



## NEWS RELEASE

### ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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#### Rabid cat in Billingsley prompts health alert

#### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The discovery of a rabid cat next door to the Billingsley School in Autauga County has prompted public health officials to issue an alert to help avoid risk factors to rabies. On Jan. 13, neighbors destroyed a stray cat that viciously attacked two children and a man. The cat was submitted to the Alabama Department of Public Health's Montgomery laboratory, where it tested positive for rabies.

As a result, the three people have been started on the expensive post-exposure rabies treatment. Other unvaccinated, stray cats in the community are being humanely destroyed to prevent further infections. There is no effective treatment for rabies once symptoms begin, but proper treatment started before symptoms is totally effective.

According to state public health veterinarian, Dr. Bill Johnston, "It is not uncommon to diagnose rabies in raccoons, and the disease has become established in wildlife in Autauga County."

Dr. Johnston said, however, that it is disturbing to have domestic animals infected, and that the cat is the first animal diagnosed with rabies in the state this year. "There is no cause for alarm, just common-sense precautions," Johnston said. "People should never approach or attempt to pet wild animals or unknown or stray animals.

"Spillover of rabies from wildlife to domestic animals is a major concern - particularly in Autauga County," Dr. Johnston said. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, at least a 70 percent rabies immunization rate in domestic animals is required to provide a protective buffer between wildlife rabies and people. Of the 17,030 estimated dogs and cats in Autauga County, only around 30 percent are properly immunized against the always-fatal disease.

State law requires that all dogs and cats be vaccinated against rabies by a licensed veterinarian each year. "For pet owners to disregard that requirement is to needlessly place their pets and themselves at exposure to a preventable disease," said county rabies officer, Dr. Frank Jones. "This should be a wake-up call for responsible pet ownership."

"A lack of animal control in many rural areas of the state presents another risk," Johnston continued. Health department records reveal that of the 35 dogs and cats found with rabies in the state over the past nine years, 30 were strays.

