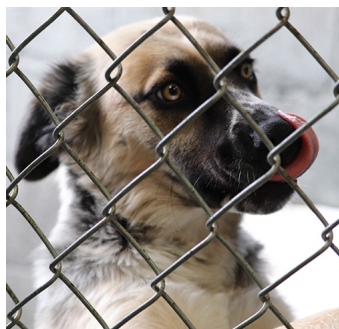


Protecting precious pets from distemper

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
Friday, 30 September 2022 06:40



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Gallup-McKinley County Humane Society handles deadly canine virus

The Gallup-McKinley Humane Society faced the start of a cruel summer with a distemper outbreak at the shelter. Nearly two-dozen dogs were euthanized after being infected by the often-fatal canine scourge.

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The shelter declared a four-week quarantine due to a distemper outbreak, according to a June 24 press release.

Distemper attacks the respiratory, gastrointestinal, and nervous systems of adult dogs and puppies. It's highly contagious and can be transferred from dog to dog via airborne exposure (sneezing or coughing). And it's often fatal in puppies. Survivors can face a lifetime of neurological and other health problems.

In a Sept. 16 interview with the *Sun*, one of the shelter's directors, Cosy Balok, said the shelter had to put about 23 dogs down due to the virus. She said the shelter's first distemper case appeared in June.

"When we first got a couple cases of it we were hoping that just by putting those isolated cases down then that would be it, but then more and more cases started popping up. So it was probably over a month's time that we put them down," she said.

She explained that it can be difficult to control the spread of distemper in a shelter, but that it can be isolated in controlled environments, such as a single dog or puppy owner's home.

"If you have a dog at home and your dog comes down with distemper, you can do the treatment that the veterinarian gives you to do for them at home. But in our case, when you have a facility, unless you had an isolation room for each animal, you're spreading it while you're treating it," she said. "So that makes it very difficult, because we can get a pup that doesn't seem too sick, we can be treating it, but it can be shedding the virus. So you have an effect that's just snowballing."

Balok said that a dog that is 10 kennels down from a dog who has distemper can become sick with the virus.

Symptoms include lethargy, loss of appetite, diarrhea, upper respiratory issues, gunky eyes, and noticeable clogged nasal passages.

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Even if the respiratory symptoms are treated, the virus often reaches the brain, causing the dog to have seizures. Balok said that at that point, it's basically impossible to treat the virus.

It's this virus, and other diseases, that make it crucial for people to vaccinate their pets. Balok said puppies need a distemper and parvo vaccine at least three or four times, two or three weeks apart.

The reason?

"Antibodies are protecting the [puppy] from viruses, and they'll protect them against the shot," Balok said. "You don't know at what point a mama's antibodies disappear from the baby, and then they're on their own, so you're giving this vaccination series in hopes that you're hitting the time after their immune system from their mother has faded away."

When a dog turns 1-year-old, it has built immunity against a variety of illnesses, but the dog still needs to get a booster shot annually to maintain its immunity against distemper and a host of other doggy diseases.

The Gallup-McKinley County Humane Society hasn't seen a case of distemper in about a month, so Balok believes the shelter staff has contained the spread for now.

She said that distemper, even though it can spread quickly, is easy to kill. Disinfecting areas with bleach and water and other cleaning supplies can wipe out the virus.

"I don't want people to totally freak out about it because they can actually treat their animals. Just because their animal gets it doesn't mean they're going to die from it if they get it treated right away," she said.

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One way to prevent a dog or puppy from getting any virus is to keep them at home and away from other dogs until they've received their series of shots.

"You shouldn't take your puppies out to public areas until they're fully vaccinated. Before they're spayed or neutered you should make sure they've had all their puppy shots," she said. "Try to prevent them from being with other dogs during that time of going through their vaccination series."

The humane society, she said, needs foster homes to prevent the spread of diseases within the shelter.

"Shelter situations are very stressful on animals, especially puppies," Balok explained. "You don't like them to be in the facility for very long because it's very stressful on them, and when they're under stress it lowers their immune system."

Community members can volunteer to foster a litter of puppies, or a litter and their mother. The shelter provides fosters with everything they need to make their experience as enjoyable and successful as possible.

To learn more about fostering, call the Gallup-McKinley County Humane Society at (505) 863-2616.

By Molly Ann Howell
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