

General Order

Houston Police Department



ISSUE DATE:

February 4, 2026

NO.

600-43

REFERENCE: Supersedes all prior conflicting Circulars and Directives, and General Order 600-43, dated April 25, 2017

SUBJECT: ANIMAL ENCOUNTERS

POLICY

Any employee who encounters an animal in the course of police business shall follow state and local law regarding animal bites, rabies control, abuse, neglect or abandonment, and distress. Employees shall complete an incident report and notify BARC of animal bites and complaints regarding dangerous animals.

This General Order does not apply to HPD service animals. An officer responsible for an HPD service animal shall follow divisional standard operating procedures to report animal bites. If an HPD service animal bites a person and the service animal soon thereafter exhibits any abnormal behavior, the animal's handler shall immediately make the animal available for testing by the local rabies control authority.

This General Order applies to all employees.

DEFINITIONS

Bureau of Animal Regulation and Care (BARC). The division under the City of Houston Administration and Regulatory Affairs Department responsible for the City's animal shelter, animal adoptions, and enforcement of animal regulations.

Custodian. A person or agency, including an owner, that feeds, shelters, harbors, has possession or control of, or has the responsibility to control an animal.

1 GENERAL GUIDELINES

An officer who responds to an incident with an unsecured animal that poses a public safety risk shall secure the animal if it is safe to do so. The officer shall warn nearby persons regarding the active scene, if necessary. Officers should be cognizant of potential risks of handling any animal (e.g., bites, scratches).

An officer who responds to a nuisance or potentially dangerous animal that hasn't attacked anyone shall contact BARC to capture or contain the animal.

If an officer secures a stray animal that poses no danger to the public and is unable to locate a caretaker, the officer shall contact BARC for pickup. If BARC cannot pick up the animal, the officer may release the animal if safe to do so. The officer may use a patrol vehicle with a cage to transport the animal to a BARC shelter. If the BARC shelter declines to accept the animal, the officer may transport the animal to another shelter. After removing the animal from the patrol vehicle, the officer shall ensure the transport area is clean.

Employees should contact the Major Offenders Animal Cruelty Unit or the Command Center after hours if they have questions about how to handle an animal encounter incident.

Using Force Against Animals

An officer may use objectively reasonable force against an animal that is attacking or imminently about to attack the officer or a third party. An officer may use deadly force against an animal when justified by the totality of the circumstances; some of the factors may include:

- a. The species of the animal (e.g., dog, cat, bird) and the natural weapons of that animal.
- b. The size and strength of the animal.
- c. The aggressiveness of the animal.
- d. Whether the animal appears to be domesticated, stray, or wild.
- e. Whether the officer has alternative reasonable options to create distance or use barriers to contain or avoid contact with the animal.
- f. Whether the officer has alternative reasonable options to use an intermediate weapon (e.g., baton) against the animal.

When using deadly force against an animal, the officer should avoid damaging the animal's head if possible, as the brain is needed for rabies testing.

2 ANIMAL BITES

An officer who responds to an incident involving an animal bite to a person, shall follow the applicable procedures in Section 1, *General Guidelines*. If the officer cannot secure the animal, the officer shall attempt to keep the animal in sight. The officer shall investigate the incident by obtaining appropriate information about the animal and complainant. The officer shall attempt to determine whether the animal may have rabies, as outlined in Section 3, *Animals Who May Have Rabies*.

An officer who investigates a dog or cat bite to a person or another animal, shall request proof (e.g., a vaccination certificate) from the animal's custodian that the animal is current with rabies vaccinations as required by the Texas Health and Safety Code, Section 826.021, and document the findings in the incident report. The officer may issue a citation to the custodian for failure to vaccinate the animal.

Contacting BARC

An officer who responds to a bite incident shall report the bite to BARC and follow their instructions. If any person suffered serious bodily injury or death due to a dog bite, the officer shall also contact Major Offenders Division. If BARC responds to the scene, the officer shall transfer the scene to BARC. Prior to the arrival of BARC, the officer shall create an incident report with the information gathered.

If BARC cannot make the scene in less than one hour, officers shall obtain the following information and document it in the incident report:

- a. Name and contact information of the victim or the victim's guardian.
- b. What the animal and victim were doing prior to, during, and after the bite.
- c. Whether the complainant will seek immediate medical attention from a physician or hospital.
- d. Relevant information from the animal's custodian, including:
 1. Name and contact information of the custodian.
 2. Name of the veterinarian used by the owner or custodian.
 3. The location of the animal, if not already known.
 4. Whether the custodian allows the animal to roam off the custodian's property.
 5. Whether the animal has suffered from any diseases or medical problems.
 6. Whether the animal has been microchipped.
- d. The animal's prior behavior and any type of history between the complainant and the animal.

If BARC does not respond to the scene, the officer shall advise the complainant to contact BARC via 311 regardless of the seriousness of the bite, as required by state law.

