



Dog Licensing

Q. Who is required to obtain a dog license?

A. Dog licensing is governed by chapter 174 of the Wisconsin Statutes. All owners of dogs more than 5 months old as of January 1 must pay an annual dog license tax and obtain a license from the town or village. An individual whose dog reaches 5 months of age or who acquires a licensable dog *during* the calendar year must apply for a license when those events occur. A dog license is valid for the calendar year in which it was issued. See Wis. Stat. § 174.05. The licensing requirements do not apply to a person who owns dogs that are kept only for educational or scientific purposes or dogs that are specially trained to provide support for blind, deaf, or mobility-impaired individuals. See Wis. Stats. §§ 174.054 and 174.055. Cats and other pets are not required to be licensed by state law, although municipalities may adopt local ordinances requiring licenses for other pets.

Q. Who is responsible for collecting dog licensing fees and issuing licenses?

A. The dog licensing statutes state that the “collecting official” is responsible for issuing dog licenses. The collecting official is the town or village treasurer, “unless the... village or town board provides by ordinance or resolution for the appointment of a different person.” See Wis. Stat. § 174.065. Towns and villages may designate veterinarians or local humane societies as collecting officials via such an ordinance or resolution.

Q. What must a dog owner provide to obtain a dog license?

A. A dog owner must pay the required licensing fee and present evidence that their dog is currently immunized against rabies. Upon receipt and verification of these items, the collecting official must complete and issue a dog license and tag to the owner, keeping a duplicate copy of the license on file. The owner must keep the dog tag attached to the dog’s collar and on the dog at all times. A dog is considered untagged if it is outdoors in an unconfined area and does not have a valid license tag. See Wis. Stat. § 174.042(2).

Q. Can a town or village charge higher dog licensing fees than the ones set by statute?

A. Yes. Per Wis. Stat. § 174.05, the minimum license fee for a neutered or spayed dog is \$3, and the minimum fee for an unneutered or unspayed dog is \$8 (or half of these amounts if the dog reaches 5 months of age after July 1 of the license year). A town or village board has the authority to implement higher fees via resolution, as long as the local fee is greater for unneutered and unspayed dogs. However, the additional tax “may not exceed the total cost of all dog licensing, regulating and impounding activities for the previous year, less any refunds which may be received under s. 174.09(2).” A sample resolution

for increasing dog licensing fees is available in the Wisconsin Town Law Forms:

https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/townlaw/forms/resolution_and_ordinance_to_raise_dog_license_tax?view=section. Note that when a town or village collects dog license fees it may keep any additional revenue levied by the board via such a resolution but must send the remainder to the county, at the time settlement is made with the county treasurer for collections of personal property taxes, to go into the county's dog license fund. See Wis. Stat. § 174.08.

Q. What type of license is required if an owner has multiple dogs?

A. Per Wis. Stat. § 174.053, a person who keeps more than one dog may apply for a “multiple dog license” instead of licensing each dog separately. The statutory rate for a multiple dog license is \$35 for 12 or fewer dogs, with an additional \$3 for each dog in excess of 12. The owner must present evidence that all dogs over 5 months of age are currently immunized against rabies. Multiple dog license tags must be made in a form that is distinguishable from individual license tags.

Q. What penalties apply if a dog owner fails to obtain a dog license within the required timeline?

A. The collecting official must assess and collect a late fee of at least \$5 from every owner of a licensable dog who fails to obtain a license by April 1 each year (or within 30 days of acquiring a licensable dog or prior to the dog reaching 5 months of age during a calendar year). See Wis. Stat. § 174.05(5). A town or village board may charge an additional late fee above \$5.00 via local resolution or ordinance.

Q. What steps can a town or village take to enforce the dog licensing requirements?

A. The statutes provide multiple methods for enforcing dog licensing requirements. First, per Wis. Stat. § 174.065(3), delinquent dog license fees may be collected in the same manner as personal property taxes, meaning that a town or village has the legal authority to file a small claims action against the dog owner for the delinquent amount. Secondly, per Wis. Stat. § 174.12(4), town and village treasurers must notify their county's district attorney “of every refusal or failure of an owner to obtain a license for keeping the owner's dog and it shall be the duty of the district attorney to institute proceedings against such owner and against every owner within the district attorney's county who has violated any of the provisions of the dog license law.” Under Wis. Stat. § 174.15, any person who violates the dog licensing chapter of the statutes may be fined up to \$500 or imprisoned up to 60 days, or both.

Q. How does a town or village keep track of which dog owners are required to obtain licenses?

A. Every municipality is required to “ascertain by diligent inquiry” all the dogs owned or kept within the municipality by September 1 each year. See Wis. Stat. § 174.06. In villages, the village clerk is the “listing official.” Town boards must designate a person to be the listing official. The listing official is responsible for maintaining a record of all dogs in the municipality that are subject to the dog licensing tax, to whom they are assessed, the name, number, sex, spayed or unspayed, neutered or unneutered, breed and color of each dog, as well as a list of the names of persons holding multiple dog licenses and the number of dogs kept by each of those persons. The listing official must deliver copies of this list to the county clerk and the municipal treasurer by September 15 each year.