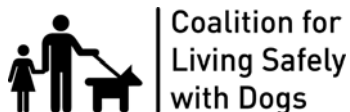


The Coalition for Living Safely with Dogs exists to promote understanding of the human and animal behaviors that impact community safety and to reframe the civic conversation about dangerous dogs.

Strategies for Safer Communities

On March 8, 2006, 75 people participated in a forum on community strategies for dealing with dangerous dogs—symbolizing the spirit of partnership between organizations and institutions that care about animals and people. Managing dangerous dogs is a complex issue within a metropolitan area where municipalities have overlapping issues and mutual needs. Sponsored by the Coalition for Living Safely with Dogs, the Animal Assistance Foundation, and the University of Denver, the forum was an initial step in working on a well-planned community approach to a critical and complex issue that is facing municipalities in Colorado and around the nation. The goal of the forum was to initiate a broad-based dialogue to affect municipal rule-making because what happens in one community impacts other communities.

Participants representing 21 Front Range jurisdictions and 18 local, state, and national veterinary and humane organizations came together for mutual fact finding, understanding, and clarification. These participants included animal control officers, city and town council members, other law enforcement personnel, municipal attorneys, animal behaviorists, and animal health and welfare professionals.



General Inquiries: David Gies, Animal Assistance Foundation, 303/744-8396, D_Dog@aaf-fd.org
Media Inquiries: Jayme Nielson-Foley, Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society, 303/318-0447, jaymenielson-foley@colovma.org

HISTORY OF FRONT RANGE ORDINANCES

In 1990, a Denver District Court ruled that pit bulls could be treated differently than other dogs because “there is credible evidence that pit bull dog attacks are more severe and more likely to result in fatalities.” The enactment of breed-specific ordinances was also taking place in communities across the country and internationally. Prior to the 90s, German shepherds, Rottweilers, Dobermans, and Great Danes had each been considered the “dangerous dog” breed. In the 90s and into the new century, the American Pit Bull Terrier has emerged in popularity and labeled, by many, a “dangerous” dog.

Several Front Range communities have established pit bull bans. In 1993, Castle Rock put in place an ordinance that prohibited pit bulls. Louisville followed suit in 1994. Denver passed a pit bull ban in 1989 which was reinstated in 2005 after the state passed legislation prohibiting breed-specific legislation, triggering a confrontation over home rule. Also in 2005, Commerce City implemented requirements for liability insurance and registration of pit bulls. Most recently, a pit bull ban went into effect in February 2006 in Aurora and a pit bull ban was passed in Lone Tree. Other jurisdictions have decided against pit bull bans in favor of looking at different ordinance options. Municipalities in Jefferson County, for example, are working together to find a community-wide approach. This issue continues to generate activity.

CONTEXT OF THE FORUM

The framework of the day-long working session was to present diverse perspectives and to articulate “what we know” and “what we don’t yet know” about the issue of dangerous dogs. This collaborative work was designed to provide a foundation and direction for future efforts of the coalition as it strives to assist Colorado communities in effectively addressing dangerous dog issues.

The complexity of the dangerous dog issue is fueled by a dynamic environment in which multiple perceptions, trends, and values are commingled. Coalition spokesperson Ralph Johnson presented the following list of perceptions, trends, and values that are encompassed in the issue of dangerous dogs:

- o **Public Safety:** We all want to feel safe in our communities, but how do we get there? Some believe breed bans or restrictions provide that security, while others believe that to truly see an impact, the underlying societal factors and related public policy issues must be addressed.
- o **Constitutional Rights:** Is the regulation of dangerous dogs an issue of broad concern to all Colorado citizens and, therefore, best handled by the state to avoid a patchwork of varying regulations? Or is community safety an issue reserved for local control?
- o **Resources:** How can we expect animal control professionals to do their jobs without adequate resources?
- o **Ethical Issues:** If a banned breed is presented to a veterinarian for medical care, what is the veterinarian to do—treat the dog and violate the law or follow the law and violate the veterinarian’s oath and code of ethics?
- o **Media Attention:** Why is it that the media choose to sensationalize the stories of dog attacks rather than perform a beneficial role by heightening public understanding of the circumstances in that attack?
- o **Fear:** Why is that our society seems “more fearful of fangs than fenders,” as one writer commented when analyzing the level of fear connected to the statistical improbability of being attacked by a dog as compared to the much more likely incidence of injury or death by automobile?
- o **Human Behaviors:** What are the societal factors that lead people to train their animals for aggressive behavior, or to use aggressive animals to protect criminal activity? Are there ways to address these societal factors so that communities can defuse the appeal of owning a dangerous dog?

