

Putting a bite into dog laws

Staff writer

State legislators, local leaders ponder banning dogs bred for fighting

By Johnna Kelly

It was a normal November day when a 31-year-old Berwyn woman walked down her basement stairs to allow her two pit bulls to go outside.

Seconds later, one of the 7-month-old dogs jumped on her back, attacked her and left her seriously injured.

Aimee Sordelli, who was called upon for help by the victim's two children, hit the pit bull with a baseball bat in an attempt to get it away from her neighbor.

"I couldn't get him off of her. I beat him with a bat. This dog just would not let go," she said.

This type of attack is what a few Chicago-area politicians and communities have seized on in an attempt to ban pit bulls. Though the American pit bull terrier was created specifically to fight with other dogs to the death, and has been known to attack children and adults, those who work with animals daily claim the breed is unfairly portrayed.

Tom Van Winkle, a certified animal behavior counselor and shelter director of the Oak Park Animal Care League, said aggressive pit bull behavior often comes from the way they are treated.

"Unfortunately, they are trained to be aggressive. It's not a breed issue, but a society issue. As in any dog, it depends on the individual. Sometimes whatever you do, the dog is nasty. I've seen a Labrador and Chihuahuas who want to eat me," he said.

Van Winkle has a 2-year-old pit bull at the shelter named Boris, who he described as a sweet and good family dog.

Gene Mueller, president of the Chicago Anti-Cruelty Society, said dogs who are loved by their owners are more pleasant to be around. The society does not support banning specific breeds.

"If pit bulls are banned, the market will just shift. People who have dogs for bad purposes will just go out and get the next big dog breed," he said. "It has been proven that if an animal is loved by its owner it will be healthier, more sociable and less likely to be involved with a bite."

However, leading up to the November Berwyn attack, Sordelli said her neighbors' dogs did not show any aggressive behavior.

"I never thought in a million years he would turn on her like he did. He was at our block party this summer playing with the kids. He was a loving dog. I'm guessing he just went nuts," she said.

During the November attack, police had to shoot the dog to free the woman, who suffered multiple lacerations from the attack. The woman refused to speak with reporters for this story.

Local legislators and animal control personnel believe stricter animal laws would protect residents. Other communities in different states, such as Denver and Miami, ban the ownership of pit bulls. In these communities, pit bulls are destroyed if found and owners are fined.

In Illinois, each county and municipality has its own laws regarding animals. However, a lawmaker from Cook County is striving to push legislation later this month to make particular breeds licensed as dangerous dogs, such as pit bulls, and insist that owners have canine liability insurance.

State Sen. Martin Sandoval, D-12th District, of Chicago wants the Illinois General Assembly, at the very least, to pass a uniform law that would require dog owners to muzzle their dangerous dog anytime they are outside the house, whether it be on the porch, in the backyard or walking down the street.

Sandoval said any of the following breeds of dogs would be deemed dangerous: pit bull, Rottweiler, German shepherd, Husky, Alaskan malamute, Doberman pinscher, chow chow, Great Dane and Saint Bernard.

"Certain animals are just dangerous. Pit bulls and Dobermans are dangerous dogs in an urban setting, such as around schools and parks. These types of dogs are not acceptable for public safety reasons," he said.

However, Van Winkle does not believe muzzling all animals of a specific breed will solve the problem of people being bitten.

"The muzzle can make the animal react differently than it normally would in a given situation. They will feel constricted. People on the street will react differently to them. I don't think we should muzzle dogs due to a specific breed. We need to muzzle dogs that show aggressive tendencies," he said.

Sandoval said he would go to even more drastic measures if his bill is not passed.

"If I'm not successful with this bill, I'm going to be motivated to put a bill through banning pit bulls," he said.

Communities in Grundy, Will and McHenry counties are all considering some form of pit bull restrictions, mostly as a result of a vicious pit bull attack that put four adults and two children in the hospital in McHenry.

Cook County allows residents to have three pets per household, according to a spokesperson of the county's animal control. However, each municipality has the option of enforcing stricter laws.

"A lot of people go with the popular dog as a status symbol. It's not a thought-out process," the spokesperson said.

In December, Chicago aldermen discussed outlawing pit bulls, while those already residing in the city would be required to get microchip implants. The chip would provide authorities with identification information and give them a way to determine what dogs are "illegal" after the ban would take effect.

The pit bulls grandfathered into the law would be required to be sterilized and have a dangerous animal license that would help the city keep track of where the dogs are. Owners of the dogs would have to provide outside pens and erect fences on the perimeters of the property and put up warning signs.

The owners also would not be allowed to have more than two dangerous animals, including pit bulls, in one household. Violators of the proposal would face fines of up to \$1,000, up to six months in jail and impoundment of their animals.

In DuPage County, residents are allowed to have four adult dogs at one time, according to Kerry Vinkler, executive director of DuPage County Animal Control. However, the agency only allows someone to adopt a pit bull if they have no other dogs or children residing in the home.

"They were originally bred to fight amongst one another. But now some go after people. Be prepared to deal with unpredictable behavior," she said.

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