

Policy Research Memorandum - OCAS

To: Commissioner Kelly Martinez Semrad, District 5 Legislative Team

From: Ethan Temple, Research Aide, District 5

Subject RE: Report on Pet Stray Holds and Licensure

Background:

Orange County Animal Services (OCAS) has proposed a slate of six reforms, with the intent of modernizing Chapter 5, which governs animal services, of the County Ordinances. There has been pushback against one of these proposals, which reduces stray holds for stray cats without identification. Moreover, discussion has continued over the implementation of a pet licensing program, which was a trend that was identified in researching the benchmark counties. This research memorandum will outline the differences between the current stray holds of the benchmark counties (Brevard, Broward, Lake, Miami-Dade, and Palm Beach). This will also assess pet licensure as a pillar of the policy infrastructure, and make a recommendation for staff based on the research.

Stray Holds

County	Dog w/ ID	Dog w/o ID	Cat w/ ID	Cat w/o ID
Brevard	5 (working) days	5 (working) days	5 (operating) days	5 (operating) days
Broward	5 (operating) days	3 (operating) days	5 (operating) days	3 (operating) days
Lake	5 (working) days	3 (working) days	5 (working) days	3 (working) days
Miami Dade	3 (calendar) days	3 (calendar) days	3 (calendar) days	3 (calendar) days* (de facto no holds)
Palm Beach	4 days	4 days	4 business days	No mandatory hold
Orange County Current	5 working days	3 working days	5 working days	3 working days
Orange County Proposed	5 calendar days	3 calendar days	3 calendar days	1 calendar day

This table compares the five benchmark counties Orange used in developing its proposed changes for stray holds. From the table, there is broad consistency in how long stray dogs and cats with identification are held, but cats with *no* ID are treated rather differently. Miami Dade and Palm Beach have no mandatory holds for these cats, while Orange's proposed holds would hold them for 1 calendar day. Underpinning Miami-Dade and Palm Beach's policy are their *community cat models*, which assumes ID-less cats are "community cats." Orange assumes there is the **potential that they are still owned**, and, unlike Miami-Dade and Palm Beach, **does not operate under a fully articulated community cat framework**, which includes a **dedicated licensing infrastructure and large-scale TNVR program**.

Pet Licensure

In researching the benchmark counties, it was discovered that each benchmark county identified, as well as counties such as Osceola and Hillsborough, utilize a pet license program. Generally, a license program requires (or in Lake's case, encourages) owners to obtain a license and tag for, at minimum, their dog. While the **Humane World for Animals (HWA)**, formerly the **Humane Society of the United States**, generally supports dog licensure, criticism has been levied at the licensure program on three grounds:

1) it is ineffective; 2) it costs more than it benefits the county; and 3) it is equivalent to a tax that punishes poor pet owners. This memorandum will now shift to address these arguments, point by point, in terms of “effectiveness,” “cost-benefit” and “social equity and efficiency.”

Effectiveness

While national pet licensure compliance is low (approximately 13%), a **20–30% rate is considered successful in practice, and jurisdictions such as Hillsborough (36%) and Miami-Dade (36–43%) demonstrate that higher compliance is achievable.** Importantly, **74.1% of dogs with good identification — including licensure — can be reunited with their owners.** Evidence from high-performing jurisdictions such as Memphis further indicates that improved live outcomes depend less on stray-hold timelines and more on integrated systems of field reunification, safety-net services, and TNVR/return-to-field capacity. These are systems that can be, and have been, materially strengthened by a countywide dog licensure and identification program that enables rapid reunification without shelter impound. **(Note: HSUS supports dog licensure but recommends against cat licensure).**

County RTO & Outcome Comparison (2022-2024)

County	2024 Dog RTO Rate	2023 Dog RTO Rate	Licensing Program Status
Miami-Dade	~19-21%	~19%	Mandatory License (PetHub QR tags)
Broward	~17.5%	~14%	Mandatory Registration
Orange	15.3%	~15%	Rabies Tag Only
Palm Beach	~18-20%	~19%	Mandatory License
Lake	~18%	~17%	Mandatory License (Low compliance)
Brevard	~22%	~23%	Mandatory License

Cost-Benefit

Although low compliance led Seminole and Volusia Counties to end their programs, other large Florida counties continue to rely on licensure as a significant revenue source: **Miami-Dade generated approximately \$9.4 million in FY 23–24 (23% of operating revenue), Hillsborough generated \$2.6 million (11%), and Palm Beach projected \$2.52 million (19%).** The Memphis experience suggests that the greatest returns on investment come not from shortening stray holds, but from coordinated field reunification, TNVR/RTF capacity, and community safety-net programs. All of these are more cost-effective when supported by a dog licensure and identification system that reduces shelter intake and impound costs through faster reunification.

Social Efficiency/Equity

Critics argue that pet licensing functions as a “tax” on low-income owners; however, the equity question ultimately depends on how the revenue is used. Each benchmark county reinvests licensing revenue into low-cost community programs, including spay/neuter, rabies vaccination, TNR, foster care, and public education. **This creates a self-sustaining, preventative cycle consistent with HWA best practices.** The Memphis model illustrates that equitable outcomes arise when shelters pair reunification with accessible community services and robust TNVR/return-to-field programs; a countywide dog licensure and identification system advances this goal by enabling faster in-field reunification, particularly for low-income residents whose pets are less likely to be microchipped or immediately reclaimed. For OCAS, this additional revenue and integrated model could expand current programs into more proactive responses, reduce long-term shelter and staff strain, and support more frequent low-cost (or free) TNR and spay/neuter services in low-income communities.

Recommendations

From the information presented, county staff should 1) revert the hold times to the original stray hold times in our current ordinances and 2) develop and implement a pet licensure program in Orange County by the start of FY 26-27, FL as a means of ensuring the following:

- Practices in Orange County are better aligned with the benchmarks identified in our ordinance
- Pets are returned to their owners in as speedy and efficient a process as possible
- Shelters and staff strains are reduced with long-term holding of pets
- Additional revenue can be generated so that programs such as microchipping, TNR, and sterilization procedures can be accomplished on a broader, more proactive scale

Sources:

[Humane World for Animals, Municipal Pet Policy Toolkit, 2019
https://floridaanimalfriend.org/#:~:text=Help%20%E2%80%9CFix%E2%80%9D%20Florida's%20Pet%20Population,defense%20against%20Florida%20pet%20overpopulation.](https://floridaanimalfriend.org/#:~:text=Help%20%E2%80%9CFix%E2%80%9D%20Florida's%20Pet%20Population,defense%20against%20Florida%20pet%20overpopulation.)

[Miami Dade Strategic/Business Plan](#)

[Miami Dade FY 25-26 Proposed Budget](#)

[Hillsborough County 24-25 Budget](#)

[Osceola County 24-25 Budget](#)

[Pasco County Budget, 2024-25](#)

[Brevard County Sheriff's Office](#)

Working Document on Animal Services

Ordinances:

Miami-Dade [S. 5-7](#) and [5.8](#)

Brevard [S. 14-52](#)

Broward [Ordinance 2013-10](#);

Osceola [S. 4-29](#)

Palm Beach [S. 4-11](#)

[PetData](#)

[The Zebra](#)

Appendix

Stray Holds By County

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