CONTENT OF THE FORUM

The facts and opinions offered by forum speakers created a multi-faceted context in which participants were made aware of the broad range of factors impacting this issue. That context included perspectives from law enforcement, city/town councils, prosecutors, the insurance industry, the real estate industry, the media, sociologists, and animal behaviorists. No one perspective is a sufficient lens through which the problem of dangerous dogs can be thoroughly understood and resolved. The following are the perspectives discussed at the forum:

Competing Laws

- o City and state laws may or may not be complementary. Where they are competing, municipalities are confused about what to do.
- o Local laws cannot be less restrictive than the state law, but they can be more restrictive.

Inconsistent Law Enforcement

- o Consequences vary widely in the administration of justice in dangerous dog cases, sending ambiguous messages to animal owners.

Limitations on Law Enforcement

- o Law enforcement usually does not have authority for addressing dogs in the pre-dangerous designation; there is no law that permits officers to deal with the intermediate signs of aggression. Animal control officers need to prove dogs dangerous before any intervention is possible. Therefore, intervention only happens after the fact.

Relationships Between People and Their Dogs

- o Relationships between people and their dogs have changed as lifestyles and culture have changed. No longer is a dog considered a work dog by most owners in an urban setting; more often a dog is considered part of the family or even a furry child.
- o Even though we are treating dogs more like people, they can only react as dogs (and those behaviors include biting, in some circumstances).

- o A dog's nature is to be led by its human owners. Dogs need rules, and positive but assertive behaviors from their owners. Dogs are more content when human leadership is clear. When human leadership is lacking, dogs are more likely to exhibit dangerous behavior.
- o Changes in the density of our neighborhoods have also impacted the possibilities of more frequent human-animal interaction, including attacks. The opportunity for conflict is greater.

Data

Data available on dog bites and attacks are often inconsistent or incomplete and therefore of little or no use in guiding municipalities that are striving to deal with dangerous dog issues. No central dog bite repository exists in Colorado so the prevalence and circumstances of bites are unknown, and there are many questions still unanswered:

- o Are there animals that are more likely to bite if unprovoked? (As communities we can attempt to avoid provoked bites, but it would be impossible to avoid unprovoked bites.)
- o Does breed-specific legislation work? How should “work” be defined—by simply reducing the numbers of a specific breed or by increasing public safety in measurable ways? What’s the evidence, one way or the other?
- o Are people with banned dogs moving with their dogs to jurisdictions where the dogs are not banned?
- o Are people relinquishing their banned dogs to shelters in jurisdictions where the dogs are not banned (without moving themselves)? Shelters have seen dramatic increases in surrendered pit bulls in the past year, and data exist on number and breed of surrendered animals. Data does not exist on owners who have moved with their banned animals to other jurisdictions instead of relinquishing their pets or conforming to breed restriction requirements which can be very costly.
- o Are people going underground with their banned pets or just ignoring the law? How many have been found and prosecuted?

Breeding

- o Animal professionals can identify predispositions in breeds, but those predispositions can be modified by owners’ leadership and the care of an individual dog.
- o Even breeds traditionally regarded as good family dogs or good with children can be dangerous given the “right” circumstances.

Homeowners' Insurance

- o Some homeowners' and renters' policies have breed exclusions on the coverage of bite claims; some policies exclude coverage of all bites.
- o Some insurance companies refuse coverage at all if the applicant owns one of the companies' "banned" breeds.
- o There is no consistency within the industry on the subject of dangerous dogs.

Real Estate Impact

- o Landlords and property managers are becoming enforcers of breed ordinances by default. They are having to guess at what looks like a banned animal.

Media

- o When the media report on dog attacks they tend to sensationalize without presenting the circumstances of the attack so that the reader/viewer is left to blame the dog.
- o According to Pete Webb, former investigative reporter, what drives the media (change, conflict, simplicity, drama, wrongdoing, and feel good themes) cause things like breed bans to occur.
- o The media might do a better job of reporting incidents of dog attacks if we are successful in educating them; stressing the positive; building a history of credibility; realizing that changing the public perception is a marathon, not a sprint; and developing common messages throughout our arena.

Policy Makers' Perspective

- o Municipalities want solutions that are practical, neat, quick, and simple. According to one city manager, those solutions are never very good, but they are usually pretty fast. Municipalities have to be more pragmatic than philosophical in their solutions. The political process isn't geared to social experimentation; it's geared toward quick solutions (of perceived problems) that are frequently wrong.
- o According to a city council member, cities are concerned with the health, safety, and welfare of all people, as well as their rights. Cities worry about the "push-around" effect, one city's ban impacting the surrounding communities.

Community-Based Approaches

- o According to keynote speaker, Christian Molidor, Ph.D., Associate Dean of the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work, as a society we often limit our responses to complex, deep-rooted problems to surface interventions only, interventions that sweep the problem out of sight instead of attempt to solve the problem. Breed bans exemplify the surface intervention approach.
- o We need multiple strategies across disciplines to get at complex, deep-rooted problems. In the case of negligent and abusive people owning dangerous dogs, removing the dog will not change the owner's anger or hostility toward his or her community. Intervention of the animal care community and the human services community is required.

