban, rural, and forested areas. This strategy aims to lower the risk of rabies in wild animals, thereby lowering the risk to individuals who may experience wild animal bites or scratches.

The number of animals that have tested positive for the rabies virus in Waterloo Region is low. From 2021 to 2025, there were 5 animals reported to have rabies in the Region: four bats and one skunk. Two of these bats were from 2025. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), who oversees testing for rabies in animals, indicated that 2070 animal samples were submitted for testing in Ontario in 2025 and 120 (5.8%) tested positive for rabies.

While the overall risk of rabies in Ontario to the public remains low, the risk of fatality in humans who acquire rabies is high. This means that individuals with an exposure (e.g. bite or scratch) to bats, racoons, skunks, other wildlife or stray animals should continue to receive prompt assessment and initiation of rabies post-exposure prophylaxis, if required.

**6. Communication and Engagement with Area Municipalities and the Public**

Public Health continues to actively engage with local, provincial and federal stakeholders to meet the Ontario Public Health Standards and deliver the rabies prevention and control program. Public Health works with community stakeholders such as local physicians, hospitals, police, veterinarians, and local animal control.

Public education and awareness is a key component of the Rabies Prevention and Control program. Public Health continues to promote vaccination of pets and assist with the promotion of low-cost vaccinations through local Humane Societies. Public Health also maintains relevant rabies webpages and social media posts (e.g. Instagram, Facebook) to communicate important information to the public. Additionally, Public Health Inspectors provide education to all individuals involved in rabies investigations.

**7. Financial Implications:**

	Current Year	Future Year(s)
<b>Budget Impact?</b>	No new impact	Annualized into budget
<b>Capital Plan Impact?</b>	N/A	N/A

This program is cost shared between the Province of Ontario and the Region of Waterloo. The budget is approved annually by Regional Council (as the Board of Health). Mandatory programs are funded approximately 2/3 (67%) by the province, with the remainder 1/3 (33%) funded by the local tax levy.

**8. Conclusion / Next Steps:**

Although the number of animals testing positive for rabies remains low in Waterloo Region, Public Health remains vigilant in preventing rabies in humans. This is important, as the number of reported animal-to-human exposures has increased. In addition, rabies continues to circulate in animals throughout Ontario, and it is almost always fatal to humans if they contract it. Public Health will continue to promote the vaccination of pets, reporting of animal bites and scratches, conduct risk assessments and investigations for potential exposures, and recommend rabies post-exposure prophylaxis to humans when necessary.

**9. Attachments:**

Appendix A: Summary of Rabies Program Activities

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