3 ANIMALS WHO MAY HAVE RABIES

Rabies is an acute viral disease that affects the central nervous system. The key to human survival of rabies is quick diagnosis and immediate treatment. An officer shall use the following information to determine if an animal may have rabies:

- a. Only mammals (including humans) can be infected with rabies, which is transmitted through close contact with the saliva of an infected mammal (e.g., bites, licks on broken skin or mucous membranes).
- b. A mammal with rabies may show a variety of signs, including fearfulness, aggression, excessive drooling, difficulty swallowing, staggering, seizures, self-mutilation, and/or unusual characteristics (e.g., nocturnal wild animal wandering during daylight hours).
- c. Once symptoms of the disease develop, rabies is fatal to animals and almost always fatal to humans.

If the investigation of an incident involving an animal reveals that the animal may have rabies, the officer shall contact BARC for instructions.

BARC has the authority to enforce all provisions of Chapter 826 of the Texas Health and Safety Code. BARC makes the final decision on the disposition of an animal that has bitten a person and cannot be overruled by the officer or any other person, including a magistrate, veterinarian, or the animal's owner or caretaker.

4 DEAD ANIMALS

An officer who discovers a high-risk dead animal (e.g., skunk, bat, fox, coyote, raccoon), shall report the discovery to BARC and follow their instructions.

An officer who discovers a low-risk dead animal (e.g., opossum, shrew, mole, gopher, rabbit, armadillo) shall attempt to secure the area to prevent contamination. If possible, the officer should place the animal in a plastic bag and shall not touch the animal without personal protection equipment (e.g., gloves). If the animal is in a location accessible to the public, the officer shall report the finding to the City of Houston Solid Waste Management Department, Dead Animal Collection Section.

An officer who encounters any other dead animal, other than a rodent or bird, shall contact BARC for guidance.

Before a dead animal collection agency (e.g., City of Houston Waste Management Department) collects the carcass of a deceased animal, the officer shall determine if the animal is the subject of a crime. If the deceased animal is the subject of a crime, the officer shall contact BARC and the Major Offenders Division to determine if a necropsy is needed to determine the cause of death. If the dead animal is not needed for a necropsy, officers can report dead animal pickup via <https://www.houstontx.gov/solidwaste/deadanimal.html>.

5 SUSPECTED ANIMAL ABUSE, NEGLECT, AND ABANDONMENT

An officer who has reason to believe an animal has been abused, neglected, or abandoned, shall conduct an investigation, complete an incident report, and adhere to the requirements outlined in General Order 500-07, **Filing Class B or Higher Charges**, if applicable. The officer shall collect evidence (e.g., witnesses, video surveillance) pursuant to General Order 600-27, **Initial and Follow-Up Investigations**. The officer shall describe the involved animal in an incident report with factual descriptions of the animal (e.g., brown male dog with a white spot on the face). The officer should not make assumptions in their description (e.g., breed, age, weight).

An officer who responds to a scene of cockfighting or dogfighting shall contact the Major Offenders Division to receive instruction on how to proceed with the response.

If an officer believes that seizing an animal is necessary to prevent injury or death of the animal, the officer shall contact the Major Offenders Division or the Command Center after hours for guidance.

If an officer needs to take immediate action to prevent serious bodily injury or death of an animal, the officer shall take reasonable action to prevent such harm prior to contacting the Major Offenders Division. This includes making forced entry into hot vehicles when an animal is in distress (e.g., labored breathing, nonresponsive). Once the situation is under control, the officer shall contact the Major Offenders Division or the Command Center after hours for guidance.

An officer who seizes an animal shall transfer custody of the animal to BARC or the Major Offenders Division prior to giving custody of the seized animal to any other entity or person.

Abandonment

An unattended animal is not necessarily criminal abandonment, as additional factors are required.

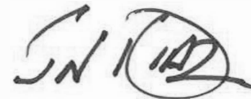
During times of extreme weather events (e.g., high or low temperatures), animal related calls for service may increase. An officer may use discretion in cases of possible neglect or abandonment, considering education over issuing a citation. The officer shall consider the totality of the circumstances, including the animal's health and the custodian's willingness to remove the animal from the hazardous situation (e.g., bringing the animal indoors or providing adequate shelter and water).

6 CARE, CUSTODY, AND CONTROL OF ANIMALS

If an officer is at a scene where an animal's custodian is transported for any reason (e.g., arrest, medical, death), the officer shall not leave the scene without first arranging care for the animal by doing one of the following:

- a. With permission of the custodian, the officer may release custody of the animal to another person on scene who agrees to take custody of the animal.
- b. With permission of the custodian, the officer may leave the animal at a secure location (e.g., the custodian's residence) only after confirming a caretaker has been arranged.
- c. If unable to arrange for a caretaker in the above items (a) and (b), the officer shall contact BARC, which may hold the animal for a limited time, depending on circumstances.
- d. If unable to contact BARC or a caretaker or BARC is unable to take custody of the animal, the officer shall contact Major Offenders Division for guidance.

Regardless of the disposition of the animal, the officer shall document the disposition in an incident report or supplement, including who took custody of the animal, the person's contact information, and where the animal was left.



**J. Noe Diaz, Jr.
Chief of Police**