The working session concluded with forum participants engaged in **dialogue** on the topics of “what we know” and “what we do not know yet.” There was not the luxury of time to get consensus on these topics, but they are an indication of the breadth of information that needs to be understood in order to move our communities toward better solutions regarding dangerous dogs. Future activities of the coalition will be informed by these topics.

WHAT WE KNOW

- o Public policy tends to be made on the annual 20 or so fatal dog attacks, not on the 4.8 million dog bites that occur each year (or the 800,000 dog bites that require medical attention).
- o Dog-related deaths have remained relatively stable over the past three or four decades, despite the human population increase.
- o Humans create the circumstances that allow bites and attacks to happen, yet the behavior gets blamed on the dogs. We must consider the human factor in solutions to this problem.
- o Most people have not been trained to read dog behavior and body language.
- o 76% of dogs involved in attacks that cause bodily injury or serious bodily injury are un-neutered male dogs.
- o A network, like the coalition, that works to solve the problem of dangerous dogs needs to work with professionals in human services, child protection, and domestic violence (not only professionals in animal services).

- o A large segment of the population believes that pit bulls are different from other breeds, and they are more fearful of pit bulls than of other breeds.
- o The publicity around pit bulls is causing some surrendered dogs (with acceptable behavior) not to be adopted.
- o The banning of pit bulls is reflective of the current fad in dog selection (previously it was German Shepherds, Rottweilers, Dobermans, and Great Danes).

As citizens, we often demand knee-jerk reactions from our policy makers.

- o We know how to raise a dog that bites. And we know how to socialize, supervise, and spay/neuter a dog to reduce its likelihood of biting. But we do not know how to prevent all dogs from biting.

WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW YET

- o What are the specific factors that create a dangerous dog? Of those factors, what is attributable to the natural instinct of the dog and what is attributable to the owner?
- o Are breed bans working?
- o Should dangerous dog laws be at the state or municipal level or both? If both, how can they work together?
- o How many dogs are there (by breed)?
- o What are the statistics on incidence, prevalence, and circumstances of bites/attacks?
- o Does free choice, testing boundaries, or other types of lenient behaviors by owners contribute to a dog's violent behavior?
- o Who is a dangerous dog owner? What is the psychology of a dangerous dog owner?
- o Do owners of dangerous dogs (of banned breeds) move? Do they change breeds in order to still have a dangerous dog?

NEXT STEPS

The March 8th forum connected people across jurisdictions and stimulated dialogue and learning. Feedback from the participants indicated that the forum met a critical need and provided a productive setting for collaboration.

The Coalition for Living Safely with Dogs will formulate its next steps based on what was shared and proposed at the forum, to build on the momentum initiated there. Likely focus areas will be: data collection, common definitions and language, identification of missing stakeholders, identification of preventive and reactive steps, and centralization of outreach.

The coalition recognizes the complexity of this issue, the need for a community-wide approach, and the commitment that will be required to make progress toward better solutions. We seek to move beyond surface interventions like breed-specific restrictions to discussion of more comprehensive strategies that address both the human and animal behaviors that can heighten (or diminish, if left unchecked) the safety and well-being of our communities.

ABOUT THE FORUM'S SPONSORS

Coalition for Living Safely with Dogs

Founded in the fall of 2005, the coalition is comprised of professionals representing Colorado animal health, care, and control organizations. The coalition exists to promote understanding of the human and animal behaviors that impact community safety and to reframe the civic conversation about dangerous dogs. The coalition seeks to educate dog owners about responsible pet ownership, inform citizens about their rights and responsibilities in making communities safer, and assist municipalities in establishing and enforcing new or more effective dangerous dog laws. Member organizations are All Breed Rescue Network (ABRN), Animal Assistance Foundation (AAF), Colorado Association of Animal Control Officers (CAACO), Colorado Association of Certified Veterinary Technicians (CACVT), Colorado Federation of Animal Welfare Agencies (CFAWA), Colorado Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA), Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society (DAVMS), Metro Denver Shelter Alliance (MDSA), and Summerlee Foundation.

Animal Assistance Foundation

The purpose of the Denver-based foundation is to foster a culture that provides good stewardship of animals. The foundation seeks to enhance the understanding of the relationship between human beings and animals for the betterment of both. Now in its thirty-first year, the foundation has invested more than \$50 million in the well-being of animals in Colorado.

University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work

The Graduate School of Social Work is the new home for the Institute for Human-Animal Connection, to be launched in the fall of 2006. The program is based upon a growing body of research into the therapeutic application and use of the human-animal bond. The institute will serve as a vehicle to bring the momentum of academic scholarship to partner agencies interested in the development, implementation, and research of the important relationship between people and animals.